



# LATINO POLICY & ISSUES BRIEF

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## NOT QUITE A BREAKTHROUGH: THE OSCARS AND ACTORS OF COLOR, 2002–2012

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The Oscar nominees this year include two black women who are favored to win: Viola Davis, nominated for Best Actress, and Octavia Spencer, nominated for Best Supporting Actress. Another actor of color, Demián Bichir, a Latino, was a surprise nominee for Best Actor. This scenario recalls 2002, when Halle Berry and Denzel Washington won Academy Awards for Best Actress and Best Actor in a year that also included Will Smith's nomination for Best Actor and Sidney Poitier's receipt of an honorary Oscar for lifetime achievement.

That unprecedented slate of nominees led some to describe 2002 as a breakthrough year for actors of color, after their many decades on the margins of the film industry. In her emotional acceptance speech, Berry said, "This moment is for Dorothy Dandridge, Lena Horne, Diahann Carroll. . . . And it's for every nameless, faceless woman of color that now has a chance because this door tonight has been opened" (Berry 2001; Munoz 2002). Similarly, Tom Ortenberg, president of Lions Gate Films, which released Berry's *Monster's Ball*, noted, "I think it was a watershed evening. I do think this will help end the pigeonholing that goes on for black actors and other people of color and just help open people's

eyes in the corridors of power that old stereotypes don't apply anymore" (Lyman 2002).

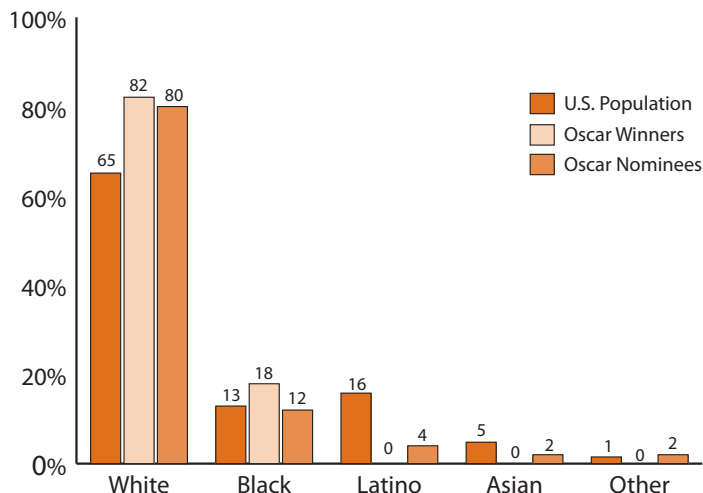
Did 2002 truly herald a new era for actors of color? To answer that question, we analyzed the career paths of Oscar winners and nominees since 2002. Our study discovered some progress for actors of color, but we also found considerable continuing racial/ethnic disparity:

- All Best Actress winners since 2002 have been white.
- No winner in any acting category during the last ten years has been Latino, Asian American, or Native American.
- Oscar winners and nominees of color make fewer movies per year after their nominations than their white peers do.
- Oscar winners and nominees of color are more likely than their white peers to work in television, which is considered lower-status work.
- Oscar winners and nominees of color are less likely than their white peers to receive subsequent nominations.

From 1990 through 2000, about 9 percent of the Oscar nominees in the top categories were people of color (Munoz 2002).<sup>1</sup> Our analysis shows that from 2002 through 2012, almost 20 percent of nominees were people of color, which is a notable increase (fig. 1).<sup>2</sup> This figure, however, falls short of representing the American public, one-third of which is comprised of people of color.<sup>3</sup> In particular, Latinos are substantially underrepresented. No winner in any acting category since 2002 has been Latino, Asian American, or Native American—winners have been overwhelmingly white (fig. 2).

