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Boston ushers in historic diversity with new City Council, leadership

By [Milton J. Valencia](#) Globe Staff, January 6, 2020, 7:58 p.m.



The new Boston City Council was sworn in Monday morning at Faneuil Hall by Mayor Marty Walsh. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF/GLOBE STAFF

Boston entered a new political frontier Monday, officially ushering in the most diverse City Council in the city's history and electing new leadership with what councilors said is a proactive agenda to tackle inequities in housing, transportation, and education access.

“Representation matters, and this body is much more representative of a city that we all love and serve,” said Councilor Kim Janey, who was elected the new council president at the panel’s first meeting of the year, the first president in decades to represent Roxbury, one of the city’s poorest neighborhoods.

“Everyone deserves a seat and everyone deserves to be heard,” she said, in an acceptance speech. She replaces Councilor Andrea Campbell, who can no longer serve in that post because of term limits.

At an inauguration ceremony earlier Monday at Faneuil Hall — where Sam Adams, James Otis, and other white historic figures encouraged the Revolutionary War — four new councilors officially joined the body, now its most diverse in history, with the most people of color and the first majority of women. Boston, did not elect its first female black councilor, Ayanna Pressley, until 10 years ago, as the city’s communities of color became a majority during the last two decades.

Kenzie Bok, an activist who holds a doctorate in political thought, was sworn in to represent District Eight, which is based in Back Bay.

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Liz Breadon, an activist and massage therapist by trade, who represents Allston and Brighton in District Nine, was sworn in as the first openly gay woman councilor.

Ricardo Arroyo, a lawyer and social justice advocate whose District Five seat is largely based in Hyde Park, brings a Latino voice to the council.

And Julia Mejia, a community activist who won an at-large seat [by one vote](#) after a dramatic recount in December, is the first Afro-Latina and immigrant councilor, and her ascension sparked perhaps the greatest applause Monday during the swearing-in ceremony, and in pictures and celebrations thereafter. She grew tearful at times, surrounded by supporters.

The new members' elections came after one of the most intense election campaigns in recent history, amid newfound excitement in the City Council — and the stepping-stone it can provide, following former councilor Ayanna Pressley's surprising ascension a year ago to Congress. Over the last two terms, councilors have challenged the power of Mayor Martin J. Walsh like never before and have spearheaded progressive legislation in areas including housing and climate change.

"I believe this can be the most effective, most powerful council," said former councilor Tito Jackson, who represented Roxbury until he unsuccessfully challenged Walsh in 2017.

"They are taking on the most important issues affecting our city," he said.

State Representative Nika C. Elugardo, who [staged a successful longshot bid](#) to win her Jamaica Plain-based seat over incumbent Jeffrey Sanchez 16 months ago said that the ceremony at historic Faneuil Hall was a symbolic measure of the progress Boston's minority communities have made in government.

"You can just see people who come from a long heritage of people telling us, 'you're not supposed to be here,' now up front leading. And all that's bursting through . . . is going to

be good for everyone — not just for immigrants, not just for people of color, not just for women, but for everyone. I was just deeply encouraged in my spirit.”

During the swearing-in ceremony, Walsh told councilors he looked forward to collaborating with them on their agenda on housing, transportation, and education access.

“These are priorities we all share together, and we want to make sure Boston is the best city for those of us who want to stay here and live here,” the mayor said. “We’re going to work together to tackle our biggest challenges in the spirit of collaboration.”

Janey was nominated to serve as president by Councilor Michelle Wu, who in 2016 was the first woman of color to be elected council president. Wu said during the council’s first meeting that she was “honored to make a motion . . . for justice, equity and opportunity.”

Janey had said in December that she [had garnered enough votes](#) among her colleagues to take the post. On Monday she said she is looking forward to leading the panel, amid challenges to bring equity to a city that is seeing an economic boom that leaves many behind in housing, education, and health care. The city has some of the world’s finest hospitals, and yet a worsening opioid epidemic, she said.

As president, Janey said, she will create the city’s first PILOT Committee, to examine ways that some of the city’s world-class, nonprofit institutions can make payments to the city in lieu of taxes, to help generate revenue from organizations who have benefited from the city’s wealth.

“In neighborhoods all across our city, families are finding it increasingly difficult to make ends . . . income inequality is a persistent and pervasive problem plaguing our city, our commonwealth and our country,” she said. “Our vision for 2020 has to be one in which we lift up those who have been left behind.”

She added: “Let’s find new ways to tackle old problems.”

Stephanie Ebbert of the Globe Staff contributed to this report. Milton J. Valencia can be reached at milton.valencia@globe.com.

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