

Unfinished Business: Women Running in 2018 and Beyond

A New Report from the Center for American Women and Politics

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Gender disparities in American politics were not upended in a single cycle, but the 2018 election marked sites of progress as well as persistent hurdles for women candidates. Evaluating the 2018 election in the context of both past and present offers key insights into the gendered terrain that candidates will navigate in 2020 and beyond.

Women candidates in election 2018 disrupted the (White male) status quo in American politics and challenged assumptions of how, where, and which women can achieve electoral success.

- Women ran for and were elected to office in record numbers in the 2018 election, in addition to achieving historic milestones for women's political representation.
- Women were winners in 2018, outperforming men among non-incumbents at nearly every level in both primary and general elections. Women candidates won the majority of U.S. House seats that flipped from Republican to Democrat in election 2018.
- More than one-third of women of color elected to the U.S. House for the first time in 2018 won in majority-White districts.
- Women running in 2018, especially Democratic women, embraced gender as an electoral asset instead of a hurdle to overcome en route to Election Day. They drew upon distinctly gendered experiences and challenged both the valuation and expression of stereotypically masculine credentials for officeholding.
- Women challenged gender and intersectional biases while campaigning, proving their power in disrupting instead of adapting to the prevailing rules of the game.
- Many women candidates refused to wait to run for office in 2018, challenging party norms as well as historical hurdles confronting young women and mothers of young children.
- The rise in the number of women donors and their concentration of support for Democratic women candidates created more equitable financial conditions between women and men in 2018.
- While sexism in the electorate contributed to President Trump's success in 2016, research indicates that some Republican candidates paid a penalty for perceived sexism in 2018.
- In 2018 and 2020, greater scrutiny of and public backlash to gender and/or intersectional media bias reflects some progress in creating a media landscape where bias – even if it persists – does not go unanswered.

But the 2018 election did not upend durable gender and intersectional disparities in electoral politics and officeholding.

- Women were still underrepresented among all candidates in 2018 and remain less than one-third of elected officials in 2019.
- The gains for women in election 2018 were concentrated among Democratic women; at every level of office, the number of Republican women officeholders declined.
- Celebrating “firsts” for women, and especially women of color, across levels of office serves as a reminder of the work left to do to create political institutions that reflect the full range of constituencies they serve.
- The party and financial support infrastructures for women vary for Democrats and Republicans, as well as between White women and women of color.
- Gender parity in outcomes – whether in fundraising or at the ballot box – can mask differences in the amount and type of work women candidates must do to achieve the same results as White men.
- Gender and intersectional biases persist in evaluations of women and women of color candidates.
- Women continue to face harassment and threats of violence, including threats of a sexual nature, as a cost of candidacy.
- Gender biases persist in media coverage and commentary of U.S. campaigns, and mainstream coverage and commentary on political campaigns remain dominated by White men.

Early signs from the 2020 cycle indicate that women will continue to disrupt U.S. electoral politics.

- Many women candidates who lost in 2018 are running again in 2020, and others are refusing to “wait their turn” to run. These decisions reflect some lasting and positive effects of expanding the pool of women candidates in 2018.
- Achieving gender parity among candidates and officeholders will be unlikely without Republican women. The Republican Party’s reaction to women’s losses in 2018 and recruitment efforts in 2020 will serve as one indicator of whether the party serves as a gateway or gatekeeper to Republican women’s candidacy and officeholding.
- An historic number of women are running for president in 2020, capitalizing on the success of women in 2018 and continuing to confront and challenge electoral norms and institutions that have advantaged White men.

- Men have had to navigate shifting gendered terrain in recent elections, with White male candidates – perhaps for the first time – being asked to address their privilege as a potential liability for their presidential bids instead of assuming that their race and gender identities provide only electoral advantages. Their experiences serve as a reminder that men play a central role, especially as they continue to outnumber women as candidates for office, in reinforcing or rejecting the status quo in American elections.

The story of gender in election 2018, as well as what it tells us about the future for women candidates and their success, is more complex than simply celebrating a “surge” in women running and winning in one election. This report draws from research conducted before, about, and after the 2018 election to tell a more comprehensive story with important lessons for 2020 and beyond.