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WHY ARE WOMEN UNDERREPRESENTED IN THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL?

A REPORT BY THE CITY COUNCIL'S
WOMEN'S CAUCUS



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CITY POLITICS?**



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WOMEN'S CAUCUS

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The New York City Council Women's Caucus

Executive Summary

"In a political year filled with challenges for all Americans, especially historically marginalized people – women, LGBTQ people, and communities of color – we need more leaders to stand up and speak for those who still do not have a voice."
--Council Member Margaret Chin

This report investigates the problem of women's representation, **drawing on social science research and the experiences of the members of the Women's Caucus to examine why women continue to be under-represented in government.**

As policymakers grapple with issues like health care, sexual assault, and equal pay for equal work, it is imperative that the women affected by these issues are represented in elected office.

At this moment, though, **only 13 of the New York City Council's 51 seats are held by women (26%)**, putting the city more than ten points behind the average of the U.S.'s 100 most populous cities. **New York lags not just in comparison to the rest of the country but in terms of its own history**--as recently as 2009, 18 women served on the City Council. In the near term, this downward trend is likely to continue, as four women Council Members are term-limited in 2017, in all probability leading to an even smaller number of women in the body next year.

Women and men win elections at roughly the same rates, but **structural barriers and issues of perception create a "political ambition gap."** Traditional gender roles force women to choose between careers and family, limiting the potential pool of female candidates. Electoral gatekeepers then fail to reach out to and support women. Women also underestimate their own qualifications and overestimate the challenges they will face in electoral politics.

To increase the number of women in the New York City Council, the political ambition gap must be addressed through more aggressive recruitment of female candidates and stronger mentoring efforts. Young women should be a focus of this effort as the political ambition gap widens significantly in early adulthood.

New York City prides itself on its progressive values and commitment to equality, but right now it is not living up to these values. There should be more than 13 women in a council of 51, and this number should be steadily growing not falling. **City government and individual New Yorkers must take a more active role in increasing the number of women serving in our City Council.**

The Current State of Women's Representation In Government

A National Overview

Despite the legal, legislative, and cultural victories for women's equality in the past 50 years, women's representation in government remains low in the United States and has not improved significantly since the 1990s. Representation for women of color also remains startlingly low, despite the modest but well publicized improvements in the 115th Congress.

Women in Key Governmental Bodies

Governmental Body	Number of Female Members	Number of Female Members of Color	Total Number of Members	Percentage of Female Members	Percentage of Female Members of Color
U.S. Senate	21	4	100	21%	4%
U.S. House of Representatives	84	34	435	19.31%	7.82%
New York City Council	13	10	51	25.49%	19.61%

In the governmental bodies listed above and in other bodies such as state legislatures, the number of female members and female members of color rarely comes close to reflecting the U.S population, which is 50% female and 19% women of color.¹

With appointed office, this can be different. Women serve in as very close to half of New York City's Commissioner and Director roles, making this Administration is a standout. It goes to show that when an executive branch official makes an effort to include women in their administration, the results can be powerful. However, not all executives make equitable gender representation a priority (as made obvious by the Cabinet appointed by the current President, with just 4 women serving out of 24 posts.) It has also proven more difficult to realize gender parity when officials are elected as opposed to appointed.

¹Henderson, Nia-Malika. "White Men Are 31 Percent of the American Population. They Hold 65 Percent of All Elected Offices." The Washington Post. October 08, 2014. Accessed July 25, 2017.

International City Councils

The United States as a whole lags behind many nations, both wealthy and developing, in the representation of women in government. According to data compiled by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the United States ranks 104th in women's representation globally, and its ranking has been steadily plummeting for two decades, all the way down from 52nd.²

New York City is no exception to this general failure, with women's representation well below that of international peers. Many cities of similar size, wealth, and government structure have across the board better gender parity, with the exception of Toronto.

Number of Women Serving on City Councils in International Peer Cities

<u>City</u>	<u>Number of Female Council Members</u>	<u>Number of Total Council Members</u>	<u>Percentage of Female Council Members</u>
Paris	73	163	44%
London	10	25	40%
Toronto	12	44	27%
Quebec	10	21	48%
Taipei	19	63	30%

(International cities selected based on their similar size, socioeconomic status, and city government structure.)

City Councils Nationwide

New York City also falls behind when compared to other large cities in the United States. Overall, in America's one hundred most populated cities, 34% of city council members are women (in New York it's 26%).³ Among the ten most populous cities, only Los Angeles and Houston have fewer women represented.

Cities with notably high female representation on their city councils include Phoenix (50%), Seattle (55%), and Austin (70%). New York should consider looking towards these cities in order to understand and mimic best practices.

