Will Tuesday's Election Narrow the Gender Gap in Representation?

Will Tuesday's Election Narrow the Gender Gap in Representation?

By Kathryn Pearson | November 6, 2018

Women are dramatically underrepresented at every level of office in the United States, and that won't change after election night. Women comprise only 19 percent of the U.S. House; 23 percent of the U.S. Senate; 26 percent of all state legislators; and 12 percent of governors. However, a record-number of women are running for office in 2018, and it is all but certain that the number of women in elected office will increase.   The question is: how much will the gender gap in representation narrow?

Women's candidate emergence reached new levels in 2018.

A record 53 women filed to run in primaries for the U.S. Senate and 476 women filed to run in primaries for the U.S. House. This set a new record for women in both parties running for the U.S. Senate and a record for Democratic women running for the U.S. House. The partisan gap in women's candidacies that emerged in the 1992 elections has widened; in 2018, thirty percent of Democrats' federal candidates are women compared to only 13 percent of Republican's federal candidates.

Scholarly research shows that when women run for office, women win at the same rate as men.

In 2018, Democratic women were *more* likely to win their primaries than Democratic men by a record-setting 19 points, while Republican women and men won at around the same rate.

Research shows that women typically do as well as or, in the case of Democratic women, slightly better than their male counterparts in primaries, but this gap was much larger in 2018 than in prior cycles.

The primary results mean that a record number of women are on the ballot. In the general election, twenty-nine percent of U.S. House candidates are women, 32 percent of general election Senate candidates are women, and 22 percent of gubernatorial candidates are women.

One of the reasons that women have typically won U.S. House races at the same rate as men is because women are typically better prepared to run and take more steps to be successful than men do.

Women are more likely to have already held a lower-level elected office; women raise more money than their male counterparts; and women run in districts that favor their party.

Women running in 2018 are breaking the mold, at least to some extent, and it is historic and inspiring in important ways. Many of the Democratic women running for the U.S. House in 2018 have been motivated to run by the desire to change politics, not because it is the next logical progression in a political career. This shift means that more women are running—especially Democrats—but it may mean that for the first time, women won't win at the same rate as men. Women are having a harder time raising money than men in this cycle (though they are raising more money from women donors!). And, many more women are running in districts that will make it difficult for them to win, meaning that the increase in women serving in office will not be as dramatic as the increase in women candidates.

For many women candidates, the races are too close to call.

Women's representation in the 116th Congress depends, in part, on the outcomes in twenty "toss up" races. In these races, ten Democratic women are running as challengers or in open seats, while two Republican women incumbents are defending their seats and one Republican women is running in an open seat and one is running as a challenger.

Of the ten most vulnerable U.S. Senators, three are Democratic women (although Minnesota's Tina Smith faces a Republican woman challenger, so a woman will serve either way), and one Democratic challenger is a woman.

There is no question that women's underrepresentation will continue past election day, but with women competing in many competitive races, the question is how much will women close the gap, and what will it mean for majority party control in each chamber?

– **[Kathryn Pearson](#) is an Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities.**