



ALVERNO COLLEGE  
ESTABLISHED 1887

RESEARCH CENTER FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS

50 YEARS

**WISCONSIN WOMEN  
IN PUBLIC LIFE  
ELECTED OFFICIALS  
THE ALVERNO REPORT 2020**



In partnership with



WOMEN'S FUND  
OF GREATER MILWAUKEE



## Wisconsin Women in Public Life - Elected Officials

The *Wisconsin Women in Public Life – Elected Officials* report sought to understand the pathways women take to public office and the challenges they face in doing so. This study was conducted by Alverno College’s Research Center for Women and Girls (RCWG) in partnership with the Strategic Research Institute at St. Norbert College. The project is sponsored by the State of Wisconsin Women’s Council and the Women’s Fund of Greater Milwaukee. 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, *Wisconsin Women in Public Office*.

### Context & Rationale

Women are more likely to vote than men and are often engaged in civic and volunteer work, yet they remain underrepresented in public office. The study of *Wisconsin Women in Public Life – Elected Officials* contributes to better understanding the diverse and successful pathways women take to public office while also identifying the challenges they face when running for public office. The hope of this study is that it provides ideas about how organizations can best support the development of women as political leaders.

The information in this research brief is based on a non-partisan survey, which focused on understanding paths to leadership for Wisconsin women in elected office. Women who held positions in public office in Fall of 2020 were invited to participate.

The following research brief will focus on some of the key quantitative and qualitative findings from the survey. These findings will be expanded to include additional research and culminate in an official report available to the public by September of 2021.

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### Contributors

The *Wisconsin Women in Public Life – Elected Officials* study would not be possible if it was not for the generous support of the Women’s Fund of Greater Milwaukee and the State of Wisconsin Women’s Council. Additionally, Alverno College’s Research Center for Women & Girls wants to thank Strategic Research Institute at St. Norbert College for their assistance in designing and administering the survey. For more information about these organizations and Alverno College see the end of this research brief. Finally, thank you to longtime supporters Janet & Vincent Martin for their commitment to Alverno’s 8 Abilities and dedication to the Research Center.



