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Chapter 5

Representative Bureaucracy and Urban Planning: A Thematic Framework for Scholarship and Practice

Abstract: This thematic chapter integrates representative bureaucracy theory and social justice frameworks from public administration into the urban planning discipline. While the challenges of diversity and inclusion of underrepresented groups in the urban planning profession have been explored, relatively little is written about representative bureaucracy and urban planning from a public administration perspective. This chapter provides a holistic integration of the representative bureaucracy framework by discussing relevant aspects of passive representation, active representation, and symbolic representation for public-serving urban planning administrative bodies. Passive representation examines the normative and practical importance of having planning agency personnel mirror the demographics of the communities they serve with particular attention to racial, gender, and disability representation. Active representation examines how passive representation can translate into policy and administrative action taken on behalf of underrepresented groups, including discretionary aspects related to community engagement, planning guidelines, zoning variances, etc. that enhance social justice aims. This section also addresses countervailing forces encountered by representative planning bodies when seeking to pursue actionable gains on behalf of underrepresented constituencies. Lastly, symbolic representation examines how passive representation in urban planning agencies can influence perceptions of trustworthiness and legitimacy among underrepresented citizens, including coproduction and citizen involvement. In summary, this chapter offers key lessons for urban planning scholarship and practice informed by theoretical understandings of representative bureaucracy developed in public administration.

Keywords: representative bureaucracy, racial representation, urban planning, public administration, social justice, social equity

Introduction

Representation is an enduring topic in contemporary public administration, in which bureaucratic actors shape and implement public policy at the street level on behalf of the citizenry. With the integration of historically underrepresented groups into society, the meaning of representation in public-serving urban planning bodies is central

to our understanding of democratic governance and social justice, especially as it relates to land use and urban design. Recent meta-analysis finds that scant urban planning research centers racial and social justice in planning scholarship (Kwon and Ngyuen, 2024). In turn, public administration scholarship can advance social justice in urban planning, positing that a representative bureaucracy, “provides a means of fostering equity in the policy process by helping to ensure that all interests are represented in the formulation and implementation of policies and programs.” (Selden 1998, 4). This chapter offers an interdisciplinary contribution that integrates representative bureaucracy theory and concepts into urban planning with clarity and purpose for scholarship and practice. A well-established literature in public administration has examined representative bureaucracy across a variety of public service contexts. However, to this point, there are few systematic analyses of the extent to which underrepresented populations are serving on local US urban planning bodies, or attempts to explain the causes and consequences of administrative representation in urban planning (see Park, Shin, and Liang 2025; Warner and Zhang 2023; and Leland and Reed 2013 for exceptions). This chapter seeks to fill this critical gap to offer thematic and theoretical guidance to scholars and practitioners alike.

Representative bureaucracy theory posits that more demographically diverse and congruent public bureaucracies lead to more responsive public policies and frontline actions taken on behalf of underrepresented groups (see Mosher, 1968; Selden 1998; Bradbury and Kellough, 2011; Bishu and Kennedy 2020). Representative bureaucracy is a potential avenue for advancing social justice and democratic governance (Ricucci and Van Ryzin, 2017) and can “allow for public agencies to advance social equity by representing the interests of disadvantaged groups in their desired outcomes.” (Hooker, 2020, 32). *Passive representation* is broadly understood as the degree of compositional reflection or mirroring between agency personnel and citizen clients they serve (Mosher 1968). *Symbolic* and *active representation* are referring to the potential impacts or consequences of passive representation within public-serving agencies. Symbolic representation refers to the perceptions of belonging, legitimacy, and trustworthiness experienced by represented constituencies. Active representation, on the other hand, refers to substantive policy and administrative actions taken by bureaucrats that are responsive to represented groups (see Mosher, 1968 for a foundational discussion of representative bureaucracy concepts in public administration). These various aspects of representative bureaucracy theory are explored in thematic unpacking of US urban planning agencies with a focus on administrative bodies operating at local levels.

