Vermont's Key Local Government Boards and Commissions: A Demographic Study

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April 2016

Author Note
Independent Study for Masters in Public Administration Program,
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This research was supported by the Center for Rural Studies.

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Abstract

With support from the Center for Rural Studies at the University of Vermont (UVM), this demographic study utilized an online survey of the three most influential local government boards and commissions in Vermont: Legislative Bodies, Planning Commissions, and Development Review Boards. The goals were to collect data on gender, age, race, and socio-economic status and to compare the results to the population in Vermont and analyze the level of representativeness. The survey revealed that key local government boards and commissions in Vermont are male dominated, 68% male, much older than the population, 69% over the age of 55, with much higher socio-economic status than residents in their communities, 40% with graduate or professional degrees. State-wide Vermont is currently 51% female, with a median age of 42, and 14% with graduate or professional degrees. Racial and ethnic diversity was about the same as the population. These findings indicate that key Vermont boards and commissions are not generally representative of their communities, especially regarding policies important to women, younger residents, and lower income residents.

This study was student-led and not paid for by any organization.

Keywords: citizen participation, public boards, public commissions, representativeness in local government, representative bureaucracy, women in local government, Vermont municipal officials
**Introduction**

One of the most ubiquitous yet least visible forms of government is municipal government. Thousands of local government boards and commissions exist in the United States and many have policy-making powers. Municipal or local government is an area where almost any resident can participate in government by serving on a board or commission. However, a 2009 study found that local boards and commissions as a mechanism for citizen participation are not well understood, often do not reflect the diversity of their local communities, and must be improved to benefit their communities (Dougherty and Easton 2011). Specifically, local boards and commissions were found to be overwhelmingly white and male, giving scant representation to the policy concerns of women and minorities.

Studies of rural communities show that citizens tend to join boards and commissions based on business interests, working class citizens rarely sit on boards and commissions (Flora, Flora, and Gasteyer 2016). In Vermont, it is unclear if this is due to a lack of interest or a lack of time. As shown in the 2009 study, board and commission openings are common and some seats remain vacant for long periods of time (Dougherty and Easton 2011).

As budgets represent the outcome of competition for political power (Caiden 1981), it is important to understand and analyze the influence a small number of individuals may have over how a community develops once they are sitting on key municipal boards and commissions.

**The Role of Local Government Boards and Commissions in Vermont**

The vast majority of towns in Vermont do not have an elected mayor, and therefore do not have an executive check on the other two branches of government as the state and federal levels of governments do. This is because the local government town administrator or manager reports directly to the elected legislative body.

In Vermont, this legislative body is most often a selectboard. The selectboard also serves, if needed, as the town’s quasi-judicial body. The other volunteer boards and commissions, including planning commissions and development review boards, are most often appointed by the selectboard and can be terminated by them as well. The three branches of government that Rosenbloom labels managerial, political, and legal (Rosenbloom 1983) are not present in local government within the Town Manager/Selectboard form of government. Selectboards, planning commissions, and development review boards currently have a great deal of power over how communities develop in Vermont.

**Legislative Body:** In Vermont the legislative body varies by the size of the community and across villages, towns, and cities. There are trustees or bailiffs in villages, selectboards in towns, and city councils, alderboards, and mayors in cities. The school board is the legislative body in the case of a school district, and the prudential committee in the case of a fire district (Vermont Statutes Annotated: 17; 041 V.S.A. § 2103).
Selectboards: In Vermont the selectboard is a five or three member elected governing body that is responsible for the legislative function of the town. This governing body establishes policy, passes local ordinances, appoints boards and commissions, and develops an overall vision for the community. The selectboard is charged with the general supervision of the affairs of the town and directs all duties required of towns and town school districts not committed by law to the care of any particular officer (Vermont Statutes Annotated: 24 V.S.A. § 872).

Planning Commissions: Planning commissioners in Vermont are volunteers typically appointed by the town’s legislative body, which also sets their term lengths. The planning commission must have at least three and no more than nine voting members. The majority of the planning commission must be residents of the municipality. An energy coordinator may also be a non-voting ex officio member (Vermont Statutes Annotated: 24 V.S.A. § 4322). Planning commissions are charged with preparing a municipal plan and amendments for consideration by the selectboard, presenting to the selectboard proposed bylaws and recommendations on proposed amendments, administering bylaws adopted (unless a development review board performs this function), undertaking studies and making recommendations on matters of land development, urban renewal, transportation, economic and social development, urban beautification and design improvements, historic and scenic preservation, the conservation of energy, the development of renewable energy resources, and wetland protection (Vermont League of Cities and Towns Handbook for Vermont Town Officers 2014).