² Kliff, Soo Oh and Sarah. "The US is ranked 104th in women's representation in government." Vox. March 08, 2017. Accessed July 25, 2017.

³ Drummond, Joceyln, Qian Ziang, and Victoria Lawson. Who Runs Our Cities: The Political Gender Gap in the Top 100 Cities. Rep. New York: CUNY Institute for State and Local Governance, 2016. Print.

Number of Women Serving on City Councils in 10 Most Populous U.S. Cities

<u>City</u>	<u>Number of Female Council Members</u>	<u>Number of Total Council Members</u>	<u>Percentage of Female Council Members</u>
New York	13	51	26%
Los Angeles	1	14	7%
Chicago	13	50	26%
Houston	4	16	25%
Phoenix	4	8	50%
Philadelphia	6	17	35%
San Antonio	3	10	30%
San Diego	4	9	44%
Dallas	5	14	36%
San Jose	3	10	30%

(Ordered by Population)

There is one bright spot for New York City in relation to women’s representation: ten of the thirteen women currently on the City Council are women of color, making the New York City Council 19.61% women of color. This is not perfectly representative of the demographics in New York City, but it is a higher percentage than in many other government bodies. New York City is still a leader in electing women of color in the United States.

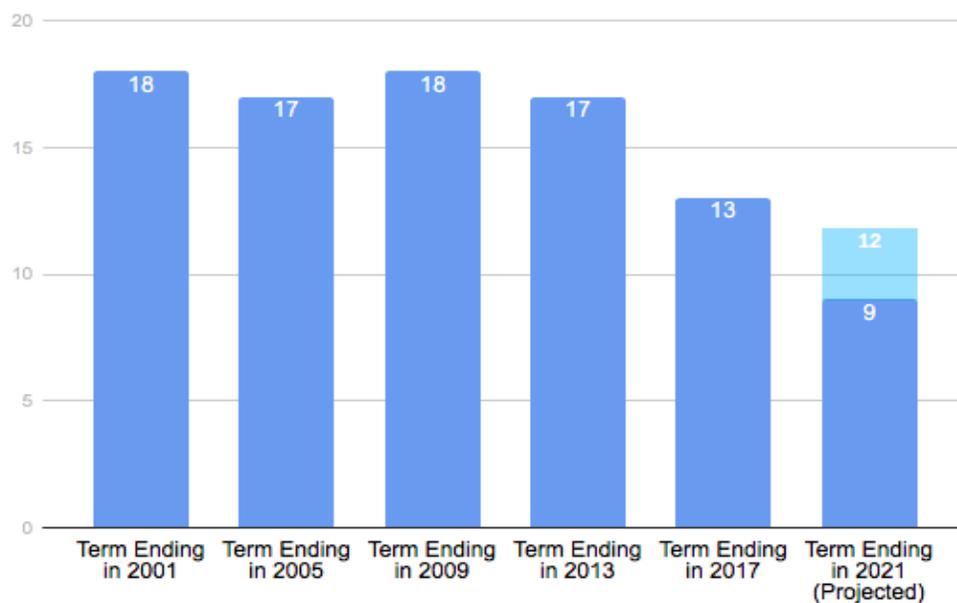
“It takes years of investment to empower a community that has been historically disengaged from the political process. I hope that the next generation of women candidates can learn from my experience and view these challenges as opportunities to open the democratic process for more New Yorkers, and teach others to approach campaigns through a lens that values community-building and cultural competence.”

--Council Member Margaret Chin

New York City Council - Women's Representation Over Time

Currently, 13 of the New York City Council's 51 members are women (26%). While the number of women in the Council remained fairly consistent for the first four terms of the 2000s at 17 and 18, it decreased over the course of the current term ending in 2017 to 13. It is projected to decrease even further, to as low as 9 for the upcoming term ending in 2021. This is because 4 of the 7 term-limited seats in 2017 are currently held by women, as well as the retirement of another.

Number of Women Serving on New York City Council Historically



It is troubling that representation for women in the City Council is getting worse and not better with time.

Barriers to Entry

Numerous studies have shown that when women run for office, they win elections at nearly equal rates with men.⁴ However, men are 40% more likely than women to consider running for office in the first place.⁵ It is largely this gap in political ambition that accounts

⁴Miller, Claire Cain. "The Problem for Women Is Not Winning. It's Deciding to Run." The New York Times. October 25, 2016. Accessed July 25, 2017.

