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Where party lines cross

Nicole Sotelo | May. 14, 2010

Voting on Arizona's new immigration enforcement law, SB 1070, which its opponents say promotes racial profiling, came down exactly along party lines. Almost. There was one Republican who voted with the Democrats against the bill. And that legislator was a woman.

While it may be an anomaly, it is one that occurs more often than one may think. Studies point to the fact that the increased presence of women and people of color does affect what laws are promoted and passed: evidence to which the government *and the church* should take notice.

For example, a report published by the Center for American Women and Politics indicates that women legislators are more likely to cast liberal votes, regardless of their party, particularly around legislation that affects women, children and other issues affecting the domestic sphere from family and medical leave to assault weapons bans.
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History is replete with examples of the deep impact of diverse representation in legislative bodies. In 1993, U.S. Senator Jesse Helms sponsored a bill that would have renewed the patent on the Confederate flag insignia by the United Daughters of the Confederacy. Carol Moseley-Braun, the only African-American in the Senate at the time, is said to have been the pivotal voice in reversing what would have been a routine vote of approval.

The 1964 Civil Rights Act was amended to include sex discrimination, in part, by the passionate advocacy, not of a man, but of Representative Martha Wright Griffiths, D-Mich. And in 1944, it was Representative William Dawson, the only African-American in Congress who stood bravely to fight for the continuance of the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) and he was supported by a woman, Representative Mary Norton.

Dawson knew that he was not only representing his district, but had to advocate for his fellow Blacks who were not adequately represented in congress. He was quoted as saying that he spoke for ?more than a million Negro Americans fighting today with our armed forces and more than 13,000,000 here at home.?

Patsy Mink, the first woman of color elected to Congress, recalled ?because there were only eight women at the time who were Members of Congress ? I had a special burden to bear to speak for [all women], because they didn?t have people who could express their concerns for them adequately.?

While the number of people of color and women in Congress has increased over the last 50 years, the numbers still remain disproportionate with the size of those constituencies in the general population. For example, the Senate today has only 17 women members out of 100, in a country where women make up over half of the citizenry. Out of the 435 seats in the House, only 42 are held by those who identify as Black, 25 by Hispanic, five by Asian and one by Native American.

While there is clearly not representational parity in the U.S. Congress, there is even less in the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. While the church hierarchy is, by no means, a democracy, it is interesting to take note of their demographics. There are only 40 Hispanic/Latino bishops who have been ordained and 28 are active;

comprising only 9 percent of all Catholic bishops in the United States. This compares with statistics -- statistics from the bishops' conference itself -- that estimate that 35 percent of all Catholics in the United States are Hispanic/Latino. The numbers of Black, Asian and Native American representation among the bishops is even lower.

And when it comes to women bishops, well, you know the score.

What is true in Congress is true in the bishops? conference. Diversity of demographics is critical to promoting laws or doctrine that assists the common good, not just the common *some*.

While I do believe in the democratic principles that promote the ability of one person of a particular race or gender to represent the needs of a plural populace, I also believe it is clear that having diverse representation and diverse views among law-making bodies is a critical component of healthy governance and, in return, healthy communities.

So thank you, Arizona Senator Carolyn Allen, for voting against SB 1070. And thank you bishops for your support of immigrants in the face of this unjust law. Now I invite you to support the inclusion of other diverse groups within your *own* ranks. The Vatican has given you the party line. It?s time to cross it.

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