

The Status of Women in Utah Politics: A 2021 Update

The Utah Women & Leadership Project (UWLP) began reporting on the status of women in Utah politics in 2014, with updates in 2017 and now 2021. The first series of reports in 2014 were initially prompted by the Center for American Progress report titled “The State of Women in America: A 50-State Analysis of How Women Are Faring Across the Nation” that ranked Utah last in terms of women being in positions of decision making and leadership. Soon after, a series of other national reports¹ also ranked Utah poorly, and most used the following four criteria: 1) gender wage gap, 2) educational attainment, 3) women in management roles, and 4) women serving in state legislatures. UWLP research released through the years also confirmed that Utah is below the national average in all these areas. Although Utah women have continually gained elected seats since 2014, Utah still ranks last in Wallethub’s Best & Worst States for Women’s Equality² (the four aforementioned indicators plus 13 more indicators) and Represent Women’s Gender Parity Index,³ which measures women’s political representation in all 50 states.

This report updates the 2017 brief titled “[The Status of Women in Utah Politics](#)” and provides both Utah and national data for the following seven areas: Congress, statewide executive offices, state legislatures, counties, mayors, city councils, and boards of education. The brief concludes with a discussion of why more women do not run for public office and offers suggestions on how Utah can “move the needle.”

Congress

National

The most current 2021 data show that, at the national level, women hold 26.5% of seats (142 of 535) in the 117th US Congress (House and Senate),⁴ which is an increase of 7.1%. In the US Senate, 24% of the seats (24 of 100) are now held by women, after the replacement of Kamala Harris (D-CA) and Kelly Loeffler’s (R-GA) loss in the Georgia senate runoff.⁵ Of the 24 female senators, only 8 are Republican. In addition, a record 27.1% (118 of 435) of the seats in the US House of Representatives—up from 104 seats in 2017—are now held by women, 75.4% of whom are Democrats (89 D, 29 R).⁶ The 117th Congress also has a record number of Republican women serving.⁷

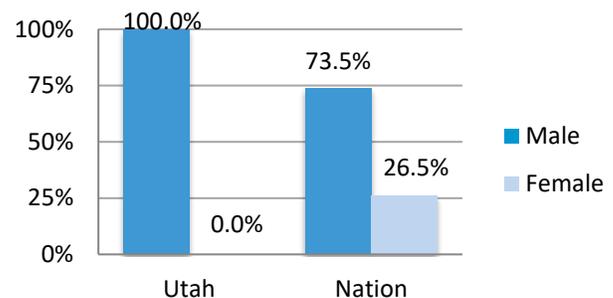
In the 117th Congress, 39 of the 50 states have at least one woman serving in Congress, leaving 11 states with no women serving in their congressional delegation (there were 13 such states in 2017); Utah is included in this list.⁸ Also, four female delegates represent the District of Columbia, the Virgin Islands, American Samoa, and Puerto Rico in the US House.⁹

The number of states that still have yet to elect a woman to serve in Congress is down to one (Vermont)¹⁰; Mississippi recently dropped from the list, electing its first female representative in 2018.¹¹ In addition, the 117th Congress has the highest count of women of color in US history, with 46 Democrats and 5 Republicans, a total of 51 seats, compared to the 34 reported in our 2017 brief.¹² The first Korean-American woman was also elected to Congress in 2020.¹³ Finally, in 2021 Kamala Harris began her term as the first woman ever elected vice president. She is the first Black and the first South Asian person to hold that office.

Utah

Utah has six seats in its national delegation (two senators and four representatives). None of Utah’s congressional seats are currently held by women. The most recent woman in Utah’s congressional delegation was Mia Love, who served in the US House of Representatives from 2015 to 2019.¹⁴ Love was the first Utah woman elected to Congress since 1995. Figure 1 compares Utah with the national average in terms of congressional seats by gender.

Figure 1: US Congress by Gender (Utah vs. Nation)



Only four Utah women have served in Congress since its statehood: Rep. Reva Z. Beck Bosone (1949–1953), Rep. Karen Shepherd (1993–1995), Rep. Enid Greene Waldholtz (1995–1997), and Rep. Mia Love (2015–2019).¹⁵ Two of the four served only one two-year term. Utah has never elected a woman to serve in the US Senate.

