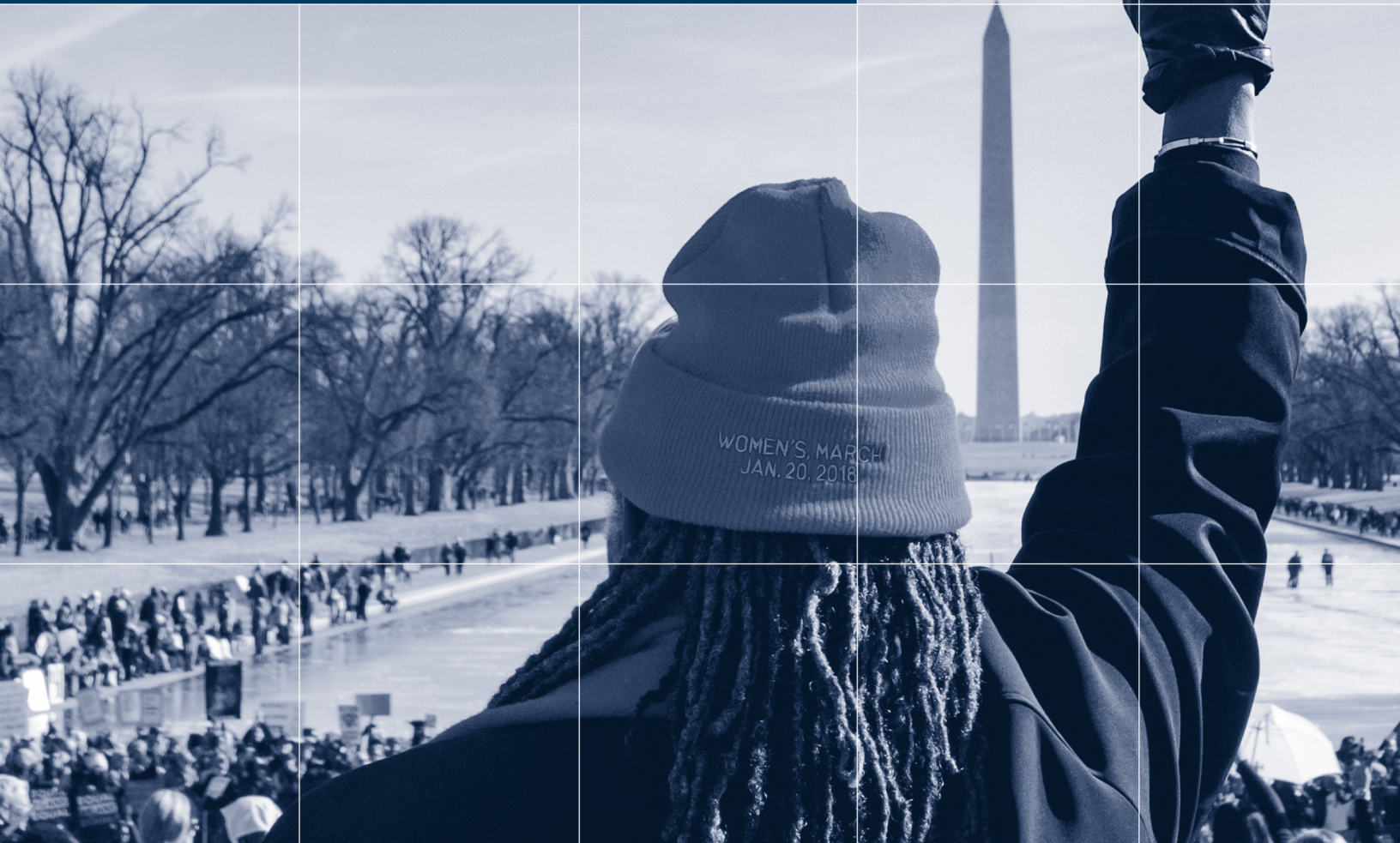




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TACKLING WOMEN'S UNDERREPRESENTATION IN U.S. POLITICS

Comparative Perspectives From Europe

Saskia Brechenmacher

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Summary

The United States has fallen behind most established democracies with respect to women's representation in politics. Women remain underrepresented at the federal, state, and local levels. The current uptick in women running for office, while encouraging, is unlikely to close this gender gap. To accelerate the pace of progress, U.S. reformers could learn from European experiences and push for measures that tackle broader institutional barriers to equal political representation.

A Transatlantic Perspective

- In the United States, women generally win elections at the same rate as men—but they are less likely to run for office. The majoritarian electoral system, a strong incumbency advantage, gender-specific fundraising hurdles, and weaknesses in party recruitment reinforce this imbalance.
- In contrast, in many European democracies, proportional representation rules, party-driven candidate selection, and public election financing have provided a more conducive institutional context for women's advancement. Several European parliaments have also taken first steps to take stock of and improve internal measures of gender equality.
- In addition, European gender equality advocates have successfully lobbied for party-level gender quotas and targets to ensure the systematic recruitment of female candidates. After initial pushback, parties accepted these measures largely due to high levels of internal and external pressure as well as strategic electoral calculations.

Steps to Ensure Equal Access to Political Office in the United States

- **Expand ranked-choice voting in multimember districts**—beginning at the municipal and state levels—to push party officials to recruit a more diverse slate of candidates and weaken the incentives for negative campaigning.
- **Institute mandatory or voluntary recruitment targets for political parties and well-resourced party mechanisms** to identify, recruit, and

support women candidates—particularly at the primary stage and in open-seat races. This step would signal high-level commitment to gender parity and ensure the continuous recruitment of qualified female candidates.

- **Establish gender parity targets for political action committees and provide fundraising support** to female candidates in primary campaigns to help overcome current inequities in candidate financing, particularly on the Republican side. In the longer run, shifting to public financing at the local level may also benefit women candidates and candidates of color.
- **Collect systematic data on gender equality and women's experiences** to identify current barriers to women's advancement in Congress, state legislatures, and executive branches of government.
- **Advocate for internal gender equality plans** that set out specific commitments to make legislatures and other branches of government more gender-sensitive—for example, by improving sexual harassment accountability procedures and prioritizing gender parity in leadership posts and committee assignments.

Introduction

The United States lags behind most established democracies with respect to women's representation in politics. While many countries have made rapid progress in this domain, the United States has not kept pace: when it comes to women's representation in national legislatures, the United States' rank has sunk from 41 in the world in 1997 to 101 in 2017.¹ Women currently hold 19.3 percent of seats in the House of Representatives and 21.0 percent in the Senate.² Over the past decade, these percentages have barely increased. At the current rate of progress, women will not achieve full legislative parity in the U.S. Congress for another hundred years.³

The comparison with Western European democracies—similar to the United States along most socioeconomic and democratic indicators—is particularly revealing. While the United States has fallen behind, most Western European countries have made significant progress. Entrenched barriers to equal representation do persist, particularly at leadership levels, yet across Western Europe—including in Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, and the United Kingdom—women's share of seats in national parliament now exceeds 30 percent.⁴ The Nordic countries have come closest to parity, with women holding, on average, 41.7 percent of seats in single or lower houses of parliament as well as significant shares of parliamentary committee chairs and ministerial positions.⁵

Of course, these numbers alone do not constitute proof of equal political power. Nor does descriptive representation equal substantive representation. Women are not a homogeneous group: their interests and experiences are shaped by social, racial, and economic hierarchies. Female politicians hail from radically different backgrounds and bring varied ideological perspectives to bear on their work. Yet any democratic system benefits from having people with diverse life experiences and perspectives represented in government—and from drawing on the full array of talent and skills in the population. Existing research also underscores that female legislators often do have different legislative priorities than their male counterparts. For example, they are more likely to introduce bills on gender equality, reproductive health, and issues affecting children and families.⁶ And they are generally more likely to consider how any policy reform will impact women as a group, while women of color tend to advance political agendas that take into account the particular concerns of both women and communities of color.⁷ The lack of women in U.S. politics thus weakens the quality of democracy: today's political elites still do not

reflect the diversity of the U.S. population but instead remain overwhelmingly white, wealthy, and male.

In the United States, civil society organizations have tried to fight this imbalance by recruiting, training, and supporting female candidates. The spike in women's political mobilization following the 2016 presidential election has given a dramatic boost to these efforts. Over the past year, record numbers of women reached out to mobilizing organizations like the political action committee (PAC) called EMILY's List and expressed their interest in running for office.⁸ Hundreds of thousands of women joined women's marches around the country to demonstrate for gender equality. And in recent months, the #MeToo movement has sparked an unprecedented national debate on harassment and abuses that undermine women's professional advancement, including in the political sphere. The movement has also led to renewed calls for more women in positions of power. As of December 2017, the number of women challenging incumbents in the House of Representatives is almost four times higher than during the same period in 2015.⁹

While many Democratic women have been politically energized, men are still significantly more likely to have considered running for office or taken concrete steps to do so ahead of the 2018 and 2020 elections.

