

STEPPING UP TO LEAD:

WOMEN RE-SHAPING AMERICA'S LEADERSHIP, POLITICS & PRIORITIES

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Women comprise more than 50 percent of the U.S. population but currently hold just 23 percent of elected seats in Congress and about 1 in 3 state legislative seats. In 2018, a record number of women were elected to office—117 women, including 42 women of color—bringing their expertise, diverse experiences, and agenda for broad and inclusive change to Congress and state legislatures across the country.

This election cycle, women are mobilizing in their communities, shaping the debate on the nation's direction and priorities, and stepping up to run for office in unprecedented numbers. In 2020, [584 women](#) filed to compete for House or Senate seats at the federal or state level, a historic high for women seeking office.

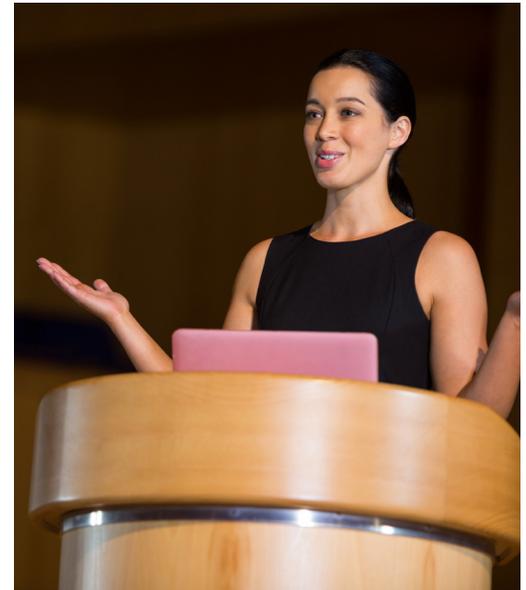
WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Increasing women's civic engagement and representation to elected office is essential to ensuring that public policies and national priorities are reflective of the diverse needs of women, their families and communities.

In the U.S., Maine and Washington, states have the highest levels of political participation among women as measured by the number of women holding elected office, registered to vote and voter turnout. The number of women elected to office is highest in Nevada and voter turnout among women is highest in the state of Maine.

Political participation is lowest in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Utah. While women in Louisiana register to vote and vote at higher rates than women nationally, Louisiana has the lowest share of women elected office, [ranking 50th](#) in the U.S. Arkansas and Utah also fare poorly when it comes to the share of women in elected office (ranking 46th and 48th, respectively), and women in Arkansas also have low levels of women’s voter register and turnout (ranked 43rd for registration and 44th for turnout).

Top 10 States for Women’s Political Participation, 2020 ¹		
State	Composite Score	Rank
Maine	11.84	1
Washington	9.91	2
Michigan	9.29	3
New Hampshire	9.03	4
Minnesota	8.96	5
Nevada	6.04	6
Arizona	5.82	7
Oregon	5.61	8
Iowa	5.58	9
Massachusetts	3.85	10



Voting

Registering to vote and voting is a key component of women’s civic engagement and political participation. Voting is one main way women help shape the issues addressed in government. Women today have a significant voice in deciding the outcomes of U.S. political elections: they have made up a majority of registered voters [since 1980](#) and vote at higher rates than men in presidential elections.



While women's voter registration and turnout varies by state, all top 10 states have higher voter engagement than the national average. Women's voter registration and turnout is [lowest](#) in Hawaii, closely followed by California, Texas, and New York.

Top 10 States for Women's Voter Turnout (2016 and 2018 average)		
State	Percent	Rank
Maine	70.45%	1
Wisconsin	67.40%	2
Montana	65.70%	3
Minnesota	64.60%	4
North Dakota	63.50%	5
Mississippi	62.40%	6
Washington	61.95%	7
Michigan	61.80%	8
New Hampshire	61.55%	9
Missouri	60.60%	10

2020 marks the 100th anniversary of the ratification of the voting rights act. The 19th amendment, however, did not extend to women of color in the United States due to widespread inequality and racism. All women were not granted the legal right to vote until the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965. However, restrictive voter ID laws passed in [36 states](#) across the U.S. continue to chip away at these rights. [Studies](#) focusing on the populations most likely to be affected by voter identification laws identify women who are paid low-incomes, older, minority, married/divorced women, and trans women as most likely to be affected by these strict voter ID laws.

