



COLLEGE OF
ARTS AND SCIENCES
Public Policy

BEYOND THE BALLOT

INCREASING WOMEN'S
POLITICAL
REPRESENTATION IN
NORTH CAROLINA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Though women have higher rates of political participation at the ballot box, the opposite is true for elected positions, indicating that many factors likely contribute to the disparity between male and female officeholders (Shaw, 2020). Several academic sources showed that women are often more qualified than men before they decide to run (Dolan, 2012; Pruyssers and Blais, 2018). Four in ten Americans also recognize gender discrimination, lack of party support, and familial responsibilities as obstacles to female politicians (Horowitz and Goddard, 2023). To address these issues and other instances of gender inequality, WomenNC trains scholars throughout the state on the problems of gender inequality and partners with local governments and organizations to suggest and implement policy solutions.

As a repository for research and public policy proposals committed to advancing gender equality in North Carolina, WomenNC has a direct stake in contributing to and disseminating research that holds the potential to explain and provide viable solutions to increase women's participation in elected office in North Carolina, offering hope for a more equal future. The UNC Public Policy Capstone team conducted qualitative research on barriers to women's representation in elected offices in North Carolina to create comprehensive perspective solutions based on our findings.

The team's approach:

- Literature review to identify critical trends within women's offices and evaluate the role of various sources in shaping these trends.
- Mapping tools to identify regions with low female political participation and identify risk factors.
- Conducted interviews with elected officials and activists to conceptualize barriers to successful election and participation in office.
- Condensed findings into a Story Map and slideshow, highlighting key findings and implementable solutions addressing barriers to political participation.

The team's findings and recommendations:

- At the Local, State, and Federal levels when women run for elected office, women win at similar rates to similarly qualified men.
- Women require more external encouragement than men to run for office, even if they are similarly qualified.
- Establish an all-girls inclusive program that allows students to experience political advocacy.
- Create a media-based campaign for women to raise awareness about the gender disparity to help reshape public opinions.

MEET THE TEAM

MADDIE EIDELMAN

Maddie is a Public Policy major with a minor in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics (PPE). She is especially interested in analysis surrounding social welfare policy and criminal justice reform. During her time at UNC, she has become familiar with programs such as R, Stata, and MAXQDA. Currently, she serves as the Vice President of Digital Outreach for the Policy Network, a student-run think tank at UNC.



ABIGAIL KOKUSH

Abby Kokush is a public policy major with a minor in Russian language. She is passionate about improving health outcomes for women, particularly maternal health. At UNC, I served as the philanthropy chair for Sigma Rho Lambda, an organization dedicated to uplifting Jewish women's voices on campus. She has become proficient at using Excel and Stata through various classes and internships. Outside of Carolina, she works part-time as a legal assistant, dealing mainly with wills, estates, trusts, and family law. Her legal work in family law has strengthened her passion for improving and removing barriers for women.



OLIVIA MOHR

Olivia Mohr is a Business Administration and Public Policy major with a career focus in government forensic accounting. At UNC, she has been actively involved on the executive board of a student-run non-profit, Build the Hill, where they distribute 0% interest micro-loans to underserved businesses in the community. She has also done significant philanthropic work with Breast Cancer Education and Awareness. Olivia will be pursuing her Masters of Accounting at Kenan-Flagler Business School upon graduation in May.



MEET THE TEAM

GEORGIA MOORHEAD

Georgia is an Accelerated Research Scholar pursuing a double-major in Public Policy and Spanish. At Carolina, she has been involved in various student-led research projects on education reform, healthcare policy, and national security. Last semester, she participated in the Honors Seminar on Public Policy and Government Affairs in Washington, D.C., where she pursued her passion for intelligence working full-time as a Corporate Operations Intern at a defense contractor. Last summer, Georgia worked at a D.C.-based lobbying firm that specializes in health and financial services. She plans to attend law school upon graduation in May.



MALEA MULL

Malea Mull is a double major in Media and Journalism and Public Policy at Carolina. At the Hussman School of Media and Journalism, she has sharpened her skills in multimedia storytelling and strategic communication, driven by a passion for shedding light on overlooked issues and driving action. She is particularly interested in policy roles in government reform, human rights, and environmental policy. Beyond academics, she advocates for mental health resources on campus. She has spent time writing for the Carolina Political Review, where she authored editorial analyses on political issues, including assessments of state and local opioid abuse issues.

