

# POLICY FOCUS

## Women in Public Office

RECIPES FOR RATIONAL GOVERNMENT FROM INDEPENDENT WOMEN'S FORUM

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### WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

In 1916, the first woman was elected to the U.S. Congress, Rep. Jeannette Rankin (R-MT). Remarkably, although Montana and several other Western states had already granted women suffrage, Rep. Rankin was elected before the 1920 passage of the 19th Amendment, which guaranteed women the right to vote in all 50 states.

A century later, women make up 52 percent of the voting-age population in the U.S. And the number of women holding public office, while still not at parity with men, has increased over the years, and today stands at an all-time high at both the congressional (19.6 percent) and state level (24.9 percent). Six of the nation's current 50 governors are female.

When American women run for elected office, **they win at rates equal to their male counterparts**. However, **women are much less likely to run for office**. When they do, women sometimes face **unique barriers and challenges**. A balanced view should be taken: For some female candidates, **gender is a plus**. As elected leaders, women bring to the table a myriad of valuable experiences, traits, and insights that are different from men.

Importantly, elected office is not the only way women can and do serve their communities and advance their ideas and values. Women have influenced American politics and government since the Founding, long before having the opportunity to hold office. Even so, we should celebrate the boldness of those women who have served in this specific way and encourage all women with the desire to run for office to do so.

## WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

America wants the best and brightest citizens—regardless of their sex—to serve as public leaders. That’s why it’s important that we encourage women, as well as men, to run for office.

- **Women are Increasingly Politically Involved:**

Women are increasingly politically active as voters, community leaders, candidates, and office holders. That’s a trend we want to continue.

However, fixating on achieving a certain percentage or creating an outcome where women are half of all officeholders is the wrong goal. We need equality of opportunity, not outcomes.

- **Women Add Important Perspectives:** Women and men often see and communicate about issues differently—not just issues that are commonly considered women’s issues. Women bring unique problem-solving and collaborative strengths to policy making. And women from a variety of political philosophies contribute to today’s public policy debates.

- **We Can Minimize Challenges and Maximize Opportunities:** We should work to minimize the gender-specific hurdles women perceive and face, so that more women can pursue their goal of serving in public office. And we should encourage women to run by celebrating the unique opportunities available to women today.

## MORE INFORMATION

### Women in Public Office

In 1916, prior to the passage of the 19th Amendment, Jeannette Rankin (R-MT) became the first woman to hold national office as the first female member of Congress. Today, women hold 19.6 percent—or about 1 in 5—of the seats in the U.S. Congress.

In 2017, women hold 21 percent of seats in the Senate and 19.3 percent of seats in the House of Representatives. At the state level, women hold 24.9 percent of all state legislative seats, and 12 percent of governorships. At the local level, women have come close to parity, holding 43 percent of school board seats **nationwide in 2015**.

Although no woman has ever been elected to the office of the presidency or vice presidency, some have come close: Hillary Rodham Clinton lost to President Donald Trump in 2016. But interestingly, in the same year, Kellyanne Conway became the first woman in history to manage a successful presidential campaign. Two women, Geraldine Ferraro (1984) and Sarah Palin (2008) have run for vice president on major party tickets and lost.

The Supreme Court is not elected, but four women have served as justices, and today’s Court, which includes three women (Ruth Bader Ginsberg, Sonia Sotomayor, and Elena Kagan), has the greatest number in history serving together.

Sandra Day O'Connor served as a justice from 1981 until 2006. Today, the federal bench is currently **33 percent** female.

We should celebrate that so many women in America have shattered glass ceilings and contributed to public life through service in these positions.

## CEDAW and Women Internationally

A **March 2017 Pew Research study** has found that the number of women leaders has more than doubled since 2000. There are 15 female world leaders currently in office, eight of whom are their country's first woman in power.

Often the United States is criticized in international comparisons for having a relatively low number of women in elected office. The United States is ranked in the bottom half of countries that include **women in their national governing body** (101/190).

The United States has not ratified an international 1979 U.N. treaty known as CEDAW, or the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, which has been adopted by 189 countries. CEDAW requires countries, among other things, to institute quotas for female representation in government. **About half** of nations worldwide have some form of gender quota for their legislature or parliament. As of June 2017, only **two countries** have 50 percent or more women serving in public office. Rwanda currently has 61.3 percent, and Bolivia has 53.1 percent.

There are many reasons why the United States has not—and **should not**—ratify CEDAW. Gender quotas, while implemented with good intentions, are a measure of outcomes, rather than opportunities. The American ideal is based on equal opportunities.

## What Women Add

What do women add as elected officials that men do not? While men can and do advocate for issues affecting women, women add new ideas and distinctive perspectives to all issues. Often those ideas and perspectives stem from an understanding of and attention to the lives of women and families.

While generalizations about men and women are interesting and often true, it's important to keep in mind that women, like men, take diverse positions on the issues. Women in public office span the ideological spectrum today, from the far left to the far right. While there are **more female Democrats than Republicans** in Congress, women who value smaller government have seen great success in recent years; indeed, 2014 was nicknamed "The Year of the Republican Woman" due to the historic number elected.

## Unique Challenges

Women sometimes face challenges (both perceived and real) to running for office that men do not.

While family demands can be a barrier to running, it is often not the number one hurdle

women say that dissuades them from running—financial resources is. Money is essential for a candidate to relay her message, and a **2014 report** suggests that female candidates believe they have less access to political networks and financial resources than their male peers.