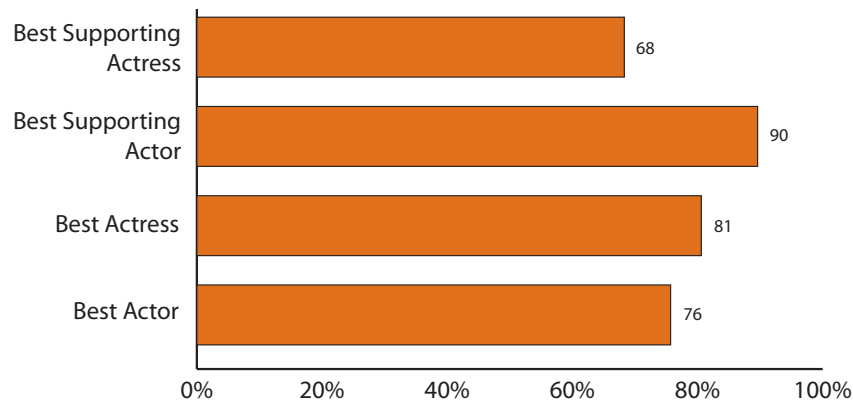
An analysis of actors' careers following a nomination or a win shows additional race- and gender-based disparities. None of the actors of color who won Oscars from 2002 through

**Figure 1. Racial/Ethnic Distribution of Oscar Winners and Nominees, Compared to the U.S. Population**



Note: The study analyzed nominees from 2002–2012 and winners from 2002–2011; percentages are rounded. Source: Authors’ study and U.S. Census Bureau (2010).

**Figure 2. White Nominees in Each Acting Category**



Note: The study analyzed nominees from 2002–2012 and winners from 2002–2011; percentages are rounded. Source: Authors’ study.

2011 was nominated subsequently, while 35 percent of white winners received a subsequent nomination. Oscar nominees of color were less likely than their white peers to receive a subsequent nomination, at 19 percent and 25 percent, respectively. Nominees of color also starred in fewer films than their white counterparts did: 1.52 films versus 2.03 films, respectively.<sup>4</sup> For example, Rinko Kikuchi and Adriana Barraza were nominated in 2006 for their supporting performances in *Babel*; despite this recognition, both have largely vanished from mainstream film. The racial disparity is smaller for winners: white actors made 1.80 movies per year, whereas actors of color made 1.56 movies per year.

Winners and nominees of color are much more likely than their white peers to perform in TV, which is considered work of lower status. For actors of color, 71 percent of winners and 72 percent of nominees worked in TV, compared to 36 percent of white winners and 51 percent of white nominees.<sup>5</sup> This trend likely reflects limited opportunities in film. As Don Cheadle (nominated for Best Actor for his work in *Hotel Rwanda*) explained, he accepted a lead role in Showtime’s *House of Lies* because his character is a “completely developed character. That doesn’t happen a lot in roles that feature African-Americans” (Lyman 2002).

A comparison of the Best Actress and Best Supporting Actress fields

demonstrates that the industry channels women of color into supporting roles. The Best Actress field is disproportionately white: 81 percent of nominees and 90 percent of winners. No Latina, Asian, or Native American woman has won during this time period, and only one black woman other than Viola Davis has been nominated: Gabourey Sidibe, the star of *Precious*, who is now playing a supporting role on a Showtime series. Two Latinas (Salma Hayek and Catalina Sandino Moreno) have been nominated, but no Asian American.

The Best Supporting Actress category is the most diverse, with women of color constituting 32 percent of the nominees. Most of these nominees, however, have been black women playing roles that embodied some combination of longstanding stereotypes: women who are sassy, full-figured, maternal, or non-sexual. Examples include winners Mo’Nique and Jennifer Hudson (and likely winner Octavia Spencer) and nominees Queen Latifah, Taraji P. Henson, and Ruby Dee. Winning an Oscar for such a part opens few career doors because there are a limited number of such racially defined roles. A victory for playing a “mammy” has not provided access to romantic lead roles, which are more prestigious and more lucrative. In short, Hollywood has required black female Oscar nominees and winners to resemble Hattie McDaniel more than Halle Berry. Gender and race combine to block access for women of color.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Creating greater access to Oscar-caliber roles for actors of color will require concerted efforts at multiple levels.