⁵ Lawless, Jennifer . It's the Family, Stupid? Not Quite...How Traditional Gender Roles Do Not Affect Women's Political Ambition. Report. Center for Effective Public Management , The Brookings Institute . July 2014. Accessed July 2017.

for the low levels of female elected officials. There are still serious tangible and intangible barriers that discourage women from choosing to run for office. To achieve gender parity in legislative bodies these barriers must be overcome.

"Running for an elected office is a daunting idea that can be eased with the support of existing leaders. For men, this grooming and support comes more often than for women. Individuals in power, and men in particular, should take care to support more women understanding that their perspectives are valuable and necessary. I have been proud to serve on a Council where the voices of women of color stood at the forefront. We made strides not only for women and families, but in our criminal justice system, business, economic development and more." --Council Member Julia Ferreras-Copeland

Structural Barriers

Women continue to perform the majority of household labor in American families. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 83% of women spend some time doing household activities each day while only 65% of men do, and on average women spend more time on these household tasks than the men who do contribute.⁶ Traditional gender roles continue to permeate our society. Women are much more likely to be the primary caregivers to children, cook daily meals, be responsible for cleaning and other chores, etc.

"As a single teen-mom, I was encouraged to conform to gender roles and didn't think much about exploring leadership positions. My foundation began at St Vincent De Paul Nursing Home, where I worked as a nurse's assistant and became a Local Union 1199 delegate, and ultimately an organizer. My leading priority at that time was to provide for my son. With the support of my union and strong encouragement from my friend Patrick Gaspard, I finally realized my potential. After years of doubting myself, I garnered enough confidence to harness my past as a tool for building my future. Now, my priority is ensuring that young women are not limited to their environment or experiences, and instead provided the support to leap beyond boundaries." --Council Member Annabel Palma

The continued dominance of traditional family arrangements can affect women's career choices long before they rise to a level of success where running for political office is an option. Women often opt-out of the professional pipelines in law, business, or education from which most candidates emerge.⁷ They are forced to choose between family life and a

⁶ "Men Spent More Time in Leisure Activities Than Did Women in 2013 : The Economics Daily." U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Accessed July 25, 2017.

⁷ "Do Family Responsibilities Keep Women from Running for Office?" The Monkey Cage. July 13, 2011. Accessed July 25, 2017.

career because they shoulder the additional burdens of household labor. In this way, traditional family arrangements limit the ability of some women to pursue political office.

Women are also less likely to be recruited by “electoral gatekeepers,” the professional political operatives who recruit and support candidates for office. The party leaders, elected officials, and activists who groom eligible candidates for office often leave women out. Whether this is conscious or unconscious, it affects the number of female candidates. Successful professionals who received external support from a political actor and a friend or family member are twice as likely to consider running for office.⁸

“Before becoming a City Council Member, I was a restorative painter with the Painter’s Union and worked for a nonprofit as an education workforce provider. All of my work experience and time with the union showed me how important it is to have workers’ voices in government, and the City Council was the body that to me was the most local and could directly affect the greatest change. My family, who has a long history in politics and community involvement, was very supportive, as was the union. I had to run three times before being elected, and these people and my strong beliefs kept me going.”

--Council Member Elizabeth Crowley

Issues of Perception

This gap in political ambition can be partially attributed to structural issues such as unequal sharing of household tasks within the family, but the way women perceive themselves and the political arena is also a barrier.

First of all, women are much less likely than men to consider themselves qualified to hold public office. In a survey of successful professional men and women, the Brookings Institute found that the men were 65% more likely to describe themselves as qualified to run for office than the women.⁹ This sense of under-qualification crystallizes early; 51% of women in college said they would never be qualified to run for office. Only 11% said they would be.¹⁰ At all ages and levels of success, women undervalue their own competence when asked to consider a career as an elected official. This confidence gap keeps women out of electoral politics.

⁸ Lawless, Jennifer, and Richard Fox. *Why Are Women Still Not Running for Public Office?* Report. Issues in Governance Studies, The Brookings Institute. Washington D.C. : The Brookings Institute, 2008.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰ Lawless, Jennifer, and Richard Fox. Not a 'Year of the Woman'...and 2036 Doesn't Look So Good Either. Report. Issues in Governance Studies, The Brookings Institute. November 2014. Accessed July 2017.

"Growing up, my brother was told by my parents that he could grow up to be President of the United States. I was never told this since they apparently they didn't think that was an option available to me. I believe that young women and girls don't know that they can be active in political issues and, also, choose politics as a career. With the scarcity of women in government, it is clear that young women are not encouraged to seek elective office. I believe it is important to encourage young women and let them know that they can be politically active, make change and run for elective office."

