



GENDER EQUALITY IN U.S. POLITICS

A Guide for Philanthropists
Interested in Achieving a
Representative Democracy

JANUARY 2020

THE ASCEND FUND


PANORAMA

ABOUT THE ASCEND FUND

The Ascend Fund accelerates the pace of change toward gender equality in U.S. politics. Ascend pools philanthropic capital and supports nonpartisan, nonprofit organizations that prepare women to run for office and work to break down the barriers preventing women from running and getting elected.

The barriers faced by women participating in political processes cut across both parties and become further exacerbated with every degree of “otherness” (e.g., women of color, immigrants, LGBTQI, people with disabilities) from the stereotypical white, male leader.

Addressing these challenges and giving women the skills and confidence to amplify their voices within the political arena at the local, state, and national level, will allow us to build upon progress made to date.

The Ascend Fund has an Advisory Committee that provides strategic direction and leadership to ensure the fund supports organizations and initiatives that accelerate the pace of change towards gender equality in the United States. The committee is made up of former elected officials across the political spectrum.

About Panorama Global

The Ascend Fund is powered by Panorama Global. Panorama is an action tank dedicated to solving local and global problems through audacious thinking and bold action. We bring together diverse perspectives to spark new ideas that create change.

Panorama partners with ambitious leaders to strengthen their organizations and achieve their goals, and we initiate projects when we see gaps that need to be filled. Working with our partners, we raise awareness and drive progress on global priorities to maximize the impact of the initiatives we support.

Panorama is a team of strategists, advocates, campaigners, analysts, storytellers, resource mobilizers, and organizational designers with deep experience in foundations, non-governmental organizations, private companies, and public institutions. We are all inspired by a lifelong commitment to improve the world.

We welcome continued dialogue on this report topic. You may contact us at ascend@panoramaglobal.org or visit our website www.theascendfund.org to learn more.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This guide aims to educate philanthropists on the status of women in elected office in the U.S., as well as the barriers women face in running for office, in hopes of inspiring funders to take bold action to increase gender equality in politics.

Status

While 2018 was touted as the “year of the woman,” the gender balance among elected officials has improved only moderately since the first “year of the woman” in 1992. Today, despite the fact that women make up a larger portion of the U.S. electorate than men, they represent just 24% of Congress, 29% of state legislators, and 28% of statewide executives.

Barriers

Progress toward women’s equality in elected office is slowed due to significant challenges. Barriers include, but are not limited to the structure of political careers, systemic biases of political establishment, financial hurdles, the perception of women in society and media, and women’s lack of self-confidence.

Compounding these systemic and sociological barriers to women running for office are landscape challenges. The field overall remains vastly underfunded, and what funding exists is episodic. As a result, during each election cycle new organizations emerge and old groups fold leaving a disjointed space where there is a lack of strategy coordination and sharing of information.

Finally, many of the organizations working to elect women are focused on the federal level and lean liberal. To reach gender equality, it is critical that the work is bipartisan and focuses on expanding the pipeline of candidates at all levels of office.

Bold Action

To accelerate the pace of change, The Ascend Fund is focused on two areas in 2020:

1. Working to improve the gender composition of state legislatures.
2. Exploring innovative new strategies to help women overcome barriers.

Funders are encouraged to contribute to The Ascend Fund to support a wide portfolio of organizations working toward our common goal or co-fund to maximize our contributions. A long-term, multi-prong investment strategy that focuses on increasing civic engagement, instilling leadership traits, trains candidates and campaign staff, and supports candidates and elected officials will help to increase the number of women in politics.

WOMEN IN ELECTED OFFICE TODAY

Although 2018 was touted as another “year of the woman,” the gender balance among elected officials improved only moderately since the first “year of the woman” in 1992.

While women make up a larger portion of the U.S. electorate than men, they represent just 24% of Congress, 29% of state legislators, and 28% of statewide executives. Only 17 women serve in leadership positions (speaker, president, or president pro tempore) in state legislatures.¹

The perception that positions of political leadership in the United States are reserved for men is socialized early on. A 2013 American University study illustrates the phenomenon: 63% of female college students never thought about running for office, compared with 43% of their male peers; and while 20% of male students thought about running “many times,” only half as many female students had the same thought.²

Yet notably when women run, they have the same chance of winning as men. Plus, how women work and what they work on change the entire system. Studies have shown that women in elected office overwhelmingly support policies that promote equality and fairness and are more likely to work across the aisle, making their presence in political bodies all the more important.



