EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

The equal participation of women in politics and government is integral to building strong communities and a vibrant democracy in which people of all genders can thrive. Women engage with the political process in a number of ways, from registering and voting, to running for local office, to supporting and working for campaigns, to running for a seat in the U.S. Congress or the Presidency. The participation of women in politics helps ensure that a broad range of issues are covered and addressed in government. While women constitute a powerful force in the electorate today and inform policymaking at all levels of government, women continue to be underrepresented at all levels and face barriers that often make it difficult for them to exercise political power and assume leadership positions in the public sphere. Covid-19 may also affect women’s ability to participate fully in the electoral process, as the pandemic has raised concerns about people’s ability to vote safely and securely.

The Status of Women in North Carolina: Political Participation presents data on several aspects of women’s involvement in the political process in North Carolina, comparing North Carolina to other states and the United States overall. The report provides data on voter registration and turnout, female state and federal elected and appointed representation, and state-based institutional resources for women. It examines how women fare on these indicators of women’s status, the progress women have made and where it has stalled, and how racial and ethnic disparities compound gender disparities in specific forms of political participation.
KEY FINDINGS

The Political Participation Composite Index combines four component indicators of women’s political status: voter registration, voter turnout, representation in elected office, and women’s institutional resources. North Carolina ranks 35th in the United States overall, with a composite index score of –2.68, and receives a grade of “D” for the Political Participation Composite Index.

Trends in Women’s Political Participation

Between 2015 and 2020, North Carolina women’s participation decreased in most Composite Index component areas, with an increase in only two areas: the share of women who voted and the share of women in the North Carolina state House of Representatives.

- While the share of women who voted in North Carolina has increased slightly (55.1 percent in 2012 and 2014 combined compared with 56.2 percent in 2016 and 2018), the share of North Carolina women who registered to vote declined from 71 to 68 percent.
- Women in North Carolina have seen a decrease in representation in statewide elected office from a little more than half in 2015 to a third in 2020.
- The share of women representing North Carolina in the U.S. House of Representatives deceased between 2015 and 2020 from 23.1 percent to 15.4 percent.
- While two female Senators have represented North Carolina in the past – Kay Hagen and Elizabeth Dole – there are no women representing North Carolina in the U.S. Senate in 2020.
- North Carolina has elected one woman Governor: Beverly Perdue served from 2009-2013 and did not run for re-election.
- North Carolina has seen an increase in the share of women state representatives, from holding 22 percent of seats in 2015 to 28 percent in 2020. At the same time, the share of women in the state Senate has declined from 24 percent to 20 percent.

Voter Registration & Turnout

Voting is a critical way for women to express their concerns and ensure that their priorities are fully considered in public policy debates and decisions.

- While similar shares of women in North Carolina and the United States overall were registered to vote for the 2016 election (69 percent compared with 70 percent, respectively), women in North Carolina are slightly more likely to turn up at the polls and vote: in North Carolina, 62 percent of women voted in the 2016 general election compared with 59 percent who voted nationally.
- North Carolina falls in the middle third of the 50 states when it comes to voter registration and turnout nationally.
- When compared to women in neighboring states, women in North Carolina had higher voter turnout in 2016 and 2018 (combined) than women in Tennessee and South Carolina, but voted at lower rates than women in Virginia.
- The share of women registered to vote for the 2016 and 2018 elections (combined) in North Carolina varies by county. For counties where data are available, women in Hertford County and Robeson County are the most likely to be registered to vote at 56 percent, followed by women in Edgecombe County (55 percent). Women in Anson County (48 percent) and Madison County (50 percent) had the lowest average voter registration rates.
- In 2016 – the last presidential election year – White and Black women had the highest voting rates nationally, at 65.6 percent and 60.4 percent, respectively.
Women in Elected Office

Although women have become increasingly active in U.S. politics, the majority of North Carolina political office holders at the state and federal levels are male.

- North Carolina has two female members in the U.S. Congress; Representative Alma Adams and Representative Virginia Foxx.

- In North Carolina, women make up 25 percent of the North Carolina State Legislature: women hold 20 percent of state Senate seats and 28 percent of state House seats.

- Women in North Carolina hold slightly smaller shares of the seats in both the state House and Senate compared with the United States. In the United States, women hold 26 percent of state Senate seats and 30 percent of state House seats.

- Despite being the majority of North Carolina’s population, women in North Carolina hold only a third of statewide elected executive office seats.