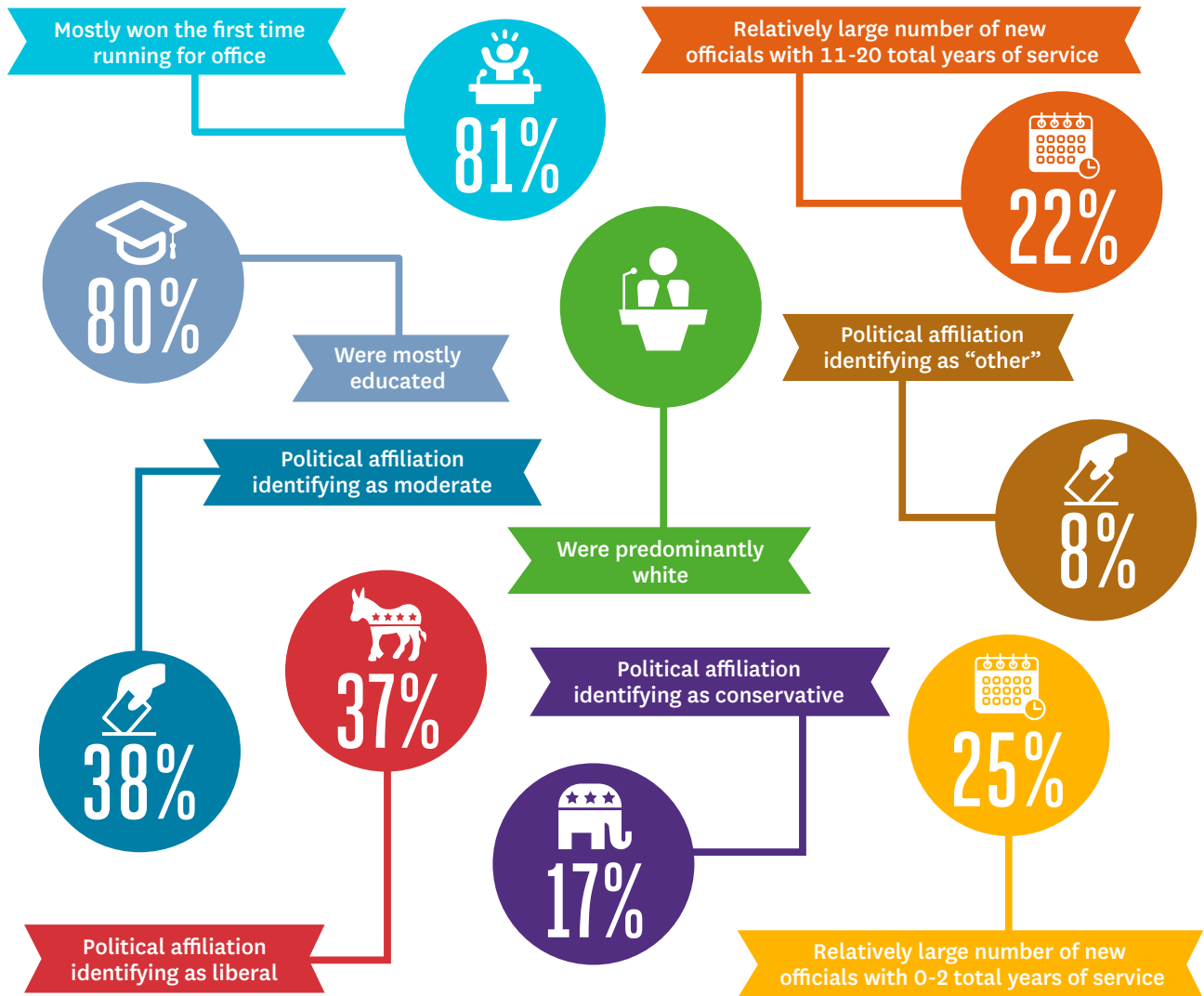
### Research Team

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## Important Survey Demographics

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. The findings in this research brief come from those responses.



### Key Findings

The research study focused on paths to leadership for Wisconsin women in elected office. Key findings of the survey responses relate to the motivation to run for office, concerns about running for office, strengths and experiences, helpful resources, and advice for potential candidates.

## Motivation to Run for Office

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. For example:

- “When a friend with school connections noted my passion for public education and suggested I run for school board, my immediate gut reaction was: Yes. I’m going to do it.”
- “Someone asked me if I’d like to run at the last minute... It often takes a village to get past that hurdle.”

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**“It often takes a village to get past that hurdle.”**

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The second most frequent response (22%) related to politicians feeling as if they possessed the skills needed to do the job well. For example:

- “A record of success in an area pertinent to the office for which you’re running.”
- “My professional experiences as an engineer, librarian, and farmer taught me skills that have helped me gain confidence as an elected official.”

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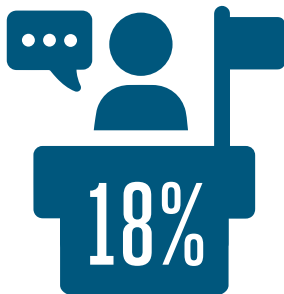
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Other motivators included:

- Passion for the job
- Sense of timing
- 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!”

Importantly, 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.”

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## Gender-Based Experiences in Campaigning

Politicians reported considerable experience with gender-based issues in their campaigns, though the experiences were by no means universal, and 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.

**Table 1:** Overall prevalence of gender-based issues

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%

### Key Findings

An important key finding is that these challenges all differ by the generation of survey respondents with Millennial (ages 24-39 in 2020) politicians more likely to say they have encountered them and Silent (ages 75-92 in 2020) politicians least likely.

