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Diversity in the U.S. Department of State Foreign Service: Background and Issues for Congress

Members of Congress, U.S. Department of State (DOS) officials, and other stakeholders have maintained a longstanding interest in ensuring that the U.S. Department of State Foreign Service workforce (hereafter, the Foreign Service) is representative of the American people, as called for in the Foreign Service Act of 1980 (P.L. 96-465, hereafter, the Foreign Service Act).

Beyond adherence to statutory requirements, some DOS officials and other observers have asserted that a diverse Foreign Service workforce adds more perspectives to the development of U.S. foreign policy and contributes to better policymaking. While many observers note that the State Department has made substantial gains in bringing about a more diverse Foreign Service workforce, high-ranking DOS officials have said that more work is needed to build on existing progress, including with respect to fostering greater diversity in senior positions.

Background

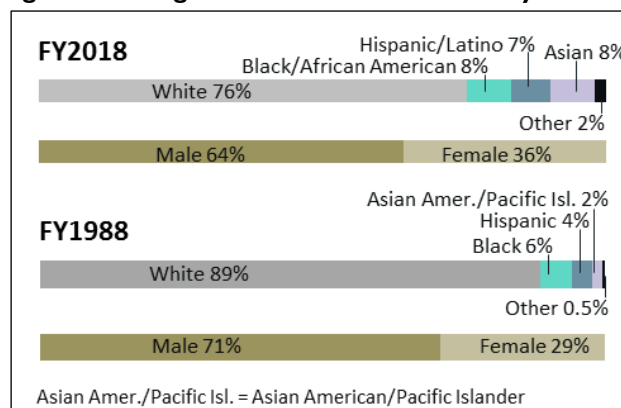
The Foreign Service has faced criticism for not being representative of the American people and has often been characterized as a bastion of white males with Ivy League educations. According to testimony DOS submitted to Congress during consideration of the Foreign Service Act, it began addressing this issue in the 1960s. For example, an affirmative action program was first established in 1967 and a prohibition on married women serving in the Foreign Service was lifted in 1971. At hearings held during this period, some witnesses and Members of Congress attributed the underrepresentation of women and minorities in the Foreign Service to causes including a lack of recruiting efforts specifically targeting underrepresented groups; concerns that the selection process disproportionately screened out minority candidates; and limited representation of women and minorities on the selection boards tasked with evaluating performance and recommending officers for promotion.

The Foreign Service Act sought to address such concerns through several provisions. For example, Section 105 requires the Secretary of State to ensure that members of and applicants to the Foreign Service are free from discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, handicapping condition, marital status, geographic or educational affiliation within the United States, or political affiliation. This section also requires that all personnel actions for career members and career candidates shall be made in accordance with merit principles. Section 211 establishes a Board of Examiners for the Foreign Service tasked with developing examinations given to those applying for appointment in the Foreign Service and periodically reviewing whether any

such examination has an adverse impact on employment opportunities for members of any race, sex, or ethnic group. Section 602 requires the Secretary of State to assure that “a substantial number of women and members of minority groups” are appointed to the selection boards responsible for personnel actions including recommending officers for promotion.

Congress conducted oversight of these matters in the years following enactment of the Foreign Service Act. It included a finding in the Foreign Relations Authorization Act for FY1988 and FY1989 (P.L. 100-204) stating that DOS had not been successful in diversifying the Foreign Service and requiring it to “substantially increase” its efforts. In 1990, Congress amended the State Department Basic Authorities Act of 1956 (P.L. 84-885) to authorize the Secretary of State to make grants to postsecondary educational institutions or students to increase knowledge of and interest in employment with the Foreign Service, with a special focus on minority students. Pursuant to these authorities, DOS launched the Thomas R. Pickering Foreign Affairs Fellowship and the Charles B. Rangel International Affairs Program in 1992 and 2002, respectively. These fellowships encourage applications from women and members of minority groups and provide financial support for graduate study, internships, and professional development activities leading to Foreign Service appointments. According to DOS, these two programs “[increased] the representation of diverse groups in the Foreign Service by nearly 21 percent ... between 1993 and 2013.” **Figure 1** illustrates progress DOS has made increasing Foreign Service diversity from 1988 to 2018.

Figure 1. Foreign Service Personnel Diversity



Source: CRS. Data from DOS and the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO).

Note: FY2018 “Other” includes Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, American Indian or Alaska Native, and Two or More Races. FY1988 “Other” includes American Indian/Alaska Native.