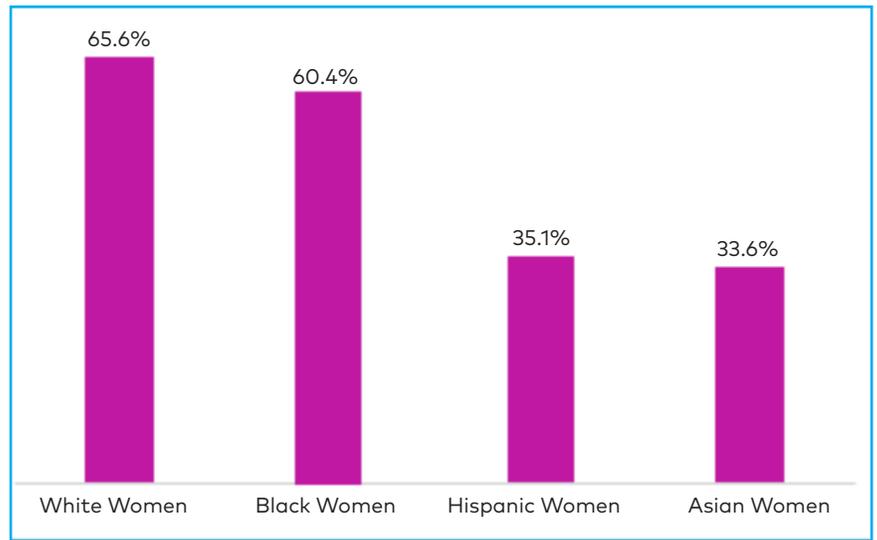
In 2016 Black women made up the second largest voting bloc in the U.S. Hispanic and Asian women, however, continue to lag when it comes to getting to the polls. The lower voter turnout among Hispanic and Asian women is due to [language barriers](#), lack of [outreach and engagement](#), and [citizenship restrictions](#).



WOMEN'S VOTER TURNOUT BY RACE (2016 ELECTION)²

Women in Elected Office

IWPR's women in elected office indicator looks at the share of women elected to the U.S. Congress, State Legislative offices, statewide elected executive offices, and governors. While the 2018 election saw record numbers of women running for and being elected to office at all levels, some states are inching closer to parity, while other states continue to lag.

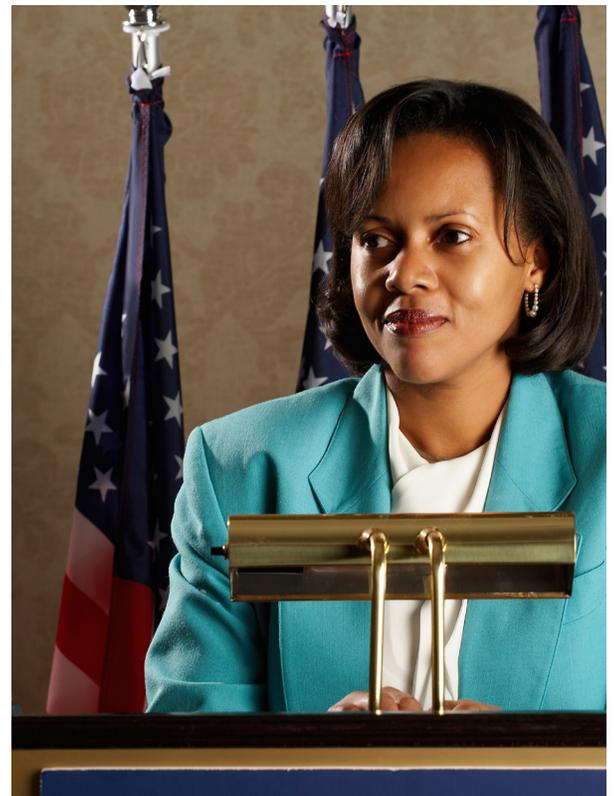


Nevada has almost reached gender parity in elected office, closely followed by New Hampshire and Washington, all ranked top 3 in the elected office index. Women hold the fewest seats in Louisiana, South Carolina, Utah, and Kentucky.

The share of women in the U.S. Congress also [varies by state](#). While women hold both U.S. Senate seats in Arizona, California, Minnesota, Nevada, New Hampshire, and Washington, 30 states have no female Senator. Additionally, while women's representation in the U.S. House of Representatives has reached (or exceeded) parity in Wyoming, Delaware, Washington, New Hampshire, Nevada, Maine, Iowa, and Hawaii, 16 states have no female Representatives in Congress.