Development Review Boards: In Vermont, the development review board or DRB conducts public hearings and renders decisions on development applications subject to the zoning and subdivision regulations developed by the planning commission and approved by the selectboard. The development review board fulfills the statutory role of an “appropriate municipal panel” (Vermont Statutes Annotated: 24 V.S.A. § 117). The DRB is comprised of resident volunteers who are appointed by the legislative body.

There is no language in statute indicating that members of a legislative body, selectboard, planning commission, or DRB must hold a degree or be a professional.

The Importance of Representativeness

In a representative democracy, representatives are chosen to make decisions and formulate policy based on the whole population of a community. However, quite often representation of certain groups requires being a part of those groups, such as being the same gender, age, race, and socio-economic status.

Gender: Women have not made as many gains in politics as they have in other areas such as higher education and the labor force (Paxton and Hughes 2014). However, multiple studies show that representation of women in government is important because, in general, men are less likely to advocate for women’s and children’s interests (Bratton and Haynie 1999; Childs and Withey 2004) and women tend to have noticeably different policy priorities than men (Chattopadhyay
and Duflo 2004; Gerrity, Osborn, and Mendez 2007). For example, women may advocate for more multi-use paths or “bike paths” for themselves and for their children, whereas men may advocate for larger bike lanes on busy streets. However, studies show that only the category of “Fearless or Confident” would ride their bikes on busy streets (Vermont Department of Health 2012). Of that category, more than twice as many men than women in Vermont would ride their bike to work – using a bike lane (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014 ACS 5 year estimates). We tend to generalize about the need for larger bike lanes to encourage more cycling, but the data shows that only a small percentage of people, who are mostly men, are willing to ride their bikes in these lanes. This is an example of how priorities can be skewed when boards are male dominated.

In addition, women are more often the primary caretaker of an older parent. Women make up more than two thirds of the adults who are providing considerable assistance to aging parents (Johnson and Wiener, 2006). This makes them much more likely to advocate for the needs of older and disabled citizens.

**Age:** For citizens under the age of 55, the time commitment involved in participating in local government can be a huge barrier, especially for busy families with young children. However, this demographic certainly has a stake in how their community develops and may have very little representation in local government. For citizens who are 35 and under, issues such as easy access to affordable and high quality child care as well as affordable housing may be vitally important, but without representation, may not be on the local agenda.

**Race/Ethnicity:** Although Vermont is one of the least racially and ethnically diverse states in the U.S., there are some important reasons to focus on inclusiveness in local government in Vermont and elsewhere.

First, a recent study found that African-American citizens and white citizens hold markedly different attitudes about policy priorities (Bradbury and Kellough 2008) and that both minorities and women are more receptive to minority issues than non-minority men (Bradbury and Kellough 2008).

Second, even though this study finds that there is an unfortunate paucity of literature regarding minority representation in local government boards and commissions, it is well understood that powerful groups in communities can block participation of certain categories of residents, which can cause other levels of government to get involved (Flora et al. 2016). This can be costly and time consuming for the whole community.

Lastly, in general, minority representation can lead to changes that enhance the whole community and ensure that certain categories of residents are not alienated or disenfranchised. As with the 1965 Civil Rights Act, ensuring minority representation can lead to influencing a non-diverse environment to allow for other groups to make similar demands (Minta 2012) such as women and disabled citizens. Being able to influence decisions that affect one’s life and one’s
community is essential for a true democracy and for a community’s overall well-being and resiliency.

Socio-Economic Status: As noted previously, working class citizens rarely sit on boards and commissions (Flora et al. 2016). Issues of social concern for those groups as well as citizens at the poverty level may not be on the local agenda. This is an important aspect of representativeness because poverty is growing in Vermont at an alarming rate. Homelessness in Vermont has increased dramatically in recent years, especially among people with children. Vermont saw a 51% overall increase in homelessness from 2007 to 2014 – the fifth highest increase of any state (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development). Without diverse representation at the local level, boards and commissions may not make affordable housing, temporary housing, or other issues facing struggling Vermonters a priority, and this lack of focus will create negative outcomes for the entire community.