--Council Member Rosie Mendez

Even among women who do see themselves as capable of holding public office, there is a perception that it will be extremely difficult for them to win elections because of their gender. In the same Brookings survey of successful professional women, 87% said they believed it was harder for a woman to be elected to public office than a man.¹¹ They were also more likely than men to judge elections in their area as highly competitive, and 64% said they believed it was harder for women to raise money than men. Women of color are even more likely than white women to assume they will struggle with fundraising.¹² Despite the fact that women and men win elections at equal rates, women perceive that it will be harder for them to raise money, gain support, and ultimately win an election because of their gender. This perception compounds the political ambition problem by discouraging the women who want to hold office from running because they believe it is unlikely that they can win.

Why Elect Women?

Fair Representation

A democracy functions best when government accurately represents the values and characteristics of its citizenry, in all of its diversity. In order for this to occur, it is necessary that women, who make up half of the population, as well as women of color and LGBTQ+ women, have a seat at the table and play an active and leading role in the legislative process. This plays out both in terms of the content of legislation as well as the way women and girls are empowered in our culture as a whole.

¹¹ Lawless, Jennifer , and Richard Fox. Not a 'Year of the Woman'...and 2036 Doesn't Look So Good Either. Report. Issues in Governance Studies , The Brookings Institute. November 2014. Accessed July 2017.

¹² Cárdenas, Vanessa. "Why We Need a Political Leadership Pipeline for Women of Color." Center for American Progress. August 20, 2014. Accessed July 25, 2017.

The Content of Legislation

When gender parity does not occur at a legislative level, the consequences are obvious. The Better Care Reconciliation Act, the Senate GOP's recent attempt at health care reform, is a notable example of this. The bill, which was drafted by a working group of 13 white male senators, contained provisions to eliminate federal funding for Planned Parenthood services, including preventive cancer screenings and birth control, placing the health and wellbeing of American women at risk.¹³ This type of decision making disproportionately hurts women and can be seen in a multitude of other policy issues such as employment, education, civil rights, sexual assault, and domestic violence.

"Without the strong female voices in the Council this past term, I'm not sure if we would have addressed issues like domestic violence, the low female representation in FDNY, or Minority and Women Owned businesses. This wouldn't have been because men don't care about these issues, but many male politicians do not feel severe gender inequity that women cannot escape. In a broader sense, women understand what it feels like to be marginalized and can serve as an advocate for other marginalized communities."

--Council Member Helen Rosenthal

Women legislators bring with them lived experiences and crucial viewpoints that allow them to identify and take on the unique challenges that women face. As a result, women legislators have been shown to introduce more legislation directly affecting women, children, and families.¹⁴ Additionally, women have been shown to introduce more legislation overall, and are also more likely to work across party lines.¹⁵ A legislature with more women members would likely introduce and pass more bills that address the needs of women, children, and families, crucial constituencies at any level of government.

"We can no longer engage in discussions on gender-based violence, pay equity, universal pre-k, reproductive rights, and elder care without women seated at the table. As chair of the Committee on Women's Issues and co-chair of the Women's Caucus, I am proud of our work to advance gender equity and dispelling the myth that women must choose between their families and livelihood."

--Council Member Laurie Cumbo

¹³ Pear, Robert. "13 Men, and No Women, Are Writing New G.O.P. Health Bill in Senate." The New York Times. Arthur Ochs Sulzberger, Jr., 08 May 2017. Web. 29 June 2017.

¹⁴ Thomas, Sue. "The Impact of Women on State Legislative Policies." The Journal of Politics, vol. 53, no. 4, 1991, pp. 958–976. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/2131862.

¹⁵ See Supra Note 1.

Empowering Girls and Women

When women are represented in government, they can be role models to girls and young women, demonstrating that pathways to positions of leadership do exist for them. A study published in 2012 in *Science* showed that increased female representation in government increases girls' aspirations for themselves as well as parents' aspirations for their daughters' futures. Women already face systemic challenges in running for office. Seeing low numbers of women in office exacerbates women's awareness of these challenges and creates a causality loop, keeping female representation down. Increasing representation now breaks this cycle, setting the groundwork for a government with more gender parity in the future.

*"I served on my community board for three decades, but I was often frustrated with our inability to make more significant changes, such as funding decisions. I decided that **I could have greater impact by serving on the City Council, and so I ran for office.** I lost, not just once, but twice. So many people discouraged me from running a third time. I am thankful I did not listen to them. I ran a third time and won. Today, I am always encouraging young women to do what I did: **Tune out the naysayers, and don't be afraid to fail.**"*

--Council Member Debi Rose

Moving Forward - Strategies for the Future

Stepping Up As a Caucus: The Women's Caucus Must Do More

Currently, the Women's Caucus of the NYC Council is limited by its lack of resources. In order to be more engaged in the crucial issues affecting women, the Women's Caucus should be equipped with a fully paid staffer. This staffer would function similarly to staffers for the Progressive Caucus and the Black, Latino, and Asian Caucus, and allow the Council's women Members to work together more effectively.