ARI SADLER

Ari Sadler is a Public Policy major with minors in Social and Economic Justice and Philosophy, Politics, and Economics. Ari has extensive experience in policy analysis, legislative research, and voting rights advocacy. During her time at Carolina, she has also had the opportunity to complete internships with the Declaration for American Democracy coalition and the PCUSA's Office of Public Witness. She also serves as the social media lead for UNC's Students Demand Action chapter. Her academic and professional work has strengthened her passion for public service and given her familiarity with many policy issues and solutions.



WOMENNC BACKGROUND

WomenNC is a nonprofit organization, dedicated to increasing the number of women in office

MISSION AND FOUNDING

WomenNC believes that one day, the world will be free of gender discrimination. By doing so, WomenNC works with the next generation of college students across North Carolina to advance gender equality (WomenNC, n.d.-a). Over the years, WomenNC has continued to train, educate, and advocate for women across the state. They focus on issues such as gender-based violence, economic inequality, and access to education and healthcare for women and girls. Their approach includes educational programs, leadership training, and active participation in policy advocacy (WomenNC, n.d.-a).

WomenNC was founded in 2009 by Beth Dehghan, an Iranian-born community leader and advocate for women's rights. The organization was created to address the need for more focused efforts on gender equality in North Carolina and to connect local issues with global conversations on women's rights, such as those at the United Nations.

WHAT THEY DO

The WomenNC Scholars page highlights the organization's focus on developing young leaders through its Scholars Program. The program selects university students passionate about gender equality and trains them in advocacy, research, and public speaking (WomenNC, n.d.-c). The scholars work on projects related to gender issues and represent WomenNC at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW).

- **Empowering women via mentorship program with “FemTors” (female mentors)**
- **Training college / university students on public advocacy**
- **Facilitating discussions with thought leaders and advocates**

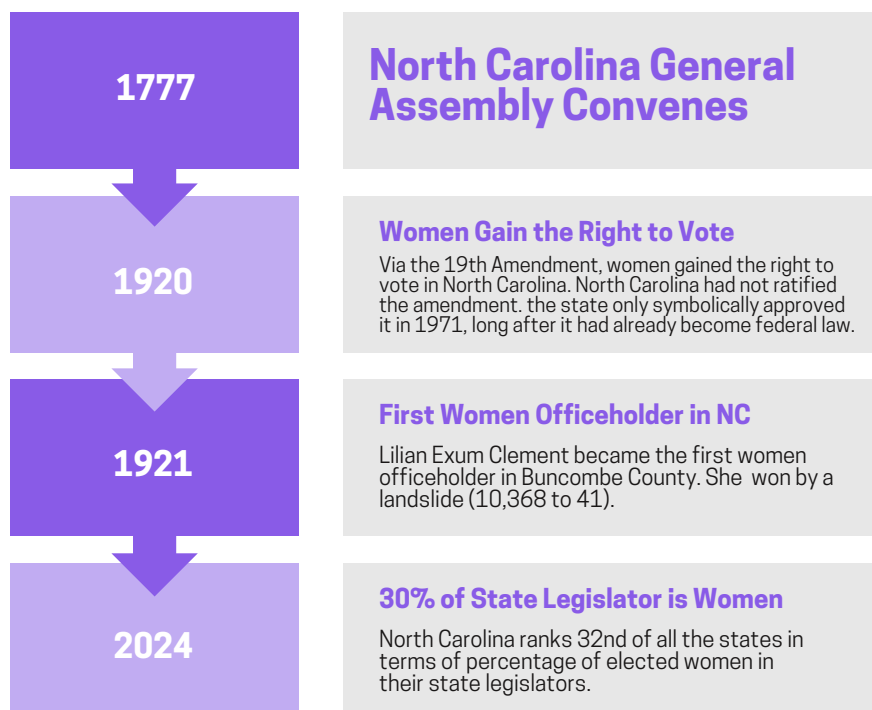


WOMEN'S VOTER HISTORY

OUR HISTORY

WomenNC strives to address various issues concerning gender inequality and discrimination, specifically the wage gap, poverty rates, political participation, workforce disparities, and sexual violence (WomenNC, n.d.). Gender discrimination has a deep-rooted history in North Carolina and across the country, with ongoing challenges, including a persistent gap in political participation between men and women. Although the North Carolina General Assembly first convened in 1777, it was not until 1921 that Lillian Exum Clement became the first woman elected to the state legislature, marking her as the first female officeholder in the American South (NC History Project, 2024). Since Clement's passing in 1925, at least one woman has been in the NC General Assembly for every session, yet male officeholders continue to drastically outnumber female officeholders (NC History Project, 2024). Women make up 29.4% of the NC state legislature, a significant decrease from 2015, when women made up more than half of the state legislature (CAWP, n.d.).