Statewide Executive Offices

National

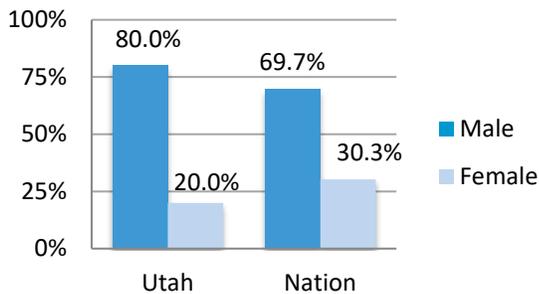
At the national level, 2021 data show that women now hold 30.3% (94 of 310) of the statewide executive offices (SEO) (51 D, 41 R, 2 NP), compared to 24.4% in our last brief.¹⁶ As of the close of 2020, 44 women (26 D, 18 R) had served as governors in 30 states.¹⁷ The largest number of women serving as governors at the same time is nine, which occurred in 2004, 2007, 2019, and now in 2021.¹⁸ In 2021, nine states

have female governors: Alabama, Iowa, Kansas, Maine, Michigan, New Mexico, Oregon, Rhode Island, and South Dakota (6D 3R) while 18 states have female lieutenant governors (11 D, 7 R).¹⁹ In 2021, 8 of the 50 (16%) state attorney general seats in the US are held by women (5 D, 3 R). Finally, 12 (26%) secretary of state seats, 10 (21%) state treasurer seats, and 10 (21%) state auditor seats in the country are held by women.²⁰

Utah

There is currently one woman serving in Utah SEO, as Deidre Henderson won the 2020 election for lieutenant governor. Of the five statewide offices up for election in 2020—governor/lieutenant governor, attorney general, state auditor, and state treasurer—both the Democratic and Republican parties nominated a female candidate for lieutenant governor. Figure 2 compares Utah with the national average in terms of SEO by gender.

Figure 2: Statewide Executive Office Seats by Gender (Utah vs. Nation)



Throughout its history, Utah has never elected a woman to serve as governor. However, Utah has had one female governor and now two lieutenant governors. Olene Walker served as lieutenant governor to Mike Leavitt from 1993–2003, until he was nominated to serve as the Secretary of the US Department of Health & Human Services. Walker was then appointed as governor to serve until the end of Leavitt’s term from 2003–2005. The only other woman to serve in a Utah statewide officer role was Jan Graham (D), who was attorney general from 1993–2001.²¹

State Legislatures

National

According to the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) at Rutgers, a record-breaking 2,276 women are serving in state legislatures in 2021 (30.8%).²² Overall, the percentage of women in state legislatures has increased through the years as follows:

1971: 4.5%	2013: 24.2%
1981: 12.1%	2015: 24.3%
1991: 18.3%	2017: 24.8%
2001: 22.4%	2020: 29.3%
2011: 23.7%	2021: 30.8% ²³

In 2021, Nevada and Colorado set the national highs for women in their legislatures (60.3% and 46.0%, respectively), followed by Rhode Island (45.1%), New Mexico (43.8%), Maine (43.5%), Arizona (43.3%), Oregon (42.2%), Vermont (42.2%), Washington (41.5%), and Maryland (40.4%). The ten states with the lowest percentages were ranked as follows: West Virginia (11.9%), Alabama (15.7%), Mississippi (16.1%), Tennessee (16.7%), South Carolina (17.6%), Wyoming (17.8%), Louisiana (18.1%), Oklahoma (20.8%), North Dakota (22.0%), and Arkansas (23.0%).²⁴ Notably, Utah is no longer included in the bottom 10, as it was in our 2017 brief. It is also interesting to note that, nationally, Democrats make up 66.2% of the total women elected in legislatures.

Utah

In 2020, Utah was ranked 32nd in the nation in terms of women serving in the state legislature, and that ranking decreased to 40th in 2021, as Utah had a 2% decrease in female representation compared to the prior year.²⁵ In 2021, 17.2% of the Utah senators, or 5 of 29 (4 D, 1 R), and 26.7% of the House of Representatives, or 20 of 75 (12 D, 8 R), are female. Overall, in 2021, 24% (25 of 104) of Utah legislators are women.²⁶ Figure 3 compares Utah to the national average in terms of Utah state legislative seats by gender.

