

BALLARD BRIEF

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Lack of Women in Federal Level Politics in the United States

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Summary

Women comprise 50.5% of the United States population,¹ but only 28% of all officeholders in the 2023 U.S. Congress.² The scarcity of female role models in politics—caused by societal expectations,³ inadequate candidate recruitment,⁴ and a lack of interest in political leadership⁵—contributes to the lack of women in politics. Further, the double bind imposes contradictory expectations upon women, affecting their political ambition and others’ perceptions of their competence.⁶ The lack of women in politics results in policy gaps, especially in areas that affect women and their communities.⁷ Women’s underrepresentation also undermines democracy, because the government is unable to reflect the interests of the entire population.⁸ To encourage more women to run, organizations like She Should Run provide free comprehensive training, resulting in positive outcomes in empowering women who have never considered running for office.⁹

Key Terms

Democracy—“The belief in freedom and equality between people, or a system of government based on this belief, in which power is either held by elected representatives or directly by the people themselves.”¹⁵

Double Bind—A phenomenon in which women find themselves caught between contradictory expectations, especially in the realm of politics.¹⁶

Gender Equality—All people have equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities. The rights, responsibilities, and opportunities of men and women do not depend on whether they are born male or female, and the interests, needs, and priorities of both women and men are taken into consideration.¹⁷

Gender Parity—Equal representation of women and men in a given area.¹⁸

Marginalization—When a person is relegated to an unimportant or powerless position within a society or group.¹⁹

Nonpartisan—Not biased or partisan, especially toward any particular political group.²⁰

19th Amendment of the U.S.

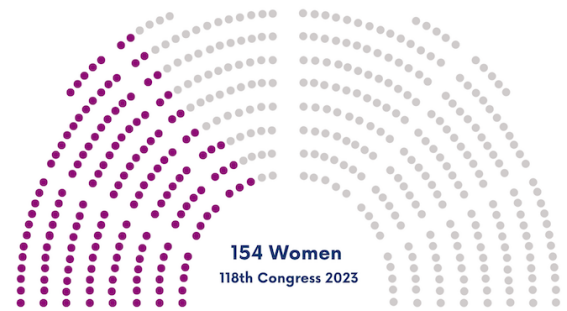
Constitution—This amendment legally guarantees American women the right to vote. It was passed by Congress on June 4, 1919, and ratified on 18 August 1920.²¹

Context

Q: What is the current state of female representation in U.S. politics?

A: Gaining a comprehensive understanding of the underrepresentation of women in federal-level politics is crucial; while women made up 50.5% of the United States population,²² only 28% of all officeholders in the U.S Congress were female in 2023.²³ To put this in perspective, even if all 154 women in the 2023 Congressional session agreed on a topic, they still would not have enough people to pass a bill,²⁴ as it requires a majority of 218 out of 435 in

the House and 51 of 100 in the Senate.²⁵



These statistics paint a clear picture of the underrepresentation of women in Congress, underscoring the need for greater gender parity in the US democratic institutions.²⁶ Many studies have shown that when women are inadequately represented in these political positions at the federal level, female trust in government and political engagement is undermined and substantive representation of women’s issues is hindered.^{27,28,29,30}

As part of the United Nations “Millennium Development Goals,” progress towards gender equality is assessed by focusing on the enhancement of women’s representation in executive, parliamentary, and federal level positions.³¹ Based on the current rate of

women's election to these positions observed over the past 15 years, projections suggest that it will take approximately 40 additional years to achieve gender parity in politics worldwide and 131 years to reach total global gender equality.^{32,33} It is estimated that at its current rate of progress, it will take the United States 95 years to reach full gender parity.³⁴

Q: What are some different types of representation?

A: When examining the dynamics of representation in the United States, it is important to distinguish between two distinct but interconnected concepts: descriptive and substantive representation. Descriptive representation is achieved when there are people in positions of power who have similar backgrounds, race or ethnicity, or gender (among other characteristics) to the people whom they represent.³⁵ Substantive representation, however, is achieved when elected representatives actively prioritize the concerns of their constituents,³⁶ and act in the interest of

those whom they represent.³⁷ As the first woman to serve as Speaker of the United States House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi has been known to pass numerous legislative initiatives during her time in office that have had an impact on women.³⁸ One example of legislation during Pelosi's time in office that led to substantive representation was the passing of the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act in 2009, which ensured the rights of workers to challenge pay discrimination.³⁹ This legislation addressed the gender pay gap between female and male employees.⁴⁰

In many circumstances, descriptive representation is incredibly important and can lead to substantive representation. In contexts of distrust, or when constituents have difficulty talking to or communicating with their representatives, shared identities can help build trust and lead to better communication.⁴¹ Similarly, when hot topic political issues are constantly shifting or evolving rapidly, which makes them challenging to define or understand conclusively, having an elected official from one's own gender

or ethnicity may be beneficial.⁴² As issues arise unpredictably, voters can expect the representative to react more or less like the voter would have.