In Chittenden County, the 2013 ECOS (Environment. Community. Opportunity. Sustainability.) Plan states that in order to have a healthy, inclusive, and prosperous community, people from diverse backgrounds, including low-income participants, need to be included in decisions that affect their neighborhoods and communities (Chittenden County ECOS Plan 2013). However, meetings held by the Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission with local groups representing low-income and minority citizens reveal that New Americans, minorities, and low-income citizens feel unfamiliar with how democratic systems work, which deters them from participating. So while it may be difficult to have an individual from that group sit on a board or commission, it is still important to ensure representation at the local level for the good of the entire community.

Methods

The goals of this study were to collect demographic data from an online survey emailed to Vermont’s legislative bodies, planning commissions, and development review boards on gender, age, race/ethnicity, and socio-economic status and compare the results to the population to gauge representativeness. In addition to the literature review, we contacted government and non-profit organizations in Vermont to understand current knowledge and state data needs. The data for this demographic study of Vermont’s key local government boards and commissions were gathered through an online survey emailed to 961 members of legislative bodies, planning commissions, and development review boards in Vermont during the spring of 2016. (The legislative bodies group includes selectboards, board of trustees, city councils, and alderman as they serve in a similar capacity – as the legislative body of the municipality. The development review board category includes zoning board and board of adjustment.) The list of names was provided by the Vermont League of Cities and Towns. Of 961 possible respondents, 355 respondents completed a survey for a response rate of 37%. This survey was designed to gather demographic data for comparison purposes to the community and did not include any questions regarding attitudes or motivations. Questions to identify gender, age, race/ethnicity, and socio-economic status were
developed using the same terms and categories as U.S. Census data in order to compare the results with the larger community to determine representativeness. Respondent data was compared to the most recent data available from the Census Bureau - the 2010-2014 American Community Survey (ACS). For the list of survey questions, see the appendix.

Results

Gender: According to the U.S. Census (2014 ACS 5 year estimates) the number of men and women in Vermont is almost equal with 51% female and 49% male. The data gathered in this survey concerning the gender of key local government board and commission members in Vermont showed that 32% of respondents were female and 68% were male. In their study of boards and commissions in the 10 counties around Pittsburgh, PA, Dougherty and Easton (2011) considered any board with 67% or higher of one gender to be dominated by that gender. Using that benchmark, we can classify Vermont’s key local government boards and commissions as male dominated. (See Figure 1.)

![Figure 1](image_url)

**Figure 1.** Gender membership on key Vermont local government boards and commissions compared with female and male population in Vermont. Source for Vermont population: U.S. Census Bureau, 2014 ACS 5 year estimates.

Age: The survey results concerning the age of key local government board and commission members in Vermont showed that the median age of respondents was 62, and the average age was 60. In addition, 28% of respondents said they were retired or not looking for work. According to the U.S. Census (2014 ACS 5 year estimates), the median age in Vermont is 42. The data show that only 3% of survey respondents were under the age of 35, yet 19% of Vermonters are between the ages of 20 and 34 (See Figure 2.) The majority of key Vermont local
government board and commission members, 69%, are over 55 years of age, yet only 31% of Vermonters are over 55.

![Figure 2](image_url)

**Figure 2.** Age of key Vermont local government boards and commissions compared to the age of the Vermont population. Source for Vermont population: U.S. Census Bureau, 2014 ACS 5 year estimates.

**Race/Ethnicity:** As discussed previously, Vermont is not as diverse as many other areas around the country, 95% of Vermonters identified as white, non-Hispanic in the U.S. Census (2014 ACS 5 year estimates). The next three largest racial groups in Vermont are Asian, Black/African-American, and American Indian or Alaskan Native (2014 ACS 5 year estimates). Of the 355 responses in this study, 347 or 98% of board and commission members identified as white, non-Hispanic. The remaining 2% identified as white-Hispanic, American Indian or Alaskan Native, or Black/African American. No respondents in this study identified as Asian. With an error rate of plus or minus 5%, it appears that, at the state level, regarding race and ethnicity, key Vermont local government board and commission members do reflect the diversity of their communities. However, this diversity representation may not be true at the city and county level, which were not looked at individually in this study. In more diverse areas such as the Burlington metro area, which is home to many immigrants, diversity representation may remain an important issue.