While a surge in women running for office represents a positive trend, there are reasons to remain cautious. Any uptick in female candidates is likely to accrue primarily to the Democratic Party, without fundamentally changing the—much greater—gender imbalance on the Republican side. With almost one-quarter of GOP women in the House of Representatives retiring or running for higher office in 2018, the party will struggle to increase its share of female representatives in Congress.¹⁰ In addition, the increase in women running for office may prove short-lived and will likely be insufficient to close the current gender gap. A May 2017 survey showed that while many Democratic women have been politically energized, men are still significantly more likely to have considered running for office or taken concrete steps to do so ahead of the 2018 and 2020 elections.¹¹ These findings suggest that closing the gender gap in U.S. politics in the near term may require more comprehensive and ambitious action.

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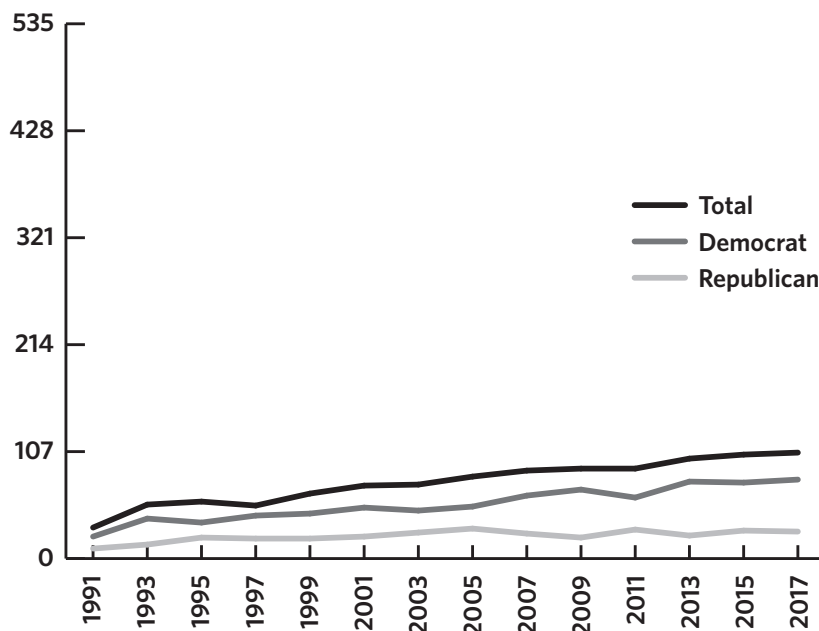
In this context, European reform experiences provide useful comparative insights. In contrast to the United States, the debate over women's political representation in Europe has focused less on the supply of female candidates and more on persistent structural barriers that work against women's political participation. Activists for gender equality in Europe have generally prioritized lobbying for institutional reforms, such as party targets and quotas, over incremental attitudinal and behavioral changes. Specific features of Western European democracies—such as proportional representation rules, public election financing, and party-driven candidate selection—have facilitated such efforts and provided a more favorable context for women's political advancement than the U.S. electoral system.

Not all of these lessons are easily transferable to the United States. A transatlantic comparison nevertheless highlights several key areas for policy change that could complement current efforts to train and support women aspirants and deepen the debate over political equality in the United States. Specifically, reforms in local- and state-level electoral systems, political party recruitment practices, campaign finance rules, and parliamentary norms and infrastructure could help shift the incentives of political actors, encourage more women candidates to step forward, and advance the difficult process of transforming power inequities and gendered hierarchies within political institutions. In the long run, such efforts could not only accelerate the move toward gender parity in representation but also help equalize access to political power more broadly.

The Data

Women currently hold 19.8 percent of 535 seats in the U.S. Congress.¹² While this represents a much higher share than in the early 1990s, the overall rate of progress over the past two decades has been exceptionally slow (see Figure 1). The same gap in representation also extends to the state and local levels: women hold only six governorships, about one-quarter of state legislative seats and statewide elective executive offices, and one-fifth of mayoral positions in the hundred largest U.S. cities.

Figure 1: Number of Women in the U.S. Congress, 1991–2017



Source: Center for American Women in Politics, "History of Women in the U.S. Congress," accessed January 25, 2018, <http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/history-women-us-congress>.

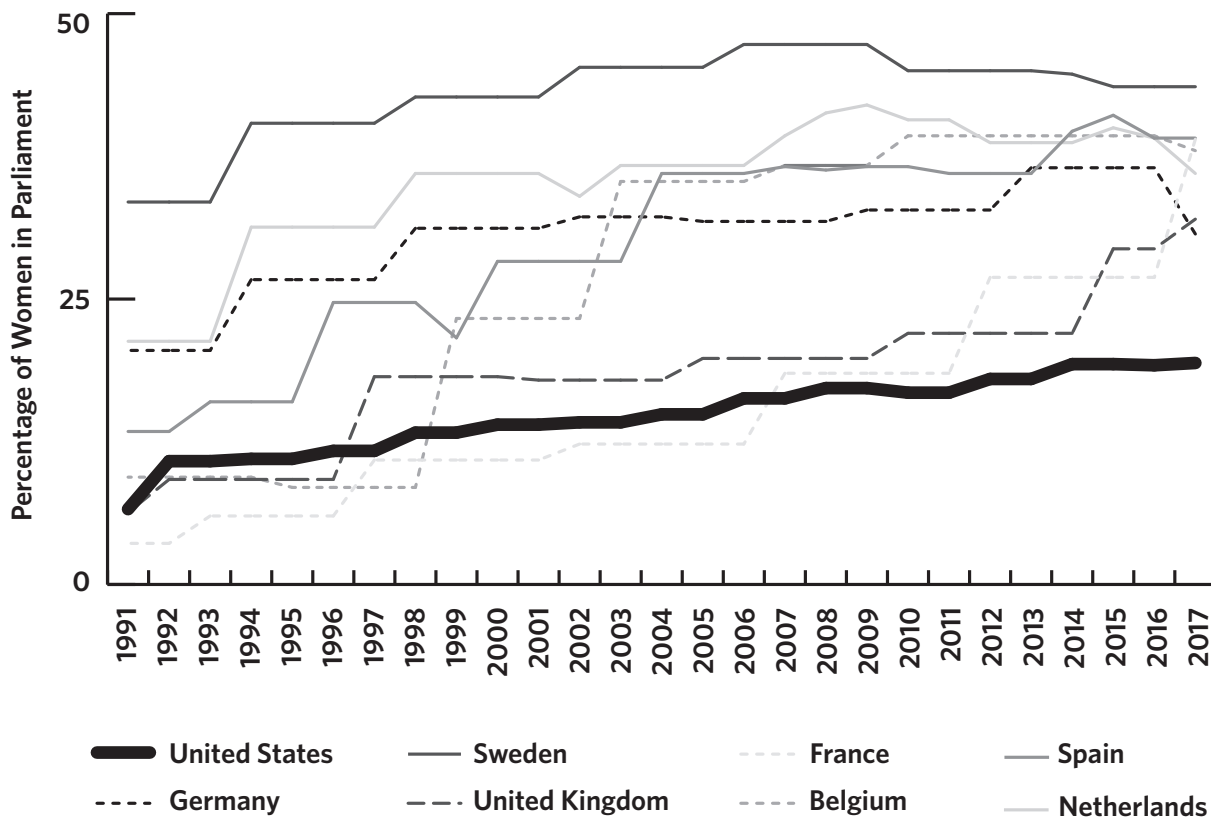
Of course, women's opportunities and experiences in politics are structured by factors other than gender. Women of color now hold elected office at historically unprecedented levels—of the 105 women serving in the 115th Congress, 36.2 percent are women of color.¹³ In fact, recent electoral gains for women have to a large degree been fueled by the success of women-of-color candidates.¹⁴ Yet they remain underrepresented compared to their share of the population, particularly in statewide elective executive positions.¹⁵ Partisanship is another key factor. In 1990, Democrats and Republicans fielded female House candidates at roughly similar rates. Yet by 2012, Democrats accounted for 70 percent of the women running for election to the House.¹⁶ Women now constitute about one-third of all Democratic representatives in Congress, whereas the share of Republican women has leveled off since hitting approximately 10 percent in the mid-2000s. This growing partisan gap is particularly stark given the Republican Party's overall electoral success at the state and federal levels over the past several election cycles. For example, Republican women made few electoral gains after the creation of new House districts following the 2010 U.S. Census—even though these districts were largely drawn by Republican-dominated state legislatures and women often do best in newly drawn districts with no incumbents.¹⁷

Only four EU countries—Croatia, Greece, Hungary, and Latvia—score worse than the United States when it comes to parliamentary representation.