Some studies have shown that women candidates, on average, receive more media attention to **their appearance, personality, and family choices** than men candidates. More recent investigations contradict this, showing that that candidate sex **does not affect journalistic coverage**. But certainly anyone running for office, male or female, should expect media scrutiny.

Sometimes women and their perceptions of politics can be their own hurdles when it comes to considering public office: Women may perceive politics to be **dirty**, corrupt or combative and not about making positive change for their communities, which is the **primary motivator for women to get involved in politics**. This perception may discourage women from running.

Women often do not run for elected positions because they have not been asked or encouraged by others to campaign for the position.

Unsurprisingly, women and men respond favorably to the encouragement to run for office; women are just **less likely to receive it**.

Compared to men, women as a whole tend to be less competitive and **more risk-adverse**. Additionally, women may be less likely than men to apply for any job if they **believe they aren't qualified**, and more women believe they are

**under-qualified to run for public office**. A **2012 survey** suggests that parental encouragement from a young age helps to boost confidence and change perceptions, making it more likely for a woman to consider leadership and elected positions later in life.

Like so many careers, there may not be gender parity due to inherent gender differences and the choices men and women make. Together, we can endeavor to encourage as many women as possible to consider representing their communities in public office.

## Unique Opportunities

One way to encourage more women to run is to be sure they are aware of the unique opportunities women face today. Women may wrongly presume that sexism might keep them from success, however, **statistics show that women** are elected at the same rate as men and that **gender bias does not** play a role in voters' choices.

Research from the Independent Women's Forum shows that gender makes no difference to male voters, but that young, left-leaning women voters were actually more likely to favor a woman candidate by **9 percentage points**.

This is corroborated by polling from Gallup, which indicates that **63 percent of voters** say the country would be governed better with more women in office. Some subsets of voters are even more enthusiastic: "Overall, self-identified liberals (78%), unmarried women (78%) and women aged 18 to 49 (76%) express the most

optimism in female leaders. A large majority of blacks (75%) Democrats (75%) and people aged 18 to 29 (73%) also believe having more women in office would improve the government.”

Regardless of whether a preference for female leadership is right or wrong, these public opinion figures should be encouraging to women candidates. Furthermore, now more than ever there is a push to get women elected: There are many organizations dedicated to helping women get elected on both sides of the political aisle, including Running Start, Women’s Campaign School at Yale, VIEW PAC, She Should Run, Right Now Women’s PAC, Emily’s List and Maggie’s List. Female candidates should take advantage of these networks.

Regardless of outcome, women who run for office will build experience and assets for future endeavors. A campaign allows women to gain new skills and grow their networks. Campaigns teach leadership skills like management and decision-making, public speaking and effective communication, activism, messaging and persuasion, time management, and fundraising.

Most importantly, when women run for office, they can impact their communities for the better. The issues women candidates care about are on the table. Young women and girls see women in their communities stepping up and boldly volunteering to serve as leaders. Candidates have the ability to guide decisions for an entire community and effect waves of change for the future.

## Women Leadership and Activism Outside of Elected Office

Women participate in politics, community leadership, and civic life in many ways, even if they never run for or reach public office. And they have a strong voice and influence on American cultural values. This has been true since the American Founding, as Alexis de Tocqueville observed in [Democracy in America](#).

Today women [vote in higher numbers](#) than men, and recent political movements, from the [Tea Party](#) to the [Resistance](#), have largely been led by women. Women are overrepresented in state-level think tanks, and increasing numbers of women writers offer their insights in various print and online political commentary.

Women are [30 percent](#) more likely to volunteer in their communities than men and [dominate the vast majority of jobs](#) in the nonprofit sector. Unsurprisingly, women spend [more time caring for children](#) in their homes than men, which gives them a great opportunity to shape and encourage the next generation.

Women might not serve in public office as frequently as men do, but these other political-activism and community-oriented activities, all taken together, have great influence on our communities, states, and nation.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO

● **Get Informed:** Learn more about Women and Politics. Visit:

- **Independent Women's Forum**
- **Center for American Women in Politics**
- **American University Women in Politics Institute**

● **Talk to Your Friends:** Help your friends and family understand these important issues. Tell them about what's going on and encourage them to join you in getting involved.

● **Become a Leader in the Community:** Get a group together each month to talk about a political/policy issue (it will be fun!). Write a letter to the editor. Show up at local government meetings and make your opinions known. Go to rallies. Better yet, organize rallies! A few motivated people can change the world.

● **Remain Engaged Politically:** Too many good citizens see election time as the only time they need to pay attention to politics. We need everyone to pay attention and hold elected officials accountable. Let your Representatives know your opinions. After all, they are supposed to work for you!

## ABOUT INDEPENDENT WOMEN'S FORUM

Independent Women's Forum (IWF) is dedicated to building support for free markets, limited government, and individual responsibility.

IWF, a non-partisan, 501(c)(3) research and educational institution, seeks to combat the too-common presumption that women want and benefit from big government, and build awareness of the ways that women are better served by greater economic freedom. By aggressively seeking earned media, providing easy-to-read, timely publications and commentary, and reaching out to the public, we seek to cultivate support for these important principles and encourage women to join us in working to return the country to limited, Constitutional government.

We rely on the support of people like you! Please visit us on our website [www.iwf.org](http://www.iwf.org) to get more information and consider making a donation to IWF.

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