Q: Who is the least represented in federal-level politics?

A: A: In the landscape of underrepresentation historically and in the present day, many marginalized groups have fought for greater visibility, recognition, and equity historically and presently. Diverse groups of all backgrounds have encountered significant hurdles due to prolonged and pervasive societal exclusion in politics. While the current composition of Congress displays a greater degree of diversity than any previous year, it remains apparent the majority of Congress members continue to be White.⁴³

Of the 12,506 individuals that have ever served in either the US House of Representatives or the Senate, 187 of those have identified as Black, 44,154 as Hispanic,⁴⁵ and 70 Asian Pacific

Americans.⁴⁶ As of 2023, there are 424 women who have ever served in Congress, comprising approximately 3% of all congressional membership.⁴⁷

To put that in perspective, there are more men named John who have been elected to Congress than all women voted into Congress combined.⁴⁸

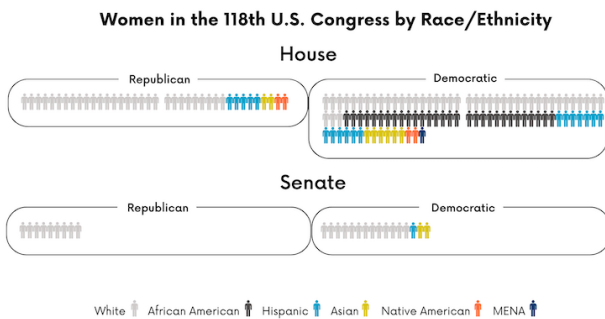
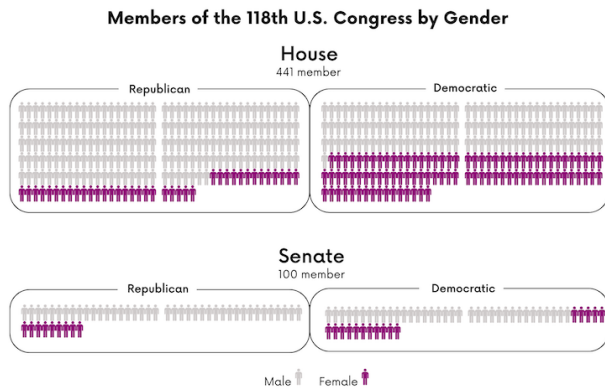
Women who identify as a member of a minority racial or ethnic group in the United States have historically made up an even smaller number. Of the 424 women who have served in Congress, 106 of them, or one quarter, have been women of a minority racial group.⁴⁹

Throughout the history of the United States, representation among congresswomen has exhibited additional disparities when exploring the racial and ethnic composition of officeholders.⁵⁰ In 1968, Shirley Chisolm was the first black female elected to the House of Representatives. The Senate did not have its first black female until Carol Moseley Braun was elected in 1992. It took another 24 years before a second black female officeholder, Kamala Harris, was elected.⁵¹ To date, there have been 55

black women who have served in the US Congress.⁵² The remaining groups have even smaller numbers, comprising a total of 16 Asian or Pacific Islander congresswomen,⁵³ 29 Latin congresswomen,⁵⁴ 3 Middle Eastern or North African congresswomen,⁵⁵ and 3 Native American or Alaskan congresswomen.⁵⁶ This diverse array of voices has the potential to enrich the congressional landscape.



In the 2023 congressional session, women occupied one-quarter of the Senate seats and just over one-quarter of the House of Representatives seats. In the 118th Congress, 61 African-American members represented approximately 12% of the overall membership, with 21 in the House and 3 in the Senate. Hispanic or Latino members added 59 representatives, including 6 Senators and 53 House members. The presence of 21 members of Asian or Pacific Islander ancestry comprised 19 representatives in the House and 2 Senators, amplifying diverse perspectives. Lastly, there were 5 Native American Members, 1 in the Senate and 4 in the House. Recognizing the multifaceted struggles faced by many marginalized groups in the US Federal Government, our focus turns towards addressing the unique challenges faced by women as a priority.⁵⁷



Q: When did underrepresentation become a problem for women?