Figure 3: State Legislative Seats by Gender (Utah vs. Nation)

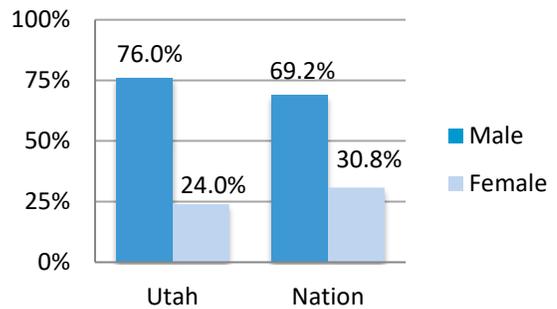


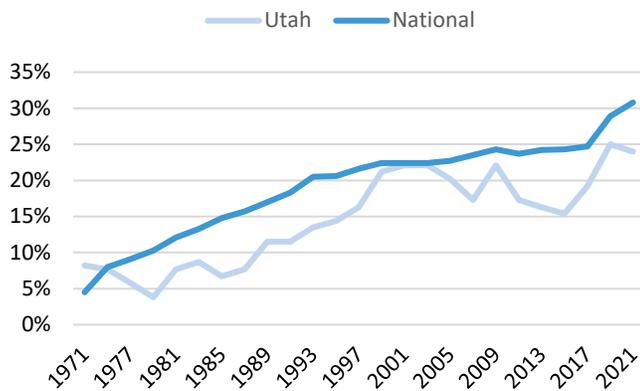
Table 1 illustrates the Utah state legislature numbers and percentages since 1971 by party and gender. Interestingly, in 1971, 8.2% of Utah state legislators were women, while only 4.5% of seats were held by women nationally. By 1981 Utah had slipped below the national average. In Utah, female legislators are more likely to be Democrat than Republican.

Table 1: Female Utah State Legislators²⁷

Year	Democrat	Republican	Total	%	Rank
1971	7	1	8	8.2	-
1981	4	4	8	7.7	36
1991	6	6	12	11.5	40
2001	12	11	23	22.1	26
2011	12	6	18	17.3	43
2013	11	6	17	16.3	46
2015	10	6	16	15.4	44
2017	12	8	20	19.2	35
2019	16	10	26	25.0	35
2021	16	9	25	24.0	40

The total number of women serving in Utah’s state legislature had been increasing since 2017, until this year. The percentage of women serving in the legislature decreased by 2% between the 2020 and 2021 legislative sessions (see Figure 4 for a comparison of this national versus Utah trend).

Figure 4: Female State Legislature Trends



As reported in the 2017 brief, four states had women serving as Speakers of House of Representatives. In 2021, that number increased to seven.²⁸ In terms of the 2021 leadership in Utah, of the 11 leadership positions in the House of Representatives, three are held by women, all Democrats: Minority Whip Carol Spackman Moss, Minority Assistant Whip Angela Romero, and Minority Caucus Manager Karen Kwan.²⁹ The Senate also has 11 leadership positions, four of which are held by women (3 D, 1 R): Majority Assistant Whip Ann Millner, Minority Leader Karen Mayne, Minority Whip Luz Escamilla, and Assistant Minority Whip Jani Iwamoto.³⁰

Counties

County government plays an important role in the lives of individuals and the governing of counties within the state. The National Associations of Counties (NACo) points out that counties deal heavily with transportation and infrastructure, community health, criminal justice, and public safety.³⁷ In addition, they deal with important community issues such as agriculture, workforce development, energy, land use, and education.³⁸ Working with NACo’s research team, we were able to collect data from the most recent gender study they conducted of county elected officials in 2015. According to NACo, women made up 12.7% of county boards and just 7.8% of county executives. Interestingly, women held 38.2% of elected county row officer seats (e.g., clerk, auditor, treasurer, recorder, assessor, sheriff, controller, district attorney, register of wills, coroner). Overall, at least in 2015, women made up 24.8% of elected county positions nationally.³⁹

