



ALVERNO COLLEGE
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RESEARCH CENTER FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS

WOMEN IN PUBLIC LIFE ELECTED OFFICIALS THE ALVERNO REPORT 2020-2022





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A Note of Appreciation

First, the Research Center for Women & Girls (RCWG) thanks the elected officials who participated in this project by providing their time, knowledge, expertise, and experiences. The report would not have been possible without the willingness of these political leaders to share their stories, ideas, and perspectives.

RCWG also appreciates the support from the Wisconsin Women's Fund and the Wisconsin Women's Council. Their belief in the importance of this topic and their efforts to empower women made this report possible.

RCWG is also grateful for the collaboration with the Strategic Research Institute at St. Norbert College, including assistance in designing and administering the nonpartisan survey.

Finally, the authors of this report extend their gratitude to the people who contributed to various aspects of this report, including Andrea Lee, IHM, Ph.D. (Former President, Alverno College); Joseph Foy, Ph.D. (Interim President, Alverno College); Laura Bolger, M.A. (Director of Corporate and Foundation Relations, Alverno College); Kim Skerven, Ph.D. (Center for Behavioral Medicine); Angela Frey, Ph.D. (Center for Academic Excellence, Alverno College); and Sara Shutkin (Archivist, Alverno College).

***The present iteration
of the study, Women in Public
Life—Elected Officials, builds
on the original report and is
intended to better understand
women’s pathways to office
in Wisconsin.***

For more than 50 years, RCWG has generated, applied, and shared research to better understand—and ultimately improve—the lives of women and girls in Wisconsin and beyond.

About This Report

To celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Research Center for Women and Girls (RCWG) and the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment, which guaranteed women’s right to vote, RCWG conducted an updated version of its first report: *Women in Public Life in Wisconsin*. The original study, which took place in 1970-71, sought to evaluate “all areas of [American women’s] social involvement—political, economic, cultural, etc., and all levels of their activity—local, state, national, and international” (Alverno Research Center on Women, 1971). The present iteration of the study, *Women in Public Life—Elected Officials*, builds on the original report and is intended to better understand women’s pathways to office in Wisconsin.

About the Research Center for Women and Girls

From its inception in 1970, the mission of what was then known as the Research Center for Women (RCW) was to contribute data to the ongoing conversation about issues impacting women. RCW was created “in the hope of contributing empirical and historical data to the study of women” (Alverno Today, 1970). The rationale for the RCW included “growing concern over the status of women and the factors—economic, political, psychological and social—which affect it” (Alverno Today, 1970). RCW began functioning conceptually as three centers: a resource center on women, a research center about women, and an outreach center for women.

With help from an anonymous donor, RCW’s focus expanded in 2006 to include studies that explored topics related to girls. To reflect its new identity, the center was renamed as the Research Center for Women and Girls (RCWG). It continues the original intent of the RCW for recognizing and addressing “the growing need for concentrated research to establish an historical perspective, a secure framework, for...contemporary issues” while also adapting to a changing academic and social landscape.

For more than 50 years, RCWG has generated, applied, and shared research to better understand—and ultimately improve—the lives of women and girls in Wisconsin and beyond. With the research conducted, RCWG helps to develop curricula and create student programming and outreach to empower women and girls to design and live their lives on their own terms.

Welcome From Alverno College Leadership

As leaders of Alverno College, we write to enthusiastically applaud and support the publication of *Women in Public Life—Elected Officials*, initiated and executed by the Alverno College Research Center for Women and Girls, and supported by collaborators at St. Norbert College, the State of Wisconsin Women’s Council, and the Women’s Fund of Greater Milwaukee. Lindsey Harness, Ph.D., associate professor of communication at Alverno College and the director of the Research Center for Women and Girls, provided exceptionally skilled leadership to this project. We are proud of its purpose, its thoroughness and its potential impact.

In 1919, Wisconsin became the first state to ratify the 19th Amendment, which extended franchise and opened up voting rights to women; in 1921, the Wisconsin legislature passed a bill awarding equal rights to women. This was a watershed moment in both Wisconsin and U.S. history, as it extended to women the right to hold any public office and was the first equal rights bill passed by any state.

A century later, the *Women in Public Life—Elected Officials* project provides an opportunity for us to take stock of how far Wisconsin has come in removing the legal and structural barriers that bar or impede women from engaging in the responsibilities of elected and appointed public office. What is clear from the report is that Wisconsin has seen significant progress in women successfully serving in public life, particularly in recent years. Notably, within the last decade, Rep. JoCasta Zamarripa became the first Latina elected to the State Assembly, Rep. Pat Strachota became the first woman to serve as Assembly Majority leader, and Sen. Mary Lazich became the first woman to serve as president of the Wisconsin State Senate. This 2021 report also corresponds with a record number of women currently serving in the Wisconsin State Legislature—32 in the Assembly and 9 in the Senate—which accounts for nearly one-third (31%) of the total seats in both chambers. In national politics, Sen. Tammy Baldwin, who in 1998 became the first woman from Wisconsin elected to the U.S. Congress, in 2012 became the first Wisconsin woman elected to serve in the U.S. Senate. These recent successes for Wisconsin women in public life build on the landmark achievements of Rep. Gwen Moore, the first African American woman from Wisconsin elected to the U.S. House; state Sen. Margaret Farrow and Lt. Governor Barbara Lawton—the first women, respectively, to serve and be elected to the office of Lieutenant Governor of Wisconsin—and Justice Shirley Abrahamson, who served as the first female Wisconsin Supreme Court Justice. These reflect distinguished accomplishments by pioneering women who are leading Wisconsin into the future.

Although there have been many notable victories for women in public life in Wisconsin, there is still much work to be done to open up more opportunities, particularly for women of color, to seek roles in public life and to successfully attain those positions. Although women account for half of Wisconsin’s population, and are more likely to be registered to vote, participate in voting, and engage in community work (e.g., volunteering) than men, women only account for about a quarter of all elected offices in the state.

Opportunities for women of color to serve in public life have significantly lagged behind the successes of their white colleagues. It was not until 1977 that Rep. Marcia Coggs was the first Black woman to be elected to the State Assembly. Another 34 years passed before the election of Rep. Zamarripa in 2011, and 44 years until Rep. Francesca Hong was the first Asian American woman elected to the Wisconsin legislature. To date, Wisconsin has never elected a Native American woman to the state legislature.

In 1919, Wisconsin became the first state to ratify the 19th Amendment, which extended franchise and opened up voting rights to women; in 1921, the Wisconsin legislature passed a bill awarding equal rights to women.

This study marks the 50th anniversary of the founding of Alverno’s Research Center for Women and Girls and honors the center’s first report from 1970, *Women in Public Life in Wisconsin*. The new report’s findings help to map a current state of how and why women engage in public life, as well as the structural, systemic, socioeconomic, and cultural barriers that persist and acutely impact women who rise to the call of public service. The report also provides insights from the lived experiences of women engaging in public life.

Ultimately, this report is a call to action. It is a call to identify and name the endemic problem of sexism that confronts women seeking to serve in public leadership, so that it can be understood and eliminated as a barrier to engagement. It is a call to motivate women to seek public service opportunities and to make our state stronger through their leadership, and to influence a national conversation about women in public life. It is a call to cultivate formal networks and informal pathways to service for women to run, and to establish ongoing support networks once elected or appointed. It is a call for everyone to recognize the unique and important contributions women bring to public life so that we may remove the lingering de jure and de facto barriers working against women in public service.

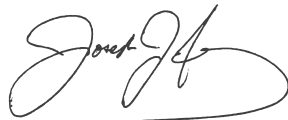
We celebrate the publication of this report and applaud the thoughtful work, meticulous research, and meaningful partnerships that led to its completion. Moreover, we celebrate the many important victories achieved by women in public service. We hope that the trails you helped forge will be traversed by more and more women who will lead Wisconsin ever forward.



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***What will you do to help
ensure that women and
girls have a central voice
in the conversation?***

Welcome From the Director of RCWG

During 1970-71, Alverno College's Research Center on Women (RCW) understood that one of the fundamental issues facing women was equal representation of women in public office. Those who worked on the project recognized that women's voices were vital to the state of our democracy. In 2022, the Research Center for Women and Girls (RCWG) honors that effort, seeking to understand the pathways women take to public office.

What I hope the current report makes clear is that we cannot take democracy for granted; democracy is foundational to the well-being of all communities, and women's voices are vital to that well-being. It will take all of us working to "build the bench" in order to ensure that all women are equally represented in political office.

While women in Wisconsin have made progress in regard to making our voices heard within public offices, we still have a long way to go, especially in regard to racial inclusivity. For instance, this study's survey sample was predominantly (90%) white. Nine of the 98 politicians surveyed were women of color. As the findings from this report indicate, women of color are not equally represented in public office. For the nine women of color who are serving in public office and participated in this report, seven reported concern of and experience with racial bias. RCWG is committed to initiatives and efforts that recognize that *all* women's voices must be heard and valued. Without this diversity of voices, our democracy does and will suffer.

It is for this reason that RCWG seeks to listen to and amplify the voices of women and girls, especially those who may face marginalization beyond their gender. Thus, it is RCWG's hope that this report is seen and experienced as a call to action.

For those of you reading this letter, and as people committed to ensuring an equitable democracy, we have to work together to support women's voices—the voices of those who are trying to challenge the status quo and resist gendered expectations of how they should be in society. We must work collectively to bolster these women's voices by encouraging their confidence and supporting their efforts, and we must do so from a young age. We must provide education to girls that makes clear their voices are essential to democracy and that democracy is foundational. We must encourage them to find their place within this world, despite the array of voices that might say otherwise.

RCWG is committed to identifying areas in our democracy that call for and need the unique strengths that women bring to social action, social consciousness, and social resistance. We know that empowered women and girls will empower people. So as you read this report, I ask you: "What will *you* do to help ensure that women and girls have a central voice in the conversation?"

In solidarity and with hope,



Lindsey Harness, Ph.D.

Director

Alverno College

Introduction to the Report

The *Women in Public Life—Elected Officials* report sought to understand the pathways women take to public office, including the challenges they face in doing so. The beginning of this study (2020) marked the 50th anniversary of the founding of RCWG and honors the 1970 conference, *Women in Public Life*, which was convened to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the 19th Amendment, and the RCW's first report in 1971, *Women in Public Life in Wisconsin*.