A: Since the inception of the United States, women have faced persistent underrepresentation in the political sphere. For a span of 140 years, women were excluded from holding political office. Only at the beginning of the 19th century did the first woman gain access to federal-level political positions. In 1916, Jeannette Rankin became the

first female member of the United States Congress.⁵⁸ Despite not being reelected for a second term until 20 years later, she was the pioneering female figure to enter the realm of Congress. Rankin spearheaded the women's suffrage movement in her home state of Montana, playing a vital role in the ratification of women's suffrage in 1914.⁵⁹ Following this achievement, she declared her candidacy for a seat in the US House of Representatives.⁶⁰ Despite significant opposition and pushback, she won the Republican primary that year, making history as the first female Representative at the federal level. Following the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920, 3 more women were elected to Congress. Throughout the next 5 decades, the number of women serving in the House of Representatives grew, but there were not many in the Senate. It was not until 1992 —called by many the “Year of the Woman”—that two women had ever served in the Senate at the same time.⁶¹ A total of 59 women have served in the Senate as of 2023.⁶² In the 2023–2025

Legislative session, there were 25 women out of 100 total seats in the Senate and 125 women out of 435 total seats in the House of Representatives.⁶³ Despite the significant milestones and advancements, the history of women's representation in Congress reveals that this underrepresentation has persisted for generations.

Q: How does the US compare to similar nations around the world?

A: The US falls behind most of what are considered highly developed countries in terms of political equality, according to the Global Gender Gap Index.⁶⁴ This measure considers a country's economic, political, educational, and health equality and determines the level of equal conditions for women and men present. The Nordic Countries, which include Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland, along with New Zealand, were some of the most outstanding leaders in the Global Gender Gap Index.⁶⁵ In 2022, the country with the most outstanding equality levels was Iceland, with a score

of 0.91 out of 1, while the US received a score of 0.77.⁶⁶ As of the 1st of April 2023, women made up roughly 45.7%⁶⁷ of parliaments in the Nordic region, whereas in the United States, women made up approximately 26.9% of government positions.⁶⁸ These numbers represent incredibly different realities, evidenced by the percentage of women in politics in each respective country and region.⁶⁹

In addition to the Nordic Countries and New Zealand, several other countries demonstrated higher levels of gender equality than the United States. For example, despite being considered a less developed country, Rwanda has made significant strides in the number of female participants in their government organizations and is often considered a global leader.⁷⁰ As of May 2022, women occupied approximately 61% of parliamentary seats in Rwanda, surpassing the levels of both the Nordic region and the United States.⁷¹ Similarly, Cuba, Bolivia, and Guyana have made substantial progress in having more women in politics, with women comprising roughly 53%, 46%,

and 35% of seats, respectively.⁷² These comparisons highlight significant disparities in political representation between countries, emphasizing the varying degrees of progress in achieving gender equality. While some nations have made impressive strides towards equal gender representation, the United States still faces challenges in closing this gender gap.

Contributing Factors

Lack of Female Role Models

The lack of female political role models leads to a lack of women in federal-level politics because such examples can diminish political ambition and hinder career aspirations. Without female political mentors, women have little incentive to pursue a career in public office. Research has shown that female officeholders in high-level political positions display a positive influence over other female candidates in motivating them to enter politics.⁷³ In a

study conducted in 2006, researchers Campbell and Wolbrecht found that as the visibility of female politicians running for high-profile offices increased in national news coverage, adolescent girls demonstrated a higher likelihood of engaging in politics through political discussions and expressed a stronger interest in becoming politically active.⁷⁴ This finding shows that when young girls see female politics being featured prominently in national news, they are more inclined to aspire to participate in politics themselves. Some scholars assert that the presence of female politicians has the potential to empower other women to envision themselves as active participants within the political system, though it may vary by political party.^{75,76} Research conducted by Jennifer Wolak, a professor in the Department of Political Science at Michigan State University, revealed that women's political knowledge increases when they are represented by other women in both Congress and state-level government.⁷⁷ Hence, it is evident that role models play a crucial role in

shaping career aspirations and fostering mentorship.