Despite only gaining the right to vote in 1920, North Carolina women have slightly higher voter turnout rates than men (Shaw, 2020). Though women have higher rates of political participation at the ballot box, the opposite is true for elected positions, indicating that many factors likely contribute to the disparity between male and female officeholders. Four in ten Americans also recognize gender discrimination, lack of party support, and familial responsibilities as obstacles to female politicians (Horowitz and Goddard, 2023). To address these issues and other instances of gender inequality, WomenNC trains scholars throughout the state on the problems of gender inequality and partners with local governments and organizations to suggest and implement policy solutions (WomenNC, n.d.).



LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

From a voter's perspective, women are active in politics. In every presidential election since 1980, women have voted equally or at greater rates than their male counterparts (Lawless and Fox, 2012). Women are active community members, signing petitions and attending public meetings at similar rates as men (Lawless and Fox, 2012). However, women's political representation in elected offices is a growing concern, particularly in states such as North Carolina, where women have outpaced men in voter turnout yet remain massively underrepresented. In recent years, the share of seats in elected offices held by women has decreased, and projections indicate that without intervention, the state may not reach gender parity until 2084 (North Carolina Department of Administration, n.d.).

In examining the broader literature on women's representation, a few key overarching trends emerged: compared to men, women are more involved in local politics, they win at rates similar to men when they choose to run for office, and the American electorate overestimates the number of women in elected office (Anzia and Berhanrd, 2022; Dolan, 2014; Burden and Ono, 2020). The literature also indicates potential barriers to office, explicitly highlighting differences in political ambition, the culture of politics, and traditional gender roles (Verge and de la Fuente, 2014; Oliver, 2024; Dolan, 2013).

This literature review will explore these trends and barriers in detail, alongside potential solutions to addressing gender disparities in political representation. While the review will not exclusively focus on North Carolina and local elections due to limited state and local-specific research, it draws from broader studies that can be reasonably applied to understanding the challenges faced by women in the state.

Trends in Women's Representation in the American Political System and Electorate

How Women Excel in Local Elections and Shape Policy

Women are especially advantaged in local politics. Voters rate female candidates highly on education, healthcare, and social services, all of which are local issues (Bauer, 2018).

A study done by Sarah F. Anzia and Rachel Bernhard drew on existing literature to formulate three hypotheses. Then, they pulled data from thousands of local California elections to test the hypothesis (Anzia and Bernhard, 2022). Local elections are significant in policymaking, especially in policing, public education, and housing. On average, women candidates have an advantage over men in city council elections but a disadvantage when running for mayor (Anzia and Bernhard, 2022). They hypothesized that women will have a larger advantage over men in legislative than in executive races (hypothesis 1); women will have a larger advantage over men in offices where policy domains correspond to areas of perceived women's competence, like education and health, compared to offices where the policy domains do not, like crime and economy (hypothesis 2), and that women will have a more significant advantage than men with constituencies that are more liberal than with more conservative constituencies (hypothesis 3).

Anzia and Bernhard found that 34% of nonincumbent women win their races in city council races, whereas only 28% of men do. There was a difference between the rates that men and women won for mayoral elections. Women have a distinct advantage in school board races, winning 43% of the time (Anzia and Bernhard, 2022). They found a negative and statistically significant correlation between women and Republican constituents. Women win more in local legislative than executive races, especially when the salient policy issue is education (Anzia and Bernhard, 2022).

Their data was pulled almost exclusively from California, which has one of the largest economies in the US and is also one of the largest states, population-wise. California is highly Democratic, and the data may not necessarily indicate local elections in North Carolina; more research would be required to determine the role of gender stereotyping in different states.