Encourage Women to Run

For gender parity to be realized in the New York City Council, more women must decide to run for office in the first place. Steps must be taken to reduce the gender gap in political ambition. Training programs and mentorships can help encourage women to run on both a systemic and individual level. Thus, the Women's Caucus is calling for more funding to be dedicated to not-for-profit groups that support women in public life.

"My first period of service in elected office was in the NYS Assembly, where I served for five years. I decided to enter that legislative body following the appeals and encouragement of members of the community, who knew of my long-standing involvement in fighting for social justice issues. After several months of deliberating, I decided to run, and with the support of this same group who had encouraged me to run, I was successful."

--Council Member Inez Barron

Party leaders, advocacy organizations, and other political groups also need to make an active effort to reach out to individual women about running for seats. The women in City Council should make an effort to encourage politically active women in their circles to run for office, as current or former Council Members have a unique ability to address many of the factors that discourage women from running. Research demonstrates that something as simple as strong mentorship can play a huge role in encouraging women to put their names on the ballot.

"My mentor and someone who saw potential in me and gave me an opportunity to learn from her is the Deputy Borough President of the Bronx, Hon. Aurelia Greene. I started out as her intern while a student at SUNY Albany and she hired me upon graduation and never let go of my hand. Years later, that experience and mentoring propelled me to elected office and now I am proud to serve as a mentor to others!"

--Council Member Vanessa Gibson

Engage More Young Women in the Political Process

The gender gap in political ambition skyrockets in college. College-aged women are less likely to discuss politics with their friends, take political science classes, and join political organizations than their male peers.¹⁶ This must change. College women need exposure to female candidates and elected officials. They need to be well informed on how running for office can affect societal change. They need to know that there is support for female candidates within party infrastructure and activist/lobbying circles.

To make this happen, young political groups should make an active effort to recruit female members. National organizations should organize to provide political development opportunities to college women. Government offices should prioritize the recruitment of women for internships and other opportunities. The foundation for a strong pool of women candidates must be built early.

¹⁶ Lawless, Jennifer , and Richard Fox. Not a 'Year of the Woman'...and 2036 Doesn't Look So Good Either. Report. Issues in Governance Studies , The Brookings Institute. November 2014. Accessed July 2017.

“Running to be a NYC Council Member was an extension of the ideals I grew up with and was also a way for me as a single parent to make great strides and positive contributions to our educational system. I was fortunate to have a two terrific mentors in former Council Member Arthur Katzman who urged me to run and Congressman Tom Manton who supported my candidacy and gave me concrete ideas on how to improve the quality of life for the residents of my district.”

--Council Member Karen Koslowitz

To this aim, the Women’s Caucus advocates for the creation of a new program that would fund the promotion of women’s political engagement on a collegiate level. By bringing inspiring speakers to campuses and running interactive workshops, this program would not only encourage young women by exposing them to women who have thrived in the public sector, it would provide the necessary resources and networking opportunities that are crucial to building up the next generation of women politicians.

*“During my tenure as a New York City Council Member, I have appreciated the presence of women in politics, simply because it gives us a voice in creating change throughout our communities by passing local laws. Women should be able to enter the world of politics without feeling intimidated. **We must use our voices in public forums to empower ourselves and the next generation.**”*

--Council Member Darlene Mealy

Conclusion

The New York City Council is currently in a crisis concerning its gender composition. Only 13 of its 51 members are women, and this number could be in single digits by the end of the year. This would bring the percentage of female representation to a paltry 20%, significantly below the national average of 34%.¹⁷

This is not about any one individual woman. The voters of any individual district should choose the candidate they feel will represent them best in the City Council. But the overall statistics reveal that we face a systemic crisis of representation here in New York City. New York is failing to meet its own standards of equality and falling behind its peer cities across the country and the world in doing so.

To take this crisis on, we must begin to address the cultural and institutional barriers are getting in the way of women in politics here in New York City. That starts with naming this

¹⁷ See Supra Note 5.

issue and talking about it in public life. The presence of women legislators on the City Council increases the equity of the Council's representation of constituents, improves the quality of its legislation, and empowers the city's girls and women. We must begin working toward that empowerment.

Acknowledgements

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