Many of these challenges are mirrored across the Atlantic. Yet a number of European countries have made much more significant headway in achieving balanced legislatures and national governments over the past three decades (see Figure 2). In 2017, three countries—Finland, Iceland, and Sweden—could claim gender parity in their parliaments (if parity is defined as neither sex holding more than 60 percent of the seats). Belgium, Denmark, France, Norway, and Spain all come close to crossing the 40 percent barrier, with Spain having crossed in the past. In the European Parliament, women currently hold 37.3 percent of the seats—up from 19 percent in 1989. In addition, in 2017, the national governments of Bulgaria, France, Slovenia, and Sweden were fully gender-balanced. In Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Romania, and the United Kingdom, women hold more than one-third of all ministerial positions.¹⁸

Certainly, not all European democracies have been equally successful. Across Europe, women still account for only 27 percent of parliamentarians.¹⁹ In a number of countries, the introduction of quotas spurred rapid increases in representation, but progress has since leveled off. Female politicians continue to face gender-specific hurdles, harassment, and backlash. They remain underrepresented in political leadership positions: in 2016, women accounted for 32.1 percent of European Union (EU) parliamentary leaders, 18.8 percent of leaders of major political parties, and 27.9 percent of senior government ministers.²⁰ The fact that many European democracies have made progress in improving women's descriptive representation thus does not mean that the

Figure 2: Women's Representation in the United States and Selected EU Countries, 1991–2017



Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union Parline Database on National Parliaments, accessed December 2017, <http://archive.ipu.org/parline/parlinesearch.asp>.

struggle for political equality in these countries is over. Yet, despite these caveats, it is striking that only four EU countries—Croatia, Greece, Hungary, and Latvia—score worse than the United States when it comes to parliamentary representation.²¹ These trend lines suggest that a transatlantic perspective may offer valuable insights for U.S. reformers and shed light on promising areas of policy innovation.

The Root Causes

The problem in the United States is not that women win elections at lower rates than men: when women run, they tend to do just as well or better than male candidates.²² Instead, women—for a variety of factors—are simply less likely to run for office. The majoritarian electoral system, decentralized party structures, and a strong incumbency advantage exacerbate this imbalance.

In contrast to popular perceptions, voters' gender bias does not explain women's underrepresentation in politics. For example, in 2016, women made

up 28 percent of Democratic candidates for the House of Representatives—and 32 percent of Democratic winners.²³ Yet American women are not running for office at the rate needed to come closer to parity. In 2014, only 28 percent of candidates for federal, state, and local office in the United States were women.²⁴ Women are less likely to consider running for office than similarly placed men—a gap that seems to have endured since the early 2000s.²⁵

Existing research typically attributes this gender gap in political ambition to two main causes: gendered political opportunity structures and/or differences in gender socialization.²⁶ Survey data by the Bureau of Labor Statistics show that American women continue to bear a far larger household and caregiving burden than men, leaving them with fewer resources and time to run for election.²⁷ They often view themselves as insufficiently qualified and are less likely than men to think they could win their first campaign. Women are also

more likely to perceive the electoral environment to be highly competitive and biased against them. They are put off by the treatment of prominent female politicians and certain aspects of modern campaigns, such as the loss of privacy, fundraising burden, and lack of civility in political discourse.²⁸

When women run, they tend to do just as well or better than male candidates.

While gender bias does not seem to drive voters' choices at the ballot box, this does not mean discrimination and sexism in politics play no role. First, women are less likely than men to receive the suggestion to run for office—whether it is by party officials, political activists, colleagues, spouses, or family members. This gap in recruitment exists at the local, state, and federal levels.²⁹ Second, those women who do decide to run for office also face the implicit or explicit biases of party officials, activists, and other gatekeepers.³⁰ For example, male party elites may prefer candidates who are more like themselves or view women as less competitive or committed candidates.³¹ Several studies have found that U.S. states with stronger party organizations and more entrenched gatekeeper networks, such as Pennsylvania, have generally had lower levels of female representation.³²

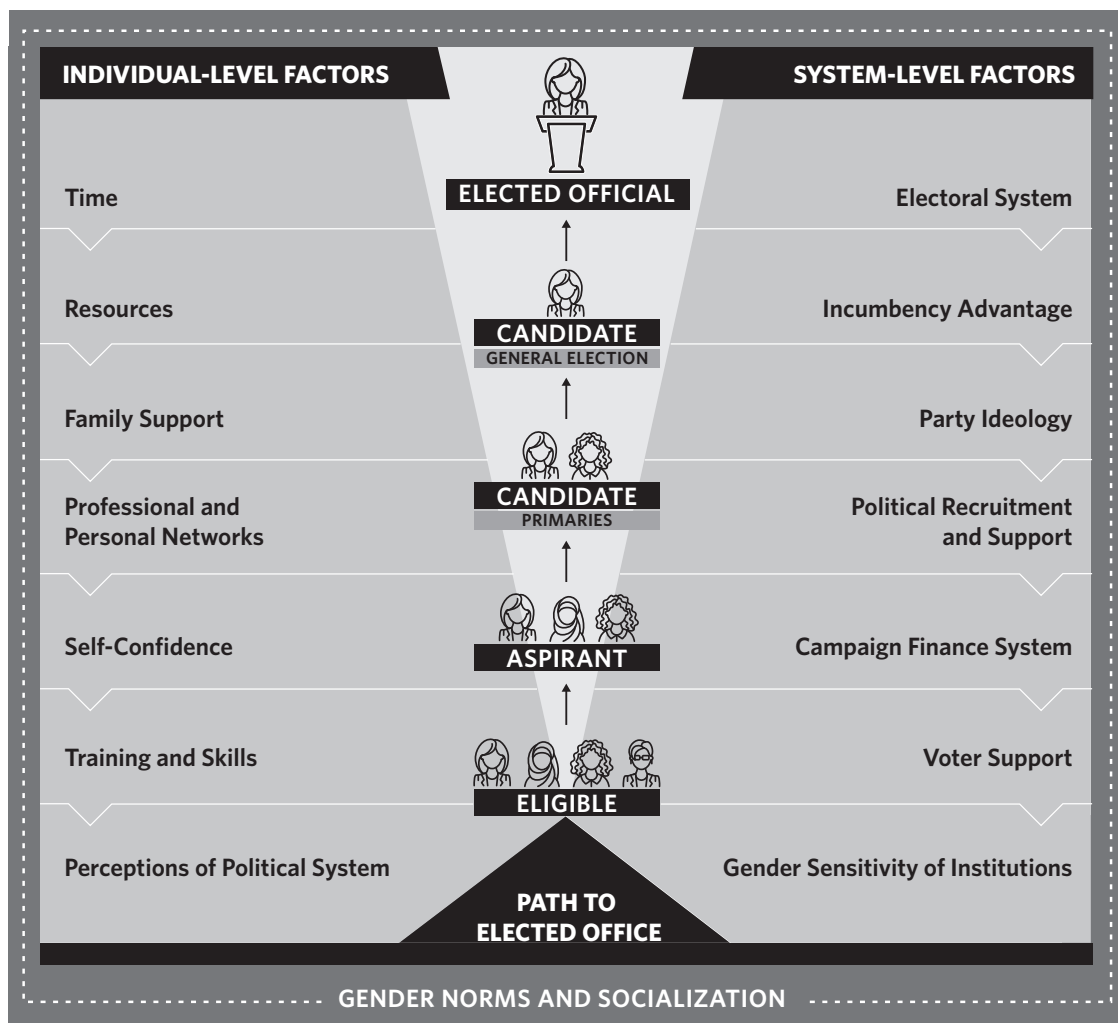
None of these dynamics are unique to the United States. Yet several institutional features of the U.S. political system create additional hurdles. First, women candidates generally do better in multimember districts with proportional representation (PR) rules than in winner-takes-all systems—a factor discussed in greater detail below. The U.S. system is candidate-centered: parties play a very limited role in nominating candidates. Changes in women's political representation in the United States thus depend heavily on women candidates stepping forward.³³

Second, incumbents in the United States wield an unusually high electoral advantage: about 89 percent of House members run for reelection, and 97 percent of incumbents who run are reelected.³⁴ As a result, there are generally few open seats in each election cycle. Given that the overwhelming majority of representatives are men, women therefore have to wait for men to retire. This

pattern is particularly disadvantageous for Republican women, as there are few female Republican incumbents.³⁵ However, the introduction of term limits in some U.S. states has led to *decreases* rather than increases in women's political representation, suggesting that incumbency is far from the only barrier to elected office.³⁶

In sum, women run for office at lower rates than men—yet this gap has not emerged in a political vacuum. Specific aspects of the current electoral process and candidate selection mechanisms appear to discourage women's participation. A number of institutional features and perceptions of gender bias compound these patterns. Ensuring more equitable access to political power thus requires a multifaceted effort to address both individual- and system-level factors (see Figure 3). A comparative perspective that draws on European experiences helps to elucidate the broader institutional barriers and incentives at work—and to identify possible avenues for reform.

Figure 3: Factors Shaping Women's Access to Political Office



Insights From Europe

Four central factors have enabled European democracies to progress at a faster rate than the United States:

1. The majority of European countries use PR rules, which, as noted above, tend to facilitate higher levels of female representation than the U.S. majoritarian electoral system.
2. Many European political parties have implemented gender targets or quotas, driven by women's mobilization and strategic calculations. In the United States, the candidate-centric electoral system, strong ideological resistance to group-based representation, and limited pro-quota advocacy have kept such measures off the agenda.
3. European elections are primarily publicly financed, and several European countries have instituted additional financial incentives for parties to recruit more women. In contrast, the U.S. system depends heavily on private donations. While women raise similar amounts as men, they tend to express a greater dislike of fundraising and face gender-specific fundraising hurdles.
4. Several European countries have taken initial steps to make political institutions more gender-sensitive and set internal gender equality goals. In the United States, such efforts remain nascent, particularly with respect to parity in leadership posts, work-life balance, and accountability for sexual harassment.