When Women Run, Women Win

When women run for office, they win at similar rates to men, and the literature has found that gender stereotyping does not play a prominent role in how constituents vote. A two-panel survey of 3,150 US adults was drawn from twenty-nine states and stratified to include individuals who have voted on mix-sex or single-sex races for statewide office and the U.S. House and Senate (Dolan, 2014). The purpose of the survey was to measure the significance that gender has on constituents in comparison to other political cues, such as political party and incumbency (Dolan, 2014). Using previous research, male stereotypes were measured by crime, economy, national security, immigration, and the deficit, with masculine traits measuring intelligence, decisiveness, leadership, and experience. In contrast, female policy stereotypes revolved around childcare, health care, and abortion, with attributes such as honesty, compassion, and the ability to build a consensus. The study found that when constituents vote, their party is the most dominating influence on how they vote. There was little evidence that constituents transfer their traditional gender stereotype beliefs into a vote for or against women candidates (Dolan, 2014), showing that gender does not have a significant effect on voters. Rather, voters are greatly influenced by political parties.

Recent research corroborates similar findings. A survey experiment was conducted to track how feminine and masculine stereotypes affect voter evaluations of female candidates running for local office in both partisan and nonpartisan elections (Bauer, 2018). The author of this study created campaign websites for men and women, emphasizing either masculine or feminine traits, which was then embedded in the 2014 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, an ongoing study that aims to match the US population on critical characteristics (Bauer, 2018). The survey defined feminine stereotypes as caring, compassionate, and sensitive, while masculine stereotypes were described as tough, assertive, and decisive (Bauer, 2018).

The study found that female candidates fare just as well as male candidates when voters lack trait-specific information about the candidates, reflecting similar results from earlier literature (Bauer, 2018). However, female candidates received significantly less positive ratings when associated with feminine traits than when female candidates were related to masculine traits, suggesting that voters prefer female candidates with masculine traits (Bauer, 2018).

The American Electorate's Understanding of Women in Elective Office

In *Ignorance is Bliss? Age, Misinformation, and Support for Women's Representation*, Burden, and Ono investigate the quality of information shaping the American electorate's understanding and views on public affairs. Conducting a multivariate linear regression on an original national survey, the study found that Americans vastly overestimate the proportion of women in elected office in Congress and state legislatures. The degree of bias varies across demographic variables. Individuals with strong party identification and individuals with lower income levels report higher estimated proportions of women in office, indicative of greater bias. Individuals who have completed a college education and individuals with a higher interest in politics report, on average, slightly lower estimates of the proportion of women in elective office, indicating somewhat less bias.

According to Burden and Ono (2020), with all other demographic variables held constant, older individuals (ages 18 to 89) tend to show less bias about the proportion of women in elective office as their age increases. Burden and Ono's findings raise questions about the effect of misinformation on women's election to office. The authors acknowledge that these misconceptions could hinder their election — voters who align with egalitarian and feminist viewpoints but believe the share of women in elected office is higher than it may be less enthusiastic and mobilized to vote and elect women representatives. Contrarily, Burden and Ono also suggest that these misconceptions could encourage more women to run for office, as some research indicates that women are more encouraged to vote and run for office when more women serve in those positions (2020).

However, in reviewing the existing literature on women's representation, there was little supporting discussion of how these trends might influence voter enthusiasm, indicating a gap in research on these potential influences.

Barriers to Election, Re-Election, and in Office

Differences in Political Ambition

Women are less likely to consider running for office, compared to similarly qualified men, are more likely to believe that they are underqualified to seek office, and are less likely to run without external encouragement (Fox and Lawless, 2014). Multiple sources imply that women are often more qualified than men before they decide to run (Dolan, 2012; Pruyzers and Blais, 2018). Another study mentions that women are more likely to need encouragement to run for office (Coffe and Bolzendahl, 2010).

Interestingly, research found that encouragement from a political party does not increase the odds that a participant would consider running for office compared with encouragement from less “credible sources” like family members or colleagues (Pruyzers and Blais, 2018). Women report only a 14 percent increase in odds of running for office if given encouragement (Pruyzers and Blais, 2018). As this study took place in Canada, more research should be done to determine the results of similar studies in America. Still, the study echoes sentiments identical to those in previous American literature (Fox and Lawless, 2014; Pruyzers and Blais, 2018).

