

MORE WOMEN ELECTED, BUT GENDER GAP PERSISTS

In 2021, women held 31% of the seats in the Wisconsin Legislature. That was the most in state history and was roughly in line with the national average for statehouses. Yet it was also well below the percentage of women in the general population and a shift from the 1980s and 1990s, when Wisconsin had more female legislators than most states. An even smaller share of women serve in many important local offices in the state, which often function as steppingstones for higher office.

The 19th amendment that recognized women’s right to vote has now been in place for more than a century, but whether women have yet attained equal representation in both Congress and state legislatures remains a pertinent question. In addition, much less attention has been given to women serving in local offices like mayors or village board, yet these positions are also important as the first steps in electoral careers as well as critical jobs in their own right.

The available data on local and state offices in Wisconsin show that in most cases women hold far fewer than half of the positions and often fewer than one-third. Though there are some notable exceptions – including state Supreme Court justices and county clerks – women are a distinct minority on county boards, city councils, and even school boards.

The available figures show the share of female lawmakers in Wisconsin has gone from being substantially greater than the rest of the country to just average. The lack of female elected leaders at the local level suggests that may be difficult to change in the short term.

Few Wisconsin women have held elected federal or statewide offices. To date, there have been:

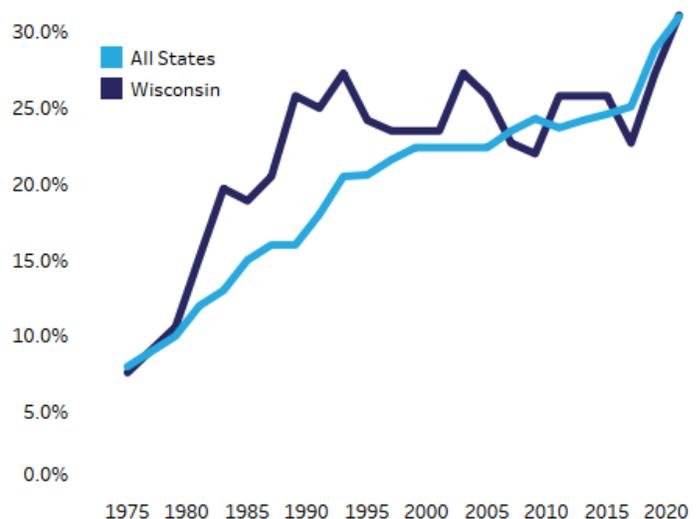
- No Governors
- 3 Lt. Governors
- 5 State Treasurers
- 4 Superintendents of Public Instruction
- 2 Secretaries of State
- 1 Attorney General
- 2 U.S. Representatives
- 1 U.S. Senator
- 9 Supreme Court Justices

Our March 2020 report, [No Contest](#), found that races for local office such as city council and county board often lack competition, with voters in many cases finding only one candidate on their ballot. Consideration of why women are under-represented and what it might take to alter that trend may help to ensure a greater range of choices for voters as well as a broader range of perspectives in policymaking.

WISCONSIN STATE LEADERS

In the early years after Wisconsin’s statehood in 1848, women were denied both suffrage and elected office. The one exception was school boards – an 1869 state law allowed women to run for school board positions even though they could not vote. An 1886 referendum

Fig 1: WI Closely Tracks Nation for Women in Legislature
State legislature comprised by women, Wisconsin vs. all states



Source: Center for American Women and Politics, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University



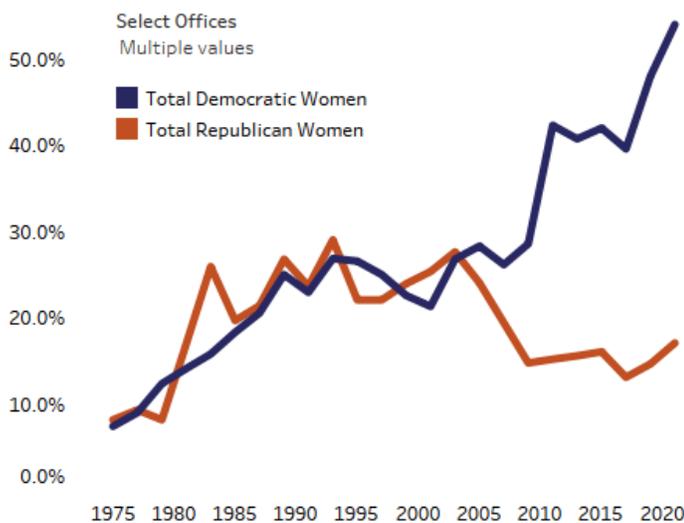
recognized women’s suffrage for school-related matters only.

It wasn’t until 1920 that women in Wisconsin won the right to vote through the 19th amendment, and the right to run for office was further bolstered by a 1921 state law recognizing the same legal rights and privileges for women as men. Three women were elected to the state Assembly in 1925, but it took 50 more years for a woman to be elected to the Senate and for the number of women in both houses to grow steadily.

Data compiled by the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University (CAWP) show the share of women holding legislative seats in Wisconsin rose from 7.6% in 1975 to 31% in 2021, with women now holding a record 41 of the 132 legislative seats in both houses (see Figure 1 on page 1). Yet other states have made greater progress, and the percentage of women holding legislative seats in Wisconsin has gone from outpacing the rest of the nation in the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s to being just average today.

Further analysis of CAWP data as well as historical records from Wisconsin Blue Books shows that, since about 2009, the growth of women in the Legislature was driven by a rise among Democratic lawmakers. Twenty-seven Democrats out of 50 (54%) are now women, compared to 14 Republicans out of 82, or 17% (see Figure 2). That is a shift from the 1990s and early

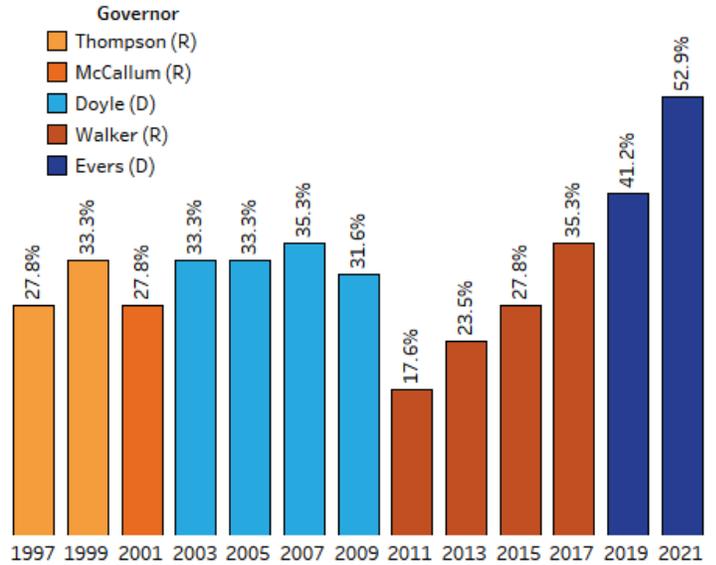
Figure 2: Democratic Women a Majority in WI Legislature
Makeup of Wisconsin legislature* by gender, 1975-2021



Sources: Wisconsin Blue Books and Center for American Women and Politics, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University. *Percentages are based on data recorded at session inaugurations. Political and gender composition of members can fluctuate modestly over the course of the year for reasons such as special elections.

Figure 3: More Women in Cabinet Positions Today

% of governor’s cabinet comprised of women, 1997-2021 by governor



Source: Wisconsin Women’s Council and Wisconsin Blue Books. *Cabinet officials can change over the course of a year. These figures are based on the public officials listed in historical Wisconsin Blue Books.

2000s, when the share of women in both parties was relatively similar.

Additional insight into women’s service in high-level state positions can be gleaned from looking at appointed positions in the governor’s cabinet. Using data provided by the Wisconsin Women’s Council as well as Blue Books, Figure 3 shows the cabinet makeup for each administration dating back to 1997. The general trend has hovered at or below 33%, although the current cabinet under Governor Tony Evers has equal representation for the first time in state history at 53% (9 of 17 positions).

OTHER ELECTED OFFICES

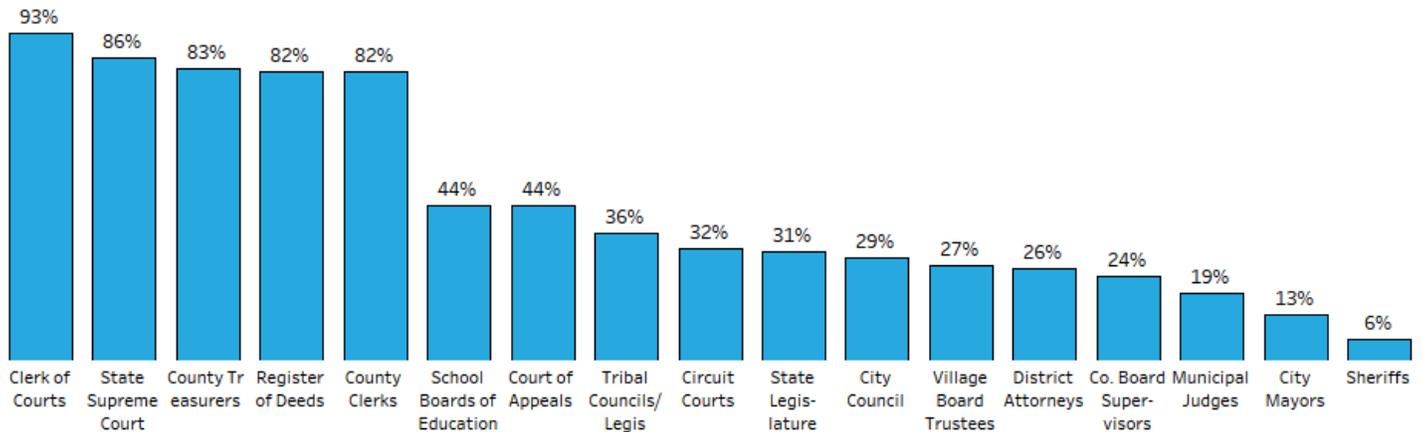
With a handful of exceptions, women hold municipal, county, and judicial elected office at rates lower than seats in the state Legislature. Using available 2021 and 2015 data from the Wisconsin Women’s Council, Figure 4 compares data for elected offices across all levels of government in the state.

The positions with the highest representation of women are clerk of courts (93%), Wisconsin Supreme Court justices (86%), county treasurers (83%), county clerks (82%), county register of deeds (82%), court of appeals (44%), school boards (44%), and tribal councils and legislatures (36%). In most municipal and county offices, however, women fill 29% or fewer of elected



Figure 4: Elected Women in Wisconsin Government

% of positions held by women in 2021*



Source: Wisconsin Women's Council. *Municipal judge figures are from 2015.

positions. For instance, in 2021, women held approximately 29% of Wisconsin's 1,500 city council positions, 27% of 2,500 village board trustee positions, and 24% of 1,600 county board supervisor positions. These figures include leadership positions but viewed separately, women hold 17% of village board president seats, 12.5% of county board chair positions, and 9% of tribal chair or president positions. The lowest areas of representation are city mayor (13%) and county sheriff offices (6%).

In the judiciary, women occupied 44% of court of appeals seats and 32% of circuit court seats in 2021, and the most recent available data from 2015 shows that women held 19% of municipal judge seats – a contrast with the Supreme Court. These relatively low numbers may be partially explained by a [2018 U.S. Census Bureau analysis](#), which found that only 38% of lawyers nationally are women. However, the analysis found women and men between the ages of 25 and 34 hold roughly equal numbers of attorney positions, suggesting that the situation has at least the potential to improve over time.

Notably, the representation of women in nearly all offices shown in Figure 4 has grown since 2015. The share of women elected as circuit court judges, district attorneys, and State Supreme Court justices grew by 15 percentage points. However, women holding offices in municipalities and counties saw slower growth. The proportion of women serving as village board trustees and county board supervisors each grew by five percentage points, while their share on city councils grew by six percentage points and among city mayors by

one. The Legislature saw a five-percentage-point growth in female representation while tribal councils and legislatures saw a six-percentage-point decline. Women held 9% of county executive positions in 2015, but are currently at zero.

As of January, the Wisconsin Supreme Court leads the nation with six out of seven, or 86%, of its seats held by women, according to a review by the Forum. In addition, Annette Kingsland Ziegler serves as the third female chief justice of the court in a row. As noted earlier, however, women account for far fewer of trial and municipal court judges.

INSIGHTS AND CONCLUSION

Two pertinent questions that arise from our findings are whether there are actions that could be undertaken to encourage more women to run for office as a means of increasing electoral competition, and what might be the impact of having more equal gender representation across elected officials?

With regard to the latter question, one insight comes from the [Marquette Law School Poll, which has shown](#) that women and men in Wisconsin tend to [prioritize certain issues differently](#). For example, in an October 2018 poll, health coverage received the highest percentage of responses among women when asked to cite the state's most important issue, while K-12 education ranked second. Conversely, jobs and the economy received the highest percentage of responses among men and the condition of roads and infrastructure received the second-highest, narrowly outpacing K-12 schools.



On major issues like these the differences could be modest and often what was a first or second priority for one gender was a second or third priority for the other. Still, to the extent that men and women may have different legislative or policymaking priorities, having more equal representation in legislative bodies among the two genders could produce at least some changes in legislative agendas.

Meanwhile, for those who would like to see more women run for office, greater encouragement may be necessary. A [2017 Wisconsin Blue Book feature](#), for example, found that nearly all women state legislators had to be asked to run (often multiple times) before starting a campaign.

In addition, the feature found that 56% of the women legislators in the 2015 session had previously served in local office, suggesting the importance of recruiting women to run for local positions not only to generate more local competition, but also to potentially build larger rosters of women who might be encouraged to compete for higher offices. Research by the [University of Wisconsin Extension Division, Office of Local Government Education](#) finds that efforts to recruit women to local office in Wisconsin that specifically address misconceptions about running for office also may be helpful, including those surrounding campaign costs and what it takes to be qualified.

Overall, our analysis has shown that while the share of women elected to office in various levels of government in Wisconsin has largely increased over time, women are still underrepresented in most elected offices in the state and often by large margins. When combined with our previous research that found there is often little to no competition for many local offices, this suggests that efforts to grow the number of women seeking office may provide voters with more choices while also offering the possibility of greater representation of the voting population in policymaking across Wisconsin.