Electoral System Reform

Perhaps the most significant current barrier to women's political representation in the United States—and one of the key differences between the United States and most European democracies—is the single-member district plurality voting system. Existing research unequivocally shows that this type of electoral system tends to disadvantage female candidates, particularly in contrast to PR systems. Around the world, roughly twice as many women get elected to parliament under PR systems than they do under winner-takes-all systems. Within PR systems, large district magnitudes appear to particularly benefit women candidates.³⁷

Perhaps the most significant current barrier to women's political representation in the United States is the single-member district plurality voting system.

Several factors explain this pattern. In PR systems, parties run multiple candidates per electoral district and typically play a central role in candidate selection. It is therefore in their interest—and power—to construct candidate lists that are at least somewhat representative of the electorate in order for their candidates to have wide appeal.³⁸ PR systems also encourage a contagion effect: if one party nominates a large number of women candidates

on their list, other parties feel pressured to do the same.³⁹ In contrast, party officials in plurality systems have few electoral incentives to prioritize parity—their primary interest lies in identifying and running the candidate with the greatest likelihood of winning in each district. Moreover, incumbents tend to enjoy a greater electoral advantage under majoritarian systems, which makes it more difficult for female candidates to challenge and replace male representatives. Lastly, PR systems are also much more conducive to gender quotas than majoritarian systems, as parties control the candidate selection process to a much greater degree.⁴⁰

With the exception of the United Kingdom and France, all European democracies use either PR or mixed electoral systems that combine proportional and majoritarian elements. While PR systems alone have not guaranteed gender parity, in-country comparisons in places that use different types of electoral systems show that they do indeed result in higher levels of representation. For example, in Germany, there has been a persistent gap between the number of women elected to the Bundestag via party lists in multimember districts and those elected through first-past-the-post voting in single-member districts.⁴¹ Analyses of the French Senate elections, which also rely on a dual system, similarly indicate that women’s share of Senate seats is approximately 9 to 11 percentage points higher in proportionally allocated district elections, with all else being equal.⁴² A parity law passed in 2000 that requires all parties to run equal numbers of male and female candidates in PR elections further reinforced this pattern—though the effect of the law was later stymied by electoral reforms that expanded the use of plurality districts.⁴³

Options for the United States

The United States is unlikely to adopt a party-centric European model of proportional representation. However, recent efforts to expand ranked-choice voting (RCV) at the municipal and state levels represent one avenue by which greater proportionality could be introduced into the U.S. electoral system. Existing evidence suggests that RCV could facilitate women’s representation while also preserving or even improving the representation of ethnic and racial minorities.

In a RCV system, voters rank all candidates in order of preference. Votes are counted in several rounds: if no candidate has a majority of votes based on first choices, the candidate with the fewest first choices is scratched from the ballot, and those who voted for the defeated candidate will have their second choice counted. The precise mechanism by which votes are aggregated depends on whether RCV is used to fill a single post or to elect multiple candidates at once. In single-member districts, the system encourages candidates to appeal to a broad constituency and ensures that winners truly have majority support. If used in multimember districts, the system enables a form of proportional

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representation: any candidate who meets a certain threshold of support will be elected.⁴⁴

The benefits to women's and minorities' political representation are likely to be greatest if RCV is implemented in large multimember districts. This system incentivizes parties and candidates to appeal to a broad base of voters and ensures that ethnic or racial group preferences are not diluted. Voters are still able to balance their own tickets, so women's representation is not guaranteed: the outcome ultimately depends on voter preferences. However, a study of local elections in the San Francisco Bay Area found that the use of RCV has indeed had a positive impact on the descriptive representation of women and people of color—perhaps because the system better aggregates voters' preferences and candidates do not have to fear acting as spoilers to other candidates from their community.⁴⁵ Research also shows that RCV encourages more civil campaigning and cuts campaign spending by avoiding costly runoff elections, all of which may also encourage more women and minority candidates to run.⁴⁶ Voters in cities that already use RCV appear to approve of the system and vote at similar rates than in other places, which belies the critique that the system is too complex and depresses turnout.⁴⁷

The 2016 presidential election has generated new momentum for electoral reform in the United States. Change is already happening at the local level. At present, RCV is used in eleven U.S. cities, including in Cambridge, Oakland, and Minneapolis—with other cities considering or initiating similar reforms.⁴⁸ States, on the other hand, face greater political barriers and election administration costs.⁴⁹ However, in 2016, voters in Maine became the first to choose RCV for the state's gubernatorial, congressional, and state legislative elections. Supporters of the initiative are currently mobilizing for a new referendum to overcome legislative attempts to delay implementation.⁵⁰ If successful, Maine's reform effort may inspire civil society groups in other states to continue pushing for electoral system change—for example, by spearheading further ballot initiatives or mobilizing for candidates that support electoral reform. While the mechanisms by which RCV impacts women and minority political representation deserve further study, the voting system represents a promising area for coalition building and policy experimentation.

Party-Level Targets and Recruitment

While electoral system reform can reshape the nature of political competition and parties' incentives to recruit female and minority candidates, it is unlikely to be sufficient to address decades of political exclusion. In Europe, the single most effective tool to increase the number of women in politics has instead been the introduction of electoral targets and quotas. Europe is not unique in this respect—half of the world's countries have implemented some type of electoral quota for their parliament.⁵¹ U.S. advocates tend to reject the idea of quotas up front, noting the difficulties of implementing this tool in single-member

district systems and the strong ideological resistance to broad-based affirmative action. The decentralized party system and weak party involvement in candidate selection represent additional hurdles. As a result, most U.S. women's organizations have focused their efforts on recruiting and training female candidates rather than advocating for quota measures.⁵²

In examining European experiences with quota implementation, several patterns stand out. First, the most common type of quota used in European democracies are quotas set by political parties themselves—in contrast to the mandatory legislative quotas or reserved parliamentary seats more commonly used in the developing world. Second, these party-level quotas typically began as voluntary targets that were gradually strengthened to ensure greater compliance. Third, quotas have often been met with fierce political and legal resistance, particularly from the right. Yet in a number of countries, sustained mobilization by women's groups and high-level political support successfully reshaped the political discourse over time. Lastly, the effectiveness of quotas has varied significantly from country to country and party to party, depending on fit with existing institutional frameworks, sanction policies for noncompliance, and leadership commitment.⁵³

Which factors have facilitated the adaptation of quotas in Europe, particularly in the face of skepticism and pushback? No single explanation accounts for all cases. Campaigns for quotas have often been spearheaded by women's groups within political parties, typically after other means of improving representation—such as trainings and mentorship programs—failed to produce lasting change. In both Austria and Sweden, for instance, women threatened to create separate women's parties unless party leaders took action.⁵⁴ In some cases, women joined forces across partisan boundaries: in the early 1990s, for example, prominent French feminists, female politicians, and women's organizations came together to mobilize for “parity” in French politics. One of their key achievements was to question the notion that gender equality measures contradicted Republican ideals—by arguing that the latter had historically excluded women and that gender was distinct from other forms of group identification.⁵⁵ More recently, in Ireland, a group of civil society organizations, the National Women's Council, and the women's section of the Labour Party launched the 5050 Group, a high-profile coalition that used the broader momentum for political reform generated by Ireland's economic crisis to successfully push for quota legislation.⁵⁶

Party elites have supported quotas when they perceived a strategic benefit in doing so.⁵⁷ For example, in Austria, Germany, and Sweden, social democratic parties embraced quotas because they feared losing women's support. This calculation became particularly important after new parties born from left-wing political movements emerged on the political scene in the 1970s and 1980s

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and threatened to pull away women members and voters with a more radical commitment to gender equality. Electoral competition has also shaped policies on the European right, even though most conservative parties remain ideologically opposed to mandatory quotas. For example, the German Christian Democrats (CDU) faced pressure to increase women's participation after both the Greens Party and the Social Democratic Party had adopted quotas in the late 1980s and the lack of diversity in the CDU started hurting its image.⁵⁸ While an internal quota campaign led by the party's women's organization ultimately failed to garner sufficient support, the party voted to adopt a non-binding quorum of 30 percent for its candidate lists.⁵⁹

In most cases, quota reforms have only been the beginning of a long and contested process to improve buy-in, particularly in places where weak sanctions encouraged inconsistent compliance.⁶⁰ European advocates have devised a wide range of tactics to fight back against backlash—from publicizing empirical research on the effect of quotas to cultivating institutional allies (such as specific ministries or offices for gender equality) and pushing for better monitoring and sanctions.⁶¹ When implemented effectively and with political backing, quotas have generally proven successful at increasing women's representation. Existing research also does not corroborate the fear that quotas undercut meritocratic advancement. In both Sweden and the United Kingdom, women selected through quotas have been equally (and sometimes more) qualified than their nonquota counterparts.⁶² In fact, quotas have even been shown to increase the competence of male politicians, possibly due to heightened competition from female colleagues.⁶³

The Case of Sweden

Sweden ranks among the countries with the highest representation of women in politics. All Swedish political parties represented in parliament—with the exception of the far-right Swedish Democrats—have adopted some form of voluntary commitment to equal gender representation. These range from nonmandatory recommendations to formal internal requirements to alternate male and female candidates on party lists (known as the zipper system). Yet the move toward greater gender parity was a gradual one, and women's organizing tactics shifted over time.

