



The Partisan Gap Among Women in Elective Office in 2020 and Beyond

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The 2020 elections saw robust gains for Republican women in state legislatures and Congress. Republican women increased their numbers from 13 to 31 in the U.S. House of Representatives, and from 662 to 729 in state legislatures nationally. The impressive performance of Republican women in elected office led CBS News to label 2020 as “The Year of The Republican Woman.” To those who believe that American democracy will be stronger—more legitimate, more representative, and produce better policy outcomes—if its members more fully embody the diversity of the American population, the gains for Republican women were welcome news.

Since the early 1990s, almost all of the gains for women in state legislatures and Congress have occurred on the Democratic side of the aisle, resulting in a dramatic partisan gap. Overall, Democrats contribute 72% of the women in the 117th Congress, and a similar pattern exists at the state level. Women will never reach parity in elective office unless both Republican women and Democratic women increase their numbers. And while many associate “women’s issues” with a progressive policy agenda, the reality is that close to half of American women lean in a more conservative direction and typically support Republican candidates.

The Structural Causes of the Partisan Gap

The causes of the partisan gap—the steady success of Democratic women and the plateauing of Republican women’s representation—have not been the product of Donald Trump’s election or any single election cycle. Rather, they are driven by long-term structural changes to the U.S. electoral environment. Research has examined how American partisan politics have undergone ideological, regional, and racial realignments over the past half century, but insufficient attention has been paid to the consequences of these realignments for women’s representation. Each of these realignments has contributed to the growth of the partisan gender gap by creating conditions that help Democratic women run and win while erecting obstacles for Republican women.

- **Southern partisan realignment:** The heavily conservative climate of the South used to act as a barrier for women in both parties, but as conservatism has become concentrated almost exclusively on the Republican side of the partisan aisle, the Southern electoral landscape only acts to constrain the election of Republican women. Even though the South is the region where the Republican Party does the best, southern Republican women hold relatively fewer of their party’s seats (15% of Republican state legislators in the South are women, compared to 21% nationally.) Republican women have their lowest levels of representation in heavily Republican states that enjoy the most opportunities for building seniority, which is critical for attaining party leadership positions and winning higher office.
- **Racial realignment:** The South no longer hinders the representation of Democratic women in a parallel manner. In fact, Democratic women have made remarkable gains in southern states, making up 42% of southern Democrats in Congress and of Democrats in southern state legislatures—with women of color leading the surge. Women of color have made gains in Congress and state legislatures at a faster rate than white women, a pattern that has benefitted the Democratic Party almost exclusively since over 90% of women of color in elective office are Democrats. In the 117th Congress, women are 43% of the Members of Congress of color, whereas they are only 22% of the white members of Congress. A similar pattern exists in state legislatures, especially in the South.
- **Ideological realignment:** Although at one point in the 20th century, the Republican Party was arguably more progressive on issues of gender equality than the Democratic Party—it embraced the Equal Rights Amendment in its platform before the Democrats did for example—the parties have undergone a significant realignment. Today the Democratic Party is vocal and active in making gender parity in elective office a goal. The party is also comfortable making specific efforts to recruit women, and its decentralized open culture has enabled outside groups, most notable EMILY’s LIST to act as a recruiting

arm of the party. The Republican Party's more hierarchical culture, as well as its individualistic ideology which rejects the idea of explicit female recruitment as problematic "identity politics," tends to reproduce white male majorities and leaves groups interested in recruiting Republican women in a precarious and weakened position.

The Partisan Gap in 2020 and Beyond

The modest success of Republican women in 2020 is in part due to women in the Republican Party—especially Representative Elise Stefanik—defying Republican traditions to call out the lack of women in the party as a problem and specifically recruit and fund women candidates, starting early in the 2020 election cycle. Republicans also benefited from having a more diverse group of women candidates. Republican women of color in Congress increased from one in the 116th Congress to five in the 117th Congress. If Republicans continue with such efforts, they may continue the gains made in 2020. However, the huge prior advantage of Democratic women over Republican women coupled with high re-election rates will make the closing the partisan gap a steep challenge.

It remains unclear whether Republican Party leaders are interested or able to make sustained efforts to recruit more women candidates, especially those of color. The Republican Party has pushed one of its women members, Liz Cheney, out of a leadership position and failed to elect the widow of a deceased Republican member to an open seat in Texas. Indeed, the regional, racial, and ideological forces behind the partisan gap for candidates and office holders portend a further widening, not narrowing, of the partisan gap among women in elective office—unless Republican leaders across the board to take strong, proactive steps are taken to counteract those forces.

Read more in Laurel Elizabeth Elder, *The Partisan Gap: Why Democratic Women Get Elected But Republican Women Don't* (NYU Press, 2021).