Passive Representation in US Urban Planning

This section discusses important aspects of passive representation in US urban planning bodies. Passive representation is compositional, referring to demographic representation within administrative agencies and representative congruence or shared social identities between administrators and the communities they serve (Mosher, 1968; Bishu and Kennedy, 2020). Passive representation exists when the presence of public-school teachers, police officers, or urban planners mirror their service clientele along salient social identities like race, class, and gender composition (Selden, 1998). For example, the work of Kennedy et al. (2017) examines the racial makeup of municipal US police forces relative to the racial composition of local service areas, finding that underrepresentation of Black, Asian, and Latine officers and overrepresentation of White officers remains the dominant administrative pattern in US policing over time.

While a variety of administrative contexts have been examined by public administration researchers, much of the extant research on passive representation focuses on educational and law enforcement agencies (Bishu and Kennedy, 2020; Kennedy, 2014). This is likely due to the wide availability of demographic and administrative data for public schools and police forces, allowing for ready-made empirical investigation, but this relatively narrow administrative focus does a disservice to our broader understanding of representative bureaucracy in American governance leaving multiple unexamined gaps in knowledge (see Bishu and Kennedy, 2020). This chapter expands our notions of passive representation to include an important but underexplored area of public service functioning—local US planning agencies.

Investigation into passive representation among urban planning bodies is nascent. However, a recent Urban Institute research report finds that, “the people who draft, adjudicate, and implement land-use laws rarely share similar demographics, occupations, or housing tenures as their jurisdiction’s residents. Instead, we find that land-use boards . . . feature persistent overrepresentation by non-Hispanic White residents, men, homeowners, and real estate or planning professionals.” (Lo, Noble, and Freemark, 2023, p.2). While more research is needed on passive representation, this key piece of evidence suggests that representative mismatch between urban planning bodies and service areas requires additional scholarly attention toward greater inclusion and democratic governance in urban planning.

Representation and Urban Planning: Agencies and Identities

Fundamentally, themes of passive representation would suggest that administrators operating within US urban planning bodies should mirror the composition of communities in which they serve along salient identities. Due to being in close proximity to communities in frontline administrative activities, we posit that municipal planning

and land use bodies operating at the local level should be at the forefront of immediate representational dynamics for scholars and practitioners.

Typically, numerous discretionary street-level administrative decisions related to land use and planning are made at the local level. This is important contextually because foundational work in representative bureaucracy argues that empirically one must be able to connect bureaucratic composition to responsive frontline administrative actions taken on behalf of underrepresented groups (Meier and Stewart, 1992; Selden, 1998). For instance, planning and development services provided at the municipal level include multiple frontline tools like: general plan preparation and updates; focused development guidance including site-specific and community-wide plans; zoning code administration and zoning variances; environmental reviews (e.g., California Environmental Quality Act—CEQA reviews); permitting processes—including development applications; site plan and design review; subdivision review; and historic preservation review.

The land use administrative work performed by municipalities is generally handled by administrators in city-level planning and development departments. Using the eighty-eight municipalities of Los Angeles County as an illustration, municipal planning functions often fall under subdivisions of broad-ranging Community Development Departments. For example, the City of Long Beach Planning Bureau or City of Torrance Planning Division operate under their respective Department of Community Development. The more populated City of Los Angeles has a stand-alone Department of City Planning that could be examined for representative purposes. Additionally, municipal planning commissions serve as advisory bodies on local land use and development issues, influencing planning related outcomes. These include bodies such as the City of Long Beach Planning Commission and City of Costa Mesa Planning Commission.

With “planning” being a relatively boundary-spanning administrative area (e.g., zoning, transit, environment, economic development, etc.) of departments and subunits of divisions and bureaus we urge urban planning and social justice researchers to focus representative attention on municipal-level planning bodies that deal foremost with street-level land use decisions within local communities, including those with discretionary aspects such as zoning variances, community engagement, and permit approvals. Put another way, representative bureaucracy scholarship in urban planning should focus on capturing passive and active representation within those agencies undertaking frontline administrative activities oftentimes with discretionary planning aspects, generally operating at the local level in US governance.