Research suggests that women feel more political ambition when there are more women politicians. A study at the University of Massachusetts Amherst found that undergraduate women were six times more likely than men to name women involved with federal politics as their role models (Oliver, 2024). Political ambition was operationalized at three levels: low, medium, and high. Participants were determined to have low, medium, or high ambition based on a series of questions related to political ambition. The questions asked about consideration of running for office, perceived qualifications to run for office, perceived likelihood of winning their first election, and attitude toward running for the future (Oliver, 2024).

Women were more likely to express interest in local office than federal office, with 56.1% of women surveyed expressing an interest in local, versus only 11.6% expressed interest in federal office, and 32.3% of women expressed interest in state office (Oliver, 2024). The study also suggested that women have lower political ambition than surveyed men: women were 10 percent more likely to report low political ambition than men (Oliver, 2024).

The Culture of Politics and Informal Networks

The male-dominated culture of political workplaces emerged in literature on women's representation as a significant barrier to women's election and re-election to political offices. *Playing with different cards: Party politics, gender quotas, and women's empowerment* adopts a cross-sectional study to explore party institutional configurations and the efficacy of gender quotas. The research includes mapping informal institutions and comparative studies across a multi-party setting in Catalonia, Spain, with varied positions on equality of representation. Chief among their findings is that informal, male-led networks and institutions hinder women's political success. These informal institutions involve networking and discussions that often occur over numerous in-person meetings at late hours, which are disproportionately more difficult for women to participate in (Verge and de la Fuente, 2014).

According to Verge and de la Fuente, these informal gendered institutions force women out of party politics and discourage them from running for party nominations, offices, and re-election. Moreover, they write that gender-biased institutions and norms exert control over resources such as personnel, money, office accumulation, and public perception, creating a self-sustaining power imbalance tipped in favor of men. The authors emphasize the generalizability of these findings and concepts, noting that the gender roles present in the parties in this study are not country-specific (Verge and de la Fuente, 2014).

Gender Parity in Election Laws: Past, Present, and Future, published by the American Bar Association, also reports discussions about women feeling unwelcome and undermined in political spaces.

Women and Elective Office: Past, Present, and Future make note of the gendered culture and networks of politics. Regarding recruitment, the book emphasizes that political networks are often male-dominated and less likely to seek out, support, and advocate for female candidates. Moreover, the book mentions that when Black women serve as chair committees in state houses, they face an increased likelihood of exclusion from informal power networks of leaders. This finding suggests that while women of color may face amplified versions of the challenges women encounter in general, they also experience distinct and unique barriers (Thomas and Wilcox, 2014).

More literature supports the findings of *Women and Elective Office: Past, Present and Future*. A qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of 10 African American female directors in the North Carolina government. One key theme in their experiences was that networking is essential for African American women seeking leadership positions in North Carolina government organizations; without a robust social network, African American women struggle to stay in politics (McGill, 2014). However, given the male-dominated nature of politics, it can be difficult for African American women to form a robust networking system, losing out on potential career advancements (McGill, 2014). However, a significant gap in the literature addressing the experiences of African American women remains.

While some evidence indicates that the gendered landscape of politics hinders women's ability to enter and participate effectively in elected positions, more research is needed to identify conditions that favor women's ability to do so.

Societal Gendering

The term societal gendering captures attitudes surrounding men's and women's roles, characteristics, and the expected divisions of labor between them (Thomas and Wilcox, 2014). Societal gendering can present a significant barrier to women's effective entry into and participation in elected offices. These attitudes, and more specifically, beliefs about traditional gender roles, can act as a barrier to women's equality of representation in a myriad of ways, including unequal divisions of labor, negative perceptions of women's ability to serve in elective office, and diminished political ambition (Thomas and Wilcox, 2014). *Women and Elective Office: Past, Present, and Future* points to unequal division of labor as a significant barrier to women's entry into elective offices. Despite women's growing professional responsibilities, they remain expected to take on the lion's share of duties in the private sphere. Women are much more likely to oversee household chores, shopping, and caretaking of children (Thomas et al., 2002). These duties constrain their entry into politics, leading women to delay, decline, or enter on a limited basis and for shorter periods than men (Thomas and Wilcox, 2014).

Domestic responsibilities appear again as a barrier to participation in elected office in *A qualitative study on the attitudes of women politicians toward their roles in politics: a case of Northern Cyprus*, where Artaç and Oğurlu discuss their study's findings on obstacles and determinants of women's political participation. In the semi-structured interviews, participants indicated that challenges to women's participation in politics are greater than their opportunities. Responses reflecting concerns about domestic responsibilities occurred with the greatest frequency among these challenges surrounding political participation. Constrained by duties in the private sphere, women's effective entry and participation in elected office is hindered substantially (Artaç and Oğurlu, 2014).