Women make up more than 1/2 of the population, but fewer than 1/3 of elected leaders.

In January 2019, Nevada became the first state to swear in a majority female legislature. *The Washington Post* noted “the male old guard has been shaken up by the perspectives of female lawmakers. Bills prioritizing women’s health and safety have soared to the top of the agenda. Mounting reports of sexual harassment have led one male lawmaker to resign. And policy debates long dominated by men, including prison reform and gun safety, are yielding to female voices.” As of May

2019, “More than 17 pending bills deal with sexual assault, sex trafficking, and sexual misconduct, with some measures aimed at making it easier to prosecute offenders.”³

Despite celebrating gains made in 2018, in the 100 years since women secured the right to vote, women’s political representation has grown slowly. To make a significant impact, efforts aimed at gender equality must work strategically to ensure a more representative democracy.

BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S ELECTED LEADERSHIP

The current political system paves the way for wealthy, well-connected, American-born, white men to easily run for office, win elections, secure appointments, and sit on our judiciaries. Additionally, the part-time nature of legislatures, created in the days of the gentleman farmer, is outdated for today's workforce and lifestyle and detrimental to those without existing means or highly flexible, well-paying jobs.

Further exacerbating this reality is the negativity women face in the ways they are portrayed and treated in the media, which largely shapes how the public perceives them and thus appraises their qualifications.

This report outlines five major barriers that impede women's participation in politics: the structure of political careers; systemic pressures; public perception and the media; women's lack of self-confidence; and funder engagement today. The report concludes with recommendations to donors about how to break down these barriers.

Structure of political careers

For many women, both running a campaign and sustaining an elected position present insurmountable challenges, including:

Distance from home – The logistics of living part-time in Washington, D.C. or a state capitol city, and spending days or weeks away from home at a time, disincentivizes women from entering the political arena.

Unconventional schedules – In most states, serving in the legislature is considered a part-time, seasonal job, with time commitments that range from biannual meetings to 120 days of engagement per year.

Significant time commitment – While holding an elected office may be considered a part-time job, in reality campaigning and serving constituents can easily require 40 or more hours of work per week.

Insufficient compensation – Many state and local positions pay little, creating a barrier to entry to those who need to earn a living wage. Legislators' salaries in most states range from \$20,000 to \$40,000 annually, but vary widely— Texan legislators earn \$7,200 per year while California lawmakers earn about \$90,000.4

The unique demands of political positions can make holding down a “day job” difficult. A 2019 report by *The New York Times* found that fewer than 5% of members

serving in the U.S. House of Representatives have experience in blue-collar or service jobs. According to Nicholas Carnes of Duke University, it is not a lack of politically ambitious, qualified working class-candidates, but that “blue-collar workers are less able to shoulder the practical burdens associated with running a campaign – like taking time off from paid employment.”⁵ Furthermore, many nonprofit organizations shy away from hiring legislators out of concern of risking their nonprofit status by appearing partisan.

Arranging childcare is an additional hurdle for women putting in long hours on the campaign trail, particularly if they are forgoing a paycheck. While candidates for federal office are allowed to use campaign contributions to cover the cost of childcare, candidates in only six states are allowed to do so. The Pipeline Initiative conducted a survey in January 2019 in which about 30% of state legislative candidates cited “difficult to balance family roles” as one of their top campaign challenges.⁶ Not surprisingly, less than 5% of Congress is made up of mothers with children at home.⁷

Systemic pressures

Political party establishments have little incentive to address barriers holding women back from equal participation in the political process. With limited formal support, and without the institutional knowledge needed to navigate these systems, women face numerous challenges, including:

Narrow view of electability – The political “establishment” – party leaders and elected officials – is still dominated by a white male worldview. Therefore, stereotypes about women’s electability can play into whether the establishment supports female candidates. This is particularly true for Republicans, for whom the degree of a candidate’s conservatism plays an important role in their electability.