Conversely, insufficient female role models diminish the potential for more female candidates. In a study conducted in New York, surveys were given to college students down to middle school students to gauge why women are less likely to run for political office.⁷⁸ In addition to other questions, the survey asked the students to identify whether they could recall any elected government official they admired and, if so, to specify the individual. The results showed a significant gender imbalance among college and junior high school students regarding the politicians they admired. One hundred percent of male respondents named a male politician, while only 52% of college women and 46% of junior high school women named at least one female politician.⁷⁹ The lower percentages of female politicians named as admired officials highlight a lack of prominent female role models in politics and suggest that this absence contributes to the lower likelihood of women running for office. However, the survey also demonstrated

that representation matters, as girls were more likely to name a female politician than boys, underscoring the significance of visible female politicians as influential role models for empowering and mentoring younger women to pursue careers in politics.⁸⁰

Lack of Support for Women

The lack of support for women in politics contributes to the lack of women in politics because when women lack support, the decision and process of running becomes more complex and challenging.⁸¹ The additional challenges created by a lack of support can hinder women's ability to confidently pursue and navigate the complexities of running for political office.

The lack of support for women in the political pipeline process is highlighted by the absence of political ambition observed in many women in the United States.⁸² A study in 2012 identified seven factors that either impede ambition directly or significantly complicate the decision-making process for women compared to men, listed below:⁸³

- 1 Women are substantially more likely than men to perceive the electoral environment as highly competitive and biased against female candidates.
- 2 Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin's candidacies aggravated women's perceptions of gender bias in the electoral arena.
- 3 Women are much less likely than men to think they are qualified to run for office.
- 4 Female potential candidates are less competitive, less confident, and more risk-averse than their male counterparts.
- 5 Women react more negatively than men to many aspects of modern campaigns.
- 6 Women are less likely than men to receive the suggestion to run for office - from anyone.
- 7 Women are still responsible for the majority of childcare and household tasks

Inadequate candidate recruitment and fundraising efforts also contribute to this lack of support for women who want to run for office. Running a political campaign is incredibly expensive, and the existing donor channels that are associated with specific political parties are more inclined to support liberal female Democrats rather than female Republicans.⁸⁴ Consequently, women often face a more challenging path than men in attracting donors and may find themselves compelled to take more extreme positions on either side of the political spectrum to rally support and contributions from their party.⁸⁵ Further, party leaders and recruiters hold significant influence over women's representation. Many party leaders use traditional and socially isolated methods

of recruitment, looking to current officeholders or other active party members (the majority of which are male) as a first resort, which diminishes female recruitment.⁸⁶ However, in a study in 2017 aiming to understand how to elect more women, researchers found that if recruiters looked beyond traditional methods and utilized other forms of social networks and recruitment techniques, women were more likely to be involved.⁸⁷

Lastly, the prevalent societal expectations placed on women that affect political ambition affect the support to potential female candidates. According to a study of 1,240 American women following the 2016 election, researchers found that the level of political ambition in ordinary women is influenced by the gendered expectations imposed on them by their social environment.⁸⁸ For example, ordinary women's aspirations in politics heavily rely on the support they receive from personal and political networks, which help them navigate the challenges associated with candidacy challenges, especially balancing family and

professional responsibilities. The sometimes impossible choice between familial responsibilities or political candidacy acts as a deterrent to many women.⁸⁹ This societal pressure, coupled with limited support from current female political officeholders and all the above-mentioned factors, contributes to women's lack of ambition to engage in politics.

The Double Bind

The double bind of gender standards imposes substantial and unique additional hurdles that must be overcome to attain political office, leading to a lack of women in federal-level positions. The double bind occurs when women are caught between contradictory expectations.⁹⁰ In politics, navigating the social, cultural, and political landscape becomes particularly challenging when confronted with this complex dilemma. The question often arises whether women should conform to or reject traditional gender roles and stereotypes.⁹¹ On the one hand, if women adhere to the traditional roles of

nurturing, caring, and emotional, they risk being likable but deemed too feeble or a liability in the tough and competitive world of politics. On the other, women who are assertive and decisive may be perceived as too aggressive or competent but unapproachable.⁹² For a significant period, the notion of being too sweet or too shrill has been dominant in the political realm for female candidates.⁹³ Women are forced to find a balance between showcasing competence and expressing feminine traits while simultaneously trying to build credibility and gain support for their positions, which often becomes incredibly challenging.⁹⁴ A study of the last six US elections found that most female candidates strategically emphasized and balanced stereotypically masculine and feminine characteristics more often in various settings with different audiences to appeal to whichever trait was deemed appropriate for political success.⁹⁵ For example, in the 2020 election, Senator Amy Klobuchar has been noted to balance warmth and competence

