Women's Political Participation: Status of the Women in the States

Participating in the political process is one way women can seek representation of their interests and influence policies affecting their lives. Voter registration and turnout, female state and federal elected representation, and women’s state institutional resources are all crucial to making women’s political concerns visible.

Although women have made significant political gains over the past century, women are far from achieving political equality. Eighty years after the Nineteenth Amendment granted female suffrage, women today are more likely than men to register and to vote. However, women are still drastically underrepresented in federal and state government. Although slightly more than half of the population, women hold only 12.1 percent of seats in the U.S. Congress and 22.4 percent of seats in state legislatures across the country.

The Status of Women in the States is an ongoing research project conducted by the Institute for Women’s Policy Research (IWPR) to establish baseline measures of the status of women in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Political participation is one of several measures IWPR uses to compare women’s status among the states.

Women’s Overall Political Participation

IWPR’s political participation composite index ranks each of the states and the District of Columbia by combining data on four aspects of women’s political status: voter registration, voter turnout, representation in elected office, and women’s institutional resources.

◆ The state with the highest composite political participation index is Maine. Maine ranks second in voter registration and voter turnout among women and third on the women in elected office component.

◆ Overall, political involvement for women tends to be higher in the western United States, New England, and some midwestern and plains states.

◆ In the southeastern states, from West Virginia and Tennessee to Florida, women have the least influence and involvement in political matters. Tennessee has the lowest score on the political participation index of any state.

Voter Registration and Voter Turnout

Women have reported consistently higher registration and voter turnout rates than men since 1980. By 1996, nearly 68 million women, or 67.3 percent of those eligible, reported being registered to vote, compared with nearly 60 million, or 64.4 percent of eligible men. In addition, although 49.0 percent of both male and female registered voters voted in 1996, in 1992, 57.3 percent of women and 53.0 percent of men voted. These numbers are typical of recent trends.

◆ Registration is generally highest in the East and West North Central states (the prairie states and parts of the midwest), New England, and parts of the Southeast. The highest voter registration rates are in North Dakota, where an average of 92.4 percent of women eligible to vote reported they were registered in the 1992 and 1994 elections (unlike other states, North Dakota has a system of automatic registration: registration occurs when an eligible resident votes).
Map 1. Political Participation Composite Index

Map 2. Women's Voter Registration

Note: Percent of all women 18 and older who reported voting in 1992 and 1996.
- Nevada has the lowest reported women's voter registration, with an average of only 57.1 percent of eligible women registered in 1992 and 1994. Some southern and mid-Atlantic states also have low female voter registration rates.

- Women voters in Montana have the highest turnout rate in the country, with an average of 68.5 percent of registered women estimated to have voted in 1992 and 1996. Estimated women's voter turnout is generally high across most of the northern states, from Wisconsin west to Oregon, as well as in Alaska.

- Voter turnout is lowest in some southeastern and western states. In Hawaii, only 42.4 percent of registered women are estimated to have voted, on average, in the 1992 and 1996 elections, making it the lowest ranked state in the country. Georgia (44.3 percent) and South Carolina (45.4 percent) rank next lowest.
Map 4. Women in Elected Office

Note: Percent of state and national elected officeholders who are women, 1998.

Elected Officials

Although women constitute a minority of elected officials at both the national and state levels, their presence has grown steadily over the years. A record number of women hold office in the 106th Congress (1999-2001). Nine women serve in the U.S. Senate, and women fill 56 of the 435 seats in the U.S. House of Representatives (not including Eleanor Holmes Norton, the delegate from the District of Columbia, and Donna Christian-Green, the delegate from the Virgin Islands). In contrast, in the 96th Congress (1979-81), only one Senator and 16 members of the House of Representatives were women. Women currently hold 26.3 percent of statewide elective executive offices across the country, and 22.4 percent of state legislators are women.

- In general, women are more likely to hold elected office in the West. Washington has the highest score on the women in elected office indicator. The top ten states also include California (2nd), Arizona (4th), and Colorado (6th). A few northeastern states also rank in the top ten: Maine (3rd), New Hampshire (8th), and Connecticut (10th).

- In 2000, women fill both U.S. Senate seats in two states, California and Maine. Six states – Alaska, Delaware, Iowa, Mississippi, New Hampshire, and Vermont – have never sent a woman to Congress (though New Hampshire has a woman governor).

- Nearly all of the southeastern states rank in the bottom third on the women in elected office indicator. West Virginia (47th), Alabama (48th), Kentucky (49th), and Mississippi (50th) have the worst records of electing women to public office.

- Three women serve as governors in 2000: Jane Dee Hull of Arizona, Jeanne Shaheen of New Hampshire, and Christine Todd Whitman of New Jersey. To date, a total of only 16 women have served as governors.
Institutional Resources

Women's institutional resources can play an important role in providing information about women's issues and attracting the attention of policymakers and the public to them. They can also serve as an access point for women and women's groups to express their interests to public officials. Institutional resources include several types of state organizations that serve women: women's state agenda projects, caucuses formed by female members of a state legislature, and state commissions on women appointed by the governor or state legislature.

- Ten states – California, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, Massachusetts, Missouri, New York, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia – have all three types of institutional resources for women at the state level. Institutional resources for women tend to be concentrated in the South Atlantic region.

- Only two states Kansas and Tennessee – have none of these institutional resources for women at the state level.
This Research-In-Brief is based on data from IWPR's 1998 report on *The Status of Women in the States* and the forthcoming 2000 edition of *The Status of Women in the States*. It was written by Amy Young and formatted by Caroline Wall in May 2000.

The 2000 *Status of Women in the States* Reports will be released in the fall of 2000.

For more information on *The Status of Women in the States* reports or membership please call (202) 785-5100, or visit our website at http://www.iwpr.org

The Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) is a public policy research organization dedicated to informing and stimulating the debate on public policy issues of critical importance to women and their families. IWPR focuses on issues of poverty and welfare, employment and earnings, work and family issues, the economic and social aspects of health care and domestic violence, and women's civic and political participation.

The Institute works with policymakers, scholars, and public interest groups around the country to design, execute, and disseminate research that illuminates economic and social policy issues affecting women and families, and to build a network of individuals and organizations that conduct and use women-oriented policy research. IWPR, an independent, nonprofit organization, also works in affiliation with the graduate programs in public policy and women's studies at The George Washington University.

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