Utah

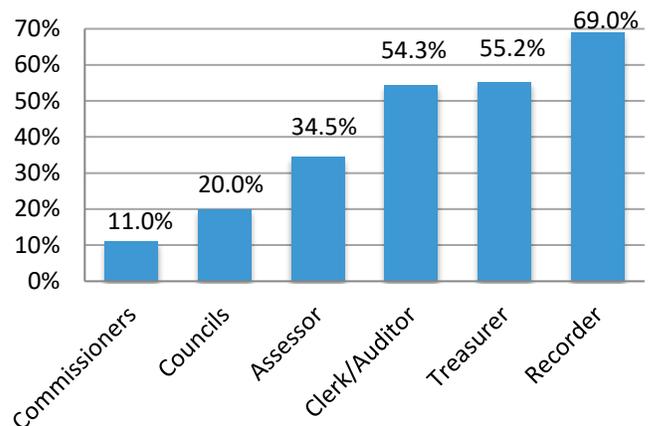
For Utah, we collected 2020 county data from links listed on the Utah Association of Counties website. We then compared the 2020 database with the lieutenant governor’s online election results site to determine the number of county officials elected in 2020. Of the 29 counties in Utah, 23 have elected commissioners, while just six have elected county councils

(Cache, Morgan, Salt Lake, Summit, Tooele, and Wasatch). In addition, each county elects a clerk/auditor, treasurer, recorder, and assessor. In 2021, of the 73 county commissioners in Utah, 65 (89%) are men, and eight (11%) are women, who serve in the counties of Beaver, Davis, Duchesne, Grand, Iron, Millard, and Washington. Of the six county councils with a total of 40 seats, 32 (80%) council members are men, while 8 (20%) are women.

Additional elected county positions for 2021 revealed that, of the 35 county clerk/auditor seats, 19 (54.3%) are held by women and 16 (45.7%) by men. There are more than 29 positions, as some counties split the position of clerk and auditor, while most combine the two into one position. For county treasurer, 55.2% of seats are held by women. Women hold 20 of 29 (69.0%) county recorder seats, 10 of 29 (34.5%) county assessor seats, and only one county (Salt Lake) has a female sheriff (3.4%). Comparing county data from 2020 and 2021 shows that women gained a net seat of 1 in 2021.

Overall, the legislative bodies of county commissions and councils in Utah are overwhelming held by men (86%), while 53.3% of the predominately full-time elected positions of clerk/auditor, treasurer, recorder, and assessor are held by women. See Figure 5 for a summary of county offices held by Utah women in 2021.

Figure 5: County Seats Held by Utah Women



Because there are no recent national gender data available, we are unable to compare Utah to the nation in terms of county elected posts held by women. It is also important to note that our data did not include many of the male-dominated positions (e.g., attorney) often found in counties across the US because they are not found within Utah counties.

Mayors

Nation

According to the National Foundation for Women Legislators,³¹ the number of women serving as mayors, city councilors, and county commissioners is slightly on the rise. In 2019, the percentage of female mayors of cities with a population of at least 30,000 increased to 22%, a 3.2% increase since 2017.³² Nine Utah mayors were included on this list, up

from three in 2017: Michelle G. Kaufusi (Provo), Dawn R. Ramsey (South Jordan), Kristie Steadman Overson (Taylorsville), Holly H. Daines (Logan), Debbie Winn (Tooele), Maile Wilson Edwards (Cedar City), Emily S. Neihaus (Moab), Paula Larsen (Kearns), and Erin Mendenhall (Salt Lake City).³³ Among the 100 largest cities in the US, 27 had women mayors (27%) in 2019, which is an increase from the 20% in 2017.³⁴ It appears that 59 (20.8%) of the 284 US cities with a population over 100,000 had women mayors in 2019.³⁵

Utah

The Utah League of Cities and Towns lists 248 municipalities in the state. Currently 43 of these have women mayors (17.3%), reflecting a significant increase from the 9.1% reported in 2017. Of those 43 mayors, 9 represent cities with populations of 30,000 or more; in Utah, 32 cities have populations of that size, which means that 28.1% of mayors of those cities are women. Most female mayors in Utah serve cities with populations of 10,000 or less (see Table 2).

