



Women of Color in American Politics

Over the past few decades, the US population has changed dramatically. The growth of Latino and Asian populations, driven largely by immigration, has fundamentally altered the composition of the electorate. Elected officials are changing in much the same way. To a large extent, recent gains in women's office-holding have been fueled by the achievements of women-of-color candidates. Increasing the number of elected women of color is vital to achieving gender parity in politics. Many challenges remain, however, in order for women candidates of color to reach office in proportion to their share of the population.

Collapse Content

Officeholding by Women of Color

Today's officeholding by women of color represents a historic high.* In 2012, 24 women of color serve in Congress, 11 in statewide elective executive office, and 350 in state legislative office. African American women constitute the majority of women of color in public office; their representation has risen dramatically since the 1965 passage of the Voting Rights Act and the creation of majority-minority districts.* In the past three decades, African American women's presence as state legislators has nearly doubled: while they made up only 7% of women state legislators in 1981, today they are 13.8%*

Women of color are more likely to identify as Democrats than Republicans. African Americans—both voters and elected officials—tend to be overwhelmingly Democratic, dating back to the Democratic party's embrace of civil rights in the 1960s.* All four of the Asian American women in Congress are Democrats.*

However, the greater tendency to support the Democratic party is less strong beyond African Americans; the Asian American and Latino communities are more likely than are African Americans to include Republican party adherents.* While all of the African American women serving in Congress are Democrats, five of the seven Latinas serving in Congress are Democrats and two are Republicans.* And the two women of color who grabbed national headlines in 2010 were Republicans: Susana Martinez of New Mexico

and Nikki Haley of South Carolina became the first women of color to win gubernatorial office in the United States.*

According to the Gender and Multicultural Leadership Project (GMCL), the most comprehensive study of officeholding by people of color, women of color are less likely to hold office than are men of color.* Yet, looking over time at officeholding patterns, scholars have found that considerable growth in officeholding by people of color in recent years has been driven by women of color.* At local, state and national levels, African American women hold office in the largest numbers followed by Latinas and then Asian Americans, with the smallest group women of Alaskan Indian or Native American descent.*

The Intersection of Gender and Race

The pathways that women of color take to public office and the challenges they face as candidates are somewhat different from those of nonhispanic white women.* For example, women of color legislators are more likely to be elected from majority–minority districts.* Such districts were drawn in response to racially polarized voting patterns and the desire to allow minority voters to select their candidates of choice. The creation of these districts was critical to the progress that women of color have made in winning office to date.* It is unlikely, however, that majority–minority districts alone can increase officeholding by women of color in the future—in part because of limited opportunities to draw additional districts.

While majority–minority districts have provided critical electoral opportunities for candidates of color, winning statewide office has proven more challenging. Women of color are only 3.5% of all statewide elective executives.* In the history of the United States, only one woman of color, Carol Moseley Braun, who is African American, has ever served in the U.S. Senate (1993–1999).* The stereotypes and barriers that women of color face in electoral politics are not identical to those faced by nonhispanic white women or by men of color; instead, race and gender intersect, creating unique opportunities and barriers for minority women.*

For example, negative stereotypes about African American women including their personality traits and sexuality—many of which date back to slavery—are unlike those stereotypes that confront white women.* Challenging these damaging stereotypes is made more difficult because of the dearth of women of color in visible public positions. In a new book, Melissa Harris–Perry contends that African American women face damaging stereotypes but have lacked the resources and public presence to challenge those stereotypes.* It is for these reasons that First Lady Michelle Obama has served an unusually important role on the national stage, counteracting longstanding stereotypes about African American women.