Domestic duties are also a significant barrier to effective participation in elective office in *Playing With Different Cards: Party Politics, Gender Quotas, and Women's Empowerment*. The article suggests that women's time availability — lessened due to their more significant share of housework and child-caring responsibilities — inhibits them from participating in political decision-making processes. Responsible for carrying out most duties in the private sphere, time becomes a scarce resource for women, making full-time dedication to political landscapes more difficult (Verge and de la Fuente, 2014).

It is important to note again that the literature lacks an understanding of how other identities, such as race or sexuality, compound the prevailing challenges and barriers faced by women. Future research should center on how these identities further complicate women's challenges in achieving gender parity in elected office. Moreover, many of the barriers and trends found in the review of the existing literature may not entirely coincide with the challenges women in the United States face in 2024. Given some of their settings — Northern Cyprus and Catalonia, Spain, and years of publication — 2014 — these sources may have limited applications to the United States currently.

Nevertheless, the intra-household division of labor is still skewed to the disadvantage of women. According to the results of this survey, compared to 22 percent of men, 48 percent of women performed housework, such as cleaning or laundry, on an average day in 2023. Women living with children under the age of 6 spent an average of 1.2 hours a day providing them with physical care, such as bathing and feeding. Men spent 34 minutes providing this kind of care on an average day (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024).

Solutions in the Literature

Evidence on practical and effective solutions for overcoming the gender gap remains limited. Lawless, Fox, et al. write, “Barring radical structural change... gender parity in U.S. government is not on the horizon.” While they suggest that their research can inform future solution-oriented studies, promising results from comprehensive strategies have yet to emerge. Some existing literature explores and analyzes various developing and existing interventions, such as gender quotas.

Playing With Different Cards: Party Politics, Gender Quotas, and Women’s Empowerment investigates the efficacy of gender quotas, focusing on whether they increase women’s agency and power in political areas. Currently, in areas where electoral gender quotas have been adopted, they are operationalized primarily during the recruitment of candidates (Krook and Norris, 2014). While the implementation of gender quotas at this stage has effectively addressed unequal gender distribution in offices, Verge and de la Fuente emphasize that quotas alone are insufficient to resolve the broader structural barriers women face in office. Within office and across parties, women’s political power is diminished through various informal institutions, inhibiting their ability to advance and succeed in their political careers (Verge and de la Fuente, 2014).

Beyond Quotas: Strategies to Promote Gender Equality in Elected Office examines and advocates for multi-faceted interventions on inequality in political representation apart from gender quotas. These interventions are centered around increasing the number of women running for office and, thus, should be implemented while recruiting candidates. As mentioned, the enactment of gender quotas also occurs primarily during this stage, so these interventions could work alongside or in place of gender quotas in advancing gender parity in elected offices (Krook and Norris, 2014).

The first intervention involves raising awareness through media-based campaigns to reshape public attitudes toward women in politics and highlighting the current lack of female representation. The second focuses on recruitment initiatives to find and convince women to run for elected offices. The article also emphasizes training programs developed to help women navigate the pursuit of nomination for office and fund-raising networks that seek to ensure that women have the financial resources to create and conduct successful campaigns. While these strategies offer potential solutions, the authors acknowledge that future research is needed to assess the efficacy of their implementation as current studies are limited (Krook and Norris, 2014).

Researchers examined whether high school programming impacted teenage girls’ political ambition by surveying 916 participants of L’Taken. L’Taken is a program run through the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, designed to increase political ambition in high schoolers; it is a three-day coed program that invites high schoolers from all over the country to Washington D.C to learn about policy issues, political advocacy and how to lobby congressional representatives (Kalla and Porter, 2022). Political ambition at a young age indicates a future path in office, as most politicians start at local levels and then pipeline to bigger, more competitive, and expensive elections.

Previous studies have shown that self-confidence is a significant barrier to female participation in politics; however, programs such as these allow participants to learn how to lobby and enact change (Kalla and Porter, 2022). Prior to beginning the program, researchers surveyed the L'Taken participants in the program, finding that 35% of male participants were either “extremely likely,” “moderately likely,” or “slightly likely” to run for office compared to 25% of female participants (Kalla and Porter, 2022). However, by the end of the program, 32% of female participants surveyed stated that they were likely to run for office, on par with male participants before the program. Female participants’ willingness to one day run for political office after completing the program were roughly as politically ambitious as the male participants before they had participated in the program (Kalla and Porter, 2022).