- Black women make up 30 percent of the women elected to the North Carolina State Legislature. However, women of color do not hold any of the statewide elected executive office seats in North Carolina.

- Outside of the State Legislature, women hold three state council seats: Secretary of State, (Elaine Marshall), State Auditor (Beth A.Wood), and Secretary of Labor (Cheri K. Berry). Additionally, women hold four of the Governor-appointed Cabinet Department seats: Department of Administration (Machelle Sanders), Department of Natural and Cultural Resources (Susi Hamilton), Department of Health and Human Services (Mandy K. Cohen, M.D), and Chief of Staff (Kristi Jones).

- Between 2017 and 2020, women made up 48.9 percent (1,170 of 2,395) of the North Carolina governor’s appointments to state-level boards and commissions, including “power” boards and commissions – those that have policy-making authority.

Women’s Institutional Resources

Institutional resources dedicated to helping women succeed in the political arena and to promoting and prioritizing women’s policy issues play a key role in connecting women constituents to policymakers. These resources help magnify the voices of women in government and increase access to decision makers.

- In the United States: 44 states have state-level campaign trainings specifically for women, 34 states have women's PACs, 26 have women's commissions, and 12 have National Women's Political Caucuses.

- North Carolina ties with 20 other states by having three of the four institutional resources. North Carolina has at least one women-focused campaign training, a women's PAC, and a women's commission.

- North Carolina also has five county-level women's commissions or advisory boards, which are appointed by the County Commissioners, in Mecklenburg, Durham, Greensboro, New Hanover, and Asheville/Buncombe counties.

MOVING FORWARD

As seen in the previous Status of Women in North Carolina reports on Employment & Earnings and Health & Wellness, there is a need for policymakers to support policies that reduce barriers and ensure equity for all women in North Carolina. As research shows, increasing women’s participation in politics – both by making their voices heard and by running for office – means issues central to the health and
well-being of women will more likely be addressed through policy change. Although women have made significant progress in recent years in their overall political participation, obstacles persist at all levels. While women in North Carolina have been voting at higher rates in recent years, their representation in elected office has declined. Women’s lesser economic resources in North Carolina compared with men’s, their greater caregiving responsibilities, and their more limited access to important resources restrict their political participation.

Efforts to increase women’s representation should include:

- **Ensure that all women have equal access to a fair electoral process**, including implementing a fair system of drawing states’ political maps – to combat gerrymandering – and eliminating unjust voter ID laws that disenfranchise vulnerable women. Policies should also focus on removing barriers to voting for immigrant women who face additional language barriers.

- **Prepare strategies to ensure safety for voters**. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important for North Carolina to take extra precaution to ensure the safety of voters. This includes increasing electronic voter registration, expanding use of absentee ballots and mail in voting – including ensuring North Carolina has the ability to process a higher volume of mail-in ballots – and making election day a paid holiday so those who are able to make it to the polls have the time off from work needed to wait in longer, socially distanced lines. Additional activities could also include increasing the number of polling locations to help cut down the number of people voting at one location.

- **Recruit more women to run for office and higher office**. Expanding recruitment could include targeting women who are already leaders within their communities as well as ensuring that women who are in politics at the state and local levels are introduced to national networks.

- **Institute policies that will increase the number of women in elected office**. This could include instituting campaign finance reforms, policies and practices that ensure political parties promote women within the party structure, and quotas.

- **Improve access to opportunities for both mentorship and sponsorship**. Mentoring programs often help women build their networks and gain valuable insight and understanding of their political party. Sponsorship takes mentorship one step further and includes introducing women political candidates to moneyed connections and putting women’s names forward as candidates for higher office.

- **Expand programs that provide education and training for women**. Program expansion could include increased support for existing education and training programs for women running for elected office or developing new programs in areas that lack training programs. This includes outreach and partnership with colleges and universities to reach younger women.

- **Expand resources that support women’s involvement in the political process at all levels**. This could include activities such as expanding women’s commissions to all counties across North Carolina to ensure greater representation and focus on issues impacting women and families at the local level. Programs and commissions should also do additional outreach to colleges and universities to provide young women with opportunities for political engagement in roles such as volunteers and campaign managers, among others.

- **Address structural barriers that prevent women from running for office**. Lack of affordable child care and paid leave are some of the barriers that prevent women, especially mothers, from running for federal, state, and local offices. Proving affordable child care, universal pre-k, and paid leave will ensure that women are able to care for their families while being involved in political campaigns.