Next, representative bureaucracy theory suggests that social identities should have salience within an administrative area to have analytical importance (Selden, 1998). For instance, racial identity has deep historic ties to law enforcement practices and outcomes, and exhibits representational importance within that particular administrative context. As discussed later in this chapter, we employ two immediately salient identities for illustrative purposes of representation in urban planning bodies:

(1) racial representation, (2) disability status representation. Other salient identity markers like age, gender identity, sexual orientation, religious identification, etc. also potentially can be examined with regard to representation and urban planning personnel composition and outcomes, but due to bandwidth limitations we choose to limit our immediate attention in this thematic chapter to race and disability status as salient representational markers under examination.

Measuring and Explaining Patterns in Passive Representation

Research into bureaucratic representation and urban planning can advance this line of inquiry in a more devoted and systematic way, documenting patterns of representation within planning agencies. This can be accomplished in multiple ways. For a cursory view of personnel diversity, researchers can examine the overall number or percentage of administrators originating from underrepresented backgrounds, such as the total number or percentage of physically disabled administrators employed within a municipal planning body.

A more rigorous and instructive empirical approach involves measuring representation between the proportion of agency personnel relative to the proportion of citizens in a service area. One standard measure involves constructing a representation ratio using administrative and population proportions (Selden, 1998; Kennedy et al., 2017). For example, observing the percentage of Black-identifying administrators serving in a municipal planning bureau divided by the percentage of Black residents in the municipality. A ratio of 1.0 demonstrates perfectly proportional representation—the same demographic percentage observed in bureaucratic agencies and local communities. A ratio of less than 1.0 would signify *underrepresentation* in that the percentage of administrators is less than the percentage of citizens in the community. A ratio greater than 1.0 would signify *overrepresentation* in which administrators with certain demographic characteristics have an outsized presence relative to the service area population. Describing patterns in personnel diversity and passive representation in urban planning bodies is instructive, but researchers and social justice advocates should also seek to explain why variation exists across agencies and over time.

An established literature in representative bureaucracy can guide empirical investigation. For example, evidence exists that larger and more diverse jurisdictions and those with more liberal-progressive ideological leanings are predicted to have more diverse and representative administrative bodies (Eisinger, 1982; Selden, 1998; Kennedy et al., 2017). Additionally, minority political power, serving as mayors, city managers, agency heads, or city council members can enhance representation on administrative bodies (Kennedy et al., 2017; Selden, 1998). These potential determinants among others can extend to urban planning bodies and provide researchers and so-

cial justice advocates with enhanced understanding of the determinants of passive representation in urban planning bodies.

Active Representation in US Urban Planning

Next, we draw attention to active representation or the notion that passively represented bureaucracies are more likely to engage in policy and administrative acts on behalf of underrepresented populations in the practice of urban planning. According to Selden (1998), “The central tenant of the concept of representative bureaucracy is that passive representation, or the extent to which a bureaucracy employs people of diverse demographic backgrounds, leads to active representation, or the pursuit of policies reflecting the interests and desires of those people.” (p.5). Put another way, “the values associated with the social origins of a bureaucrat will translate into public policies or programs that benefit citizens with those same social origins.” (Ricucci, Van Ryzin, and Lavena, 2014, p.3).

An abundant empirical literature uncovers links between passive and active representation, especially as it relates to discretionary frontline administrative actions. For example, an increased presence of Black teachers in public schools is associated with more Black students recommended for gifted classes, fewer suspensions and higher academic performance of Black students (Meier and Stewart, 1992). An increased presence of Black administrators in the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) increases the amount of successful discrimination claims for Black laborers (Hindera, 1993). An increased presence of women in law enforcement agencies increases clearance rates for sexual assault cases in local jurisdictions (Schuck, 2018). Racial representation among EPA administrators leads to greater enforcement of polluters operating in heavily minority areas (Liang, Park, and Zhao, 2020). Racial minority presence in the Farmers Home Administration leads to more loan assistance directed toward minority applicants (Selden, 1998). Racial representation in local police agencies is found to increase the likelihood of adopting civilian review boards and reduce excessive force complaints (Kennedy et al., 2017).

In turn, we might expect to observe aspects of active representation in US urban planning, influencing policy and administrative outcomes. How might representative US urban planning agencies work on behalf of underrepresented constituencies and communities? More specifically, how might enhanced representation of racial minorities and disabled populations within urban planning agencies potentially translate into policy and administrative actions taken on behalf of underrepresented groups? We discuss how active representation among US urban planning administrators can potentially manifest in multiple ways that we discuss below.