Introduction to the Report

1971 Report—*Women in Public Life in Wisconsin*

In 1971, the RCW sought to gather a more comprehensive understanding of women in public offices in Wisconsin. The guiding questions of that study included:

- Why, 50 years after the passage of the suffrage amendment, is it still so unusual for a woman to seek public office?
- What special characteristics, if any, are found in women who do seek office?
- What implications does this have for future participation of women in politics and government?
- Who are the women in Wisconsin who hold elective office: age, personal status, educational and work experience, etc.?
- What factors—individuals or events—influenced their decision to run for office?
- Are they represented in all offices, or are they heavily concentrated in certain offices or levels of government?
- Do they encounter any particular problems or enjoy certain advantages because they are women?
- What has been the biggest handicap to overcome in entering political life?
- Do they possess characteristics as a group that distinguish them from women who, though active in government and civic affairs, have not chosen to seek public office?
- Do they resemble other groups of women, e.g., business executives, who have achieved success in a public sphere?

As the 1971 report notes, the hope was that “the study would provide some insights that may have implications for the future participation of women in politics and government.” Three findings from that report are of particular interest to the current *Women in Public Life—Elected Officials* project. In the 1971 report:

1. Many of the elected officials, who mainly were between 41-60 years of age, stated that they decided to run for public office because they had to find a job after the death of their husbands. They sought public office because the position was part-time, and work could be done from home.
2. In the open-ended responses to the survey, the elected officials implied that they won their campaigns because they had lived in their community for many years. It was implied that they received little opposition when they decided to seek public office.
3. More than two-thirds of the 296 women who held elected public office and responded to the survey in 1971 said they believed their gender was not an issue in their election campaign. As one respondent noted, “The fact that I was a woman made absolutely no difference.”

Despite recent gains, there is still a disproportionate number of women in elected office. If you are interested in these statistics, please visit RCWG’s webpage (alverno.edu/research).

RCWG has partnered with the Wisconsin Women’s Council to produce research briefs related to the gains made and the still existing challenges. While there are studies on why women do not pursue state and federal office, there needs to be more focus on women running for local office. This report hopes to help fulfill this gap in scholarship.

Methodology

The *Women in Public Life—Elected Officials* project used a mixed-methods approach to gather data. The first iteration of the study centered on a nonpartisan survey.

Nonpartisan Survey

Survey respondents were women who were serving in a Wisconsin public office in the fall of 2020. Of the 501 initial invitations to participate in the survey, 111 started the survey, and 79 of the respondents completed the survey. A second invitation generated an additional 19 surveys. In total, the survey generated 98 completed cases.

In 2021, the initial findings from the survey were presented in a research brief, which can be found on the RCWG’s webpage (alverno.edu/research). Findings from this survey helped inform the recommendations at the end of this report. Additionally, the findings were used to generate an interview guide for the second iteration of the project, which centered on in-depth interviews.

In-Depth Qualitative Interviews

In 2021, 13 in-depth interviews were conducted with women serving in public office at the time of the research. All respondents identified as female.

The interviews were conducted via Zoom and lasted approximately 60 minutes. Each interview was audio and video recorded. The transcripts of the interviews were thematically analyzed. Researchers use thematic analysis to identify categories or “themes” that appear from the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). This form of analysis relies on “the words of the participants,” requiring that the “researcher recognizes similarities and differences between responses and organize these interpretations into themes as a way of explaining a particular phenomenon” (DETA, 2020, p. 70). Findings from the qualitative interviews were also used to inform the recommendations presented at the end of this report.

If you are interested in learning more or have any questions about the research design for this study, please contact research.center@alverno.edu or lindsey.harness@alverno.edu.

Understanding the Context and Looking Ahead

- Why gender parity matters
- Where we are and how far we have left to go
- What girls learn regarding gender differences at an early age
- What are the barriers women face and the need for effective change
- What works to move toward positive change resulting in a more robust democracy

This section provides a broader context for the report. It also provides brief recommendations for improving gender inclusivity. More recommendations are provided at the end of the report.

Understanding the Context and Looking Ahead

We the People: Gender Parity and Democracy

“We the People.” These are compelling words in the Constitution. Historically, however, these words were not written or understood to include all people. Today, we know that strong communities that respect diversity experience the positive benefits that result from hearing all voices.

Research has shown how diverse teams in supportive environments help make better decisions (Ely & Thomas, 2020). We know this is essential for effective decision making across the community. We are best when there is a diversity of thought and perspective in the community and at the decision-making table.

Wisconsin communities are becoming more and more diverse (Curtis & Lessem, 2014). We have diversity in gender, race, culture, economic status, sexual orientation, language, religion, etc. We also have diverse lived experiences, from veterans to families with young children. These are just a few examples of how different identities and experiences can contribute to diverse perspectives.

At the same time, we recognize that there is a lack of diversity regarding representation in elected officials in the United States. In international gender parity rankings for national government seats, the U.S. ties at 72 with Egypt and the Philippines as of January 2022 (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2022). Among U.S. states, Wisconsin ranks 27th for the proportion of female elected officials (Rutgers, 2021). Much improvement is needed to reach gender parity in local government seats (Wisconsin Women’s Council, 2022). Specifically looking at the demographics of gender and local government, we have a lot of room to improve. And, to effectively improve, we need to understand why more women are not running for local elected office as well as how to spark and sustain change.

Political Ambition in Early Life

Men and women are socialized into gender roles in many aspects of life—in relationships, parenting, and the workplace, to name a few. These gender expectations and roles also apply in local government. For example, while women statistically want to “volunteer to help improve community” at a higher rate than men, “young women... are less exposed to environments that would push them to consider running for office later in life” (Lawless & Fox, 2013, page 15). In addition, research shows “... the gender gap in declared political interest appears quite early in the life of citizens (they are clearly present at 15 years old)” (Fraile & Sánchez-Vítores, 2019, page 90).

When asked what characteristics make up a strong leader, many traits associated with men are identified, such as competitiveness, self-confidence, aggression, ambition, power, and decisiveness (Heilman, 2012). Yet when we reflect on the stereotypes commonly associated with women—such as being caring, nurturing, family-oriented, emotional, supportive, sympathetic, nice, helpful, and dependent (Heilman, 2012)—those characteristics are identified as desirable for a leader who is responsible for shaping policies that affect communities. Elected leaders who embody cooperative behavior and a sense of community versus a competitive stance better benefit those whom they serve. According to the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP), when women serve, they provide a different perspective and are more likely to raise concerns about safety in the community, gender equity issues, education, and economic issues related to children and families. Women in political office are also more likely to involve the public in decision-making processes, and they are typically more persistent in following through on constituent concerns.

Sparking and Sustaining Political Ambition

In addition to understanding political ambition early in life, it is essential to understand the barriers adults identify when considering running for local elected office and serving once elected. As will be discussed in a later section of the report, we know the many barriers women face in government (Erickson, Hill, & Solomon, 2018). Unfortunately, many of these challenges still exist, as we found in more recent interviews with local elected officials. Overarching themes include not considering running for office without being asked, overcoming fears of running, and confronting challenges like sexism and gender socialization.

CREATING AWARENESS AND OVERCOMING FEARS OF RUNNING

Current female elected officials interviewed in the *Women in Public Life—Elected Officials* survey shared how important and influential it is for someone to ask them to run for office. Without being asked to run, they would not have considered running and serving in office. When asked how they knew they were ready to run for public office, the most frequent (24%) statement was that someone encouraged them to run.

“... A woman in town called me, who serves on the county board, and asked me to run because of an open position. And I think that helped push me over the edge. I was considering it, but I think just having someone who I know I could ask all the questions and get the ropes as I was getting started, that really made a huge difference.”

The second most frequent response (22%) related to politicians feeling as if they possessed the skills needed to do the job well. However, one current elected official shared that she did not feel qualified to run for office, despite having transferable skills.

“I mean, I felt like I had a good business background and I had some skills, but I did not really know what I was getting into. And so, I didn’t feel confident in running or feeling like I was going to know what I was doing.”

Approximately 18% of the politicians indicated that they did not feel ready but ran for public office anyway. Motivators included a passion for the job, a sense of timing, and a desire to change things or make a difference in the world.

“I wanted to do the work to make a difference, and I was willing to invest in myself to do it!”

CONFRONTING SEXISM AND GENDER SOCIALIZATION

Women interviewed for this project shared their experiences confronting sexism and conflicts with gender role expectations. For example, because women are under-represented in local elected office, many were the first or only women to have served in this capacity.

“On our board a lot of times, especially in the beginning, I really got the feeling that women are supposed to be seen and not heard. And any time we would say something, especially with our previous county administrator, he would roll his eyes... You really have to build confidence and believe in yourself, and you’ve got to find a partner to really support you and stand up for that because, I mean, it’s just ridiculous.”

A related issue is a struggle for some elected leaders to perceive women as fellow leaders. These experiences ranged from small microaggressions to outright sexism.

“I don’t back down from people. I especially do not back down from men and their attitude about [the] capabilities of women. I’ve had a run-in with a couple of people in the township that, ‘Oh, you’re a woman,’ and I said, ‘Yeah, and so?’”

In addition, women cited conflicting roles as they attempted to balance the demands of politics and home.

“Some women can plug into networks that will help them with childcare, help them with dinner and cleaning, but it is a difficult thing to ask.”

In another study, “Political Ambition: Where Are All the Women,” men and women in Wisconsin were surveyed on their perceived barriers to running for local office. For example, men were less likely than women to cite “time away from family” as a reason not to run for office.

Recommendations for Improving the Gap

Recognizing the gap between the number of men and women serving in elected office and the unique challenges women face puts each of us in a better position to help create a positive change intentionally. There are three overarching themes for action-oriented recommendations.

1. INTENTIONALLY IMPROVE THE CIVIC LEADERSHIP AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT ENVIRONMENT FOR YOUTH

One of the actions to decrease gender gaps in political interest is to increase the understanding of local government. We can create an opportunity to educate about the importance of strengths and diverse perspectives in the community—be that career, community service through volunteerism, or serving as an elected official. We can also use the value of different strengths and experiences to combat social penalties for straying from currently identified gender roles. An important step to normalize these changes is expanding youth development environments related to civics and local government.