The initial impetus for quotas came from internal pressure by female party members. In the first half of the twentieth century, calls for quotas had been rejected repeatedly for being in conflict with fundamental principles of equal opportunity and merit-based selection.⁶⁴ Yet as the women's movement expanded in the 1970s, women's federations (which functioned as women's sections within Swedish political parties) grew increasingly dissatisfied with the pace of change—women still

only made up just over 10 percent of parliamentarians, despite participating actively in party ranks. Rather than turning their back on party politics, they intensified their pressure on party leaders, arguing that women's underrepresentation violated democratic principles and demanding internal targets.⁶⁵ Gender equality activists commissioned studies on the issue, pushed to get more female candidates on top of party lists, and organized regular public hearings at which party officials were asked to explain their efforts to address gender imbalances.⁶⁶

In addition to facing heightened internal pressure, party leaders had strategic incentives to prioritize gender equality. Throughout the 1960s, Swedish women turned out to vote at lower rates than men, and many voted for the Conservative Party. This spurred the Social Democratic Party and the Liberal Party to begin competing for women's votes and made them more receptive to pressure by women's groups.⁶⁷ Both initially adopted "soft quotas," such as recommended targets for candidate selection. Other parties followed suit. As in other European countries, the Left Party and the newly founded Green Party were the first to make the jump to mandatory quotas for candidate lists. However, the most significant change came in the early 1990s, when Sweden's largest party, the Social Democratic Party, adopted a mandatory zipper system.⁶⁸

Several factors explain this shift. The share of female parliamentarians fell unexpectedly from 38 percent to 33 percent in 1991, which provided an opportunity for women within the Social Democratic Party to demand further action.⁶⁹ Key women leaders from across the political spectrum organized into an informal feminist network called The Support Stockings and threatened to set up a women's party if the established parties failed to enact change. Six months before election day, polls showed that around 23 percent of Swedish voters were prepared to vote for a women's party.⁷⁰ This threat was evident at the Social Democratic Party's 1993 party congress: male party members realized they would not be able to survive electorally without women's sustained support.⁷¹ The party thus moved to adopt the zipper system out of fear of losing women members and voters. Other parties also committed to nominating as many women as men on their party lists.⁷²

Swedish parties on the conservative end of the spectrum have resisted formal quotas to date. In the early 1990s, women within the Conservative Party introduced various motions on women's underrepresentation at party congresses, arguing that women voters would no longer accept male-dominated party lists.⁷³ Most party members rejected the proposals, arguing that they would undermine notions of competence and infringe upon local constituencies' rights. Instead, the Conservative Party and the Center Party chose to set general goals, whereas the Liberal Party and the Christian Democratic Party both have adopted nonmandatory targets for party boards, committees, and electoral lists. While the proportion of women in those parties has fluctuated more as a result, party competition and a strong cross-partisan commitment to gender equality have ensured relatively high levels of compliance. All Swedish parties have thus gradually expanded their commitments over the past several decades, with quota policies spreading from progressive left-wing parties to the center—even as ideological divides persist.

The Case of the United Kingdom

The case of the United Kingdom illustrates that party quotas can also work in majoritarian electoral systems: since the early 1990s, the Labour Party—with a brief interruption—has used a system of all-women shortlists (AWS), which allows only women to stand in a selected number of constituencies. The policy, which was first used by the party in the 1997 election, doubled the number of women in the House of Commons from 9 percent to 18 percent overnight.⁷⁴

The Labour Party's adoption of AWS in the early 1990s was the result of women's mobilization within the party, party elites' electoral calculations, and transnational learning.⁷⁵ While the party had embraced quotas for internal positions in the late 1980s, proposals for candidate quotas were repeatedly voted down at annual conferences. Yet, after Labour lost its fourth consecutive election in 1992, party leaders initiated an internal reckoning process. Due to internal quotas, there were already enough women in decisionmaking positions to bring the issue of women's representation into internal discussions. They were influenced in part by campaigns for quotas in other European social democratic parties, which had been shared through the Socialist International Women network.⁷⁶

Leadership support and electoral calculations played in the advocates' favor. The Labour Party's new leader, John Smith, was more sympathetic to gender equality than his predecessors and recognized the strategic logic of their demands. Polling indicated that fewer women than men had voted for Labour in the 1992 election and that the party could have won the election if it had won over more women voters. The proposal for AWS also enjoyed the support of key union leaders, who were prepared to link the issue to other reforms. In the end, the motion for AWS was adopted as part of a broader reform package at the 1993 party conference.⁷⁷

However, AWS proved highly controversial: it was challenged by two disgruntled male party members and subsequently overturned in court as violating the Sex Discrimination Act. Without AWS, the Labour Party quickly reverted back to old practices—ahead of the 2001 election, only 10.3 percent of women were selected for Labour-held seats.⁷⁸ As a result, women within the party, as well as civil society groups, continued their activism, publishing research on discrimination in candidate selection processes and briefings on the success of quota measures in other countries.⁷⁹ They successfully lobbied for a legislative amendment that allowed AWS to be reinstated in 2002. While critics still argue that the system undermines meritocratic selection processes, the policy has resulted in tangible changes: women now represent 45 percent of Labour members of parliament (MPs).⁸⁰ Under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership, the party has committed to using AWS to select candidates for nearly half of the party's top seventy-six target seats in the next election.⁸¹

Both the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats have so far rejected the use of AWS, arguing that the system undermines the autonomy of local party associations and generates resentment against women.⁸² Repeated national debates about women's underrepresentation and consecutive

electoral losses in the late 1990s and early 2000s nevertheless led the Conservative leadership to adopt soft quotas and other internal measures.⁸³ For example, in 2005, then MP Theresa May set up the Women2Win campaign, which, since its founding, has identified and supported conservative women candidates.⁸⁴ In addition, then party leader David Cameron established a priority list of 50 percent women and a significant share of black, minority ethnic, and disabled aspirants from which certain winnable or safe districts were to select their candidates.⁸⁵ The initiative was met with local resistance, and many constituencies refused to comply.⁸⁶ High-level attention still had an impact, however: in 2010, the party nominated record numbers of female and minority candidates. As a result, the percentage of female Conservative MPs increased from 8.6 to 16.1 percent.⁸⁷ Over the past two election cycles, party leaders have started encouraging local associations to give “due regard to a gender balance” when pulling together candidate shortlists.⁸⁸ While the Conservative Party still lags behind the Labour Party, the share of Conservative women in the House of Commons now stands at 21.0 percent.⁸⁹

Regarding the Liberal Democrats, the grassroots base has been similarly opposed to quotas on ideological grounds. Party members rejected AWS after a heated internal debate in 2001.⁹⁰ Efforts to increase the number of women MPs have thus primarily consisted of general targets and training and mentoring for women aspirants.⁹¹ For example, in 2011, the party established the Liberal Democrat Leadership Programme, aimed at identifying and mentoring candidates from underrepresented groups.⁹² However, the program has had little impact, and party leaders and members have grown increasingly worried about the lack of diversity hurting the Liberal Democrats’ electoral chances.⁹³ At the party’s 2016 spring conference, members voted to use AWS to replace retiring MPs and to reserve two spots on the shortlists of winnable seats for candidates from underrepresented groups—a proposal copied from the Canadian Liberal Party.⁹⁴

While U.S. political parties are much less involved in candidate selection than European parties, they do play an important role in identifying and reaching out to potential candidates and incentivizing them with campaign support services.⁹⁵ Party support is particularly important for recruiting women candidates: women are less likely than men to have planned a career in politics and often need explicit encouragement to consider running for office.⁹⁶ In fact, women are four times more likely to enter electoral politics upon encouragement by a political leader.⁹⁷

However, U.S. political parties have generally not made the recruitment of women candidates a systematic priority. Neither party has set official targets or goals, and, in some cases, they have instead hindered women’s advancement. For example, one survey found that 51 percent of female candidates and elected officials had never been encouraged by party leaders to run for office,

and some even reported being *discouraged* from mounting primary challenges to incumbents.⁹⁸ Another study of party-level recruitment found that in states where parties play stronger roles in candidate selection, fewer rather than more women hold state legislative office.⁹⁹

Most party-led initiatives to recruit female candidates have been poorly resourced and fragmented. The problem is particularly acute on the Republican side. While party leaders have publicly acknowledged the importance of attracting female candidates, many within the party remain uncomfortable with the idea of group-based rights and representation.¹⁰⁰ The most sustained recruitment effort emerged from the party's post-2012 election autopsy, which concluded that the party needed to attract more female voters. The Republican State Legislative Committee launched a program called Right Women, Right Now, which seeks to identify, recruit, and train women candidates for various state offices.¹⁰¹ The National Republican Congressional Committee, on the other hand, launched Project GROW, which is its first formal effort to recruit and support women candidates for competitive house seats. Yet the latter initiative had several limitations: it only focused on a short time window in the election cycle and played no role at the crucial primary stage or in Senate races. Overall, the program had limited visibility and yielded few new candidates that had not already considered running.¹⁰²

The Democratic Party has generally had a better track record—though not necessarily due to a more sustained party recruitment effort. Democrats have traditionally embraced women's issues as part of their broader ideological platform, which has facilitated links to women's organizations.¹⁰³ As a result, they have benefited from a vibrant network of activists outside groups that recruit and train Democratic women to run for office. EMILY's List in particular has played a prominent role in funding female candidates at the early stages of primary campaigns, when they tend to be in most need of support. While similar PACs have emerged on the Republican side, none has a comparable profile, resource base, and reach.