Racial Minorities and Active Representation

Racial representation has been examined extensively in the representative bureaucracy literature, and there have been calls for elevating racial consciousness in urban planning (Goetz, Williams, and Damiano, 2020; Song, 2015; Thomas, 1994). In turn, might racial representation within urban planning bodies encourage actions that advance social justice for underrepresented populations of color? This key question around racial representation and administrative action has arguably taken on renewed importance in the US under a federal-level regime that has curtailed diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. That is, in the absence or removal of DEI-related initiatives, minority representation in administrative bodies undertaking public service provision on behalf of group interests arguably takes on greater importance. Scant urban planning research exists with regards to race and representative bureaucracy, but one existing study finds that minority planners are more likely to support affordable housing partnerships and eliminate blighted parts of urban areas (Leland and Read, 2013). In turn, how might racial identity potentially matter to active representation?

Historically, sewer systems and water filtration were less likely to be planned in minority neighborhoods, while garbage incinerators, hazardous waste facilities, etc. were routinely sited in segregated residential communities, placing negative externalities squarely on these marginalized places—a phenomenon popularly dubbed “environmental racism” (Trounstine, 2018; McGhee, 2022; Mascarenhas, M., Grattet, R., and Mege, K., 2021; Troesken 2004). Urban renewal, urban infrastructure such as highway construction and pipelines, and slum clearance initiatives of the 1950s and 1960s infamously razed entire neighborhoods of minority residents for development purposes (Rothstein, 2017; Thomas, 1994), further entrenching residential segregation and concentrated poverty, while cementing White affluence in outlying suburban enclaves (Goetz, Williams, and Damiano, 2020; Trounstine 2018). The effects of these policies are long lasting, such as the current construction of xAI Colossus in a minority Memphis neighborhood with a history of industrial pollution and limited environmental protections (Harris, Gerberg, and Gosk, 2025).

In turn, among more racially representative urban planning bodies might there be a unique focus on pursuing environmental justice through zoning and discretionary permitting decisions that reduce pollution levels in historically underserved communities? Might decisions to reduce negative externalities like pollution or traffic accidents in minority communities be prioritized and acted upon when racial minorities are staffed among local planning bodies? Might there be more direct community engagement or community-based partnerships (e.g., community benefit agreements) when administrators of color are employed in local urban planning agencies? These questions are pertinent to both researchers and practitioners alike. Scholarship in the academy can center these questions in research endeavors, while public service leaders in the field, such as city managers and planning agency personnel, can center

these questions when pursuing social equity, which is a core pillar of public administration practice (Frederickson, 2015). For example, in 2020, under the leadership of minority-identifying Principal Planner, Faisal Roble, the City of Los Angeles Department of City Planning launched the Office of Racial Justice, Equity, and Transformative Planning (ORJETP), with an expressed purpose of advancing racial equity in city planning (Los Angeles City Planning, 2025). In turn, the ORJETP has informed frontline planning practices within historically segregated minority neighborhoods of Los Angeles by utilizing a Community Plan Implementation Overlay to “regulate polluting uses and other harmful everyday uses that detract from neighborhood quality of life” (Los Angeles City Planning, 2025).

Racial minorities, particularly Black and Indigenous people, historically faced overt discrimination in land use and development decisions through racist zoning ordinances, redlining, housing covenants, etc. (Rothstein, 2017; Thomas, 1994). These segregationist practices led to entrenched resource imbalances in these historically underserved and disinvested places. Minority urban planning administrators that serve local communities of color are likely to be aware of this shared history and in turn could potentially be motivated to address inequities in urban design with racial equity and minority advocacy at the forefront of administrative actions (Thomas, 2008). Indeed, timely new research examining racial representation in transportation agencies suggests that passive representation can improve traffic safety outcomes for minority groups (Park, Shin, and Liang, 2025). For example, the researchers find that increased Latine presence in federal transportation agencies reduces traffic fatalities among Latine populations, while increased Black presence across both federal and state agencies reduces traffic fatalities among Black populations (Park, Shin, and Liang, 2025). Future research can build upon foundational scholarly efforts to examine racial representation and administrative outcomes in different areas of planning practice (e.g., environmental planning, residential zoning, community outreach, permitting approvals, etc.), and with enhanced focus on municipal-level administrative bodies operating in closest proximity to communities and discretionary land use decisions.