Table 2: Women Mayors in Utah by Population

Municipality Population	No. of Female Mayors	Total No. of Mayors	% of Female Mayors
100,000+	2	5	40.0%
65,000 to 99,999	1	4	25.0%
30,000 to 64,999	4	14	28.5%
10,000 to 29,999	5	26	19.2%
1,000 to 9,999	13	95	13.7%
1 to 999	18	104	17.3%
Total	43	248	17.3%

City Councils

Nation

Unfortunately, the National League of Cities (NLC) no longer tracks gender data and has not for years. *Next City* reported that the overall share of women city council members in the 15 largest cities in the US declined from 33% in 2010 to 30% in 2016.³⁶ For this update we used data from Represent Women and found that, among the largest 100 US cities in 2019, the average percentage of women on city councils with single-member districts (the vast majority of city and town councils in Utah) was 32%.³⁷ In terms of more national historical data on city councils, the NLC reported that representation of women on US city councils increased between 1989 and 2001 and that the proportion of women grew from 21% to 25% in small cities, 25% to 36% in medium-sized cities, and 33% to 36% in large cities.³⁸ However, between 1979 and 1989, there was a drop in gender diversity on city councils from 32% to 26%.

Utah

For Utah, we collected data from every municipality in the state that had a council (N=248). We gathered information from websites, and then emails and calls were made to obtain

the data that were not available online.³⁹ In Utah, 29.3% of city/town council seats were held by women in 2019, up from 24.1% in 2017 (see Table 3). The city councils from the five largest cities in Utah are 36.4% female. Without Sandy City (86%), the average would be 23%. All other population ranges have between 17.4% and 36.4% women serving in these positions.

Table 3: Women Council Members in Utah by Municipality Population

Municipality Population	No. of Females	Total No. of Seats	% of Females
100,000+	12	33	36.4%
65,000 to 99,999	4	23	17.4%
30,000 to 64,999	29	67	43.2%
10,000 to 29,999	47	129	36.4%
1,000 to 9,999	95	466	20.4%
1 to 999	126	424	29.7%
Total	335	1,142	29.3%

Although our analysis showed that there are 47 councils with no women, there were no clear patterns in terms of population size. Utah’s five largest city councils include women members, and Provo and West Valley City each have one woman serving (14% and 20% respectively). Salt Lake City and West Jordan each have two women serving (29%), and in Sandy, six out of seven council members are women. The four cities with populations of 65,000 to 99,999 each have one woman on their councils. Cities with populations of 30,000 to 64,999 show a range of representation, and only one (Snowville Town) has zero women. For cities with a population of 10,000 to 29,999, only one had no women (Washington City). Of municipalities with populations of 1,000 to 9,999, 23 have no women, and four had councils with more than 70% women (Providence, Fruit Heights, Helper, and South Salt Lake). The story is similar for councils representing populations of 1 to 999, where 22 have no female representation, and eight are 75% female.

It appears that 97 councils in Utah had one woman serving in 2019, while 79 had two women, 20 had three, and none had all seats held by women. Overall, 29.3% of all council members in Utah municipalities are female, which puts Utah below the national average of data gathered historically in 1979 (32%), 1989 (26%), 2001 (28%),⁴⁰ 2016 (30–33%), and 2019 (32%).

Only one town or city in Utah’s history has had an all-female mayor and city council. According to *Southern Utah News*, “Kanab made history in 1912, when its newly-elected mayor and city council took the oath of office making it the first time in the history of the United States where the town board and mayor were entirely comprised of women.”⁴¹ More recently, Sandy City made history in 2019 with six of their seven-person council consisting of women.⁴²

Boards of Education

In January 2014, the National Association of State Boards of Education provided a list of each state's board of education membership by gender.⁴³ In 2014, 48.6% of state board members across the country were female. The states with the highest percentages of females at that time were Colorado (85%), South Dakota (78%), Alabama and Nebraska (75%), and Louisiana (72%). The states with the lowest percentages were Missouri (16.7%), Mississippi (22.2%), and Oklahoma and West Virginia (25%).