Top 10 States for Women in Elected Office, 2020³

States	Index score	Rank
Nevada	5.00	1
New Hampshire	4.36	2
Washington	4.31	3
Maine	4.25	4
Arizona	4.22	5
Michigan	4.05	6
California	3.82	7
Minnesota	3.77	8
Oregon	3.31	9
Iowa	3.29	10



Women of Color in the U.S. Congress

Women of color are still vastly underrepresented in the U.S. Congress: only four women of color serve in the U.S. Senate (Kamala Harris, Catherine Cortez Masto, Mazie Hirono, and Tammy Duckworth) and women of color make up 9.9 percent of representatives in the U.S. House of Representatives despite comprising 18 percent of the U.S. population.



While all women face "[campaigning while female](#)" – the uniquely gendered experience of running for elected office – women of color face additional barriers. [Racism impacts](#) both how much donors decide to give a candidate and how much the candidate is able to fundraise, meaning that donors will hold their support until a woman of color has proven her candidacy is "viable."

The share of women representing their state in the U.S. House of Representatives varies by state, with largest numbers of women of color representatives in California, New York, Florida, and Texas.

States with the Highest Number of Women of Color in the U.S. House of Representatives, 2020			
State	Number of WOC in U.S. House of Rep	Number of Women in House of Rep	Share of WOC
California	10	17	58.82%
Texas	4	6	66.67%
Florida	4	8	50.00%
New York	4	8	50.00%

States with the Highest Share of Women of Color in the U.S. House of Representatives			
State	Number of WOC in U.S. House of Rep	Number of Women in House of Rep	Share of WOC
Delaware	1	1	100.00%
Georgia	1	1	100.00%
Hawaii	1	1	100.00%
Kansas	1	1	100.00%
New Mexico	2	2	100.00%
Wisconsin	1	1	100.00%

WOMEN IN STATE LEGISLATURES

Women’s participation in politics helps to ensure that [a broad range of issues](#) are addressed in government. Women legislators are more likely to prioritize issues such as child care, education, and health than their male counterparts.

Much like women’s representation in Congress, women’s share of office in State Legislatures is also at a historic high. However, this share ranges widely by state. Half of Nevada’s state legislative seats are held by women, closely followed by Colorado, Oregon Washington, and Vermont, where women hold more than two in five seats in the State Legislature.

Women are [least represented](#) in the State Legislatures in West Virginia (13.4%), Tennessee (15.2%), Louisiana (15.3%), and Wyoming (15.6%).

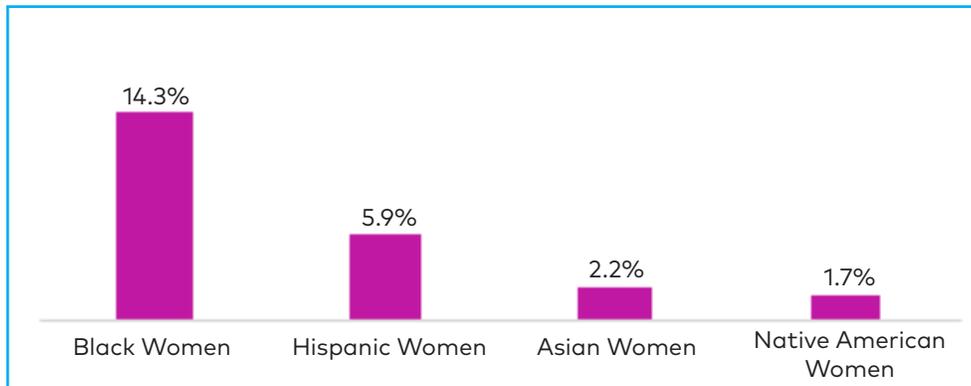
Top Ten States for Women in State Legislatures ⁴		
States	Share of Women in State Legislatures	Rank
Nevada	52.4%	1
Colorado	45.0%	2
Oregon	41.1%	3
Washington	40.1%	4
Vermont	40.0%	5
Arizona	38.9%	6
Alaska	38.3%	7
Maryland	38.3%	8
Maine	37.6%	9
Rhode Island	37.2%	10



Women of Color in State Legislatures

Patterns of women of color’s representation at the federal level extend to state legislatures. Black women make up 14.3 percent of the women who are state legislators, and Hispanic women make up 5.9 percent of the women in state legislatures. Asian, Native American, Middle Eastern, and multiracial women each make up less than five percent of the women serving in a state legislative seat.