Voter perceptions about a candidate posed challenges in a campaign. Reflecting on their most recent campaign, one-third of the politicians indicated that gender bias was a concern.

Nine of the politicians were women of color. Seven of the nine politicians of color reported concerns about racial bias. It is important to note that the survey sample was predominantly (90%) white. People of color made up 10% of the politicians surveyed.

## Concerns about Running for Public Office

Politicians were asked what aspects of their first and, if applicable, most recent campaign were concerning to them at the time. Politicians who have been in office 0-2 years are more likely to report concerns about most of these topics than those who have served three or more years.

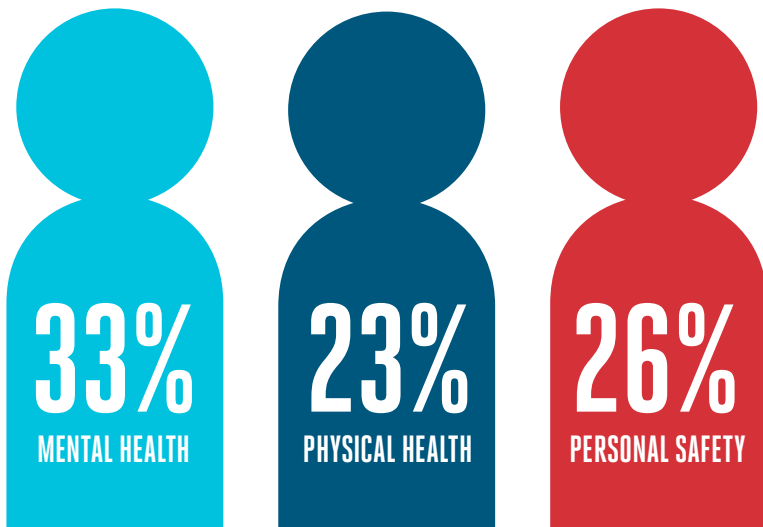
### People who have been in office 0-2 years report more concerns about most of these topics:

- knowledge of issues
- knowledge of how politics works
- knowledge of procedures
- personal or family concerns
- childcare

**It is not uncommon for people less familiar with running for public office to feel the most uncertainty. Yet, these concerns are likely to decrease as experience in public office increases.**

Politicians less familiar with running for public office felt the most uncertainty about running for office. However, these concerns decreased as experience in public office increased.

The politicians surveyed also cited time away from family or home responsibilities as a factor in the decision to run for public office. Time was identified as a necessary sacrifice in order to run. Other sacrifices included work responsibilities and time away from other things they enjoy.



**Politicians noted that they sacrificed their mental health (33%), physical health (23%), and/or personal safety (26%) while running for public office.**

## Strengths & Experiences

Politicians identified varied strengths and experiences to best prepare a candidate to run for office. The most frequently cited strengths were:

- be informed on policy issues
  - attend government meetings
  - have public speaking experience
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When asked to describe specific strengths that they brought to campaigns or political life, several people mentioned professional work. For example:

**“My background in journalism (more than 20 years in print media) gave me a solid knowledge of Open Meeting laws, which helped me... in my early months of county board.”**

**“[I am] a school administrator that is retired from public education.”**

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Some politicians listed personal traits (determination, passion, open-mindedness) as helpful in running for office. For example, the capacity to communicate effectively was cited as an important strength to fulfill the job requirements.

**“Communication skills and willingness to learn and LISTEN to your constituents.”**

**“The ability to interact with people you don’t know and get to know them; develop and maintain relationships with people who you disagree with.”**

**“I also think that not being afraid to ask questions is extremely important, and I am not one to NOT ask questions.”**

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Politicians also mentioned that mentoring or education helped prepare them for their run.

The study shows that political leaders build on their particular strengths and experiences to fit themselves to a political role. They use these strengths to circumvent the obstacles that are associated with running for public office, especially for women.