strategically: “She was warm and approachable in her mom-joke way, and able to pivot to tough and considered at all the right moments... She answered the questions, and she pushed on her opponents.”^{96,97} Countless elections are characterized by media coverage heavily focused on the warmth and competence of female candidates, often criticizing women for not displaying enough warmth to be likable.⁹⁸ In that same 2020 election, media coverage of Senator Elizabeth revolved around a discussion of her likability, with headlines such as “Is She Likable Enough to Be President?” or “Is Elizabeth Warren Actually ‘Unlikable?’”⁹⁹ Further, men and women are often perceived as competent in differing areas, consistent with stereotypical masculine and feminine stereotypes.¹⁰⁰ According to a study conducted by Virginia Sapiro, female candidates were perceived as more competent than men in three areas: “improving our educational system,” “maintaining integrity in government,” and “dealing with health problems.” On the other hand, male candidates were more likely

to be rated as competent in two areas: “dealing with military issues” and “making decisions on farm issues.”¹⁰¹ Moreover, such gender-biased perception goes beyond mere evaluations of competence in certain areas. It extends to different attributes or characteristics and how each is perceived based on the gender of the person they are describing.¹⁰²

Numerous attributes, when displayed by women, are often deemed deficient in the political realm.¹⁰³ One of the most frequent examples of negative traits is displays of emotion. In a foundational study in 1993, researchers discovered that when compared to males, female politicians experienced a much larger decrease in their perceived competence upon displaying compassion and warmth.¹⁰⁴ Rather than assessing the validity of women’s political arguments based on the soundness of logic, their competence is evaluated by their capacity to avoid emotion.¹⁰⁵ This evaluation implies that showing emotion is a weakness, although, in reality, it is not the case.¹⁰⁶ New research has revealed that when a female

politician is labeled as emotional, her subsequent statements and arguments are undermined, and she is often perceived as less legitimate.¹⁰⁷ Further, a study in 2010 revealed that “1 in 8 Americans believe that women are too emotional for politics.”¹⁰⁸



In the book, *Beyond The Double Bind* by Kathleen Hall Jamieson,¹⁰⁹ the challenge of balancing femininity and competence is explored. Jamieson explains that this specific dilemma is rooted in a longstanding history of sexual stereotypes that shape the perceptions of both men and women regarding themselves and their interactions. The perpetuation of this double bind is reinforced by societal norms that assign specific traits to each

gender, resulting in the notion that certain qualities are desirable for one gender but undesirable for the other. These biases are often seen more prominently when politicians are dealing with policy areas that are traditionally associated with their gender.¹¹⁰ Citizens frequently hold specific expectations for the behavior of male politicians in defense-related affairs, such as exhibiting strength and expressing anger. Conversely, female politicians are often expected to demonstrate communal and compassionate qualities when dealing with education-related issues.¹¹¹

However, when politicians work in policy domains that are seen as incongruent with their gender, expectations may change.¹¹² In such cases, citizens may expect politicians to adapt their behavior to meet the demands of the situation rather than strictly adhering to traditional gender roles. For instance, female politicians working in a policy area considered traditionally masculine might be expected to display the strength and emotions associated with

masculinity.¹¹³ These ever-changing expectations, especially when they are displayed negatively in the media, often dissuade women from engaging in politics.¹¹⁴

In a comprehensive analysis involving both male and female potential candidates, researchers have discovered that the phenomenon of the double bind also extends to women's perceptions of their own political competence.¹¹⁵ By comparing women and men with similar professional and educational backgrounds, along with numerous other objective measures, the study revealed that women are 5 times more likely than men to undermine their qualifications and display lower self-efficacy when considering a political career.¹¹⁶ Despite having comparable qualifications to men, women tend to doubt their abilities more often than men, which reflects the internalization of societal expectations. This tendency is attributed to the effects of gender role socialization, which contributes to the emergence of divergent perceptions among women and men regarding the

essential skills required for political success.¹¹⁷ Consequently, many women experience apprehension when contemplating engagement in a political campaign, ultimately discouraging their emergence as political candidates.

Numerous scholars argue that gender socialization, which begins early in life and persists throughout life, contributes to the limited number of women in high-level positions.^{118,119} These social expectations can impact both individual attitudes and broader systemic obstacles that contribute to the underrepresentation of women. In a 2004 study, it was discovered that due to socialization towards passive, rule-abiding, and compassionate gender roles, women are notably less likely than men to receive encouragement to pursue political office and much less likely to perceive themselves as qualified candidates for political positions.^{120,121} This phenomenon highlights the societal norms that steer women away from political roles by way of diminishing their confidence for success in these

positions. As a result, a cycle is created where fewer women engage in politics, reinforcing obstacles that hold them back from participating in the political field. Moreover, this process contributes to the underrepresentation of women in politics by creating disparities in attitudes and available resources.^{122,123}