Youth in Governance (YIG) program evaluations have shown their power in effectively increasing civic engagement and leadership skills. “[Evaluation] respondents reported significant increases in knowledge of county government, connection to community, empowerment, communication skills, and confidence” (Calvert, de Montmollin, & Winnett, 2014).

They are foundational in increasing the diversity of perspectives at the table by strengthening multi-generational discourse. Evaluations of YIG programs have proven the positive impact of these programs. Additionally, YIG programs build the potential pipeline of people considering running, exposing youth to expanded opportunities. As one youth participant shared at the end of the term, “I would consider pursuing a position in government now” (City of Monroe Youth in Government Program, 2016). In another example of the impact that these programs can have, a Brodhead High School student served on a city council, and then recruited female high schoolers to participate in the YIG program (City of Brodhead Youth in Government Program, 2017).

2. EXPAND ON RECRUITING COMMUNITY MEMBERS TO THINK ABOUT RUNNING FOR LOCAL ELECTED OFFICE

Despite recent gains, there are still disproportionately fewer women than men in elected office (Rutgers, 2022). One of the ways to narrow the gap is to encourage women to run for local office.

Having women in a local office creates benefits that are twofold: serving in a local office is often a pipeline for higher office, and impactful decisions happen locally.

The ability to form policies that directly impact local communities may be attractive to women considering running for office. In “Recruiting the Next Generation of Local Officials,” Erickson et al. (2018) identify seven strategies for recruiting women to run for local office. The research team developed these strategies based on conducting focus groups with women in Wisconsin who ran for local elected office (town, village, county

boards, and city councils). These strategies include identifying potential positions, communicating to the potential candidate that she would be a great leader, and committing to support the candidate. Many women in the focus groups considered themselves advocates for various causes and groups, and their involvement in these groups usually identified them as potential leaders. That also made them want to pursue elected office because of their passion for specific causes and issues. Similarly, in this project, women identified a sense of community as one of the reasons they serve.

“I think that you’re doing the work of the people, and I think that you need to value them as your constituents, and so you really need to be a part of the community and community-focused to really succeed at this job.”

“[Serving] is very rewarding. I mean, I really would never have had the opportunity to meet such an interesting group of people from very different backgrounds and from different parts of the country. And it really makes me proud to see the services that we provide with a lot of constraints due to budgets and things. It is very rewarding, and you do make a difference, and your opinion matters, your viewpoint and representing your people.”

In the research by Erickson et al. (2018), we see that relationship building and networking are critical when encouraging women to run for office. Again, corroboration comes from the responses given by women interviewed for this project.

“The networking, in general, again, it’s that personal someone [who is] encouraging, someone who has been a leader, looking back, looking at others, and pulling them along saying, ‘Come on, we can do this’ type of thing.”

Through networking and relationship building, women and allies can encourage women they know who would make strong leaders pursue elected office. In addition, women who currently serve can also serve as champions for other women considering a run for office.

3. PROMOTE CONTINUED LEARNING AND NETWORKING WITH A FOUNDATION OF RESPECT

Support cannot end after the election—continued support is essential. Women who currently hold elected local government positions have identified needs for multiple forms of support. These include training for both new officials and ongoing training to support more experienced officials, network-building opportunities, both locally and across geographies, and a need for increased civility.

The women commonly cited their values, including diversity, as their inspiration to keep going. Additionally, they shared a belief that women bring something unique to public life, and their knowledge of this strength served as a motivating force. Coming full circle, local elected officials shared that serving positively impacted their communities. A commonly identified hope for the future includes helping to shape a positive environment for younger generations.

“I think I made an impact for women, which I think is important, especially younger women. I was the first-ever female council president and only council president for the city.”

“But I think one thing that empowers me, too, is I’m a single parent, and my daughter’s now 24 years old. But as a single parent of a daughter, you want her to see that women can do things.”



History of Wisconsin Women in Public Office

“Failure is impossible.”

—Susan B. Anthony

A century ago, Wisconsin women gained the right to hold public office. The 1921 law was enacted one year after women received the right to vote under the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Therefore, a look at the history of women in public office in Wisconsin needs to start in the 19th century.

History of Wisconsin Women in Public Office

Before Suffrage

“Long before suffrage was extended to women nationwide with that constitutional amendment, women were running for office—and winning—in some states with more inclusive qualifications for voting and holding office.” (Waxman, 2017)

The earliest offices for trailblazing women included:

- **1874:** County Superintendent of Schools, Mitchell County, Iowa (Bonney, 1981)
- **1887:** Mayor of Argonia, Kansas (Billington, 1954)
- **1895:** State legislator, three women, Colorado (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2019)
- **1917:** U.S. Congress, Montana (Center for American Women & Politics, 2022)

Wisconsin Women in Elected and Appointed Office Before Suffrage

Earlier, legislative enactment of an 1869 Wisconsin law had allowed women to run for school boards and other related offices such as a library board, although they still could not vote in those elections. By 1923, more than 200 women had been identified as already holding office on school and library boards (West, 1923).

In 1868, Angela (Angie) Josephine King was a clerk at the Janesville Post Office when friends encouraged her to seek office as postmaster. A special election was held to narrow a field of local candidates for appointment by President Andrew Johnson. Noted as one of the “most exciting races in Janesville history,” King won the race by 42 votes and traveled to Washington for her appointment (State Bar of Wisconsin, 1998, p. 5). However, the congressman required to endorse the appointment felt “[the] idea of endorsing a woman, however, was too radical” and gave the appointment to the runner-up (State Bar of Wisconsin, 1998, p. 5).

In 1875, Lavinia Goodell, already a pioneer for women in law, ran for Janesville City Attorney against two male attorneys, coming second (with only men casting votes) (LaviniaGoodell.com, 2022).

Nearly 25 years later, in 1902, Wisconsin Governor Robert La Follette sought an opinion from his attorney general on whether he could appoint a woman to fill a vacancy as a register of deeds. He was advised, as a general rule, “though citizens in the broad sense, women are not possessed of any political power and cannot, in the absence of an enabling statute, be considered eligible to public office... until the privilege is extended to women by legislative enactment, she cannot participate in any branch of government or hold public office” (Hicks & Buell, 1902).

1921 Wisconsin Equal Rights Act

[T]o remove discriminations against women and give them equal rights before the law.

1921 WI Civil Rights Act Preamble: To remove discriminations against women and give them equal rights before the law (Wisconsin Historical Society, 1921).

Wisconsin became the first state to pass equal rights legislation in 1921, marking a return to the national stage after being the first state to ratify the 19th Amendment two years earlier.

The landmark equal rights bill provided that “[w]omen shall have the same rights and privileges under law as men in the exercise of suffrage, freedom of contract, choice of residence for voting purposes, jury service, holding office, holding and conveying property, care and custody of children and in all other respects.”

The 1921 Equal Rights Act did not live up to the hopes of reformers, however, having included loopholes that quickly undermined many of the intended reforms (Youmans, 1921; Burakoff, 2021). Nonetheless, on the heels of suffrage, the right to “hold office,” fifth in the list of seven reforms, set Wisconsin women on a new path as government leaders.

A Seat at the Table: Then and Now

During 1923 and 1924, the University of Wisconsin–Madison Division of Extension’s Municipal Information Bureau surveyed Wisconsin cities and villages to determine the status of women in public office. Their report identified more than 400 women elected and appointed office holders in local government (West, 1923). About half sat on school and library boards, where women had served since the 1860s. Wisconsin’s first female sheriff (Burnett County) was appointed in 1924 (West, 1924).

Soon thereafter, Wisconsin elected its first women to the state Legislature. In 1925, three women were elected to the state Assembly. Originally called “assemblymen” like their male colleagues, the official title for all members was changed to “representative to the Assembly” in 1969. It would take another 50 years to elect a woman to the Wisconsin State Senate (1975) and nearly 25 more years to send a Wisconsin woman to the U.S. Congress, which happened in 1998 (WomeninWisconsin.org, n.d.).

Wisconsin State and Federal Representation

Women’s place in the Wisconsin State Legislature was slow to take root. There were three female members in 1925, but from 1926 to 1943, there was only one woman serving in any given year. After seeing two women hold office in 1943, there were no new female candidates elected during the 1950s or 1960s. The turning point came in 1971, with four women serving, quickly growing to 20 by 1981, reaching a peak of 38 women in 1989. The first female State Senate member arrived in 1975, with three more female senators elected before the end of the decade (Kamps, 2021).

The high point of 38 women in the state legislature (29% of all members) was unbeaten until 2021. Now there are 41 women in the legislature (32 Assembly and 9 Senate), accounting for a record 31% of all seats (Kamps, 2021).

Minority representation was even slower to arrive. In 1977, Wisconsin elected the first African American woman to the legislature. It took another 34 years for the first Latinx woman (2011) and 44 years for the first Asian American woman (Wisconsin Women’s Council, 2015) to be elected. To date, Wisconsin has never elected a Native American woman to the state legislature.