**Socio-Economic Status:** Generally the measures used to determine socio-economic status are occupation, education, and income. This study reveals that 38.5% of key Vermont local government board and commission members make over $100,000 a year in household income whereas only 20.9% of the Vermont population makes that amount (see Table 1). However, income may not always be a reliable predictor of socio-economic status as one’s income may not account for one’s total wealth. In this study, we have already noted that 28% of respondents were retired or not looking for work, so while their regular income may be low, they could have considerable wealth.
Occupation and industry can help provide more information about socio-economic status. The survey reveals that 54.4% of respondents are business people versus 39.9% state-wide (see Table 2) and 19.1% of respondents are professionals versus 8.6% state-wide (see Table 3). However, over time, education level has been the most commonly used measure of socio-economic status in epidemiologic studies (Winkleby, Jatulis, Frank, and Fortmann 1992). This study finds that key Vermont local government board and commission members have much higher education levels than the general population, with 40% holding graduate or professional degrees versus 14% state-wide (see Table 4). While these key board and commission members may be well qualified, they may not be aware of the needs of community members with lower education levels and limited resources.

Table 1
Income of Respondents and Vermont

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income</th>
<th>Percent Responses</th>
<th>Percent Vermont*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than $10,000</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$10,000 to $24,999</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$25,000 to $49,999</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>24.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$50,000 to $99,999</td>
<td>42.1</td>
<td>33.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$100,000 to $199,000</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>17.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$200,000 or more</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2014 ACS 5 year estimates.

Table 2
Occupation of Respondents and Vermont

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Percent Responses</th>
<th>Percent Vermont*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Management, business, science, and arts occupations</td>
<td>54.4</td>
<td>39.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service occupations</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural resources, construction, and maintenance occupations</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales and office occupations</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>21.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Production, transportation, and material moving occupations</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2014 ACS 5 year estimates.
Table 3

Work Industry of Respondents and Vermont

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Percent Responses</th>
<th>Percent Vermont*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional, scientific, and management, and administrative and waste management services</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational services, and health care and social assistance</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>28.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other services, except public administration</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public administration</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting, and mining</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts, entertainment, and recreation, and accommodation and food services</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance and insurance, and real estate and rental and leasing</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail trade</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation and warehousing, and utilities</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wholesale trade</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2014 ACS 5 year estimates.

Table 4

Highest Level of Education of Respondents and Vermont

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Percent Responses</th>
<th>Percent Vermont*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Graduate or professional degree</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>14.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's Degree</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>21.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College- no degree</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Graduate (includes equivalency)</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>30.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate's Degree</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>8.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2014 ACS 5 year estimates.
Conclusions and Future Research

The findings of this demographic study indicate that key Vermont local government boards and commissions are not generally representative of their communities, especially regarding policies important to women, younger residents – especially those under the age of 35, and lower income residents. These findings are similar to the 2009 study in the Pittsburgh, PA area that found that local boards and commissions do not reflect the diversity of their local communities, and must be improved to benefit their communities (Dougherty and Easton 2011).

Highly qualified boards and commissions can provide valuable expertise that can be of great benefit to their communities. However with strong policy-making powers, there should also be a focus on representativeness for the good of the entire community. Currently, representativeness may not be a consideration in the recruitment or election of local board and commission members. This may suggest that in the area of recruitment:

- Vermont’s current local government boards and commissions should reflect on the make-up of their bodies and include diversification as a goal when recruiting new volunteers. This would be consistent with business practices that encourage diversity in hiring.
- The Vermont League of Cities and Towns should gather data on and regularly track the demographics of local government boards and commissions to gauge representativeness on an ongoing basis.
- The Vermont Legislature should consider enacting legislation to encourage gender diversity on local government boards and commissions. The State of Iowa’s gender balance statute could be reviewed for sample language (The Iowa Legislature; 69.16A).
- Work should be done with women’s organizations to understand and address barriers for women.
- The government and nonprofit sector should work collaboratively toward the common goal of increased representativeness.