Disability Status and Active Representation

Next, we surmise that disability status should be a salient identity for urban planning and land use, in particular the presence of physically disabled planning administrators. Historically, the unique needs and accommodations of disabled populations have been ignored by ableist urban planners in areas like land use, transportation planning, bathroom facilities, etc. creating physical impediments and social exclusion (Stafford, Vanik, and Bates, 2022). In turn, might the presence of disabled populations within urban planning agencies lead to land use and development decisions that are favorable toward disabled populations and advance social equity? For example,

among jurisdictions with enhanced administrative representation of physically disabled populations might we observe increased prioritization on disability-friendly land use such as mandatory curb cutouts for sidewalks, beach access for wheelchair users, public transit accommodations, access for recreational spaces, and additional disability-friendly accommodations as evidence of active representation? In short, can increased representation among disabled populations in local urban planning agencies lead to more of these active representation decisions for access and equity for disabled populations.

Moderating Influences on Active Representation

This section discusses limitations and countervailing forces that might limit the reach of active representation among representative urban planning bodies. Most prominently, organizational socialization has been found to be a critical moderator influencing the association between passive representation and active representation (Selden, 1998). Research demonstrates that specific administrative areas and unique socialization dynamics might lend themselves to magnifying or limiting the association between passive and active representation. In some public service areas like education, social welfare, and equal employment agencies, the links between passive and active representation are strengthened likely due to socialization processes that favor minority advocacy (Selden, 1998). However, other administrative areas might not lend themselves as readily to active representation or administrators taking on minority advocacy roles. For example, law enforcement agencies are imbued with histories of White supremacy and maintaining traditional power structures (Alexander, 2012; Kennedy et al., 2017). Therefore, the connection between passive and active representation might be inhibited in such contexts. Indeed, research finds that Black police officers are oftentimes *more likely* to engage in traffic stops of minority citizens (Wilkins and Williams, 2008). Other research shows that racially representative police departments fail to consistently reduce police-involved homicides (Kennedy et al., 2017, Nicholson-Crotty S., Nicholson-Crotty J., and Fernandez, 2017).

Research commonly supports the notion that urban planning bodies generally exude a dominant White-male centric work environment (Thomas, 2008; Goetz, Williams, and Damiano, 2020) that dominates and permeates bureaucratic norms limiting the reach of active representation. Minority administrators in urban planning bodies are likely socialized to a large extent into a relatively heteronormative, White-centric, ableist urban planning body and thus might be prone to behave with orientation toward those interests—e.g., more focus on administratively “neutral” efficiency considerations over equity and social justice considerations in agency priorities and practices. In short, agency culture-socialization-norms can mediate and mute active representation and we need a better understanding of

these moderating influences with regards to urban planning bodies and the outcomes they produce for the citizenry.

Symbolic Representation and Coproduction in US Urban Planning

Lastly, symbolic representation is linked to the presence of passive representation and can serve as an appropriate bridging mechanism to more active forms of coproduction, substantive representation and quality of bureaucratic outcomes. Mosher's (1968) pioneering work posited that a representative bureaucracy has intrinsic symbolic underpinnings for democratic values and inclusive governance, apart from any substantive actions taken by administrators. According to Mosher (1968):

Passive representation . . . carries some independent and symbolic worth that are significant for a democratic society. A broadly representative public service . . . suggests an *open service* in which access is available to most people . . . and in which there is *equality of opportunity* . . . The importance of passive representation often resides less in the behaviors of public employees than in the fact that the employees are there at all. (p.17, italics in the original).

Selden's (1998) seminal work further expounds that:

A bureaucracy that reflects the diversity of the general population implies a symbolic commitment to equal access to power. The symbolic role results from both the personal characteristics of distinctive group members, and the assumption that because of these characteristics, the bureaucracy has experiences in common with other members of that group (p.6).