When it comes to state supreme courts, Wisconsin was a national leader for decades, including having a female chief justice continuously since 1976. But it took nearly 80 years after enactment of the 1921 Wisconsin Equal Rights Act until women began achieving a series of firsts in higher state and federal offices. Wisconsin sent the first women to the U.S. Congress—1998: U.S. House of Representatives; 2004: African American woman to the U.S. House of Representatives; and 2012: openly gay woman

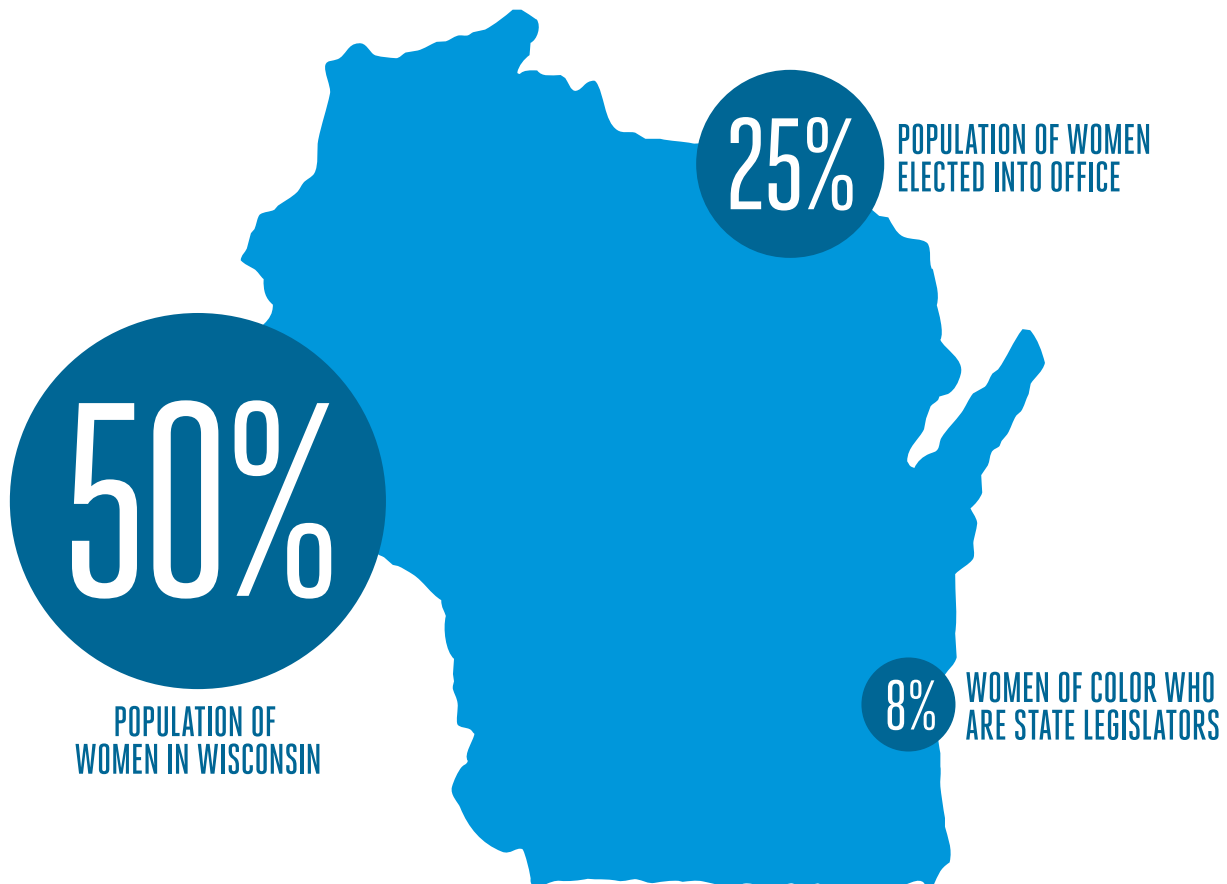


to the U.S. Senate. The office of lieutenant governor was first held by a woman in 2001, with two more women elected in 2002 and 2010; and the first female attorney general took office in 2002 (Wisconsin Women’s Council, 2015).

In 2022, more than 3,200 women serve in elected office across Wisconsin, accounting for about 25% of the more than 13,000 elected officials. Today (at last census), 26 mayors, 450 city council members, 400 county board supervisors and 650 village trustees are women. Women are six of seven state Supreme Court justices and another 80 women serve as judges on the appellate and circuit courts (Wisconsin Women’s Council, 2022).

Women make up 50% of the population in Wisconsin (United States Census Bureau, 2021) but only about 25% of all elected offices (Wisconsin Women’s Council, 2022). Women of color face an even larger representation gap across state and local offices, accounting for just 8% of state legislators. Francis Huntley Cooper, elected mayor of Fitchburg in 1981, is the first and only elected African American mayor in Wisconsin (Tomei, 2020). Recently, Wanda Montgomery, a Brown Deer Village Board member, became Wisconsin’s first African American village board president (Rumage, 2019).

The next century of women in elected office starts now. The demographics of these next generations of women in public office is up to us. Continue reading to learn what you can do to improve gender equality and inclusivity in Wisconsin’s democracy.



Gender-Based Experiences in Campaigning

- The ‘likeability trap’
- Questions about family responsibilities
- Scrutiny on physical appearance
- Funding gender gap
- Facing abuse and harassment

Women face unique challenges when running for office. This is widely accepted and understood, even by those who pay very little attention to politics. In this section we will focus on the following challenges: the ‘likeability trap,’ questions about family responsibilities, a focus on appearances and clothes, difficulty fundraising, and having to deal with harassment and abuse. These issues will be discussed in general and in regards to the results of the *Women in Public Life—Elected Officials* survey.

Gender-Based Experiences in Campaigning

The ‘Likeability Trap’

One issue women confront when contemplating running for office is the possibility that their candidacy might be downgraded because of a belief that ‘women can’t win.’ This was named as a concern by 38% of the respondents to the *Women in Public Life—Elected Officials* survey, but is on some level contradicted by the fact that 81% of the respondents won their first race.

Many things can contribute to this sense of ‘women can’t win’ but one of the most widely discussed is the ‘likeability trap.’ This trap has two aspects to it. The first is a belief that women, in order to be elected, have to be perceived as both competent and likable. This is in stark contrast to men who only need to be perceived as competent. “Past research conducted by Barbara Lee Family Foundation has repeatedly shown that women face a litmus test that men do not have to pass. Voters will support a male candidate they do not like but who they think is qualified. Men don’t need to be liked to be elected. Voters are less likely to vote for a woman candidate they do not like” (Politics Is Personal, 2016).

If being held to a higher standard isn’t bad enough, what really makes the ‘likeability trap’ so damaging is the second part—the tendency of women candidates to be labeled as ‘unlikable’ (or ‘shrill,’ ‘nasty,’ or ‘unpleasant’) by pundits, activists, and opponents. Men are less likely to be tagged with labels such as this, and if they are, it is less damaging (Baer, 2016). The impact of the likeability trap might have the most impact during primaries, when a partisan voter might be disinclined to vote for someone who they fear will lose the general election. A Democratic voter who liked Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) or Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) might have had second thoughts about voting for them if they were worried that they would lose to former President Donald Trump because of their perceived unlikeability.

Questions about Family Responsibilities

One question women candidates face that their male counterparts rarely do is whether first running for, and then potentially serving in, office will take them away from family responsibilities, especially with regard to children. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) tells of being asked this when she first ran for local office despite the fact that her youngest was in high school. Virginia García Beaudoux, a political science professor at Universidad de Buenos Aires, includes asking about a woman candidate’s “family responsibility” as one of the “five ways the media hurts female politicians,” saying: “Female candidates are often asked whether they can ‘juggle’ their political responsibilities with their role as a mother” (García Beaudoux, 2017). In some cases this has been expanded to include responsibilities as grandmothers. All the while, men are rarely, if ever, asked this question.

“Questions about children/family” was identified as an issue by 29% of the respondents. This was more of a concern of younger candidates (50% of Millennials and 48% of Generation X). While the survey wasn’t specific about the nature of the “questions about children/family,” it is safe to assume that for some respondents these were questions that implied they were being a ‘bad mother’ by being ‘absent’ from the lives of their children.

One negative impact of these questions could be women delaying their first run for office, which in turn could give them less time to work their way up to higher office. The effect of this can be considerable when you consider that the best time to run for an office is when an incumbent retires. A woman, if she started her political career a bit later, might be less able to pounce at this opportunity. Given how long people serve in Congress, if you pass on running for an open seat, you might not get a second chance for another decade.

Clothes and Appearance

Women in all walks of life face more scrutiny of their physical appearance, including the clothes they wear, than their male counterparts do. In politics, it has been like this from the start. In 1917 *The Washington Post* described Jeannette Rankin, the first woman to serve in Congress, as liking “nice gowns and tidy hair” (North, 2018). We should note that this topic is different than others discussed here in that sometimes, supporters can be part of the problem. It wasn’t her opponents who lit up Twitter when Vice President Kamala Harris appeared in Milwaukee wearing Chuck Taylor sneakers.

While focusing on clothes and looks makes Professor Beaudoux’s list of “five ways the media hurts female politicians,” others have sought to justify this type of coverage. *The Atlantic* claimed directly that “No, it’s not sexist to describe women politicians’ clothes” (Ball, 2012) and *The New York Times* tried to explain “Why We Cover What Politicians Wear” (Friedman, 2020). In both articles, there is a stated belief that politicians often choose what they wear to make a point or send a message, which makes style choices a legitimate topic to cover. It is part of the stagecraft of politics. They also argue that the way male politicians dress is also covered, and there is no difference between describing Hillary Clinton’s pantsuits or former President Trump’s long red ties or former Rep. Michelle Bachmann’s (R-MN) nails or Sen. Bernie Sanders’ (I-VT) unruly hair. All are fair game.

Vanessa Friedman, writing in *The New York Times*, does concede there are some differences: “Articles about men and dress usually generate a lot less attention than pieces about women and dress. Granted, there is more opportunity to write about female clothing because there is more variety, but that is part of what makes it interesting. And in many ways, the broader fashion options are a boon for women, not a problem” (Friedman, 2020).

Political scientists have tried conducting experiments to gauge the impact of media coverage of clothes and appearances, and these experiments have produced conflicting results. The research approach taken was to give different groups of respondents altered versions of newspaper articles about fictional candidates. Some of the articles are ‘clean,’ with no

mention of the candidate’s appearance, while others contain some information about appearances, either positive, neutral, or negative. After reading the article, respondents were asked to give a favorability rating between 0 and 100 for the candidate. This allowed researchers to compare the average favorability score from the respondents who read the ‘clean’ articles to those of the respondents that read an article with an appearance mention.

While the methods used in these experiments were similar, the results were not. Some found that women candidates were hurt by any mention of their appearance, whether it was positive, neutral, or negative. Others found that only negative comments lowered the favorability rates of women candidates, just as they did for male candidates. For both genders, positive or neutral comments had no impact on their favorability ratings. Both *The Atlantic* (Ball, 2012) and Huffington Post (Krupnick, 2013) cover the differing results of these experiments.

While there is disagreement about the impact of media coverage of clothes and appearance, there is a consensus that this type of coverage is more common for women candidates, and that in and of itself could be a problem. More coverage overall probably means more negative coverage. Perhaps more damaging is that coverage of the clothes and appearance of women politicians, even if it is benign, can provide an opening and cover for attacks from opponents on these matters that men don’t face. There is no male equivalent for the criticism Rep. Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) or former Republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin faced about the amount of money they were perceived to have spent on clothes or for the comments Donald Trump made about how the unattractiveness of former HP executive Carly Fiorina’s face makes her unelectable. In a *Rolling Stone* interview, then-candidate Trump said of Fiorina: “Look at that face! Would anyone vote for that?” (Stelter, 2015).

