

Sasha Bronovitskiy – Honorable Mention

On the way home from middle school, I would sit in the back of my dad's pickup truck and involuntarily listen to Mark Levin stammer about the incompetence of women on the radio. His misogynistic remarks were slighted and patronizing. "Women are too hormonal and irrational. Could you imagine giving a woman president the nuclear codes? She'd start a world war during that time of the month." After the commercial break, he would always transition to a discussion about race. His commentary withered from subtly condescending to shamelessly crass. "He had a previous criminal record and his hair pick looked like a gun, of course the officer had the right to shoot him! He was a delinquent!" These are not exact quotes, but encapsulate the message of his maniacal verbiage.

An AP Government-induced realization that rocked my world at fourteen years old was that many men like Mark Levin occupied every level of public office: President Donald Trump, who actively denounced landmark equal rights legislation; Senator Robert Byrd, who rallied for the Klan before holding office; and Virginia Governor Ralph Northam, who rationalized painting his face black for a college Halloween party. The recent examples do not end there. These are men who vehemently believe I, a woman, should not have the right to choose what I do with my body. They are men who refuse to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment because "women already have the same rights men do." They are the men that believe my peers are defined by the stereotypes associated with their race, ethnicity, and religion. They not only fail to represent my rights as a woman and an ally, but consistently uphold legislation that diminishes my autonomy in this world. Additionally, I am a white woman and I have the privilege of not being subjected to the full magnitude of systematic oppression upheld by many government officials. I do not have it the worst. This realization was more than just disquieting, it was horrifying.

A minority presence in government is not just a matter of representation. It is imperative to equitable legislation. It should go without saying that a democratic government must reflect the needs and interests of every inhabitant of the United States, not the agendas of the wealthy white men that seem to run rampant through the halls of the Capitol. The United States does not belong to them, nor are their policies a priority above all other legislation on the docket. The importance of minority representation is rooted in life experience. To put it plainly, any person who is not a rich white man will encounter some form of prejudice throughout his or her lifetime. The perspectives that result from discrimination are essential to an entity that governs millions of minorities. No one can understand the full extent of this plight unless they have experienced it themselves. A sustainable government is empathetic. And considering that legislation dictates nearly every aspect of life, empathy is necessary to the survival of marginalized people.

Kamala Harris has cemented her place in office through a victory with unprecedented voter turnout. Harris has introduced her experiences as a Black, Asian-American woman and the empathy that comes with them to a position that has only ever witnessed the apathetic white man. However, her election does not afford me the cliché personal satisfaction of thinking "Finally! If she did it, I can certainly do it too!" Her election does not suddenly legitimize the place of women in prestigious governmental offices; their presence has always been valid. Instead, Harris's election is significant because of the statement it makes: 2020 marked the first time a person who possesses empathy for the majority of Americans--over 166 million women and 90 million people of color--was elected into a high-level office. Minority representation is an alarm that has been on snooze since 1777, and it is time for us to switch it off, get out of bed, and face the work that must be done to build a government that is equitable for all. Harris's election is a great step forward, but we still have infinitely many steps to navigate.

Still, I can not help but feel incredibly excited to witness the impacts that Harris's empathy could have on current and future generations. Usually, the Vice President's legislative influence is negligible, but Harris's election comes at an exceptionally influential time. She holds the tie-breaking vote in an equally divided Senate and has aligned interests with a Democrat-controlled House of Representatives. Her election, coupled with the

record number of women in the 117th Congress, gives female empathy mobility within the government. Harris's empathy is no longer confined exclusively to the walls of the Vice President's office. Traditionally, the impacts of empathy are thought of as being limited to the individual who possesses it and the select few people he or she encounters. However, Vice President Harris does not just encounter a few people. Her empathy could meaningfully reach the millions of people who are affected by government legislation.

Harris's election, along with the recent trend of more equitable representation in Congress, has the potential to completely redefine the purpose of government for the future inhabitants of the United States. Many Americans, including myself, lack external efficacy. We tend to feel detached to our government and often perceive it as this unreachable entity that only responds to our concerns in the format of lifeless template emails. And many Americans have accepted this. The purpose of government has been contorted. We see privileged, self-serving elected officials defining government policy for decades and we can not help but rationalize that we are powerless to do anything about it. Weak efficacy stems from a lack of relatability. We simply can not identify with a government that refuses to relate to us. As we progress, we see that our government is starting to look more like ourselves, our neighbors, and our communities, and we feel that we have a place in our government: senators struggling with permanent disabilities, representatives who were born into poverty, and a Vice President who has battled life-long racism and sexism. The natural response to experiencing the negative repercussions of uncontrollable circumstances is wanting to actively work against the prejudice you have faced and being determined to make sure what happened to you never happens to anyone like you again. The power of equitable representation is rooted in empathy. Empathy is redefining our government to its original purpose: an advocate of the people, by the people, and for the people.