**Make the Academy more diverse.** The *Los Angeles Times* recently revealed that the Academy’s membership is 94 percent white and 77 percent male and that just one member of its forty-three-member Board of Governors is a person of color (Horn, Sperling, and Smith 2012). These demographics help

explain the lack of racial/ethnic diversity among Oscar nominees and winners.<sup>6</sup> The Academy should form a task force to examine its membership procedures and develop steps to make it more inclusive of people of color and women. In light of its exclusionary membership, the Academy's passive stance toward diversity is inadequate.<sup>7</sup> The task force should include Academy members and nonmembers, including experts on antidiscrimination law.

**Develop and support young actors of color.** Each year Hollywood executives select unknown white male actors (such as Armie Hammer, Chris Hemsworth, and Andrew Garfield) and cast them in big-budget action films and prestige projects, grooming them to become the next Brad Pitt or Tom Cruise. Actors of color are routinely shut out of these game-changing roles. Studios and directors should ask whether the racial and gender limitations are truly necessary to the storyline (see Robinson 2007). Studios also should track the race and gender of major roles and re-examine their hiring procedures to promote greater inclusion.

**Diversify behind-the-scenes decision-making.** Hollywood is even less diverse behind the scenes. As Spike Lee recently stated in *The Hollywood Reporter*, the cadre of executives who can green-light a film is all white (Wilson 2012). Diversifying the ranks of executives, producers, directors, and writers would lead to richer and more representative filmmaking, and this diversity could ultimately transform the Academy and its preferences.

## NOTES

The authors thank Vikram Swaruup, who provided research assistance.

1. Munoz (2002) analyzes the awards for leading actor, leading actress, supporting actor, supporting actress, and director.
2. We examined every Oscar win and nomination for Best Actor, Best Actress, Best Supporting Actor, and Best Supporting Actress since 2002, compiling data for each actor's gender, race/ethnicity, and age, plus information about each of their films: each film for which he or she was nominated or won; the total number of films made after a win or nomination; the total number of films made to date; the number of films made each year since a win or nomination; the name, budget, and gross box office earnings of each of these films; the genre of role played by the nominee; the billing order of the nominee; whether the nominee participated in television work after a win or nomination; and the type of any television roles (for example, lead, recurring character, guest, supporting character). To verify an actor's identity, we consulted the Academy's database and the Internet Movie Database (IMDB-Pro), a standard source for information on casting, order of billing, box office gross, budget, and other information. To determine the race/ethnicity of each actor, we reviewed photos, used our common knowledge of an actor's racial/ethnic background, and consulted autobiographical statements on IMDB-Pro. We employed traditional U.S. racial/ethnic categories (white, black, Latino, Asian, and Native-American) plus categories created for multiracial actors and European actors such as winners Javier Bardem and Penelope Cruz, who may not fit traditional U.S. racial categories. Because we studied all Oscar nominees from 2002 to 2012 (and winners from 2002 to 2011), rather than a random sample, statistical significance tests are not relevant.
3. Demographic data are from U.S. Census Bureau (2010).
4. For films made after a win or nomination, we counted those that were listed as either completed or in post-production and excluded those for which the actor provided a voice, those with very limited release (such as only at film festivals), and those released only outside the United States. An actor's total number of films was the number listed on IMDB-Pro; we excluded short films and films in which the actor was uncredited, provided only a voice, or was listed for special

thanks. The average number of films was calculated using data for each actor per year.

5. For nominees, this effect is driven primarily by a wide racial disparity among female actors.

6. Horn, Sperling, and Smith (2012) also reported that the median age of Academy members is sixty-two, which helps explain the types of roles and films that the Academy has chosen to honor. Blacks have long criticized the Academy for rewarding comforting films such as *Driving Miss Daisy*, *The Blind Side*, and *The Help* and ignoring more challenging fare such as *Do The Right Thing*.

7. Academy president Tom Sherak suggested that the Academy will not make affirmative efforts to become more inclusive and instead will wait for people of color and women to express an interest in getting involved with the Academy (Horn, Sperling, and Smith 2012).

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In this study of Oscar winners and nominees from 2002 to 2012, the authors found considerable continuing racial/ethnic disparity. The authors discovered, for example, that actors of color are less likely than their white peers to receive subsequent nominations, and they make fewer movies per year after their nominations.

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