Rep. Ocasio-Cortez has faced repeated criticism about her clothes, including when she appeared on the cover of *Vogue* wearing a donated outfit worth approximately \$14,000 and when she attended the 2021 Met Gala wearing a dress with “Tax the Rich” on the back. Among the things she’s been

accused of are enjoying “the fruits of capitalism” while preaching socialism (Ellefson, 2020) and “cosplaying the revolution” (Aleem, 2021).

More than 20% of the respondents to the *Women in Public Life—Elected Officials* survey identified a “focus on looks” as an issue they’ve experienced while campaigning. This issue was noted more commonly by younger candidates: 50% of Millennials and 48% of candidates from Generation X. By contrast, only 8% of Baby Boomers and no one from the Silent Generation listed this as an issue. Correspondingly, those who have only served less than two years identified this as an issue at a higher rate (32%) than those with more years in office.

Funding Gender Gap

It is hard to tell if there is a gender gap in campaign fundraising. Whether you see one might depend on how you look for it. Incumbents generally raise significantly more than challengers, though this was not the case in 2020. Since there are so many more men in office than women, in every election cycle there are going to be more male incumbents raising monstrous amounts of money than there are women incumbents, who are also raising monstrous amounts. More refined analysis tries to compare men and women running in similar circumstances—male and female incumbents, men and women running for open seats, and women and men running in competitive races. When analyzed in this manner, evidence of a gender gap is harder to see. Sarah Bryner, the research director for the Center for Responsive Politics, the organization responsible for [opensecrets.org](https://www.opensecrets.org), which is the go-to source for anything related to campaign fundraising, told *The New York Times* that “We’re approaching equity in terms of campaign fund-raising, but there are still specific groups having a harder time” (Zernike, 2018, p. 1).

Research on [opensecrets.org](https://www.opensecrets.org) found that “in 2020 races for the U.S. House and Senate, women candidates outraised men on average, while also nearly closing the gap in state-level contests” ([OpenSecrets.org](https://www.opensecrets.org), 2020). It is impossible to tell at this point if this is the start of a new trend or a one-time anomaly as Trump-induced “rage donating” gave Democratic women a clear fundraising advantage. This same study found that “Black women, Latina women, Indigenous women, and Asian and Pacific Islander women face unique difficulties raising money compared to their white and male counterparts.” In 2018, [opensecrets.org](https://www.opensecrets.org) found that Black women raised the least amount across all race and gender categories.

This conclusion of equity, or near-equity, has not been universally reached. Research conducted by National Public Radio in 2018 found that Democratic women running in competitive House races raised \$500,000 less than Democratic men competing in similar races. This analysis was limited to districts held by Republicans but were rated as being “competitive” (Overby, 2018).

It is important to remember, though, that just because there is no gender gap in terms of total amount raised, it doesn’t mean that women do not still face challenges in fundraising. Campaign fundraising often starts with personal networks. If a woman making her first run for office reaches out to her personal network, and it is largely made up of women who have spent their entire careers earning less than men, there might be fewer resources available to donate than there would be for a male candidate going through the same process (Dittmar, 2019). This early money can be so important because it can help a campaign be viewed as viable by party activists and establish a foundation for future fundraising.

Other challenges related to fundraising are based on gender norms. “Cultural expectations about women’s selflessness can make women candidates feel awkward about seeking campaign contributions. Women seem to be more comfortable raising money for a cause rather than for their own candidacies” (Sanbonmatsu, n.d.).

The way women candidates have been able to match, or even surpass, their male counterparts has been through getting a greater number of smaller donations. While this might be something to celebrate on some level, it means that women have to work harder and invest more time in order to raise the same amount as a man. In light of this, it is not surprising that 18% of respondents to the *Women in Public Life—Elected Officials* survey identified a “higher burden to raise funds” as a concern. As has been the case with other topics covered here, this is a greater concern of younger women—50% of Millennials and 23% of Generation X.

Something that has benefited women in fundraising has been organizations whose sole purpose is to raise money for women running for office. These organizations usually have a partisan focus. The best known is EMILY’s List, which directs money to female Democratic candidates. The importance of early money is reflected in the EMILY acronym: Early Money Is Like Yeast. Each election cycle, EMILY’s List generates millions of dollars to Democratic women. Republican equivalents (like Winning for Women or VIEW PAC) have not yet achieved the same level of success.

Abuse and Harassment

Public figures of all sorts face abuse and harassment, but in politics, it is different for women. The Women’s Media Center referred to the abuse faced by women in politics as being “violent, sexualized, and sustained” (“Silencing Women,” n.d.). A male politician might receive an email criticizing a position they’ve taken or a vote they’ve cast, whereas a female politician will get an email criticizing their position or votes, plus their appearance and personality, all accompanied by derogatory names. At its most extreme, a man will receive a death threat, while a woman will be threatened with abduction, gang rape and/or death. An often-cited survey conducted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union found that 45% of the women members of parliament surveyed, from 39 different countries, received threats of “rape, beating, death or abduction” (Sexism, Harassment, 2016).

While abuse is widespread, it is not evenly distributed. Women from minority communities, whether based on race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, or gender identity, are targeted with a higher level of abuse (Guerin & Maharasingam-Shah, n.d.). Higher-profile figures also attract more abuse. Based on this, it is not surprising that Vice President Kamala Harris, whose parents emigrated from India and Jamaica, is the “most targeted American politician” (Bierman, 2021).

The abuse women in politics face can vary. While online abuse has gotten most of the attention recently, there is still plenty of “traditional” abuse, including threatening phone calls, stalkers, and uncomfortable face-to-face encounters.

Sometimes the abuse can take the form of microaggressions. A woman running for Boston City Council tells of canvassing door to door and being told by a man that she would have his vote, unless he learns someone “more attractive” is running (Ebbert, 2019).

On the other hand, abuse can also be organized and purposeful. White supremacists and anti-Semitic groups have flooded the inboxes of targeted women with hateful, threatening messages. In some cases the abuse has been nonpolitical as supporters of a candidate refuse to respect personal boundaries, in some cases necessitating restraining orders.

At other times the abuse has taken the form of “gendered disinformation,” which is defined as “the spreading of deceptive or inaccurate information and images” (Di Meco & Brechenmacher, 2020). This can include spreading rumors about someone’s sexual past or behavior, drawing sexualized images of candidates or superimposing the face of a female

politician onto a pornographic image. In the Women’s Media Centers video that was already mentioned, Rep. Katherine Clark (D-MA) tells of seeing “pictures of my face pasted on to pornography” (“Silencing Women,” n.d.).

This type of abuse has many costs. At the most basic level, there are monetary costs. Campaigns might find it necessary to hire more security, or a woman running for office might be compelled to upgrade her home security system (Norwood et al., 2021). There are also considerable opportunity costs. When candidate training sessions for women, like Emerge Wisconsin, spend time discussing how to deal with harassment and abuse, that is time not spent talking about other things that candidates might need to do to get elected. Time taken up at staff meetings focused on dealing with harassment is time not spent on other issues. Time and mental energy women in office spend on trying to decide which threatening emails rise to the level of needing to be reported to law enforcement is time and energy they can’t spend on other concerns (Dittmar, 2019).

There are also competitive costs. Women have said they’ve stopped canvassing after dark, fearing for their safety, a step their male opponents did not need to take (Ebbert, 2019). A campaign dealing with a stalker might not publicize the candidate’s schedule as much as they normally would, which can undermine the effectiveness of the campaign events. In a more general sense, there is the psychological cost of constantly having to deal with the abuse. The ultimate cost is that it leads someone to retreat from public life. There have been cases where women have either dropped out of a race or resigned from office, citing fear for their safety (Mekouar, 2019).

Concern about abuse and harassment was evident in the *Women in Public Life—Elected Officials* survey. A quarter of the respondents said they felt they were sacrificing “personal safety” by running for office. This response gets at the fear related to abuse most directly, but concerns about it could also be reflected in those who felt they were sacrificing “personal privacy” (53%) or “mental health” (32%). In an interview conducted for this report, a respondent said that the fears she had to face in order to run included that her house would get egged or that she was “going to get nasty letters.”

The abuse and harassment that women in politics face has been getting more attention recently. Part of the reason for this is simply that more women are running for office. Additionally, the #MeToo movement has opened up space for women to publicly discuss the harassment they have faced. Women running for office have been advised to be open and call out

A Democratic voter who liked Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) or Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) might have had second thoughts about voting for them if they were worried that they would lose to former President Donald Trump because of their perceived unlikeability.

this type of behavior (Putting Sexism, 2020). The Women’s Media Center’s “Name it, Change it” campaign is based around this idea. In 2018, *The New York Times* published an article on harassment of women candidates that was accompanied by a video of some of the women featured reading abusive messages they were sent (Astor, 2018, p. 1). Other candidates made their own ‘mean tweets’ videos (Vignarajah, 2018, and DeVito, 2018). Social media companies are under pressure to be more proactive with dealing with abusive material and to be more open with their processes. Others are calling for legislation that would establish a stronger regulatory framework for social media (Lehr & Bechrakis, 2018 and Di Meco & Brechenmacher, 2020).

Some may question the decision to include in a report celebrating women in public life a section documenting the abuses and barriers women face. At the same time, noting these challenges provides greater context for the gains women have made. Having to overcome these barriers makes the success women candidates have achieved even more impressive. Additionally, raising awareness about the barriers women still face might be a step to reducing their impact.

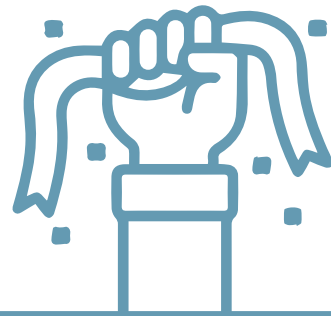
Table 1: Gender-Based Experiences in Campaigning

Politicians reported considerable experience with gender-based issues in their campaigns, though the experiences were by no means universal. Reports of specific concerns varied by both the ages of the elected officials and their years of elected service. The following table represents the frequency of responses.

