

Diverse citizens need diverse leaders



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I was running on the treadmill at the gym when I glanced up at the TV and saw a live broadcast of Barack Obama announcing his candidacy for president. I was compelled to walk over to the TV to hear a few words of his historic announcement.

That announcement came around the same time as similar announcements from New York's own senator, Hillary Clinton, and New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson, a Hispanic American. What do all these politicians have in common and why is it that after seeing Obama's announcement I was filled with a sense of hope and excitement? None of them is a white man and all are running for president of the United States.

I was honored to be elected to represent the 21st Legislative District in the County Legislature in 2005. I joined three other

women serving in the legislature. We are now four out of 29 — hardly representative of women, who make up 50 percent of the Monroe County population.

I am in the company of three African-American men, again out of 29 legislators, and one Hispanic man. It is worth noting that all of these representatives of color — Jose Cruz, Willie Joe Lightfoot, Glenn Gamble and Calvin Lee Jr. — are Democrats. On the Republican side of the aisle, there are no faces of color. And, quite frankly, that assessment includes the county executive's administration.

So, why is having three atypical candidates running for president so important? Certainly, white male politicians are capable of giving good representation to all constituents and being good leaders. Mayor Robert Duffy and Gov. Eliot Spitzer are just two examples of the many who do so. And I do believe each candidate has to be judged by his or her qualifications and skills.

However, what really does make a difference and what distinguishes each elected representative is the life experience

he or she brings to the table. For example, I have never experienced being pulled over while driving because of my skin color. Or having someone laugh at me because I spoke English with an accent.

However, I have experienced sitting in a business meeting knowing full well that the person I'm working with is more interested in sneaking glances down my blouse than listening to what I was saying. And I may have to decide to give up years of service at work, promotion possibilities and an increased pension if I choose to take time off to raise a child.

These life experiences contribute greatly to how we analyze policies, look at programs, prioritize spending and make many other decisions that are the core of governing. Without having a diverse elected body, issues that matter to many people can be ignored, even unintentionally, or not prioritized.

That is why it is so exciting to see two men of color and a woman vying for president in 2008. The ongoing conversation about whether or not our country is ready to elect a woman or a person of color to its highest

office is offensive and ignorant. One only has to look at a sprinkling of the countries that have elected women to their highest offices — such as Haiti, Finland, Ireland, Liberia, Philippines and Chile — to see that the argument that we're not ready is without merit. Are we truly that far behind those countries that we feel only white men can govern America? Engaging in this conversation serves as a distraction to the real issues and qualifications of each candidate and it should stop.

It is too early to say if Barack, or Hillary or Bill will survive the months leading up to the November 2008 election. All will have to surmount months of attacks that stir racism and play on people's unfounded fears. It will be a long fight. And in the end, they may not make it. But, we are wise to embrace their candidacies and feel optimistic that we have credible candidates, at least on the Democratic side, running for president who reflect the diversity, strength and future of our country. □

Andrews, a Democrat, represents the 21st District in the Monroe County Legislature.