In the urban planning context, when citizens from underrepresented groups engage with administrators of shared social identities serving within urban planning bodies, perceptions of legitimacy and confidence in agency performance to make appropriate planning and land use decisions are likely engendered among the represented citizenry. For example, more racially representative US police forces are found to enhance notions of legitimacy and trustworthiness among Black citizens (Theobald and Haider-Markel 2009).

One reason why symbolic representation matters beyond normative ideals of democratic inclusion and governing legitimacy is the notion that symbolically represented constituencies will engage in what representative bureaucracy scholars dub "coproduction" (Bishu and Kennedy, 2020; Headly, Wright, and Meier, 2021). Coproduction is the notion that represented populations will act more forthrightly to facilitate administrative work and better their communities (Headly, Wright, and Meier, 2021). Citizens will behave in more cooperative and engaged ways and work alongside bureaucratic bodies more proactively to improve administrative outcomes, societal health, etc. According to Headley, Wright, and Meier (2021), "symbolic repre-

sentation . . . enhances bureaucratic outcomes because the public is more cooperative and more likely to engage in coproduction”. (p.1033).

While remaining an open question empirically, in the urban planning context this potentially means that represented citizens take a greater interest in local land use and development discussions and decisions, leading to improved outcomes for underrepresented communities. For example, citizens in more administratively representative contexts might be more likely to attend planning events, voice their opinions in meetings, lobby administrators and policymakers and be more active in shaping urban planning operations like transit, residential zoning, land use decisions, etc. To our knowledge, symbolic representation and coproduction have not yet been examined in the urban planning context. Researchers should seek to better understand the impact of administrative representation within planning bodies on perceptions of legitimacy and belonging among underrepresented citizen populations.

For instance, might the presence of physically disabled administrative professionals within local planning bodies with community engagement efforts led by disabled administrators heighten perceptions of legitimacy, trustworthiness, and coproductive actions among disabled populations being served in the community? Might racially representative urban planning bodies heighten perceptions of legitimacy and coproduction among citizens of color? These types of questions can guide future research into representative bureaucracy and urban planning as it relates to symbolic representation and coproduction.

A Note on Intersectionality and Representative Bureaucracy

There are recent calls from public administration scholars to expand representation investigations beyond one single identity axis and examine multiple, co-existing marginalized identities with an intersectional lens (see Kennedy, Bishu, and Kennedy, 2025; Meier, 2019). Representation is likely to be occurring beyond just one single identity axis, such as race, gender, etc. and might be playing out across multiple co-existing identity axes, such as race and gender *simultaneously*. Intersectionality is a burgeoning area of investigation in the field of representative bureaucracy and urban planning scholars and practitioners interested in advancing social justice would be wise to pay it heed. Foundational intersectionality researcher, Kimberlé Crenshaw, argues that race and gender should be examined in combination, highlighting how Black women experience magnified discrimination and engender unique perceptions of oppression and justice due to these intersecting marginalized racial and gender identities (Crenshaw, 1989). Social justice advocates in urban planning could extend this investigation to examine intersecting marginalized identities in areas of passive, active, and symbolic representation.

Conclusion

This thematic chapter integrates representative bureaucracy theory from public administration into urban planning. We believe the insights from representative bureaucracy theory can inform the theory and application of urban planning in the US. Through better understanding the importance of passive, symbolic, and active representation, both research and practice in urban planning can enhance social justice for underrepresented populations and communities. While this chapter draws attention to passive and active representation within local urban planning administrative bodies, one final note pertains to the urban planning academy that produces planning professionals. Research has documented a perceptual lack of belonging among Black and Latine planning students and minimal social justice focus in urban planning education (Garcia et al., 2021). Unsurprisingly, data also shows continued underrepresentation of minorities in receiving urban planning degrees (U.S. Department of Education 2023). Passive and active representation occurring within urban planning bureaucracies can potentially be enhanced when the personnel pipeline emphasizes inclusivity and outreach to underrepresented populations in the urban planning profession. The challenges of diversity are undoubtedly magnified in the current political climate, but the effort can yield meaningful dividends in terms of a more representative and responsive urban planning bureaucracy.

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