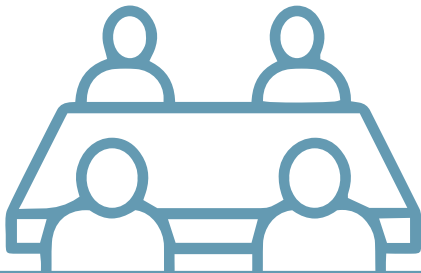
ISSUE	PERCENT SAYING THEY EXPERIENCED THIS ISSUE IN THEIR CAMPAIGNING
Excess scrutiny as compared to men	48%
Questions about women’s ability as leaders	45%
Informal male networks as barriers	45%
Perception women are less likely to be elected	38%
“Locker room feel” or masculine nature of campaigns	38%
Questions about women’s ability to control emotions	33%
Questions about women’s “distinctive approach to leadership”	33%
Questions about children/family	29%
Focus on looks	21%
Higher burden to raise funds	18%
Other	27%
None of the above	8%



CHALLENGES FACED



MOTIVATORS



CULTIVATING A PIPELINE



GAINS SERVING AS AN ELECTED OFFICIAL

Overview of Findings

In the following sections, the report focuses mainly on the findings from the in-depth interviews. Findings from the survey can be found in the research brief, which is located on RCWG's webpage (alverno.edu/research). Data from both the survey and the interviews informed the recommendations located at the end of the report.

Across all of the in-depth interviews, the women spoke passionately about their desire to make positive contributions to their communities and to support other women seeking or serving in public office. Themes that emerged across the interviews can be organized into four broad categories: challenges faced, motivators, cultivating a pipeline, and gains that come with serving as an elected official. Each of these categories will be discussed in the following sections.

Finding: Challenges Faced

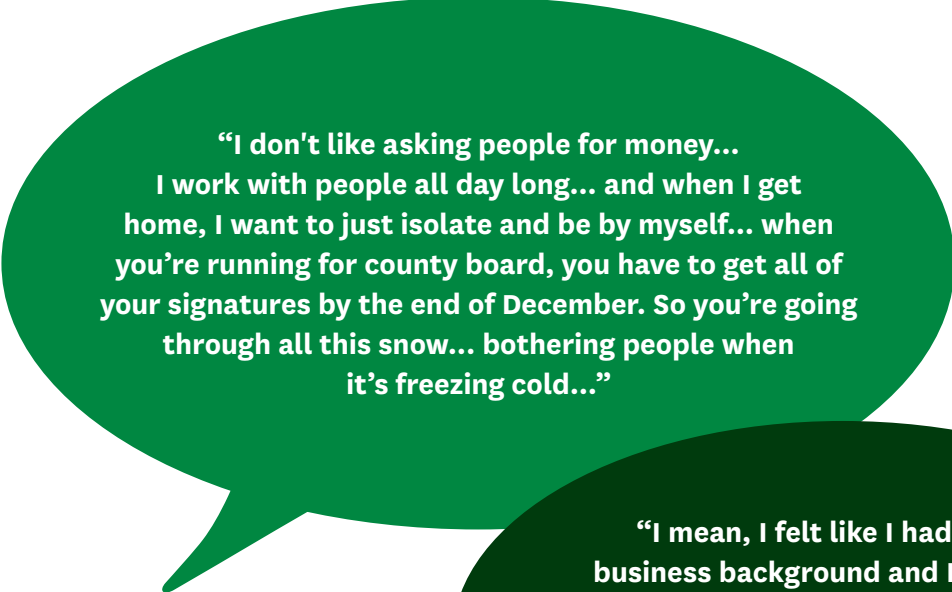
- Overcoming fears of running
- Facing gender bias
- Confronting external scrutiny

The findings from the survey and the in-depth interviews indicated that many of the women talked about identifying and overcoming challenges to serving as an elected official. Two common examples involved **overcoming fears and gender bias** in public life.


Finding: Challenges Faced

Overcoming Fears

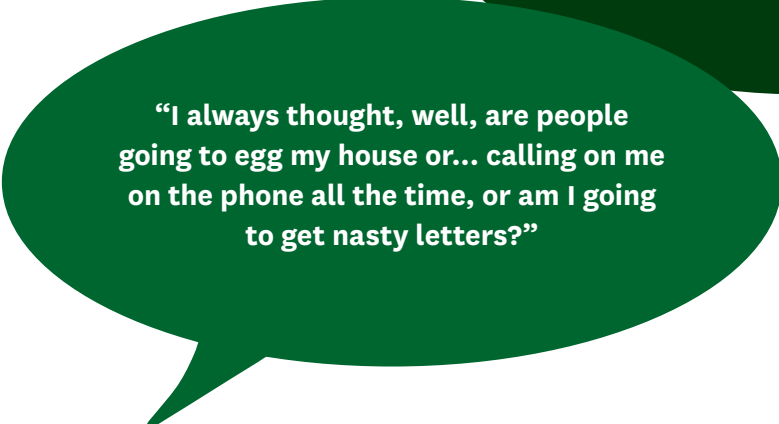
Some of the politicians shared that a barrier they had to overcome was their own self-doubt or feeling unsure about their abilities.



“I don’t like asking people for money... I work with people all day long... and when I get home, I want to just isolate and be by myself... when you’re running for county board, you have to get all of your signatures by the end of December. So you’re going through all this snow... bothering people when it’s freezing cold...”



“I mean, I felt like I had a good business background and I had some skills, but I did not really know what I was getting into. And so, I didn’t feel confident in running or feeling like I was going to know what I was doing.”

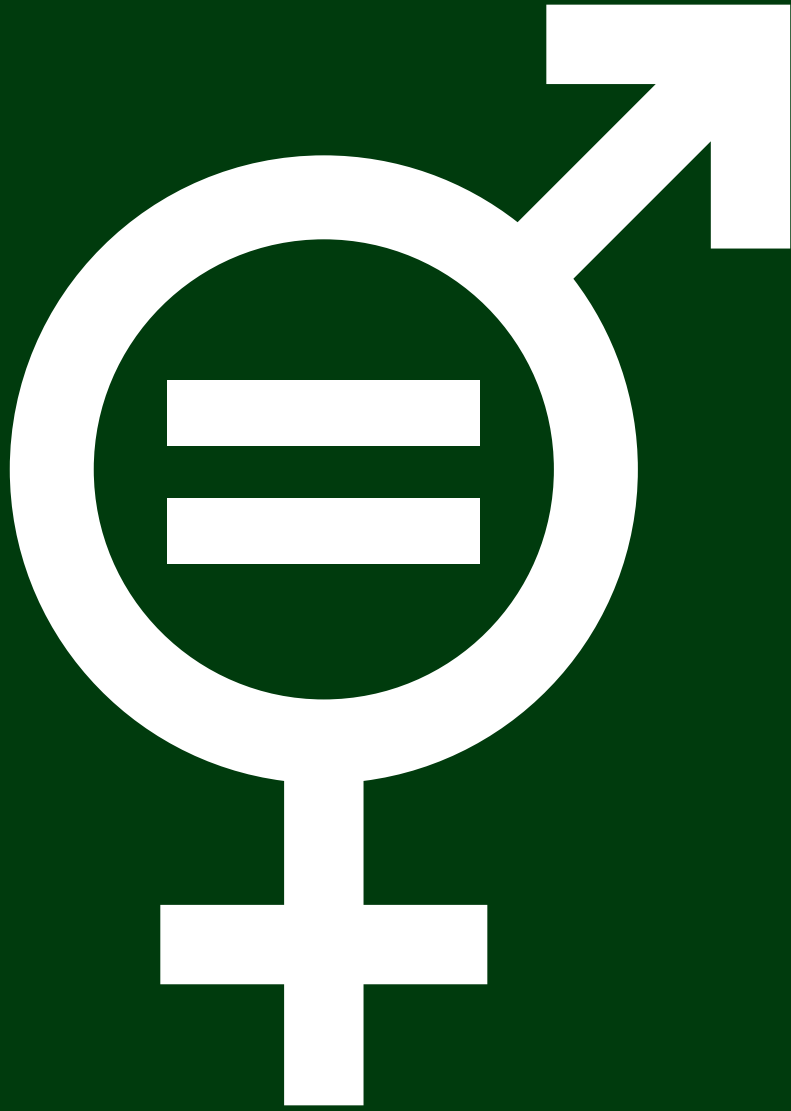


“I always thought, well, are people going to egg my house or... calling on me on the phone all the time, or am I going to get nasty letters?”

Table 2: Gender-Based Concerns

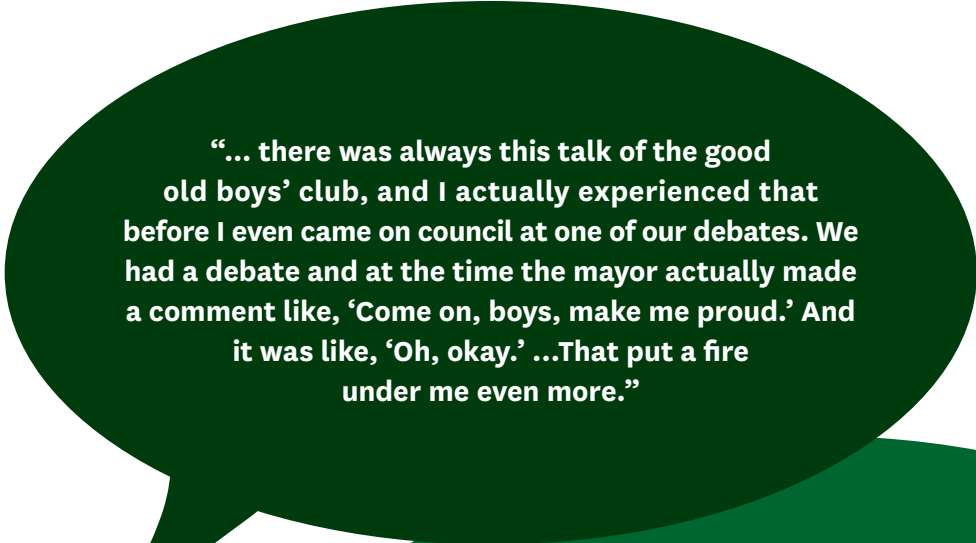
The survey sought to explore whether female candidates confronted issues or questions related to their gender. Here are respondents' answers to the question: "Have issues related to women running for office emerged during any election in your own campaign or campaigns for office?"