“There was a knee-jerk reaction [from Republican members of Congress and NRCC leadership] that I didn’t fit the mold of a typical congressional candidate.”⁸

—Representative Elise Stefanik (R-NY)

According to Rutgers University professor, Shauna Shames: “The primary campaign is the toughest hurdle for Republican women...[because] voters tend to be far more conservative than the Republican Party at large.” Research by David Hopkins, of Boston College found that even if potential female GOP candidates and their male peers are equally as conservative, “voters tend to perceive female politicians as more liberal than men.”⁹

Lack of support from party establishment – Because the interest of the parties is solely on preserving, or regaining, a majority, promoting women candidates is rarely at the top of the agenda. Some groups that support Republican women candidates “limit where they get involved to vacant, open Republican-leaning seats or swing districts currently held by Democrats – while deliberately shying away from backing challengers to male incumbents.”¹⁰

Many women – particularly Latinas – are even actively discouraged from running by those in their *own political party*. New American Leaders’ *States of Inclusion* survey found that about 30% of Latina politicians were discouraged from running by someone in their own political party, compared with 10% of Latinos and 7% of white men and women.¹¹

In June 2019, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) issued a new rule to prohibit consultants and vendors from working for a primary challenger if they wanted to receive other work from the committee. Such a move perpetuates the status quo because of the 50 longest-serving House Democratic incumbents, two-thirds are white and about the same percentage are men, whereas primary challengers are more often female, younger, and non-white.¹²

No “old girls’ club” – Women tend to have fewer traditional political connections than men, which helps to explain why fundraising and the high cost of a political campaign costs in general are such major barriers. Not surprisingly, women from communities of color and immigrant communities who may have become politically engaged only recently, and have less political power and civic knowledge, lack the established networks instrumental in securing appointed positions and winning elections.

No centralized place for information and limited transparency – Without the institutional knowledge that comes with political experience, access to political spaces and structures, and a professional and personal network of powerful people, running for office is a monumental challenge. Scant resources are publicly available to provide information on open seats and upcoming elections, making it extremely hard for those on the outside to know how to get their foot in the door. For example,

an incumbent may anoint their preferred successor prior to announcing their retirement.

Public perception & the media

Through biased and sexist coverage of male and female political leaders, the media can reinforce or challenge notions of leadership and power.¹⁴

Traditional media perpetuates gender stereotypes – Coverage of women in the media tends to focus on their appearance and uses gender as a women's primary descriptor, which differentiates them from the normative male candidate. Paramount to this descriptor is the woman's reproductive choices, which become a part of her gender identity. While men play up their family stories to humanize their persona and connect with constituents, women's family stories call into question with voters their capacity to balance their familial and professional roles.

Women are disproportionately criticized – Many women are hesitant to run because they see the way women leaders are harshly criticized and closely examined in the media and do not want to subject themselves to that treatment. Sara Blanco, of Running Start, shared that many of their participants are hesitant to run because “they fear how they will be treated in the media. They see how women leaders face all kinds of sexist coverage (focusing on appearance, doubting qualifications, criticism of parenting choices, and more) and understandably, being the object of all that really doesn't appeal to them.”

Social media provides a double-edged sword for women in the political realm – Social media has opened up major new and low-cost channels of communication, which allow traditionally under-resourced candidates access to voters. At the same time, however, social media has allowed extremely negative and vitriolic speech to spread more easily, often directed at “outside” candidates. Sexism and gender-based harassment are common, and without any real consequence for the perpetrator. This acts as a real barrier for women who may otherwise be interested in politics.

In a report on women in the media, Lucina Di Meo, a researcher at The Wilson Center, points out, “The majority of politicians and journalists interviewed for this study reported having suffered online harassment, with total impunity for their perpetrators.”¹³

Lack of self-confidence

A huge barrier to women’s participation in political processes is lack of confidence, stemming from centuries of normalized sexism throughout society. As is the case in other sectors, women imagine themselves in positions of political power far less frequently than men. Moreover, portrayal of women in news media and popular culture contribute to women’s lack of political efficacy and the low numbers of women in government.

Unlike external barriers outlined above, low self-confidence cannot be addressed only by policy reforms or structural change. Key factors include:

Feelings of incompetence and deference – Numerous organizations and individuals have cited lack of confidence as a major reason women do not politically engage in their community or on the national stage. This translates not only to feeling unprepared to run for office, but also feeling incompetent to engage through voting and other aspects of civic life.

