



Latinx Judges in the Federal Judiciary

A Series of Fact Sheets on the Lack of Diversity on the Bench

By Danielle Root

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Federal judges wield immense power. Each day, they make decisions that affect people's livelihoods, well-being, and fundamental rights. However, a recent report from the Center for American Progress demonstrates that this power is largely held by individuals who do not reflect the diversity of American society.¹

Overall, 80 percent of all sitting federal judges in the nation are white, compared with a U.S. population that is only 60 percent white. In addition, 73 percent of all sitting judges are male, while men make up slightly less than half of the population. Strikingly, there are only two sitting American Indian judges and no Muslim judges on the federal courts.²

Latinx judges are also drastically underrepresented on the bench. The report uncovered several startling findings:³

- **Federal judiciary:** Latinx people comprise just 6.6 percent of sitting judges and 9 percent of active judges on the federal bench.⁴ To put those numbers in perspective, more than 18 percent of the U.S. population is Latinx.
- **Latinx women:** There are only 27 Latinas sitting on the federal courts, comprising approximately 2 percent of all sitting federal judges.⁵ Among active judges, only about 3 percent are Latinas.
- **Federal courts of appeals:** There are only 16 Latinx judges sitting on U.S. courts of appeals, comprising just 5.5 percent of all sitting U.S. circuit judges. Among active federal judges, this number decreases to 13, amounting to just 7.4 percent of all active judges serving on U.S. courts of appeals.⁶
- **Federal district courts:** There are only 73 sitting Latinx judges serving on federal district courts, comprising just 6.9 percent of all sitting district court judges. Among active district court judges, this number decreases to 56, amounting to just 9.6 percent of all active judges serving on U.S. district courts.⁷
- **U.S. Supreme Court:** There is—and only ever has been—one Latinx justice on the U.S. Supreme Court, Justice Sonia Sotomayor, who was appointed in 2009.
- **5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals:** There is only one sitting Latinx judge on the 5th Circuit—which covers Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas—accounting for just 4 percent of that court's composition, despite the fact that Hispanics comprise more than 32 percent of the jurisdiction's population. There are no active Latinx judges serving on the 5th Circuit.



See also: [“Building a More Inclusive Federal Judiciary”](#) by Danielle Root, Jake Faleschini, and Grace Oyenubi

- **Judicial appointees:** As of August 2019, President Donald Trump had only appointed five Latinx judges—though he did appoint a sixth in September.⁸ To date, Latinx judges comprise just 4 percent of all Trump’s judicial appointees. In comparison, 9.5 percent of former President Barack Obama’s appointees were Latinx. Trump has not appointed a single Latinx judge to a U.S. courts of appeal.⁹

FIGURE 1

Latinx people are underrepresented on federal courts compared with their share of the U.S. population

Proportion of sitting federal judges who are Latinx compared with proportion of U.S. population that is Latinx



Note: The data reflect judges on Article III courts, designated in the U.S. Constitution, as of August 2019.

Sources: U.S. Federal Judicial Center, "Biographical Directory of Article III Federal Judges, 1789-present: Advanced Search Criteria," available at <https://www.fjc.gov/history/judges/search/advanced-search> (last accessed August 2019); U.S. Census Bureau, "Annual Estimates of the Resident Population by Sex, Age, Race, and Hispanic Origin for the United States and States: April 1, 2010 to July 1, 2018," available at, <https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=bkmk#> (last accessed August 2019).

FIGURE 2

President Trump has failed to prioritize appointing Latinx judges

Proportion of President Trump's federal judge appointees who are Latinx compared with President Obama's



Note: The data reflect Trump’s judicial appointees to Article III courts, designated in the U.S. Constitution, as of August 2019, Trump appointed an additional Latinx judge in September 2019. Therefore, as of the publication of this fact sheet, Trump has appointed six Latinx federal judges, which amounts to just 4 percent of all his judicial appointments to date.

Source: U.S. Federal Judicial Center, "Biographical Directory of Article III Federal Judges, 1789-present: Advanced Search Criteria," available at <https://www.fjc.gov/history/judges/search/advanced-search> (last accessed August 2019).

Diversity adds immense value to the judiciary. For parties to a case and the public at large, the court’s legitimacy is strengthened when many of the decision-makers look like or share similar characteristics to them. This is particularly true now when federal courts are increasingly taking up cases pertaining to immigrant rights and matters of equality. However, while previous presidential administrations have made concerted efforts to diversify the bench, President Trump has nominated and appointed the least racially and ethnically diverse group of federal judges since the 1980s.

CAP’s report on this lack of judicial diversity argues for a variety of reforms that would not only reverse this trend but also transform today’s whitewashed judiciary into one that reflects the viewpoints and experiences of the populace it serves.

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Endnotes

- 1 Danielle Root, Jake Faleschini, and Grace Oyenubi, “Building a More Inclusive Federal Judiciary” (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2019), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/courts/reports/2019/10/03/475359/building-inclusive-federal-judiciary/>.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Most data outlined in this fact sheet reflect findings from CAP’s recent report on judicial diversity, although some data points have been updated to reflect changes to the federal judiciary since August 2019. See Ibid.
- 4 Diversity in the federal judiciary can be measured by looking at “sitting” or “active” judges. The dataset for sitting judges includes those serving in senior status, which is a form of semi-retirement. Datasets for active judges, on the other hand, do not include senior status judges and only reflect judges who serve on the courts full time. Because judges in senior status can still hear cases, the authors have included them in this analysis. According to the federal courts’ official website, senior status judges “typically handle about 15 percent of the federal courts’ workload annually.” See Root, Faleschini, and Oyenubi, “Building a More Inclusive Federal Judiciary”; U.S. Courts, “FAQs: Federal Judges, 5. What is a senior judge?”, available at <https://www.uscourts.gov/faqs-federal-judges#faq-What-is-a-senior-judge?> (last accessed September 2019).
- 5 Federal Judicial Center, “Biographical Directory of Article III Federal Judges, 1789-Present,” available at <https://www.fjc.gov/history/judges/search/advanced-search> (last accessed October 2019).
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid.