

PUBLICATION

The Rise of Women in Politics

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In 2021, each branch of the United States government has met or exceeded the record number of women in prominent government roles. In addition, 2021 marks several firsts for women in United States politics. These accomplishments manifest the dreams and desires of the early advocates and pioneers for women's rights.

The Fight for the Right: Firsts for Women in U.S. Government

In the early twentieth century, women's suffrage was the movement that paved the way for women in government. Among the women who were instrumental in the suffrage movement include Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Virginia Minor, Ida B. Wells, Alice Paul, and Lucretia Mott. The early fight for women's rights culminated in the passing of the 19th Amendment in 1920 that granted women the right to vote.

Even before the 19th Amendment was passed, Jeanette Rankin of Montana was the first woman elected to the House of Representatives in 1916. After women gained the right to vote, women continued to push for their place at the proverbial table. Rebecca Latimer Felton of Georgia was appointed the first woman in the Senate in 1922 but the first elected woman senator was Hattie Wyatt Caraway in 1932. Bella Abzug, elected to Congress in 1971, who advocated for women's rights, notably said "This woman's place is in the House – the House of Representatives." Only in recent years have women legislators grown exponentially. Of the total 410 women ever elected to Congress, two thirds (274 congresswomen) were elected from 1992 to present.

Other notable firsts for the legislature include Margaret Chase Smith who became the first woman to serve in both the House (1940 – 1949) and Senate (1949 – 1973), Stacey Abrams who became the first woman and first African American woman to hold positions in both state and national politics, and Nancy Pelosi who became the first woman to serve as Speaker of the House starting in 2007.

Women have also broken barriers in obtaining positions in the executive branch. Beginning in 1933, Frances Perkins became the first woman to serve in the president's Cabinet when she was appointed President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Secretary of Labor. Then, women began their journey to major elected executive positions. In 1972, Shirley Chisholm was the first woman and African American to run for presidential candidate of one of the two major parties paving the way for future candidates. She famously said, "I ran because somebody had to do it first." Twelve years later in 1984, Geraldine Ferraro made it on a major election ballot as the first woman to be nominated for vice president. Next, in 2016 Hillary Clinton was the first female nominated by a major party for president, ultimately gaining the popular vote but losing the election. Finally, in 2020, Kamala Harris was elected the first woman, Southeast Asian American, and African American to serve as Vice President of the United States.

All the while, women were also striving for a position on the bench. The first woman named to a federal court was Genevieve Rose Cline appointed to the U.S. Customs Court in 1928. Florence Allen was the first woman appointed to an Article III appellate court in 1934 in the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit.

As federal judges are appointed positions, the Supreme Court of the United States arrived late to the movement for women in prominent positions. In 1981, Sandra Day O'Connor became the first woman to serve on the Supreme Court of the United States with her appointment by President Ronald Reagan. Where

O'Connor opened the door for women, Ruth Bader Ginsburg took the door off its hinges. Before serving as Justice, Ginsburg co-founded the American Civil Liberties Union and was instrumental in creating the Women's Rights Project. Ginsburg became the second woman to serve as a Justice of the Supreme Court in 1993. During her tenure as Justice, Ginsburg penned the majority opinions for groundbreaking cases like *United States v. Virginia*, finding it unconstitutional for taxpayer funded schools to exclude women. Her dissents were equally transformative for women, such as her dissent in *Ledbetter v. Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co.* where her call to action against pay discrimination paved the way for legislative equal pay protection. Even at her passing in September 2020, she made history as the first woman to lie in state in the U.S. Capitol.

These women laid the pavement, destroyed barriers, and shattered glass ceilings so that the women of today could run in and win elections, make meaningful contributions in government, and climb the ladder to become prominent political figures. Their dreams became the reality for a record number women in government in 2021.

2021: A Record Setting Year for Women in Government

In 2021, Congress is comprised of a record 27 percent of women representatives and senators with 141 women holding seats in the House of Representatives and Senate. In state legislatures, there are a record 1,684 women representatives and 552 women senators. This means for the first time in history women make up more than 30 percent of state legislatures. Women are the majority in six state legislatures with Nevada being the only state with more than 50 percent women legislators. Also, for the first time in history the leaders of the House and Senate are both women, Speaker Nancy Pelosi leading the House and Vice President Kamala Harris leading the senate.

Women make up 27 percent of federal judges. The Supreme Court of the United States maintains its record of three women serving as Supreme Court Justices with Justice Sonia Sotomayor, Justice Elena Kagan, and Justice Amy Coney Barrett.

Besides the historical election of Vice President Kamala Harris as the first woman vice president, women comprise 44 percent of the presidential cabinet. The cabinet consists of 11 women out of 25 total positions and includes Debra Haaland, the first Native American woman appointed to a cabinet position. Women also hold a record 30.3 percent of state executive seats.

While these percentages have a long way to go before women have equal representation in government, the upward trajectory is promising. Such record setting numbers show the movement that started in the early twentieth century with women's suffrage is ongoing and includes room for improvement. Nonetheless, these women's achievements serve as an inspiration for the next generation and as a testament to the women who came before them.