	YES	NO
Questions about children or family	29%	71%
Focus on looks	21%	79%
Higher burden to raise needed funds	18%	82%
Informal male networks as barriers	45%	55%
"Locker room feel" or masculine nature of campaigns and campaigning	39%	62%
Tendency for women to be scrutinized more than male peers on multiple indicators	48%	52%
Questions about women's ability to be effective leaders	45%	55%
Questions about women's distinctive approach to leadership	33%	67%
Questions about women's ability to control emotions	33%	67%
Perception that women are less likely to be elected to office	39%	62%
Other	27%	73%
None of the above	31%	69%




Gender Bias

In the interviews, politicians reported that voter perceptions about a candidate posed challenges in a campaign. Similarly, in the survey responses, when reflecting on their most recent campaign, one-third of the politicians indicated that gender bias was a concern.



“... there was always this talk of the good old boys’ club, and I actually experienced that before I even came on council at one of our debates. We had a debate and at the time the mayor actually made a comment like, ‘Come on, boys, make me proud.’ And it was like, ‘Oh, okay.’ ...That put a fire under me even more.”



“... There is definitely the good old boys’ club, and I think that strong female leaders can be seen as, I guess the ‘B word’ comes to mind with some of these guys, because I think that they don’t want to give up their power, and I think that at some level a lot of what’s going on in politics is about power and not community-focused. It’s not community-centric, or state-focused, or federally focused on doing the right things. It seems to be about grabbing power these days.”

Finding: Motivators

- Personal values as inspiration
- Gender bias
- Recognizing and leveraging valuable skills

Given the challenges that women reported experiencing running for and serving in public office, what keeps these women moving forward, confronting the barriers, and overcoming the challenges? In interviews, elected officials commonly cited their own personal values as their inspiration to keep going, frequently discussing a shared value of diversity.

Finding: Motivators

Values

There were many values discussed in the survey and the interviews, and often they provided a foundation for perseverance in the face of adversity.

In survey responses, when asked how they knew they were ready to run for public office, the most frequently (24%) stated reason was that someone encouraged them to run. The second most frequent response (22%) related to politicians feeling as if they possessed the skills needed to do the job well.

Additional values cited included: honesty, humility, listening, relationships, safety, and service.



The women drew direct links between these values and their own actions and investment in the work.

“I think it’s so important to listen. Too often, people talk without listening, and it’s different to hear than actually listen. Just listen to what people are saying, be empathetic. But it’s still important too to always stick up for what you believe in. And sometimes that may not be the popular decision, but you have to make decisions that you believe in. So sticking to your morals and your beliefs as well, but also be willing to listen and learn from others.”

“Meet [your constituents] where they’re at, find out what their concerns are, and what they value, and see if there’s a way you can come to a solution that works for both the local government as well as the individual. So I think that is the most important thing, that you work with people.”

“... leadership is about being vulnerable and being comfortable with that... because we’re all flawed, and being up-front about that, I think is important... because that allows you then to not lead from the front, but lead as a part of the group.”

In the interviews, one particular value that often emerged was diversity, which was highlighted by many female political leaders. One politician argued for the importance of “having diverse leadership,” having them be an example of a diverse leadership, to attract diverse people, sharing successes and failures maybe in leadership, or training, always hearing success stories or inspiring stories.” Other politicians remarked:

Diverse
Voices

“I think it’s important to keep that rural voice in local government... I understand that you want a diverse voice on a school board, a diverse board for a county board. So you don’t want just everyone to be retired. You need that younger family [and] working people that have to make time.”

Unique
Perspectives

“I just think until we get more diversity, and more same old, same old, in-the-box people [continue] running for office, it’s always going to be women fighting harder for those leadership roles.”

Novel
Energy

“We need to promote diversity and make things more equal and address some of these hot topics that we see in today’s world. The majority of our board has been on for a decade or more, and things have changed so much that we just need to change with that. So that is one of my big initiatives in my office.”

As the research findings suggest, many women who currently serve in public office anchor themselves to their work by calling upon their personal and professional values. What is clear from their responses is that no matter the value, it is important for women who are considering running for public office to be aware of and clear on the values that are calling them to serve their community in this way, recognizing that these values may change with time and experience.

Finding: Building the Bench

- Cultivating pathways
- Embeddedness within communities
- Creating formal networks
- Understanding sources of influence

Most of the politicians discussed the importance of creating and supporting pipelines for women to become elected officials and to succeed in this role. Ideas included pathways, such as capitalizing on community embeddedness and personal characteristics, as well as networks like mentorship relationships and organizations that train women to run for office. Finally, the importance of providing ongoing support, including after being elected, was emphasized.

Finding: Building the Bench

Pathways to Public Service

Most of the women emphasized that their *embeddedness within their community* oriented them toward public service. For some, this took the form of volunteering in a school parent-teacher association (PTA), Girl Scouts, unions, serving on boards, and volunteering on other political campaigns. Caring about their community and the future sparked some to run for office.

“I’ve lived in this community my entire life pretty much, so I just love it. I went to school here; my daughter was raised here.”

For some, passion about a single community-related issue created a springboard to seek elected office.

“It was more of a personal desire to be engaged at the local level, in crafting a direction for our township. I first got a taste of that when the township tried to take down a 100-year-old oak on my property, and I fought to have it saved because it provided really valuable shade. I’m a bit of an environmentalist. And I succeeded. But then it became clear to me that I needed to be attentive on a regular basis at the township level if I wanted to ensure that the things that I held dear were not being eroded.”

In addition to community embeddedness, *personal characteristics* were often cited as helping them be successful in running a campaign and serving as an elected official. A high number of the women talked about having strong analytical and problem-solving skills.

Research & Analysis

“I am a farmer, and an engineer, and a librarian. So I do a lot of research and I do data analysis.”

...

“A lot of county board is reading and analyzing and preparing.”

Research & Problem Solving

“I’m good with digging in, doing research, finding what needs to be found to help us make an informed decision.”

...

“I think that for me what empowers me is actually doing the work in finding the holes, finding the gaps, and actually starting to prepare those legislative pieces, whether I have to go to the state or whether I can fix it locally, those are the things that empower me. I look for the solution so that it lasts rather than just a band-aid fix. That’s where I think I get my power from.”

Others emphasized interpersonal skills and being confident.

Interpersonal Communication & Confidence

“I think women have to be confident. It helps them be competent in their abilities, and their abilities are needed.”

...

“I’m not someone who sits around and waits for things to happen. I am somebody who looks forward and looks at what might be missing that would and could help the board now and in the future.”

FORMAL NETWORKS

In their interviews, officials cited the importance of formal networks to leadership and training in running for elected office. These included specific *training organizations along with mentorship networks*. Examples of training organizations include Wisconsin Counties Organization, League of Women Voters, Emerge, Women’s Policy Institute, Victory Institute, and UW-Extension.



These experiences were valuable in terms of providing both training and mentorship.

“I also think that the networking aspect of it is incredibly helpful. It might not be something where it’s painfully obvious to people, but having that networking opportunity and that ability to be with people that are like you, whether it’s women, or LGBTQ leaders, or this other subset of the population, being with people that can support you and understand you at a deeper level helps a lot.”

“... You got a binder and it showed you how to run for office: How many calls do you have to make? How much money do you have to raise? It was very analytical. What are some of the campaign finance laws? How do you have your elevator speech while you’re standing at the door, when the mom with three kids behind her is trying to shut the door and you’re still trying to get your name out there....So, that was really helpful, sort of that methodical process.”

Another aspect of mentorship mentioned in the in-depth interviews was *being personally encouraged* or invited to run for office. Similarly, the survey, when politicians were asked how they knew they were ready to run for public office, the most frequently (24%) stated reason was that someone encouraged them to run.

Table 3: Sources of Influence

Respondents were asked: “How influential was encouragement from each of the following the first time you considered running for elected office?”

	NOT AT ALL INFLUENTIAL	NOT VERY INFLUENTIAL	SOMEWHAT INFLUENTIAL	VERY INFLUENTIAL
Political party official	63%	10%	17%	10%
Elected official	20	9	24	48
Spouse or significant other	28	5	28	40
Other family member	28	17	32	22
Co-worker or business associate	49	8	26	17
Friend or acquaintance	18	9	40	34
Non-elected activist	44	5	21	30
Other	67	12	11	11

During the qualitative interviews and survey responses, politicians were asked what influenced their decision making about running for public office. Many of the participants pointed to the role of encouragement from someone else.

“... A current Alder had reached out to me and said, ‘Hey, I think you’d be really good at this. Is this something you’d be interested in?’ I’m like, ‘Why not?’ So that’s what started it.”

“I was asked many times by female friends to run. I don’t think I would have ever done it if they hadn’t asked me so many times and encouraged me so much. I never thought I had the knowledge and experience to be a county board supervisor, but they convinced me that the men that run usually don’t worry about whether they are qualified or not and that our county board desperately needed women representation.”



Overview of Findings

Importantly, in the survey, approximately 18% of the politicians indicated that they did not feel ready but ran for public office anyway. One politician explained: “I didn’t feel ready, although I had tons of experience. My experience is that women generally don’t feel ready. You just have to jump.”

Finding: Support Networks

- Provide emotional support mechanisms
- Create concrete support mechanisms
- Empower women to succeed in local communities

Findings indicate that women running for and serving in public office provide support to one another and need support networks.

“Sometimes it’s the networking that I feel women are lagging behind on with men. In general, I think they’re making great strides, but for a lot of [them] I think, [they are lagging].”

Finding: Support Networks

Many of the women talked about how support is not only needed during the campaign but in an ongoing way. This included both *emotional* and *concrete* support mechanisms like help juggling multiple roles.

One politician explained that to combat the “misogyny against the women” in her county, women in public office need a “collective group of support.” She remarked: Politicians need “someone to call, so that the voice isn’t just yours.” The politician argued that thought needs to be given to “how do we build platforms? How do we fight against the undermining?... So, that’s kind of a support system. And it doesn’t matter what side of the aisle you’re sitting on, when you’re being attacked, primarily because of your gender or seen as somehow diminished in your capabilities because of your gender, we need to lift up those folks.”