The Democratic Party itself only began institutionalizing efforts to recruit and support women candidates in 1999. The Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) and the Senatorial Campaign Committee (DSCC) launched two parallel efforts, Women Lead and the Women's Senate Network, which partner female members of Congress with women who are considering running. Yet neither program is particularly well-resourced or well-known, and they are generally not perceived as major players in the candidate recruitment process. Both the DCCC and DSCC focus their efforts on competitive seats, and neither tends to use their primary endorsement power to support female candidates.¹⁰⁴ Overall, both parties could do more to systematically recruit and support female candidates and to incentivize local party affiliates to prioritize the issue.

Options for the United States

Set numerical targets: In most European countries, political parties' first step has been to agree to a voluntary target of female representation on candidate lists. While U.S. parties do not control the candidate selection process, they could nevertheless set a numerical target to ensure the systematic recruitment of women for primary campaigns—not only in competitive districts and at the beginning of an election cycle but on a more continuous basis. The impetus would likely have to come from within the party—for example, from female politicians and party officials. Local, state, and national party branches could begin by establishing committees charged with assessing patterns of representation at each level, setting corresponding recruitment goals, and issuing annual progress reviews. A common model in Europe has been to set incremental targets (for example, recruiting 30 percent women candidates within five years and 40 percent within ten years). Such targets would send a clear message to local party leaders, donors, voters, and aspirants that party elites are serious about supporting women candidates—and would also help advocates hold party leaders accountable for lack of progress.

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Systematically recruit and support talent: To meet these targets, parties would need to institutionalize and resource women's recruitment initiatives at the state and federal levels. This would involve investing in targeting and in messaging—in other words, *who* gets recruited and *how*. Two currently neglected target groups are women already serving in public office at the local level (for example, women on school boards or in community service organizations, as well as high-school- and college-age women).¹⁰⁵ To reach young women, parties could collaborate with existing organizations that work to encourage this group's interest in politics or set up parallel initiatives. In addition, recruiters and party officials could adjust their methods and messaging to address the specific concerns and misperceptions that keep women from running and make them less responsive to recruitment.¹⁰⁶ Research shows that women consistently overestimate the bias they will face in politics—but can be motivated to run if approached multiple times and encouraged to advance a bigger cause.¹⁰⁷ Publicizing female candidates' fundraising and electoral successes and ensuring that recruitment practices dispel rather than reinforce false perceptions may encourage more women to take the leap.

Prioritize internal equality: The continued underrepresentation of women as party leaders undermines efforts to elect more women to office, as male and

female party leaders have different social networks and different beliefs about ideal candidate characteristics.¹⁰⁸ Women party leaders are also more likely to make the recruitment of women and minority candidates a priority. Both the Republican and Democratic parties already have internal gender parity rules: for example, both parties have instituted gender-equal leadership committees and national committees.¹⁰⁹ A number of European parties have gone further and established quotas guaranteeing 40 or 50 percent representation for women and men across all internal leadership structures and committees—a measure that could be adopted in the United States to ensure that women are represented in key decisionmaking roles.

Campaign Finance Rules and Donor Action

In the United States, the current campaign finance system—which relies heavily on individual fundraising from private donors—represents another hurdle for female aspirants. While empirical research suggests that women from the two major parties raise the same amount as men in comparable situations, female politicians consistently report that fundraising is more difficult for them than for their male counterparts.¹¹⁰ A number of recent studies corroborate these perceptions, which will be discussed in greater detail below.

In contrast, most European elections are funded primarily with public money and party member contributions. As a result, campaign finance is generally a much less salient political issue, including for female candidates. Candidates in PR systems compete as part of a team, with most campaign expenses covered by the party. In addition, several European countries impose strict limits on campaign donations, spending, and political advertising, which bring down the overall cost of elections. As a result, individual aspirants do not necessarily need access to private wealth or big donors to be considered viable. However, public election financing alone is not always sufficient to level the playing field: female aspirants still need resources to build enough name recognition to be nominated or make it onto party lists.¹¹¹ For example, in a survey of British parliamentarians, 65 percent of respondents highlighted “financial pressures during the selection or campaigning process” as a concern when deciding to run for office.¹¹² These linkages between gender, political financing, and access to elected office in European democracies remain under-researched and poorly understood.

A number of European governments have used state funding for political parties to pressure parties to recruit and nominate more female candidates. Three primary models have emerged: reducing public funding for parties that fail to nominate a certain percentage of female candidates; offering supplemental funding to parties that meet such criteria; or conditioning public funding on the election of a predetermined share of female candidates. Such measures have often been adopted in conjunction with or after the implementation of legislative quotas to incentivize greater compliance.

In **France**, for example, political parties are penalized financially if they do not meet a legally mandated threshold of female representation. They risk losing a portion of their public funding corresponding to 75 percent of the gap between male and female candidates.¹¹³ Yet the fines at the moment are not consequential enough to ensure consistent compliance by larger political parties.¹¹⁴

In **Ireland**, public subsidies to political parties are reduced by 50 percent unless at least 30 percent of the candidates of each political party are female (a threshold that will be raised to 40 percent in subsequent general elections).¹¹⁵

In **Portugal**, parties that do not have at least 33 percent of each gender represented among their candidates can lose 25 to 80 percent of their public funding.¹¹⁶

In **Croatia**, political parties receive an additional 10 percent in public funding for each candidate of the underrepresented gender.¹¹⁷

Several European governments have also earmarked funding for gender equality initiatives or women's branches within political parties. For example, Finnish law requires that 12 percent of public funds be used to support women's wings within political parties; the Swedish government provides similar support.¹¹⁸ A few parties have also adopted special mechanisms to provide women candidates with financial and other forms of assistance. In Ireland, the Labour Party has an internal initiative focused on supporting donor outreach and fundraising for women members, particularly first-time candidates.¹¹⁹ The women's federation of the Swedish Social Democrats has provided childcare assistance and compensation for salary reduction to help women participate in party politics and local governance.¹²⁰

In the United States, several studies have found that women and men from the two major parties generally raise similar amounts of money—suggesting that fundraising is not a significant driver of women's underrepresentation.¹²¹ Women's PACs, such as EMILY's List and the Women's Campaign Fund, have played a crucial role in leveling the playing field by providing financial support to women candidates at the early stages of their campaigns. Party expenditures on behalf of congressional candidates also do not suggest any gender disparities.¹²² At the same time, women tend to have more negative views of political fundraising, and female politicians perceive the fundraising landscape to be biased against them. For example, in one study of state legislators from all fifty states, 56 percent of women state representatives believed it was more difficult for women candidates to raise money, primarily because women lack the necessary networks and feel less comfortable raising money for themselves (rather than for a cause).¹²³

Female candidates do indeed face some financial disadvantages. For example, women tend to raise more money from small individual donations and fewer large contributions compared to male candidates—which may result in a larger fundraising burden to get the same amount of funding.¹²⁴ This

pattern may be explained by the fact that male donors are more likely to give to male candidates, and women are particularly underrepresented among mega-donors.¹²⁵ Some evidence also suggests that women need to raise more money to obtain the same vote share as men.¹²⁶ Republican women and women of color face particular challenges. Because most PACs that specifically raise money for women target Democrats, Republican women face much bigger hurdles in establishing their viability at the primary stage.¹²⁷ In many cases, they do not receive PAC money until they become the party nominee, and that puts them at an early disadvantage.¹²⁸ They are also targeted disproportionately by negative independent expenditures by super PACs.¹²⁹ Women of color are also disadvantaged, as they, on average, receive fewer individual donations than men of color or white candidates of both genders.¹³⁰

Options for the United States

Financial incentives for candidate recruitment: Following the European model, the federal government could offer targeted grants to subsidize women's recruitment initiatives in political parties—similar to current federal grants

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to support presidential nominating conventions. National party committees could similarly incentivize local party leaders—for example, by channeling additional money to those local party committees that meet certain recruitment targets or subsidizing local women's caucuses. Another option would be to create party programs that channel funding to women candidates that meet certain fundraising thresholds during the primary stage, similar to the Republican Party's Young Guns Program.¹³¹

Targets for PACs: A 2016 study found that between 2010 and 2016, membership and leadership PACs systematically underfunded women running in open-seat races—even though those are the races that women and other “outsider” candidates are most likely to win. This pattern exists for both Republican and Democratic candidates, even though Republican women are particularly disadvantaged.¹³² To remedy this problem, high-impact donors and PACs should be challenged by voters, parties, and civil society organizations to increase their funding to women in open-seat races (for example, by setting voluntary targets).¹³³ Political parties could help raise the profile of less well-known women's PACs by publicizing their activities to voters and donors.