GALvanize, a nonprofit organization that develops tools and strategies for women to participate civically in their communities, found that 48% of the women they surveyed said they have difficulty expressing or defending their political views. Half of the white mothers they spoke to said they felt stupid when they talked about politics, deferring to the males in their family for political views and decisions.¹⁴

“You have to talk and engage. If you ask a man if he wants to run, his first question is, ‘What took you so long to ask me?’ If you ask a woman to run for office, her first question is ‘Really, do you think I’m strong enough?’ And she has a CV as long as my arm!”

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Canada, Women Deliver conference, June 2019

Self-doubt – Women also tend to doubt their qualifications to hold elected office more than men. Women worry that their ability to understand the tax code or appropriations processes may impact their ability to serve.

Low political efficacy – In addition to women’s self-doubt, distrust in the political system threatens’ women’s political efficacy – potential candidates and constituents do not feel confident that their political voice will have an impact.

Lack of role models – Fewer women in office means fewer political role models for women; it is hard for a woman to imagine herself in office when she doesn’t see her gender reflected in the occupied seats.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR PHILANTHROPIC SUPPORT

Funder engagement today

Although 2018 saw record numbers of women running for and winning political seats throughout the country, a great deal of work remains to reach equal representation in the United States. Since The Ascend Fund was created in 2019, we have learned the following:

Work in this area is extremely underfunded – Despite the perceived growth in financing for women in politics, the whole space remains extremely underfunded. The best-funded groups struggle to raise annual budgets of \$1 million. The effort just to survive limits leaders' ability to think expansively about significant change. As a recent philanthropy paper put it, "small gifts lead to small thinking."

The funding is episodic – The aftermath of the 2016 presidential election brought a surge of women's activism into politics, and with it, an increase in funding for women's political groups, a trend consistent with a "boom and bust" cycle in political funding.

A blog post by Scott Nielsen, of Arabella Advisors, on investment in civic engagement describes that the increased funding that front-line groups received during the midterm cycle allowed them to dramatically expand their reach, internal capacity, and program prowess. Many are now orders of magnitude stronger, smarter, and more effective than 18 months ago. But he cautions: "If this post-election funding cycle follows previous patterns, donors will now cut funding to grassroots and civic engagement organizations. As a result, much of the scale and talent these groups built over the last 18 months will disappear – and need to be rebuilt from scratch in two years."¹⁵

The result is a fragmented and continuously evolving universe of organizations – After the 2016 election, new progressive organizations proliferated in an effort to elect more women to office. Seasoned political strategists see this as potentially problematic – established organizations with more sophisticated programs are still struggling to secure funding and are now competing with many new groups. Of the new organizations, only a handful will likely survive past one or two election cycles, resulting in continuous flux in the system.

There is little data sharing and coordination between the groups – Efforts to generate greater political involvement by women in office and other civic spaces are

Few groups focus on electing conservative women – When looking at politics writ large, the conservative movement develop long-term strategies to promote the issues they care about such as abortion and judicial appointments. This organizational discipline, however, is not used for electing based on identity. Rather than supporting candidates in response to a lack of representation, conservatives tend to reject identity politics and emphasize the policies and beliefs of a candidate.

Few funders support nonpartisan equality in women’s civic and political engagement – Initially, it seemed as if the field was crowded with both donors and organizations whose goals aligned with The Ascend Fund’s. But on closer examination, we learned that in fact very few are focused on the broad goal of increasing the engagement of women across the full civic and political landscape, and even fewer are nonpartisan.

“If we think there’s a benefit to having women’s voices in Congress – or in any governing body – then we need it on both sides of the aisle.”¹⁷

Anne Moses, Founder and President, IGNITE

If you want true equality, you have to maintain a nonpartisan focus – Looking at the map and doing the math, it is clear there is no way to get to gender equality in political representation if the focus is on one party only. While a large number of progressive groups have sprouted up in recent years, they cannot penetrate deep-red states. Therefore, if the goal is 50–50 gender representation across the United States and at all levels, the focus has to remain bi-partisan/nonpartisan.

What can funders do now?

The United States has a long way to go to get to gender parity in elected office. However, momentum is moving in the right direction, and can be accelerated with additional support. This is a traditionally underfunded space, so donor contributions can have an outsized impact.

Act with urgency – This is a unique moment in time, and funders interested in this space should capitalize on that energy and momentum.