In a survey of voters and public officials, scholars reveal a consistent preference for female candidates who are married with children.¹²⁴ While this preference might strengthen women's standing in politics, it paradoxically creates a double bind for women aspiring to political office for three key reasons. First, the persistent gender disparity in household labor means that female politicians are implicitly expected to juggle longer work hours in politics and manage household responsibilities. This expectation, however, does not equally apply to their male counterparts. For instance, female politicians often bear the burden of not only excelling in their roles as politicians but also of convincing the public that they can effectively balance

the responsibilities of both motherhood and politics, a challenge less often posed to male candidates.¹²⁵ Second, women with political ambitions were less likely to be married with children compared to their male counterparts. Third, the preference for candidates with traditional family structures coincided with women's lower political interest during childbearing. Lastly, there was an observed negative correlation between women's political ambition and marriage.¹²⁶ These overlapping preferences and the varying expectations concerning family obligations collectively contributed to the double bind imposed upon women in politics.

The double bind and resulting gender biases transcend political party lines, as these forms of discrimination are observed within both major political parties in the United States. Both Democrat and Republican female candidates are frequently perceived by voters as more ideologically liberal than their male opponents.¹²⁷ This perception arises from gender stereotypes associated with women's

nurturing and caring roles, which align with the liberal ideology emphasizing an active government role in caring for others.¹²⁸ Further, in each presidential election since 1996, a majority of female voters have shown a preference for the Democratic candidate.¹²⁹ Studies consistently indicate that voters on both sides do not automatically rely on feminine stereotypes when assessing female candidates.¹³⁰ However, they often perceive female candidates as lacking masculine qualities and expertise in traditionally male-dominated policies like national defense and security.¹³¹ This dissonance then dictates that to be successful, female candidates need to exhibit greater qualifications than their male counterparts.¹³² The double bind of gender standards poses hurdles for women in politics, hindering their path to high-level positions. Addressing these challenges is crucial for achieving gender equality in political leadership.

Consequences

Policy Gaps

While direct research data may not explicitly show the impact of women's absence on policy, their presence leads to greater engagement with issues related to women, children, and families. Thus, women's absence in Congress results in less attention to these issues.

The absence of women in Congress results in policy gaps related to issues that primarily impact women. Policy gaps refer to the inadequacies or shortcomings in law and legislation that occur because of a disconnect between elected officials and the communities they serve.¹³³ These gaps created by the underrepresentation or absence of women in Congress result in a failure to address and incorporate perspectives on issues that are particularly relevant to women's experiences and needs.¹³⁴ Women in politics, whether by choice or by default, engage in issues related to women, like reproductive rights, equal pay, healthcare, and childcare.^{135,136} Their engagement is crucial, as the greater presence of women in politics has led to a notable impact on the

number of bills passed that address issues and challenges experienced by women.¹³⁷ Without their active participation, these issues often fall by the wayside, as females are more inclined to prioritize concerns related to women and children.¹³⁸ The absence of women's insights and experiences in decision-making leads to a lack of comprehensive understanding and neglect of critical areas.

Female legislators bring important insights to politics due to their experiences as women, which shape their understanding of the challenges faced by women in society. Because they are often part of the affected communities, female politicians often demonstrate a higher likelihood compared to their male counterparts in advocating for public health advancements and other issues that specifically address the needs of women and children.^{139,140} A substantial amount of literature establishes positive correlations between women's representation in politics and improved child health, enhanced food security, and better outcomes in literacy and

education.^{141,142,143} Therefore, when women are not adequately represented in politics, there are repercussions in the form of policy gaps. The higher success rate of women in passing priority bills concerning women's, children's, and family issues compared to men implies a greater dedication and focus on addressing these specific areas.¹⁴⁴ This suggests that women exert more effort and energy in championing legislation that addresses the needs and concerns of women, children, and families.¹⁴⁵ Women in politics play a critical role in achieving many of the Sustainable Development Goals created by the UN, such as eliminating poverty, increasing access to quality education, and ensuring health and well-being to all.^{146,147}



There have been many successful

policy initiatives led by female legislators that have yielded positive outcomes for women and the broader society. For example, a recent study using data from 162 countries over the time period of 30 years found that increasing women's political participation in high levels of government had a positive impact on children's health outcomes.¹⁴⁸ Specifically, the study discovered that women's representation in legislatures significantly reduced neonatal mortality rates by 0.6 percentage points (from a rate of 3.36%) and lowered adolescent fertility rates.¹⁴⁹ For every 1% increase in women holding political office, the number of babies who died before their first birthday goes down by about 0.9 for every 1,000 babies born. The connection between these variables is statistically significant, meaning it is not likely a coincidence. This improvement in child health can likely be attributed to increased healthcare expenditure, indicating that female legislators allocate resources to healthcare services and enact policies that benefit