Shift to public financing at the local or state level: Jennifer Lawless and Richard Fox have found that women would find running for office more appealing if campaigns were publicly funded.¹³⁴ While public financing schemes are

typically adopted to limit the power of money in politics, existing research shows that they also benefit women and minority candidates.¹³⁵ All five U.S. states with public financing systems—Arizona, Connecticut, Hawaii, Maine, and Minnesota—have higher than average levels of female representation in their state legislatures. New York City also saw an increase in the number of women and people of color running for office after it established a small donor matching system.¹³⁶ In the absence of federal campaign finance reform, more cities and states could follow these examples and offer voluntary public financing systems for state and municipal elections, drawing on existing best practices.

Parliamentary Infrastructure and Work Culture

Feminist scholars have long noted that there is more to achieving equality than body counting: simply “adding women and stirring” does not necessarily undo entrenched power hierarchies. In both Europe and the United States, parliaments and other political institutions emerged and developed as patriarchal and exclusionary bodies accessible to only a narrow category of citizens. Changes in representation over the past several decades have not necessarily undone these institutional legacies. Women and other underrepresented groups thus have to grapple with institutional procedures, norms, and practices that, in most cases, do not reflect their particular needs and interests—including a “deeply embedded culture of masculinity” that has proven remarkably resilient to change.¹³⁷

In practice, this means that parliamentary sessions are often held late into the night, provisions for childcare and parental leave are insufficient, leadership positions and powerful committees are still dominated by men, gender equality issues are sidelined as women’s issues, and sexual harassment is pervasive. Indeed, a 2008 Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) survey revealed that female legislators around the world perceive the traditional culture, rules, and workings of their respective parliaments to be hostile and unwelcoming.¹³⁸

Responding to this challenge, the IPU, as well as scholars of women in politics, have developed a body of analytical tools and guidelines focused on critically assessing and improving the gender sensitivity of parliaments. The starting point of these efforts is the recognition that gender equality in politics goes beyond getting more women elected. A focus on gender sensitivity instead directs our attention to links between descriptive and substantive representation—the mechanisms that ensure women’s interests and concerns are effectively integrated into political processes.¹³⁹ A parliament that is gender-sensitive has a road map outlining specific objectives and processes for achieving internal gender equality and integrating gender perspectives into its work,

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including—but not limited to—policies that prevent harassment and ensure respect for women's rights and needs.¹⁴⁰

Despite advances in representation, all European parliaments continue to struggle with entrenched gender inequities. Most recently, a series of legislatures have been rocked by sexual harassment scandals, including in France and the United Kingdom. Last year, the deputy speaker of the French National Assembly resigned after four female politicians accused him of sexual harassment.¹⁴¹ Just like in the United States, parliamentary leadership posts and powerful economic, security, and finance committees remain predominantly male. Yet several European parliaments have also taken initial measures to assess internal barriers to gender equality and improve their responsiveness to gender-specific challenges. Such efforts fall into the following categories:

Internal gender equality plans: In Sweden, a 2004 survey of parliamentarians revealed that women struggled to attain senior leadership positions, felt belittled or sidestepped by their male colleagues, and often did not have full access to information about parliamentary work. These findings—which were directly at odds with the popular perception that gender equality had already been achieved—resulted in the adoption of a parliamentary gender equality plan in 2007. This plan includes commitments to collect better statistics on gender equality in parliament, monitor relevant research, carry out regular surveys, and hold seminars on relevant topics.¹⁴² The Swedish Parliament administration has also instituted an equality and diversity plan focused on the parliament's staff, which sets goals to address pay differentials and gaps in opportunities for professional development between women and men.¹⁴³

Women in parliamentary leadership positions: Even when the representation of women in parliaments increases, women tend to be underrepresented in leadership positions and top committee posts, which undermines their power and authority. This gap may partly be traced back to parliaments' reliance on seniority and informal processes of negotiation to determine committee memberships.¹⁴⁴ A number of European parliaments have taken steps to address this issue, typically by committing to specific targets. The Finnish Parliament has set an internal goal of achieving gender parity (at least 40 percent of each sex) across all positions within parliament. The Dutch Parliament voluntarily signed the Talent to the Top charter, a public initiative that sets out specific objectives to increase the number of women in leadership positions in various areas of Dutch society. The administration of the chamber has to report annually on its progress and results, and the charter's monitoring commission provides regular feedback and recommendations.¹⁴⁵

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Childcare and parental leave provisions: The provision of childcare facilities and parental leave policies provides flexibility for legislators or parliamentary staffers who are trying to balance family and work obligations. Such policies often benefit women in particular: they, on average, carry greater caregiving responsibilities and are more likely to be discouraged from entering politics due to the difficulty of balancing a political career with family commitments. The parliaments of Ireland, the Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden, and the United Kingdom all offer day care services for children. Most Western European parliaments also have formal parliamentary leave arrangements (either general leave provisions or specific maternity, paternity, and parental leave provisions). For example, Danish members of parliament (MPs) can request up to twelve months of paid leave, Finnish MPs receive full remuneration during maternal or paternal leave, and Swedish MPs have the same parental leave rules as the general public. The use of substitutes is possible in both Denmark and Sweden.¹⁴⁶

Family-friendly working hours: Unpredictable hours can be another factor discouraging those with caregiving responsibilities from running for elected office. In the United Kingdom, for example, a report into the working environment in the House of Commons found the unpredictability of the parliamentary calendar made it difficult for MPs to balance work and home life along with constituency obligations.¹⁴⁷ Several European parliaments have tried to regulate parliamentary work schedules. Denmark's parliament does not allow voting after 7:00 p.m. on sitting days. In Sweden, evening votes are avoided if possible, and no votes are typically held on Fridays and Mondays to allow members to spend more time in their districts. In Spain, a fixed sitting time was established for the 2008–2012 legislative period, which mandated that plenary sessions take place on Tuesday afternoons (ending at 9:00 p.m.) and Wednesday and Thursday mornings. Before the implementation of this policy, it was common for sessions to last until 11:00 p.m.

Parliamentary support structures: Several European parliaments have established permanent committees that focus on gender equality concerns within political institutions across partisan lines. In Sweden, a female Speaker of Parliament in 1995 established the Speaker's Reference Group on Gender Equality Issues. It brings together women parliamentarians from different parties to examine the underlying conditions and assumptions in the parliament's work and raise awareness on gender equality through seminars and lectures.¹⁴⁸ The UK Parliament has instituted a gender-focused Workplace Equality Network that raises awareness of gender equality within the parliament, as well as an All Party Parliamentary Group for Women in Parliament that was set up in 2010. The latter group focuses specifically on increasing the number of women in

parliament. In July 2014, it issued a report called *Improving Parliament* with specific recommendations aimed at improving the working environment in the House of Commons to increase the recruitment and retention of more diverse politicians.¹⁴⁹

Some of these initiatives are more developed than others. Their long-term impact, in general, has not been thoroughly researched or evaluated. Some—like parental leave provisions—flow from national legislation; others are the result of advocacy by female parliamentarians and their allies. What connects many of these initiatives, besides the desire to make a career in politics more accessible to caregivers, is an initial effort to take stock of internal gender equality and create mechanisms or committees charged with monitoring progress.

In the United States, several issues have emerged as particularly pressing: the work culture in legislative bodies, the lack of women in parliamentary leadership positions, and an insufficient infrastructure for lawmakers with caregiving responsibilities. As part of the #MeToo movement, hundreds of female lawmakers, lobbyists, and staffers have come forward to describe a pervasive culture of harassment and intimidation across many U.S. state legislatures, including in Illinois, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island. Victims of harassment often lack adequate third-party channels to bring forward complaints without risk of retaliation.¹⁵⁰ In 2016, only around thirty-seven of ninety-nine state legislative chambers had formal policies on sexual harassment for legislative employees—and those policies varied significantly in substance and effectiveness.¹⁵¹ The same problem extends to the federal level: as of this writing, congressional employees can only file formal complaints against alleged abusers after months of mandated counseling, mediation, and a mandatory cooling-off period. Each office and committee currently operates by its set of specific rules, without an overarching human resources department.

An additional challenge is the lack of women in senior leadership positions. In 2017, only one of sixteen standing Senate committees is chaired by a woman, compared to seven of sixty-seven subcommittees. In the House of Representatives, the situation is similar: women chair only three of twenty standing committees. Nationwide, only eleven women serve as presidents of senates and six women serve as speakers of state houses.¹⁵² A 2001 survey of state legislators revealed that 40 percent of female legislators thought that women were less likely to be consulted on important decisions and supported for leadership positions.¹⁵³ A 2004 survey by the National Conference of State Legislatures' Women's Legislative Network similarly found that women lawmakers saw the lack of women in parliamentary leadership positions as having a detrimental impact on their careers, inhibiting inclusion in leadership decisions, progress up the leadership ladder, and their effectiveness in passing legislation.¹⁵⁴

Lastly, many U.S. state legislatures, as well as Congress itself, lack adequate support mechanisms for lawmakers with significant caregiving responsibilities, which may further discourage women from running for office. Many local- and state-level elected offices pay very poorly, particularly in states in which holding a legislative office is considered a part-time job.¹⁵⁵ Such arrangements disadvantage low-income citizens, as well as women who have greater caregiving responsibilities, no extra support at home, or limited career flexibility.¹⁵⁶ In addition, U.S. legislators and legislative staff currently do not have guaranteed paid parental leave or provisions for proxy voting.¹⁵⁷ Alaska is the only state that provides childcare for its lawmakers and staffers on site, primarily because many of the state's electoral districts are far away from the state capital.¹⁵⁸

Options for the United States

Improve data collection: The U.S. Congress, as well as state legislatures, have done little to collect data on internal gender equality. The current political momentum for greater accountability for sexual harassment provides an opportunity to address this gap. The case of Sweden could provide a road map for U.S. gender equality advocates in this respect: a first step could be to demand rigorous internal assessments—initiated by a parliamentary committee or leadership—on the gender sensitivity of current institutional structures. This could include a survey of representatives and staff to measure perceptions of gender equality within the institution, an evaluation of existing gender equality and antidiscrimination policies, and other issues. Ideally, such exercises should be conducted in an open and consultative manner to reflect a diversity of viewpoints and ensure political and institutional buy-in. In the absence of political support, such an assessment could also be carried out by civil society groups, in coordination with female parliamentarians and male allies.