Historical national data of school district board gender makeup is sparse. A 2002 report stated that 38.9% of board seats nationally were held by women at that time, with larger districts having higher percentages than smaller districts.⁴⁴ Studies by National School Boards Association (NSBA) reported that in 2010, 44% of school district board seats across the US were held by women compared to 49% in 2018.⁴⁵ As of 2020, NSBA data show that among the 100 largest school districts in the US, 66% of school board members were women. In 10 of those districts, 100% of members are women, in 31 districts, more than 80% were women, and in 52 more than 70% of members are women.⁴⁶

Utah

In 2017, 11 of 15 (73.3%) State Board of Education elected seats in Utah were held by women; thus, Utah ranked among the highest states nationally. However, by 2020 that number declined to 9 of 15 (60%). Currently the Utah State Charter School Board of Education has five of seven (71.4%) seats held by women, but these positions are appointed.

Utah has 41 school districts, and each district has an elected board of education, typically with either five or seven seats. In 2020, based on their websites, there are 233 total district board of education elected seats and women held 111 (47.6%). The boards with the highest percentages of women include Emery, Grand, Murray, Park City, and Tintic, all at 80%, and Alpine, Box Elder, Davis, Granite, and Tooele at 71.4%. Ten other districts also had more than 50% female representation, while an additional 11 hovered around 40%. Two districts were at 28.6%, three at 20%, and the following five districts currently have no women serving: Duchesne, Rich, Sevier, South Sanpete, and Wasatch. The larger districts appear to have more women, and the districts that have no women tend to be in rural areas. Yet, some rural districts do have a strong percentage of women serving. Overall, Utah is at least average, if not slightly above, for women holding district board seats.

Summary

Overall, these results show at least slight progress toward having more women serving in public office. Yet, there is still work to be done. Here is a summary of these findings:

- *US Congress:* 0% of the Utah delegation to Congress is female, compared to 26.5% nationally.

- *SEO:* 20% of the Utah SEO seats are held by women, compared to 30.3% nationally, which is progress.
- *State Legislature:* 24.0% of Utah State Legislators are women, compared to 30.8% nationally.
- *Counties:* 15% of Utah county commission and council seats are held by women, compared to 53.3% of the predominately full-time elected positions of clerk/auditor, treasurer, recorder, and assessor.
- *Mayors:* 17% of Utah mayors are women, which is an 8% increase from 2017. More of Utah's larger cities are being led by women (up to nine from three in 2017).
- *City Councils:* 29.3% of council members in Utah municipalities are female, which puts Utah below the national average of 32%.
- *Boards of Education:* Utah is at least average, if not slightly above, among women holding district board seats.

Conclusion

Like 2018, 2020 was a record-setting year for women running for office across the country. For example, in Utah nine women ran for US House seats in 2020, compared to five in 2018. No women ran for US Senate in 2020, while two ran for Senate in 2018. However, 2020 saw a woman candidate for governor and three for lieutenant governor, one of whom was successful in her bid.⁴⁷ In fact, recent research suggests the election of Donald Trump, along with the #MeToo movement, inspired more women to get politically involved, regardless of party.⁴⁸ Still, national statistics show that women win elections at the same rate as men, but fewer women run.⁴⁹ This is one of many challenges related to why Utah does not have more women serving in elected public office.

In the 2017 research and policy brief, we explored several explanations for why women do not run for office, including societal attitudes, worse treatment of female candidates who do run, and biases in party politics toward traditional practices that keep women from running and networking (see "[The Status of Utah Women in Politics: a 2017 Update](#)"). For recommendations on how to move the needle in Utah so that more women will run and serve in these roles, see this recent brief, "[Perceptions of Women Elected Officials in Utah: Challenges, Benefits, and Lessons Learned](#)," as well as other UWLP [research and policy briefs](#), [snapshots](#), and [resources](#).

This brief has summarized available research on the status of women in Utah politics. It was written to provide a more detailed look at the past and current state of affairs and, as was the previous briefs, should be beneficial as a benchmark for measuring improvement in years to come. It was also written as a *call to action* for Utah residents and leaders to do more to encourage and support future efforts to diversify voices on Utah's Capitol Hill and in cities and counties around the state. Although there has been some progress in the last few years, we encourage Utah leaders and residents to do more to implement and support these efforts.

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