L'Taken did not close the gender gap in ambition, but it did increase political ambition among female participants (Kalla and Porter, 2022). More research is needed to determine the impact that a similar but female only program would have on female adolescents.

Factoring in the rise of political ambition is that the program heightens its participant's sense of political efficacy or the belief that they can make a genuine difference through advocating (Kalla and Porter, 2022). There is evidence that women in the US tend to avoid activities with low self-efficacy, so programs designed to facilitate political change increase their confidence and interest in political engagement (Oliver, 2024).

When female participants met with female representatives or staffers while lobbying, those representatives might serve as role models for these females’ ambitions (Kalla and Porter, 2022). There is some evidence to suggest that women are more than six times as likely to name women in federal politics as their role models (Oliver, 2024).

Conclusion

The current literature suggests that women win at the same rate as men when they enter the political arena. Women thrive in local elections, winning at higher rates than men, especially in school board elections (Anzia and Bernhard, 2022)

However, even with very promising election rates, men still outnumber women in elected offices, with some experts predicting that states like North Carolina will not reach parity by 2084 (North Carolina Department of Administration, n.d.). Women are also likely to need more encouragement than men to run for elected office. Furthermore, college-aged women are much less likely to have political ambitions than men.

In this male-dominated industry, it can be challenging for women to attend informal networking events, as they are typically in-person evening events (Verge and de la Fuente, 2014). Traditional gender roles place women as the primary caretakers for children, thus making them unable to attend evening events and losing out on career advancement opportunities (Verge and de la Fuente, 2014).

While some literature showed promising solutions to the overall problem, such as improving women's high school political ambition, many solutions are difficult to implement (Kalla and Porter, 2022). Further research should be conducted to determine viable solutions to increase the number of women running for elected office.

INTERVIEWS

To better understand the experiences of women who pursue political office, our team conducted interviews with five women involved in political careers across North Carolina. We reached out to a diverse group, including both current and former female officeholders as well as women actively engaged in political organizations, to gain a well-rounded perspective on the realities women face in politics. As a result, we were able to include several unique viewpoints in our research. Despite the varied backgrounds of our interviewees, several themes emerged that were consistent with the team's main findings, revealing the most significant barriers that women encounter in the political arena.



INTERVIEW KEY TRENDS

While there are several important topics that were discussed throughout the interviews, five key themes appeared most frequently in each of the discussions, which were concurrent with the findings from the literature review:

Code	Theme	Definition
C-OBLIGATION	Familial obligation	Women tend to bear most of the responsibility for domestic and familial obligations.
C-JUDGE	Judgement	Refers to general views, perceptions, and expectations held toward women which can impact the decisions they make.
C-MISOGYNY	Misogyny	Captures misogynistic comments, attitudes, and expectations.
S-CHILDCARE	Childcare	Access to and perceptions about childcare show up as hinderences to women's experiences running for and in elective office.
M-COMMUNITY	Community	Women are frequently motivated to enter politics in order to enact change within their community.

KEY TREND EXAMPLES

The following quotes exemplify the instances of familial obligation being named as a barrier during our interviews. These examples were pulled from the codebook, which listed and defined all themes and codes used to analyze our data.

Theme	Interviewee
Familial obligation	Mayor Anderson: "How do we make these choices and what are things that we do that often men don't.... All of the kind of more family and domestic oriented tasks that have traditionally been on women."
Familial obligation	Mayor Roberts: "Is this going to impact my family? [County commission] is basically another full-time job."
Familial obligation	Councilmember McCullough: "And, you know, since the topic is women in politics, I didn't have the time to do this when I was working full-time and raising children. And that's one of the things that's difficult."
Familial obligation	Montica Talmadge: "You're asking me who's going to take care of my children like for real like you don't ask men that you don't that's never the question who's going to take care of your kids who's going to take your son to little league if you're running."
Familial obligation	Anonymous Participant: "If you're Baptist... [there's] really an emphasis on the importance of the mother's role in the family or the wife's role in the family, but also just sort of a culture of a man being the leader, frankly, and whether or not that's appropriate in a religious context, I don't think it carries over at all into your government context. That's my personal opinion."