The U.S. Congress, as well as state legislatures, have done little to collect data on internal gender equality. The current political momentum for greater accountability for sexual harassment provides an opportunity to address this gap.

Set internal gender equality benchmarks: Drawing on the findings, Congress and state legislatures could implement road maps for reform with context-specific objectives, actions, and benchmarks. Any successful effort at institutional change will likely depend on strong monitoring mechanisms that allow for a continuous assessment of progress. For example, legislatures can establish standing commissions or working groups on gender equality or follow the Finnish and Swedish models and put in place gender equality plans that set out specific commitments to increase the number of women in legislative leadership positions, recruit and retain more women representatives, and improve the internal work environments of legislative bodies.

Reform leave and childcare policies: In most of Europe, parliamentarians enjoy the same provisions for parental leave as specified in national law. Yet, in contrast to Western European democracies, the United States still has no federal law requiring employers to offer paid maternity and parental leave to employees. Such a law would aid female lawmakers and legislative staff and potentially make it easier for women to make the jump into a political career. In addition, more state legislatures could follow Alaska's steps and provide onsite or subsidized childcare for parliamentarians and staffers with children. However, in the absence of broader reforms to make childcare more affordable and accessible for families, extending special benefits to lawmakers would likely appear as an unjustified perk—and would only benefit a very select group of women.

Overhaul sexual harassment policies: At the moment, U.S. legislatures largely fail to provide effective avenues to lodge sexual harassment complaints without fear of retaliation. In November 2017, a bipartisan group of lawmakers introduced legislation aimed at overhauling current procedures on Capitol Hill—for example, by eliminating the mandatory mediation and cooling-off period and requiring greater transparency about the numbers of complaints and settlements.¹⁵⁹ Similar reforms are needed in many state legislatures: instituting mandatory training on sexual harassment is likely to be insufficient without independent and user-friendly accountability channels. Congress could also initiate periodic studies of sexual harassment in the legislature to gather more systematic evidence, draw attention to the problem, and identify current policy implementation gaps. No such study has been conducted since 1995.¹⁶⁰

Opening New Pathways to Political Office

The year 2017 brought high levels of women's mobilization in the United States—beginning with hundreds of thousands of people marching for women's rights and ending with a nationwide movement to address sexual harassment and its effects on women's careers. Motivated in part by perceived setbacks with respect to gender equality, increasing numbers of women have declared their intention to run for office. More energy is going into recruiting female candidates and candidates of color, and women are donating to female candidates at higher levels than in previous years.¹⁶¹

This surge in women's political participation represents an important trend. In contrast to countries around the world, progress in increasing women's political representation in the United States has largely stalled over the past several years. While women of color have made historic gains in Congress, they remain underrepresented at all levels of government. The number of Republican women in Congress has plateaued since the late 2000s. This underrepresentation of half of the U.S. population matters: research shows that

women legislators are more likely to introduce laws on issues primarily affecting women and children and to consider the gendered effects of major legislative changes in domains like healthcare and tax policy. Given that women make up 47 percent of the U.S. labor force, issues like parental leave, workplace protections, and children's health insurance go to the core of economic prosperity, population health, and growth.¹⁶²

An uptick in women running for office—while encouraging—may prove insufficient to close the persistent gap in representation, particularly on the Republican side. Yet the present political moment also represents an opportunity for further action. More women are politically energized than in previous years. Public and media attention to persistent barriers to women's professional advancement has increased. In addition, the 2016 election has re-energized grassroots mobilization to address worsening democratic failings, including distortions in the electoral system, the gap between political parties and voters, and the outsized influence of money on politics. This confluence of factors may enable innovative coalitions for policy changes that previously seemed far-fetched.

Of course, increasing women's political representation remains a multifaceted challenge. No single reform will undo the structural barriers, gendered institutions, and psychological biases that have perpetuated the exclusion of women and other underrepresented groups from the political sphere. Existing research indicates that a gap in political ambition between women and men emerges at an early age—indicating the need for comprehensive efforts to promote girls' and young women's leadership, correct misperceptions about voter bias and women's electoral chances, and mitigate the impact of stereotypical gender roles and representations. But this gap in political ambition has not emerged in a vacuum: it appears to be reinforced by specific features of the current U.S. electoral process, weaknesses in party recruitment and support, and the gendered nature of U.S. political institutions.

Here, the comparison with Western Europe offers several avenues for policy change that could help transform the broader political opportunity structure for women in politics—as well as some preliminary lessons on the strategies and factors that facilitated reform. First, the institutional context in Western Europe has generally proven more conducive to women's political advancement. The multiparty system combined with PR rules incentivizes parties to compete for women voters and run candidates that are reflective of the electorate. Party-driven candidate selection processes pressure party leaders to recruit and run female candidates, while public financing of election campaigns reduces the fundraising burden for individual candidates.

Second, gender equality activists in Europe have, over the past three decades, successfully lobbied for targeted measures to ensure women's political

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advancement. The most common outcome—particularly among left-leaning parties—has been the implementation of voluntary quotas for internal party bodies and candidate lists. A number of European governments have supported these efforts with targeted financial incentives for political parties. Gains in women's representation combined with changing gender equality norms have also prompted changes in parliaments, including better childcare and leave arrangements, internal gender equality committees, and institutional commitments to parity in leadership positions.

European parties' adoption of quotas and soft targets—which were often met with substantial resistance—can be traced back to women's mobilization as well as strategic calculations by party leaders. After other measures

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had failed to produce tangible changes, women's organizations within political parties—often in alliance with civil society—began lobbying party members to adopt affirmative action measures. They typically first demanded internal quotas to increase parity within parties, followed by general targets for candidate lists. Women's groups commissioned studies on discriminatory candidate selection practices, held public hearings, and introduced motions on women's quotas at party conferences. They made both normative and strategic arguments, tailored to their parties' respective ideological platforms. These strategies were most successful when party officials feared losing women's support or saw an electoral benefit in appealing to women voters.

What does this mean for the United States? The decentralized nature of U.S. parties makes party-internal organizing more difficult. The two-party system and high levels of partisan polarization constrain voters' choices and render strategic arguments less effective—in contrast to European social democrats, for example, the U.S. Democratic Party does not face a significant challenger party on the left. Yet several factors could nevertheless facilitate broader reforms.

First, as noted above, U.S. civil society and women's groups in particular are currently highly mobilized. Several organizations have already expanded their efforts to recruit more women for office and announced new ambitious targets.¹⁶³ Second, both political party establishments may recognize a strategic benefit in running more women candidates. Within the Democratic Party, some factions are calling for stronger outreach to and mobilization of the party's grassroots base—which remains, to a significant degree, women and people of color.¹⁶⁴ While the Republican Party's recent electoral gains have created less urgency, the party is also divided over its future direction. Recent polls show that Democrats in Congress have a twenty-point lead over Republicans with women voters—a big shift from previous election cycles.¹⁶⁵ Republicans also lost half of their under-twenty-nine supporters in the 2016 election, reflecting fears that the party relies on an aging demographic.¹⁶⁶ If

the number of Democratic women in Congress continues to rise, pressure on Republican leaders to field more women candidates will likely increase.

Together, this constellation of factors may open up new opportunities for policy change. Despite differences in institutions and political culture, there are several areas in which the United States could borrow from European approaches, building on alternative governance models that already exist in a more decentralized fashion or at a smaller scale at the local level:

- An expansion of **RCV in multimember districts**—beginning at the municipal and state levels—could help incentivize parties to recruit a more diverse slate of candidates. It could also weaken those aspects of the electoral process that currently discourage many women from running for office, such as negative and zero-sum campaigning.
- **Recruitment targets** for political parties and **institutionalized, well-resourced mechanisms** to recruit and support women candidates—particularly at the primary stage and in open-seat races—could help break down male-dominated party networks and help counteract the gap in political ambition between women and men.
- **Financial incentives** for local party committees might accelerate such efforts. In addition, **gender parity targets** by PACs and **fundraising support to female candidates** in primary campaigns would help overcome current inequities in financing, particularly on the Republican side. In the longer run, a **shift to public financing** at the local level would likely benefit women candidates and candidates of color.
- **Systematic data collection** on patterns of representation and women’s experiences in legislative bodies would help identify current barriers to women’s advancement and retention in Congress and in state legislatures. Such an effort could pave the way for **internal gender equality plans** that set out specific commitments to make legislatures more gender-sensitive.

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