## Helpful Resources

Politicians were asked what resources helped them decide to run or while running for public office. The most common response related to support networks, whether that was support from other women, other candidates, elected officials, or their political party. One politician explained,

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**“Having friends that were running for other offices at the same time—being able to talk with someone else going through the same stressors of a campaign—the mental ups and downs—was really helpful in keeping me sane.”**

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Social support from friends and family was the second most common response while others found the greatest resource to be personal attributes, such as self-confidence, willingness to do hard work, and professional integrity.

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## Advice: If not you, then who? If not now, then when?

When asked to share any thoughts they had about running or holding office, the politicians gave wide-ranging responses. They took the opportunity to reiterate themes from earlier in the survey: be confident, go for it, listen to others, find a mentor.

They also offered cautions about sexism or gendered treatment on the campaign trail, such as be prepared for it and avoid letting it impact you. One politician stated, “It is scary to put yourself out there, but a guy wouldn’t think twice about it. And you know more than he does, so be brave.” Another participant wrote, “Don’t let the sexism and misogyny scare you away... Don’t let self-doubt allow you to falter... we all have self-doubt... even the most confident of us.”

Other responses included encouraging women to recognize that the time to run for public office is now. One politician stated, “If not you, then who? If not now, then when?”

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## Conclusion

This research brief highlights some of the key findings from the *Wisconsin Women in Public Life – Elected Officials* research study. Moving forward, the findings from the initial survey will be used to expand the study’s scope. Focus groups and/or in-depth interviews will be conducted by the research team to gain further insight into the diverse and varied pathways women take to running for public office. The objective of this second iteration will be to provide recommendations for how organizations can better support the development of women as political leaders.

## About Alverno College

Founded in 1887 by the School Sisters of St. Francis, Alverno College promotes the academic, personal and professional development of its students in a collaborative and inclusive environment. Undergraduate programs for women are offered in more than 60 areas of study, and graduate programs in education, nursing, community psychology, school psychology, music therapy, music and liturgy, and business are open to women and men.

A leader in higher education innovation, Alverno has earned international accolades for its highly effective ability-based, assessment-as-learning approach to education, which emphasizes hands-on experience and develops in-demand skills. The college, Wisconsin's first Hispanic-Serving Institution, ranks among the top schools in the Midwest for its commitment to undergraduate teaching and innovation by *U.S. News & World Report*. *The Wall Street Journal/Times Higher Education* has named Alverno the country's most inspiring college.

Based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Alverno College is a four-year independent, Catholic, liberal arts college.

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## Community Contributors and Partners

### Women's Fund of Greater Milwaukee

Our mission is to activate philanthropy to advance equity for women. We are a granting entity supporting solutions that result in sustainable and long-lasting transformation for our community. We engage in the power of collective philanthropy, and by supporting robust organizations that address issues that impact women and girls. We have supported the Milwaukee community for more than 30 years and are proud to be a member of the Wisconsin Women's Fund Alliance, the Wisconsin Philanthropy Network, and the Women's Funding Network.

### State of Wisconsin Women's Council

The Women's Council promotes initiatives to empower women, serves as a clearinghouse for information on programs and resources, conducts research on the status of women, and engages in unique partnerships to address barriers and inequalities affecting Wisconsin women. The Women's Council is composed of 15 members appointed by the Governor and Legislative leaders.

### About the Strategic Research Institute at St. Norbert College

The St. Norbert College Strategic Research Institute (SRI) is one of the Midwest's most respected sources of data-driven insight. For businesses and nonprofits throughout the region, the institute provides the means to make strategically sound decisions on fundamental questions of opportunity, direction, and growth.

Visit the SRI website for a complete list of services and examples of project experience. You can contact the SRI at 920-403-3247, toll-free at 877-214-7183, or by email at [sri@snc.edu](mailto:sri@snc.edu).





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**50 YEARS**

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