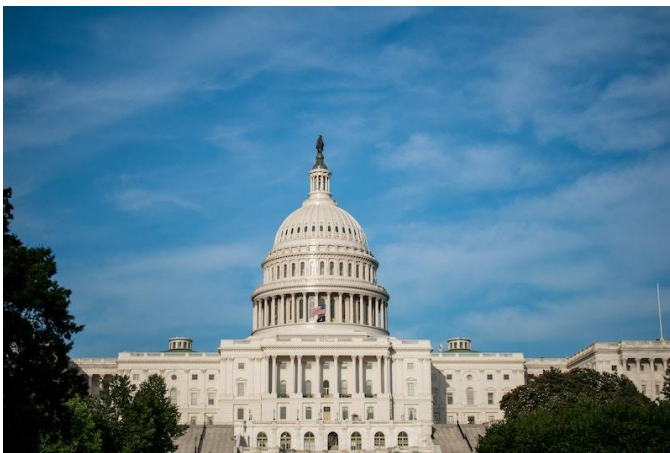
children.^{150,151} Further, in a study of 12 capitalist democracies, including the United States, scholars revealed compelling evidence indicating that the presence of women in politics has a notable impact on the level of government spending on welfare state programs.¹⁵²

Democracy is Undermined

In 2002, the United Nations General Assembly and the Commission on Human Rights outlined a set of characteristics that are essential to democracy.¹⁵³ The respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and access to power and its exercise in accordance with law are among many others on that list.¹⁵⁴ These freedoms are to extend to both men and women alike, and according to the UN, democracy requires the participation of women to be democratic.¹⁵⁵ Because women are underrepresented in government positions, democracy is undermined, diverse perspectives are inhibited, and systemic gender inequalities are perpetuated.

Central to the strength and vitality of a

democracy is the presence of diverse perspectives in decision-making processes. However, the underrepresentation of women in high-level politics leads to a lack of diverse voices and experiences, ultimately undermining democracy.¹⁵⁶ When a large group of citizens, in this case, women, are denied equal opportunities for political participation, the effectiveness and legitimacy of democratic governance are compromised.¹⁵⁷ In other words, a “democracy without women is no democracy.”¹⁵⁸ Democracy is most robust when it embraces a partnership between men and women, recognizing and embracing their differences and working as equals to shape policies that reflect the interests and aptitudes of the entire population.¹⁵⁹



When individuals have the freedom to express themselves and make choices, there is a wider variety of perspectives and ideas.¹⁶⁰ This diversity, in turn, helps maintain freedom by providing different ways to organize and structure society.¹⁶¹ The value of diversity stems from fundamental rights like freedom of speech, assembly, and association that are protected in democratic societies.¹⁶² When women’s voices are not valued in politics, the decision-making body becomes skewed toward a limited range of experiences and disregards the value that inclusive representation can bring.¹⁶³ For example, a study in 2019 found that women’s equal presence in politics increased the perceived legitimacy of political decisions and procedures in the eyes of citizens.¹⁶⁴ A desire for cultural uniformity or politics without women goes against the idea of liberty as outlined in the United States Constitution.^{165,166}

In 1992, the Inter-Parliamentary Union Council (IPU) stated that democracy will not reach its fullest potential until both policies and legislation are

decided by men and women.¹⁶⁷ This declaration highlights the critical role of gender equality in political participation for achieving truly inclusive and effective democratic systems. The United Nations recognizes the significance of women's equality in political participation as a fundamental component of the sustainable development goals (SDGs).¹⁶⁸ Equality of women in political participation and leadership is required to achieve the sustainable development goals set forth by the UN.¹⁶⁹ If such a significant portion of American Citizens, specifically women, cannot or do not participate in governing and making decisions for the nation, it is not possible to consider democracy in America as a functional system.¹⁷⁰

Practices

She Should Run

The organization She Should Run is a nonpartisan nonprofit that promotes and encourages women from all backgrounds to pursue political office in the United States.¹⁷¹ Founded in

2011, the organization engages in national campaigns to increase awareness and recruitment.¹⁷² She Should Run provides free comprehensive development training courses covering essential topics such as cultivating leadership skills and building personal networks, getting involved in civic life, and exploring pathways to public office.¹⁷³ Designed specifically for women, participants can choose between self-directed or facilitated training options in person or virtually.¹⁷⁴