In the interviews and survey responses, politicians argued that gendered expectations make tangible support important for encouraging women to run for public office, such as helping with childcare.

“I read once...something about a woman who goes through politics, has her children and makes those sacrifices for her family, it’s such a balancing act, [it] is not given credit, that’s not recognized.”

“I think that childcare can be a big issue. Being able to log on remotely is helpful in childcare pinches.”

One politician remarked that she was able to run for public office because she is retired and her children are adults. However, she is concerned about the gender-based challenges that younger generations face when running for public office. The politician stated: “Let’s say [a young professional] is new to their job, they may not have the latitude to say, ‘Hey, I’m going to flex my lunch at 2:30 because I have a meeting, is that okay?’ And the boss may go, ‘You have a job and it’s paying your bills, you need to make a choice.’ Or, young family, so now you’ve got a child, and childcare we know is already a problem. And now you need childcare for a 7 p.m. meeting.”

Whether it is to help navigate experiences of systemic oppression, financial concerns, or childcare challenges, many of the politicians discussed the importance of women supporting and empowering women. The data suggests that women serving in public office at the time of this report recognize the integral role that community networks play in that empowerment, and they are engaging in and continuing to discuss ways in which to collectively create networks that can provide various avenues of support for women in public office.

Finding: Women Bring Something Unique

- Honor women at the table
- Understand the unique view of women
- Expand societal values of leadership

Politicians noted that there is something sacred about women running for and serving in public office. The lived experiences of women provide them with a unique perspective that can amplify issues that might otherwise be overlooked. Additionally, these lived experiences can provide women with strengths that are often needed in public office.

Finding: Women Bring Something Unique

Several of the women shared their insights about how women bring something unique to public life, inspiring them to seek and take a seat at the table.

“I think it’s just getting over that idea that politics is [sic], especially on the local level, is really a men’s game. Historically, it seems like men have been very involved in making the decisions in cities, in villages, in municipalities. It’s important for women to realize that we do have a say, we have a lot of valuable insight into things. Whether that be based on our history, based on our education, based on our work experience, that we really do have a lot to offer. So I think it’s just getting over that whole intimidation factor and realizing that we really do have a place in politics.”

“I think women bring something that men don’t, and vice versa. And I think the best thing, as with diverse elements of our culture, I think the best thing that could happen is if people were acknowledged for what they bring and not who they are, in terms of a gender, or a diverse [person], or whatever label they’re being cast as.”

Some politicians who were interviewed for this study provided examples where they felt like women view issues in unique ways, including not letting money be the only factor guiding decision making.

“When we do our budget, it’s not about money. It’s a moral decision.”

“What I saw was absolutely necessary as we needed to go to the taxpayers to ask them for additional money for the operations of our skilled nursing facility. Nobody believed that the voters would vote for this. This is what I heard: ‘People aren’t going to increase their taxes. Why would they increase their taxes?’ I’m like, ‘I don’t know; let’s try it.’ Sixty-six percent voted ‘yes.’”

“Number one, I think more women need to run for office and get in office. Women in general are under-represented in public service. And generally speaking, I think that women decision makers are more community-focused and less me-centric than a lot of our male counterparts. And I think that comes from maybe being mothers or being more focused on multiple people than just [the] self.”

Understanding the strengths that women can bring to public office is an important finding to emerge from this study’s data. It would benefit those who are interested in encouraging women to run for public office to consider, discuss, and call upon the strengths that women may be uniquely positioned to provide as a result of their lived experiences in a society that sometimes relegates their voices to the margins.



Conclusion: Recommendations

- Encourage political ambition
- Spark and sustain political ambition
- Improve inclusivity
- Understand the seven strategies for recruiting candidates

Conclusion: Recommendations

Based upon this study’s findings, RCWG provides the following suggestions for encouraging and empowering women to run for public office. Additionally, RCWG holds the belief that improving gender representation within public office requires that efforts are made and continue to be made in educating girls about the important role their voice plays in the foundation of democracy. Thus, this report provides the following recommendations.

1. ENCOURAGE POLITICAL AMBITION EARLY IN LIFE

One of the most vital things we can do to improve gender representation in political life is improve and strengthen youth development environments. To do so, we also must:

1	Reduce gender gaps in political interest, working to combat gender socialization that may discourage youth to become civically engaged as a result of their gender.
2	Increase understanding of opportunities, acknowledging that interest in public life may look different for people. For instance, youth may not see their future selves serving in public office, but they may be interested in volunteering in their community.
3	Recognize the importance of strengths and diverse perspectives and emphasize that when it comes to the paths that we choose—be that career or community service through volunteerism or serving as an elected official—all roles are important to democracy. Communicate this understanding to youth.
4	Use the perspective of strengths to combat social penalties for straying from gender roles. Educate oneself about gender socialization and encourage youth to engage in this education themselves.

As Lawless & Fox (2013) indicate in their study, while women statistically want to “volunteer to help improve community” at a higher rate than men, “women...are less exposed to environments that would push them to consider running for office later in life” (pgs. 19-20). We need to continue to work to understand and improve the role that gender socialization has on girls’ aspiration and self-efficacy to run for public office, as well as women’s decision making in running for public office.

2. SPARK AND SUSTAIN POLITICAL AMBITION

The women in this study commonly cited their own personal values as their inspiration to keep going, with a frequent value of diversity being discussed. Additionally, they shared their belief that women bring something unique to public life, and their knowledge of this served as a motivating force.

Sparking and sustaining political ambition requires naming and recognizing barriers to women running for public office. (see the barriers women identified in RCWG’s *Women in Public Life—Elected Officials* survey).

- We must help women identify their fears in running for public office and resources to help them overcome these concerns.
- We must name and confront sexism at all ages. We must call out instances in which gender socialization seeks to disrupt a girl’s or woman’s confidence in her ability to run for and serve in public office.
- We must recognize that real systemic challenges, often based on gendered expectations of women’s role in the family and society, can teach girls at a young age that they do not have a place in public office and can prevent women from running for public office.
- Encourage youth to get involved in civic organizations, democracy, and volunteerism at a young age. See “Encourage political action at a young age.”

One of the barriers women face in running for and serving in public office is systemically complicated, such as the challenge of childcare. Running for and serving in public office takes a significant amount of time, yet women are typically expected to be the caregivers of the family. Thus, in order to encourage and support women’s pathways to public office, we must find ways to help provide support systems like finding equitable and accessible childcare options.

- Women expressed hesitancy about running against an incumbent, identifying open offices on the ballot may be preferable.

3. IMPROVE INCLUSIVITY

- Through networking and relationship building, women and allies can encourage women they know who would make good leaders to pursue elected office.
- Research findings indicated an informal conversation is effective and if the candidate is unknown to them to find someone who knows her—and having several people encourage her to run is especially effective. Being persistent is key; many women indicated that they were asked or encouraged to run several times.

Important work has already been done on encouraging and supporting women to run for public office. The next page will show one such example.

SEVEN STRATEGIES:

Jennifer Erickson, Dan Hill, Melissa Kono, and Victoria Solomon (2018) from the University of Wisconsin–Madison Division of Extension conducted focus groups of women “who have successfully run and served in local elected office in Wisconsin” and developed seven strategies for encouraging more women to run for public office (p. 13).

This table is taken from that work. More examples for each strategy are provided in the researchers’ published article. If you are interested in knowing more about this work, you can find the source citation in the references section.

<p>PHASE 1</p>	<p>STRATEGY 1 Identify and be clear on why you are recruiting someone to run for local elected office</p>	<p>Consider starting with a vacant position. Women expressed more concerns about running against an incumbent.</p>
<p>PHASE 2</p>	<p>STRATEGY 2 Build trust with the candidate</p>	<p>Find someone to help you who has a previous relationship with the recruit.</p>
	<p>STRATEGY 3 Be persistent</p>	<p>The candidate may never have considered running for an office. The recruitment process may be similar to planting and nurturing a seed. You will likely need to give them time to internalize the idea of running and seeing themselves in the position.</p>
	<p>STRATEGY 4 Make it clear that you believe in them</p>	<p>Convey that you are interested in them as a candidate because you believe in their strengths and what they would bring to elected office—it’s not just about filling a position.</p>
	<p>STRATEGY 5 Emphasize the candidate’s ability to make a difference</p>	<p>Many women in our focus groups referred to themselves as advocates. This can be a selling point in recruiting women: They can be an advocate for a cause, a group, and their community.</p>
	<p>STRATEGY 6 Assure the candidate that she can learn on the job</p>	<p>Focus on the candidate’s strengths and not on what the candidate does not know—parliamentary procedure, zoning codes, curb and gutter dimensions, etc.</p>
<p>PHASE 3</p>	<p>STRATEGY 7 Be prepared to commit to supporting the candidate</p>	<p>Remember that support will be needed before, during, and after the campaign. Placing your name on the ballot puts you in a vulnerable position; candidates need to feel supported. Yet many candidates say that their sense of responsibility overtook their sense of vulnerability and trepidation.</p>

Conclusion

In comparison to the RCW's 1971 report about women serving in public office in Wisconsin, the findings from the current RCWG report make clear that progress has been made regarding equitable gender representation in public office. However, the findings also indicate that there is still room for improvement. Despite the efforts of many, concerns about gender and racial bias cause concern for women who are currently interested in running for public office. Additionally, concerns about the various roles and responsibilities that women often hold in society (e.g., nurturer, caregiver, employee, etc.) can influence their decision making about whether or not to run for public office. As this report's recommendations suggest, commitment to gender parity in public office requires continued and improved efforts to create and sustain formal and informal networks that assist women in navigating the social binds that are often associated with being female. Doing so will help honor all women's voices and insist that they be heard in equal measure to their counterparts.

Finally, the findings from this report make it clear that democracy is foundational to the well-being of communities, and that we must do what is required to honor the diverse perspectives that are essential to that well-being. As people committed to ensuring an equitable democracy, we must understand and improve the various pathways that women take to public office and the reasons that they do not. Finally, we must encourage girls to see themselves as playing an integral role in democracy, encouraging them to participate in civic engagement, become involved in local organizations promoting inclusive democracy, and support them in their efforts to insist that their voices be heard within their local communities. It is through our collective energy that we will help carve out improved pathways to public office for women and girls.



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