Share of Women of Color Serving as State Legislators, 2020



INSTITUTIONAL RESOURCES

Women facing additional hurdles to political participation benefit from additional resources to overcome them. Institutional resources – resources that are dedicated to helping women succeed in the political arena and to promoting and prioritizing women’s policy issues – play a key role in connecting women constituents to policymakers, serve to magnify fundraising power and the voices of women in government, and increase women’s access to decision makers. These resources include campaign trainings for women, women’s commissions, women’s Political Action Committees, and state chapters of the National Women’s Political Caucus. Removing barriers to voter registration and voting may increase women’s participation and amplify the issues important to them.

Top States for Women’s Institutional Resources, 2020 ⁵	
States	Institutional Resource Composite Score
California	2
Florida	2
Massachusetts	2
Texas	2
Connecticut	1.5
Delaware	1.5
Georgia	1.5
Hawaii	1.5
Indiana	1.5
Iowa	1.5
Kansas	1.5
Kentucky	1.5

Top States for Women’s Institutional Resources, 2020 ⁵	
States	Institutional Resource Composite Score
Michigan	1.5
Minnesota	1.5
Missouri	1.5
New Jersey	1.5
New York	1.5
North Carolina	1.5
Ohio	1.5
Oklahoma	1.5
Oregon	1.5
Pennsylvania	1.5
Tennessee	1.5
Washington	1.5

ENDNOTES

¹ IWPR's Political Participation Composite Index is calculated by combining four component indicators of women's political status: voter registration, voter turnout, representation in elected office, and women's institutional resources. Across the 50 states (this composite does not include Washington DC), composite scores range from a high of 11.84 to a low of -7.35 with the higher scores reflecting a stronger performance in women's political participation.

² Note: Published rates from the U.S. Census Bureau are not available for Native American women
Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, 2017.

³ Source: Center for American Women and Politics, 2020. Data compiled by Institute for Women's Policy Research. Notes: The women in elected offices index has four components and reflects office-holding at the state and national levels as of January 2020. For each state, the proportion of officeholders who are women was computed for four levels: state representatives; state senators; statewide elected executive officials and U.S. representatives; and U.S. senators and governors. The percent values were then converted to scores that ranged from 0 to 1 by dividing the observed value for each state by the highest value for all states. The scores were then weighted according to the degree of political influence of the position: state representatives were given a weight of 1.0, state senators were given a weight of 1.25, statewide executive elected officials (except governors) and U.S. representatives were each given a weight of 1.5, and U.S. senators and state governors were each given a weight of 1.75. The resulting weighted scores for the four components were added to yield the total score on this index for each state.

⁴ Source: Center for American Women and Politics, 2020. Data compiled by Institute for Women's Policy Research
Notes: Women in state legislatures is a summation of women state senators and women state representatives.

⁵ Source: Data were compiled by IWPR from the Center for American Women and Politics 2020i, Political and Leadership Resources for Women database; the National Conference of State Legislatures 2019; and the National Women's Political Caucus 2020.

Notes: This index measures the number of institutional resources for women available in the state from a maximum of four, including a commission for women (established by legislation or executive order), a campaign training program for women, a women's political action committee (PAC), and a state chapter of the National Women's Political Caucus (NWPC). In order to score the states, each of the four components for this indicator was weighted equally at 0.5 points, for a total of 2.0 points. These scores were then used to rank the states on the indicator for resources available to women. In 2002 and 2004, the institutional resources indicator measured whether a state had a commission for women (established by legislation or executive order) and a legislative caucus for women (organized by women legislators in either or both houses of the state legislature). In earlier years (1996 and 1998) a third resource, a women's economic agenda project, was also included in this indicator. States that have an index score of 2 have all four of the institutional resources for women. States with an index score of 1.5 have at least three of the four institutional resources.



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Informing policy. Inspiring change. Improving lives.

The Institute for Women's Policy Research conducts and communicates research to inspire public dialogue, shape policy, and improve the lives and opportunities of women of diverse backgrounds, circumstances, and experiences. We are the leading think tank in the United States applying quantitative and qualitative analysis of public policy through a gendered lens.

IWPR advances women's status through social science research, policy analysis, and public education. We develop new policy ideas, encourage enlightened public debate, and promote sound policy and program development. Our work also helps to change minds and improve the practices of institutions. IWPR operates on the principle that knowledge is power and that social science evidence based on strong data and analysis, compellingly presented and systematically disseminated, makes a difference in moving public policy.