She Should Run has implemented diverse programs and initiatives to promote greater female representation in political leadership. The “Encourage Her” campaign emphasizes that most individuals have a woman in their own life who inspires them, whether it is a family member, friend, spouse, coworker, or service provider. This initiative seeks to assist these individuals in supporting and encouraging the women they know to consider running for public office.¹⁷⁵ For those who are unsure of their own role in politics, a short quiz can help

identify where an individual can start and easy next steps for how to get involved in a way that aligns with the information given.¹⁷⁶ Finally, the “Incubator” program is an online course curriculum designed to help participants increase their qualifications, build up networks, and hone their personal style of leadership.¹⁷⁷ Through this program, participants join a community of other women also considering running. This community aspect facilitates peer-to-peer mentorship where women can exchange ideas and advice while exploring their potential paths to public office.¹⁷⁸ These programs and initiatives, along with a few others, address the lack of women in politics by creating a platform for women to envision themselves in politics and a channel of resources for the necessary next steps.

While there are many organizations working to elect more women into political positions, She Should Run offers a unique approach to public leadership, distinguishing itself from other organizations that primarily

emphasize campaign training, such as *Emily’s List*,¹⁷⁹ *Value in Electing Women (VIEW) PAC*,¹⁸⁰ or the *National Women’s Political Caucus*.^{181,182} She Should Run takes a slightly different approach by focusing on those women who may have never considered running for office before and helping them to step forward and feel empowered to make a meaningful impact in their communities.¹⁸³

Impact

With over 40,000 members across the United States, She Should Run has created a rich and robust network of individuals interested in political engagement.¹⁸⁴ Through this network, they have discovered some key insights regarding women’s political motivation and the number of women who could be ready to run for office. Internal survey data combined with research from YWCA and UN Women highlighted that women, irrespective of demographics and ideologies, are driven by issues that disproportionately impact them and their personal communities.¹⁸⁵ These

issues include concerns related to the economy, climate change, reproductive health, racism, and gun violence.¹⁸⁶

These shared concerns serve as crucial motivational factors for women considering a run for office.¹⁸⁷



Furthermore, they also sought to identify the potential women who could be motivated to seek elected office. Patterns of motivation revealed approximately 24.4 million adult women in the US who are driven by these issues and can be encouraged to run for political positions.¹⁸⁸ In order to reach and motivate this untapped talent pool, a crucial next step for a woman considering running is to receive support from her community.¹⁸⁹ By partnering with diverse organizations like Mattel,

Modcloth, and Saucony, She Should Run has been able to expand the reach of its program.¹⁹⁰ For example, almost 34,000 women have joined the She Should Run programs because of a referral from one of their partner organizations, underscoring the importance of community, personal relationships, and encouragement.¹⁹¹ According to She Should Run's founder and CEO, Erin Loos Cutraro, over 130 women who had taken part in the organization's "Incubator" program appeared on election ballots in 2018.¹⁹² By 2019, according to Cutraro, their "Incubator" program had led to more than 17,000 women entering the political pipeline.¹⁹³ Of these, 242 participated in community-based programming, completing the Incubator program with guided facilitators. Survey results from this group revealed encouraging trends: 70% indicated that they felt confident about running for office after the program, 83% felt well prepared to navigate the path to office, and 76% expressed a strong likelihood of running for office due to the

program.¹⁹⁴ This data suggests that women who engage in She Should Run programs not only achieve success in getting on election ballots but also develop confidence in their knowledge, skills, and abilities post-program.

Gaps

While She Should Run's efforts to encourage women to pursue political office are commendable, the organization faces challenges that may hinder its ability to address the lack of women in politics. One notable issue is the lack of sufficient data to measure the long-term impact of their programs. It is challenging to assess the organization's true influence on increasing female representation in politics without comprehensive data on the outcomes of their program participants in seeking and holding political office. Emily's List is an organization that shares a comparable

mission and is effective in showcasing the outcomes of its efforts.¹⁹⁵ Like She Should Run, they also work toward electing women to political positions, but with a somewhat more specific focus on a particular group of women.¹⁹⁶ For instance, in the 2022 elections, *Emily's List* helped over 489 women secure positions across various levels of government, including local, state, federal, and gubernatorial offices.¹⁹⁷ Since 1985, they have endorsed and supported over 1700 candidates who have successfully won elections.¹⁹⁸ To improve its impact, She Should Run could adopt a similar measurement and evaluation method. Additionally, while She Should Run offers free training courses, the accessibility of these resources may still be limited or difficult for some women, especially those from marginalized communities or with fewer resources.

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