Future research should focus on:

- Chittenden County and the Burlington Metro area where there is more socioeconomic and racial diversity
- Strategies to increase representativeness on local boards and commissions in Vermont, which could be undertaken by stakeholders in the underrepresented categories
- Research such as surveys or focus groups to find out what would encourage more women and younger people to apply to serve on local boards or commissions or to run for election to a legislative body
- How to do effective targeted outreach to underrepresented categories
Appendix

Vermont’s Local Government Boards and Commissions - Demographic Survey

The Center for Rural Studies at the University of Vermont is supporting a brief survey of municipal boards and commissions, which should only take a few minutes. This student-led survey is designed to learn more about what type of people become volunteer municipal officials and has not been paid for by any organization. The responses will be aggregated and analyzed at the county level, and individual responses will be kept confidential. This study has been approved by UVM’s Institutional Review Board.

Thank you for participating.

There are 11 questions in this survey

**In which county do you serve on a board or commission? * **

Please choose only one of the following:

- Addison
- Bennington
- Caledonia
- Chittenden
- Essex
- Franklin
- Grand Isle
- Lamoille
- Orange
- Orleans
- Rutland
- Washington
- Windham
- Windsor

**What type of boards or commissions have you served? * **

Please choose all that apply:

- Selectboard
- Board of Trustees
- City Council
- Alderman
- Planning Commission
- Zoning Board
- Development Review Board
- Board of Adjustment
- Other:
**What is your gender identification?**

Please choose *only one* of the following:

- Male
- Female
- Other gender identification

**What year were you born?**

Only numbers may be entered in this field.

Please write your answer here:

**What is your work status?**

Please choose *only one* of the following:

- Employed (full or part-time)
- Unemployed (but would like to work)
- Retired or Not Looking (not in the labor force)

**Please choose the Industry Category that most closely fits where you work or most recently worked.** *(Industry classification reflects the business activity of your employer or company)*

Please choose *only one* of the following:

- Agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting, and mining
- Construction
- Manufacturing
- Wholesale trade
- Retail trade
- Transportation and warehousing, and utilities
- Information
- Finance and insurance, and real estate and rental and leasing
- Professional, scientific, and management, and administrative and waste management services
- Educational services, and health care and social assistance
- Arts, entertainment, and recreation, and accommodation and food services
- Other services, except public administration
- Public administration

**Please choose the Occupation Category that most closely fits where you work or most recently worked.** *(Occupational classification reflects the type of job or work that you do.)*
Please choose only one of the following:

- Management, business, science, and arts occupations
- Service occupations
- Sales and office occupations
- Natural resources, construction, and maintenance occupations
- Production, transportation, and material moving occupations

**Do you identify as Hispanic or Latino?** *(Refers to a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race)*

Please choose only one of the following:

- Yes
- No

**How would you describe your race?**

Please choose all that apply:

- White/Caucasian
- Black/African American
- American Indian or Alaskan Native
- Asian
- Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
- Some Other Race:

Federally-defined race categories are used for this question.

Federal racial categories generally reflect a social definition of race recognized in this country and not an attempt to define race biologically, anthropologically, or genetically. In addition, it is recognized that the categories of race include race and national origin or sociocultural groups. For additional definition please select a link below to learn more.

- American Indian or Native Alaskan
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
- White

**Please describe your highest level of education.**

Please choose only one of the following:

- Less than high school diploma
- High School Graduate (includes equivalency)
Some College- no degree
Associate’s Degree
Bachelor’s Degree
Graduate or professional degree

Please choose a range below for your total household income before taxes in 2015.

Please choose only one of the following:

Less than $10,000
$10,000 to $24,999
$25,000 to $49,999
$50,000 to $99,999
$100,000 to $199,999
$200,000 or more

Submit your survey.
Thank you for completing this survey.
Acknowledgments

The author thanks Michael Moser, Research Specialist at the Center for Rural Studies at the University of Vermont, for his support in gathering the data for this study. The author is grateful to Professor Shoshanah Inwood, at the Department of Community Development and Applied Economics, University of Vermont, for her oversight, guidance, and insights. Thanks also for the insights and suggestions from Change The Story VT, the Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission, Emerge Vermont, and the Vermont Commission on Women regarding current and future research.

References


