

## White Guys Rule

By Jan Collins

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If you were among the folks in Columbia who voted earlier this week in the runoff election for the City Council's at-large seat, you had two white males to choose from. The incumbent, Cameron Runyan, who was booted out two weeks earlier, is also a white man.

There was nary a woman—neither white nor African-American nor Asian nor Hispanic -- on the ballot. And this, unfortunately, is the story of most elections in the United States.

Consider: on ballots nationwide, 2 of every 3 names belong to a white man.

The upshot of this ballot imbalance is not surprising. Overall, of the 42,000 people in the U.S. who currently hold elective office -- from the federal down to the county level -- 90 percent are white, 71 percent are men, and 65 percent are white men.

Moreover, while men are 49 percent of the population, they are 76 percent of Republican candidates and 67 percent of Democratic candidates. Whites are 63 percent of the population, but are 96 percent of Republican candidates and 82 percent of Democratic candidates.

These figures are from a new report, "Who Runs (in) America?", which was released late last month by the Reflective Democracy Campaign of the San Francisco-based Women Donors Network (WDN). The study analyzed more than 51,000 candidates running in nearly 38,000 elections in 2012 and 2014.

This problem is bipartisan, the report says, and it's not that women and people of color aren't winning. They are. "In fact, they're winning at the same rates as men and white candidates," observes Brenda Choresi Carter, director of the Reflective Democracy Campaign. "The problem is that the demographics of our office holders are set when our ballots are printed." Indeed.

“The stark imbalance between the demographics of the American people and their elected officials will not change until voters have the opportunity to choose among candidates who reflect their communities,” adds Donna Hall, CEO of the Women Donors Network.

In the South there is especially poor representation of women candidates: the region is home to four states with the nation’s lowest share of women candidates. (Louisiana, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Alabama.) South Carolina (ranking 42<sup>nd</sup>) and West Virginia (46<sup>th</sup>) are among the bottom ten states for female candidates.

What this means, of course, is that women’s voices are not being heard when crucial decisions about our lives are being made.

South Carolina has never elected a woman to the U.S. Senate. Our Congressional delegation in Washington has been all male for more than 20 years. Currently, just two seats in the S.C. Senate (there are 46) are held by women, and from 2008 to 2012, the State Senate was wholly, totally, 100 percent male.

There are, therefore, too few women in legislative positions in the state to address the gender pay gap, or the need for better child care and mandated family leave, or the continuing problem of sexual harassment in the workplace, or the political campaigns that are rife with sexism, or fellow legislators who think sexist jokes are funny. (Remember State Sen. Thomas Corbin, Republican of Traveler’s Rest, who declared in February that women are “a lesser cut of meat”? His remark was aimed at his colleague Katrina Shealy, who at the time was the Senate’s only female member.)

So we know the problem, but what do we do about it?

Show up at the polls, for one thing. According to the WDN survey, 71 percent of S.C. women were registered to vote in 2012 and 2014, but only 59 percent actually cast their ballots. (I recently saw the excellent film “Suffragette”, which chronicles the struggle of English women in the early 1900s to gain the vote. If you see the movie, it’s doubly depressing to see how many women today don’t bother to vote.)

Second, support qualified female candidates, not only with votes but also with money. Women almost always have a tougher time raising funds to run for office than men, who usually have access to larger networks and wealthier donors.

Finally, work to change barriers to running for public office, which, says the WDN, include having to give up a full-time job, raising campaign funds, and being connected to and vetted by existing political networks (also known as the good old boys' club). "Leveling the playing field by addressing these hurdles," says the report, "could put more diverse candidates into the running, ultimately making possible a more reflective governing body in the South and the country."

There is no time to lose.

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**Jan Collins** is a Columbia-based freelance writer, editor, and journalist. A former Nieman Fellow at Harvard University, she is the co-author of *Next Steps: A Practical Guide to Planning for the Best Half of Your Life* (Quill Driver Books, 2009).