Studies show that the factors that help elect people of color to office work differently by gender.* For example, although minorities are more likely to win election in smaller, single-member district systems than in at-large systems that span a larger geographic area, this relationship turns out to explain the officeholding of men of color but not women of color.* At the same time, the factors that facilitate the election of women of color—such as majority minority districts—differ from those that affect the election of white women, making for further complexity.* In light of these differences, studies have focused specifically on the experiences of women of color and, when possible, compared women of color across race/ethnic groups.* This research has often taken the form of case studies because of the relatively small number of women of color candidates competing for state and federal office.*

Because of race-related and gender-related stereotypes, women of color can be considered to be doubly disadvantaged when they run for office.* The typical politician is a nonhispanic white male, meaning that women of color are likely to have a higher credibility threshold to surmount with voters compared with other candidates. Often, candidate recruitment is an obstacle to the election of women of color. Party leaders may seek to replicate formulas that have worked in the past in a given district, making assumptions about voter unwillingness to support candidates other than white male candidates.* These assumptions about viability can make marshaling sufficient campaign resources more challenging for women of color. Indeed, the 2008 CAWP Recruitment Study—a national study of state legislators—finds that women of color are even more likely than their nonhispanic white female colleagues to believe it is harder for women to raise money than men.*

Because women of color are more likely than nonhispanic white women to win election from majority-minority districts, and therefore districts safe for their party, they are more likely to face primary competition and less likely to reach office as a result of recruitment.* Viewed in one light, this can mean that women of color are able to reach office successfully without needing party recruitment. On the other hand, however, this means that women of color have not reaped the benefit of recruitment, which is disproportionately responsible for women reaching state legislative office compared with men's typical route.* Women of color are also more likely than their nonhispanic white female colleagues to have encountered efforts to discourage their candidacies, meaning they have surmounted higher hurdles.* Together, this evidence suggests that were parties to become more receptive to and appreciative of their candidacies, women of color could be recruited for many more races.

Campaign trainings, such as the Center for American Women and Politics' Ready to Run™ Diversity Initiative that offers specific workshops for African American women, Asian American women, and Latina women, can help women of color build networks, access role models, and develop strategies for challenging traditional recruitment patterns.* Women of color are developing financial networks and organizations

specifically tailored to women of color candidates.* Such efforts dedicated to electing more women of color to office are extremely important in light of the unique perspectives that women of color bring to government.

Cathy J. Cohen argues that the political participation of women of color doesn't always fit conventional definitions of "political activity" as defined by mainstream political scientists; instead, research—and particularly research on African American women—has highlighted political activities that women of color undertake through work in local communities and churches and through labor organizing.* Rethinking what is "political" opens the door to a wider range of potential candidates, given the important roles that women of color play in their communities.*

New studies are seeking to turn the idea of the double-disadvantage faced by minority women on its head, arguing that the intersection of gender and race may put women of color at an advantage rather than a disadvantage.* African American women and Latinas constitute a larger share of African American legislators and Latino legislators, respectively, than white women constitute of all white legislators.* Wendy Smooth argues that women of color candidates can appeal to a broader range of voters by tapping into communities of color and by appealing to women voters across racial lines.*

Electing more women from all racial/ethnic backgrounds is likely to lead to policy change. A growing body of research addresses differences among women legislators and assesses the impact of women of color. Studies show that race/ethnicity and gender intersect to give women of color unique perspectives as officeholders.* For example, Edith J. Barrett analyzed African American state legislators through a 1992 survey and found that African American women legislators coalesced around a common agenda of education, health care, and economic development—an agenda that differed somewhat from that of their African American male and white female colleagues.* Similarly, Kathleen Bratton, Kerry Haynie, and Beth Reingold find in a study of ten state legislatures in 2001 that African American women sponsor both black interest and women's interest bills, and that African American women's legislative behavior differs from African American men and white women.* In one of the few studies to examine Latino state legislators, Luis Fraga and his coauthors find considerable overlap between Latinas and Latinos but note that Latina state legislators are more likely to feel it is important to represent multiple minority groups.*

At the same time that women of color have made their mark in office, studies show that interpersonal dynamics within legislatures can produce and reproduce gender and racial categories, making legislative life more challenging for women of color.* Winning office does not always guarantee influence. Because women of color are a numerical minority within legislatures and have not typically been part of a state's traditional

power structure, they may not have equal access to formal and informal leadership positions.*

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