

Rainbow Wave and Representation: The View from One Competitive Midwest State



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By Debra Fitzpatrick | November 7, 2018

If you've been monitoring elections returns with an eye to gender and intersectionality, you know that the record number of women candidates for national office translated to an [important increase](#) of women in the US house, a slight decrease in the Senate, and a return to the record of nine women governors across the country. You also know that the exciting story nationally has been the many [historic "firsts" for people of color](#), LGBTQ people, immigrants and others gaining federal office for the first time - what Van Jones and others call the "[rainbow wave](#)."

But what do these patterns look like at the state level?

We dug into the data of one midwestern state, Minnesota, and see some similar increases of women (and men) of color gaining statewide or federal elected offices, but the numbers of women and LGBTQ people in the state legislature have declined slightly.

In federal and statewide elections, Minnesota closely hewed to the national trends. After all votes were counted, Minnesotans elected a parity federal delegation (50% women) with women picking up two congressional seats previously held by men and becoming the fourth state to have two women senators. One of the two congressional seat pickups for women went to the first Somali-American woman to serve in Congress, Ilhan Omar. Omar joined Michigan's Rashida Tlaib to become the [first two Muslim women to serve in Congress](#). At the statewide level, Minnesotans elected the first Native American woman, [Peggy Flanagan](#), to a statewide executive office as Lieutenant Governor, and the first African American Muslim man, Keith Ellison, for Attorney General. In doing so, Minnesota voters made Ellison one of the [highest-ranking Muslim elected officials in the country](#).

Omar and Ellison's victories are especially notable in the midst of an election filled with heated national rhetoric on immigration and religion.

When we move to the Minnesota state legislature however, women lost ground, losing a net two seats. Republican women led the losses - Democratic women picked up 7 seats, but Republican women lost nine amidst a Democratic takeover of the Minnesota House. The Republican Caucus in the 2018 Minnesota House will be 80% white men (up from 72.7%), compared to a Democratic Caucus that remains around 47% white male (up slightly from 2017's 45.6%).

Minnesota's Republican women came out of the election with significantly fewer people like them at the decision-making table. But the racial diversity of the Minnesota's state legislature will increase in some important ways.

While much of the immigration debate nationally has centered on Latinx and Muslim communities, Minnesota is home to the largest Hmong refugee population in the country. That community saw impressive gains in representation at the state capitol. Five of six Hmong candidates won their races, two women and three men. They join one Hmong man currently serving in the Minnesota Senate. Organizing efforts by [several organizations](#), including a new PAC, [MAIV-PAC](#), focused on Hmong women, contributing to the wins. With a net gain of two people of color, the 2018 Minnesota House is the most diverse ever. Seven women of color (the same number as 2017) and five men (a gain of two) will be seated in January, representing almost 10% of the body. One Somali woman (Hodan Hassan) and one Somali man (Mohamed Noor) are among them - with Somalis being another significant immigrant community in the state.

Minnesota LGBTQ communities lost representation in the state House, while gaining at the federal level.

[Angie Craig beat Congressman Jason Lewis](#) to become the first Lesbian to win a congressional seat in Minnesota and the first openly gay mother to serve in Congress. She joins [at least eight other successful LGBTQ candidates](#) that ran for congress in 2018. At the state legislative level, three LGBTQ women retired or left to pursue higher office in 2018, resulting in a loss of LGBTQ representation at the state Capitol.

While public and media focus tends to concentrate on the federal level, the power of state governments is often overlooked.

Governors elected this year will be in office when their states [redistrict after the 2020 Census](#), for example. State legislatures and governors make critical decisions about issues important to voters, such as healthcare and education. Diverse identities and life experiences of state office holders bring new ideas and perspectives to the table, and hopefully better or more creative solutions. The Center for American Women in Politics found, for example, women on both sides of the aisle in the 114th Congress very much [believe that their presence and their voices matter](#). Results from Minnesota suggest that a blue wave doesn't necessarily translate into a uniformly representative rainbow wave at all levels of government. As results from other states come in, we will have a better picture of how state governments may change to better represent the diverse identities of their constituents.

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— Photo of Congresswoman-elect Ilhan Omar by Lisa Miller