“Representation and Inclusion in Public Organizations: Evidence from the U.K. Civil Service” by Rhys Andrews and Rachel Ashworth seeks to answer the following question: whether having the gender and minority ethnic composition of the workforce in public sector organizations mirror the population it serves (“representativeness”) influences the levels of public services, discrimination, and bullying experienced by employees within these organizations.

Based on a survey of available literature and a statistical analysis of empirical data drawn from the U.K. Civil Service People Survey, the authors conclude that gender and minority ethnic representativeness positively relates to higher perceptions of inclusion and to lower levels of personal experience with discrimination and bullying at work.

Efforts to quantify the importance and impact of diversity-related practices in the workplace are to be applauded because without empirical evidence, it is difficult to make the “business case” that is often an imperative for sustained commitment to such efforts. Having championed diversity programs in both the private and public sectors, it is evident to me that until such programs are hardwired into business practices to achieve certain organizational ends, changes in economy, management, and priorities may result in reevaluations of (and reduced commitment to) diversity-related initiatives. In the face of ever-evolving priorities, absent a clearly articulated and substantiated rationale, diversity can suffer.

That said, a study such as this, relying on perceptions rather than objective measures, presents its own challenges. For instance, there is no factual basis to support the alleged extent to which discrimination and/or bullying actually occurred. The authors simply explore the employees’ “sense” of inclusion and self-reported “experiences” with discrimination or bullying. The strength of their argument is also somewhat limited by the fact that the authors can only point to a correlation between “representativeness” and their findings, not causation.

The authors suggest that the theory that “representative public service organizations are more likely to produce improved policy outcomes for citizens in general” (emphasis added) has already been tested. Therefore, they focus instead on the impact of representativeness within public organizations. To the extent the study does so (finding that “representativeness” results in greater perceptions of employee inclusion) and stops there, it essentially serves as an employee satisfaction analysis (i.e., “The 100 Most Inclusive Places to Work”). Research more firmly establishing superior government services as the outcome would provide a more persuasive reason for employers and public agencies to strive for representation and inclusion.

Compare, for example, the Catalyst study of Fortune 500 companies in the private sector. In that study, Catalyst found that the representation of women on executive boards correlates with measurable strong financial performance of Fortune 500 companies (demonstrated by return on sales, return on invested capital, and return on equity for at least three years). The study found that companies with sustained high representation of women board directors significantly outperformed those with sustained low representation. It may be that “the bottom line” is easier to measure in the shareholder value of the private sector (and a “business case” is easier to establish). However, the authors should consider further research that would allow them to articulate why “employee satisfaction” translates into better results in the public sector, or how a “better result” is to be measured vis-à-vis the communities these public organizations serve. Such a study might utilize survey questions that relate to the impact that “inclusion” or job satisfaction has on the work of the organization. For instance, the 2013 version of the Civil Service People Survey included two questions as follows: “My organisation inspires me to do the best in my job” and “My organisation motivates me to help it achieve its objectives.”

Other relevant key issues worth further attention include consideration of whether the distribution
Again, the effort to quantify the positive impact of diversity is critical. While the study successfully focuses attention on the important point that employee satisfaction may well be correlated with superior results, the authors recognize that many questions remain to be researched. The public sector will certainly benefit from such exploration.

Acknowledgments
Many thanks to Judith Massis-Sanchez, counsel at Queens College, City University of New York, for her insights and able assistance in preparing this commentary.

Note