Trump Administration Policy and Recent Developments

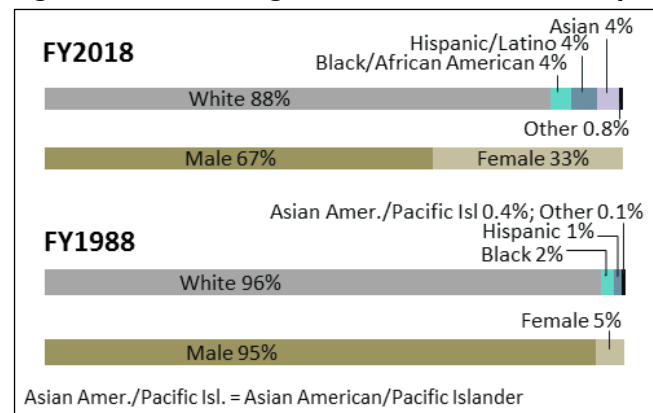
Congress continues to carry out oversight of DOS’s efforts to recruit, train, retain, and promote qualified diverse personnel in the Foreign Service. In 2016, Congress passed the Department of State Authorities Act, Fiscal Year 2017 (P.L. 114-323), which required the Secretary of State to submit quadrennial reports to Congress detailing efforts to promote equal opportunity and inclusion in the Foreign Service. DOS submitted the first report to Congress in June 2017. DOS acknowledged in this report that while women and minorities currently make up a much more significant share of the Foreign Service than they have in years past, representation lags in the Senior Foreign Service (the corps of senior leaders and experts from which the President often appoints ambassadors and other senior officials). DOS has also established an agency-wide task force to provide input regarding recruiting and retaining diverse personnel as part of its Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Plan for 2020-2024. These plans specify DOS’s efforts to recruit, train, promote, and retain a diverse and inclusive workforce. In addition, DOS has launched a pilot program intended to make merit-based pay increases more gender-neutral by anonymizing nominations for such increases submitted to selection boards.

Senior officials have emphasized that Foreign Service diversity is an ongoing DOS priority. Ambassador Carol Perez, the Director-General of the Foreign Service, has expressed concern with what she characterizes as the limited progress DOS has made in fostering diversity at more senior levels of the Foreign Service and stated that it must do more to support professional development and career advancement opportunities for Foreign Service personnel who are members of underrepresented groups (see **Figure 2**). Concern with this issue has long persisted; two separate reports that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) issued in 1989 and 2020 found that while the Foreign Service had improved diversity at the entry-level, underrepresentation of minority groups was pervasive in the senior levels. Both reports also found that DOS needed to do more to identify potential barriers within its personnel practices to the hiring and advancement of minorities and women in the Foreign Service. In the 2020 report, GAO recommended that DOS identify such barriers through means including analyzing workforce data and feedback from employee groups, such as the Asian American Foreign Affairs Association and Executive Women at State.

Concern about DOS diversity has been heightened amid protests of racial injustice that erupted in the United States and around the world following the death of George Floyd in the custody of the Minneapolis police. For example, the American Academy of Diplomacy (AAD) issued a statement asserting that a diverse DOS workforce signals to the rest of the world that the United States draws on the strength of all of its citizens. The statement also included policy recommendations to increase Foreign Service workforce diversity, such as increasing recruitment of

women and minorities and strengthening mentorship programs for female and minority officers.

Figure 2. Senior Foreign Service Personnel Diversity



Source: CRS. Data from DOS and GAO.

Note: FY2018 “Other” includes Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, American Indian or Alaska Native, and Two or More Races. FY1988 “Other” includes American Indian/Alaska Native.

Issues for the 116th Congress

On June 17, 2020, the House Foreign Affairs Committee’s Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations held a hearing titled “Diversity and Diplomacy: Why an Inclusive State Department Would Strengthen U.S. Foreign Policy.” At the hearing, some Members of Congress agreed that DOS continues to face difficulties retaining minority FSOs to enable their promotion to senior positions. To help address this and related challenges, former senior DOS officials serving as witnesses recommended ensuring that promotion criteria include an assessment of a candidate’s record in supporting diversity and inclusion efforts. Witnesses also indicated their support for more robust exit surveys to enable DOS to identify systemic issues causing minority officers to leave the Foreign Service.

Several provisions of the Department of State Authorization Act of 2019 (H.R. 3352) are intended to strengthen oversight of DOS efforts to recruit and retain a diverse Foreign Service workforce. For example, Section 402 would require DOS to provide Congress additional data regarding the diversity of its workforce and assess its efforts to refrain from unlawful discrimination throughout the employment process, including hiring and promotion. Section 403 of the bill would require DOS to provide optional exit interviews to all individuals leaving DOS and use information collected in these interviews when considering whether to implement policy changes. Section 404 would make anti-harassment and anti-discrimination training mandatory for individuals in senior and supervisory positions. Finally, Section 405 would require the Secretary of State to implement advancement requirements that reward officials who foster an inclusive environment. This bill passed the House of Representatives on July 25, 2019, and is pending before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations.

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