Invest for the long term – While we want to accelerate the pace of change, it won't happen overnight. Set a strategy, identify the organizations to support, provide renewing general operating support funds to those organizations, evaluate their progress, and be patient.

Use your money wisely – There is a lot that can be done by investing in 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations, but their work can be strengthened by complementary investments in 501(c)(4) organizations, which are allowed to endorse and work on behalf of candidates, in addition to PACs, which provide campaign funding, and also 527s, which advocate for or against specific issues and candidates. Supporting individual candidates who align with your priorities is also critical.

Run for office or encourage women in your networks to run – Elected office has for too long been seen as the purview of older, white men. Women leaders, of all ages and backgrounds, are needed in politics.

What should I invest in?

There are a wide range of organizations working at various points on the pipeline to support increasing the number of women in elected office. These organizations are working to do the following:

Increase civic engagement – Many women lack the confidence to exercise their political agency. Women who feel incompetent discussing politics at home will have a harder time making their voices heard at the ballot box.

Instill leadership traits – IGNITE found that the young women participating in their high school and college leadership training programs voted at higher rates than their peers and were three times more likely to want to run for office. Investing in civic education and leadership development for young women means more women will enter their careers ready to lead and participate in politics.¹⁸

Train candidates and campaign staff – New candidates from outside the system often need training in the basics of campaigning, and they need staff to help them win. There are numerous organizations, partisan and nonpartisan, that focus on training women to run for office. A majority of female candidates find training to be useful for their campaigns, especially regarding learning how to mobilize volunteers and fundraise.⁶

Support elected officials once they are in office – Women elected officials are often subject to excessive scrutiny. Organizations are working to create support

networks of women elected officials to learn and share best practices, and with more support they can offer greater resources to more women.

Change the system – Myriad systemic roadblocks make it harder for women to run and win. To achieve sustainable progress toward gender equality in politics, significant structural and systemic changes are essential.

Organizations are changing systems by working to ensure:

- Equitable access to the ballot, which includes mobilizing voters and advocating for reforms such as automatic voter registration, online voting, vote by mail, and ranked choice voting.
- All votes count by advocating for accurate census count, ballot security, fair redistricting through elimination of gerrymandering, and combatting voter suppression.
- Through supporting public financing measures like “democracy vouchers,” matching funds, and expansion of the allowance of use of campaign funds for child care in state and local level races.

What is The Ascend Fund doing?

The Ascend Fund is focused on three areas in 2020. As more funding becomes available, we will expand our grant making to groups with a broader mandate.

Starting with the states – State legislatures make critical policy decisions, yet in 45 states, women hold less than 40% of the seats.²² Not only are state legislatures generally more accessible for newcomers, but there are more opportunities – with 7,383 available seats compared with the 535 in Congress. In addition, electing women to state offices helps build a pipeline for Congress. In 2020, Ascend works with two organizations aiming to change the gender makeup in state legislatures in an initial 13 states.

Focusing on the gap between training and recruitment – While many organizations train women to run, few connect the women they train to specific seats. As described earlier in this report, the lack of clear information about political systems and processes is a significant barrier to engaging “outsider” candidates to run for office.

Strategic recruitment is also crucial to have greater female representation in elected positions. Ascend supports training organizations in developing alumnae engagement strategies so that they can support more women they train to find a race, run for office, and win.

“I saw myself as that outside organizer, not the insider politician. Then in 2014...I began receiving calls to run. At first, I offered the same answer I had always given: ‘No thanks, it's not for me.’”

Representative Pramila Jayapal (D-WA)

Challenging conventions – To change the face of U.S. politics, we need to throw out preconceived notions of what political leadership looks like and find new ways to recruit women from a wide variety of backgrounds. The Ascend Fund supports organizations exploring new strategies that enhance women’s ability to reach elected office.

How can we work together?

This challenge is too big to solve alone – join us! We welcome the chance to partner with like-minded donors who are interested in accelerating the pace of change for gender equality in U.S. elected officials. How can we work together?

- Contribute to The Ascend Fund and support a wide portfolio of organizations working toward a common goal;
- Co-fund alongside The Ascend Fund to maximize our respective contributions;
- Contact us for a list of vetted organizations;
- Share intelligence on progress and trends.

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