INTERVIEW KEY TRENDS

The most prominent trends appeared numerous times throughout each interview, with the total frequencies of each code listed below:

Code	Frequency
C-OBLIGATION	19
C-JUDGE	17
C-MISOGYNY	17
S-CHILDCARE	13
M-COMMUNITY	11

Codes were divided into three main categories to best represent the qualitative information shared by our interviewees. Each theme was labeled under one of the following categories:

- S: Structural
- C: Cultural
- M: Motivation

This method allowed us to determine the severity at which cultural and structural barriers impacted participants, as well as what factors motivated them to enter the political sphere. As depicted in the table above, cultural factors of misogyny, fear of judgment, and familial obligation appeared most frequently as concerns held by interviewees.

These coincide with the findings of our literature review, indicating that female candidates are successful once they enter the race, but several key barriers can hinder their political ambition or ability to run in the first place.

MEET THE INTERVIEWEES

We asked these women about their experiences in politics. Here is what they said...



Jessica Anderson

Mayor of Chapel Hill

"I think me being a woman, a mom with kids in the public schools, I think me caring about public education and children is compelling to women in this community."



Montica Talmadge

Director of Leadership Programs, Lillian's List

"The one thing I would say that could be done better in North Carolina to support women for office is believe women. Believe them."



Anonymous Participant

"You're like standing there with a group of men. And another man, especially if they're older, comes and approaches the group, they'll shake the hand of all the men and ignore me. [...] They assume that I'm somebody's wife. And because I'm a wife, I'm not, you know, worthy of a greeting."



Melissa McCullough

Council Member, Town of Chapel Hill

"And so the kind of meetings I would go into would be predominantly men [...] And I went in wearing a khaki skirt and a navy blue blazer and makeup and, you know, hose and pumps, because you couldn't give them anything to discount you. You couldn't give them anything that would mean you would come across as a flake or whatever. You needed to be there."



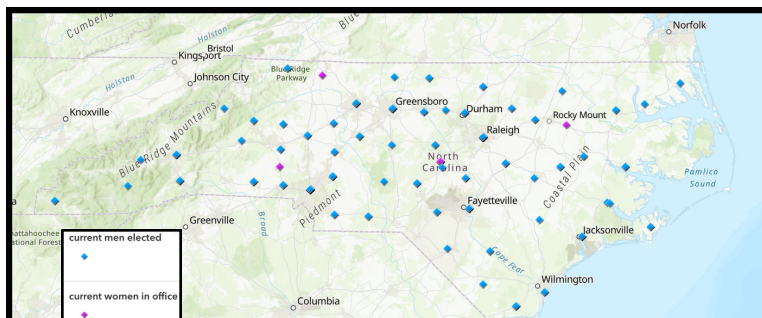
Jennifer Roberts

Former Mayor of Charlotte

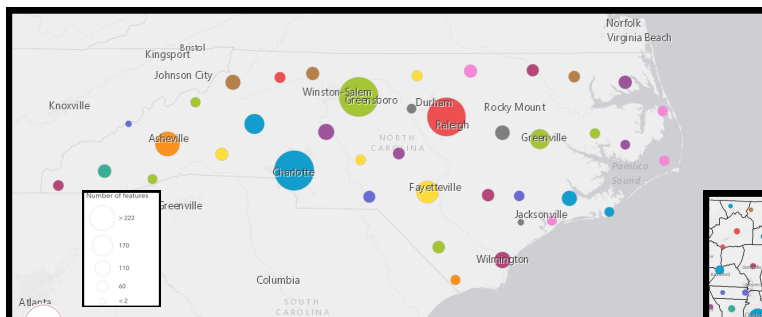
"I remember even after I got elected and certainly during the campaign thinking, 'How many male candidates have to get up, fix breakfast for everybody, fix the kids' lunch, walk the kids to the bus stop, do their laundry, and then start their day.' I bet you could count on one hand."

STORYMAPS

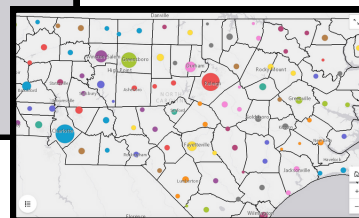
After analyzing literature and conducting interviews, we created a StoryMaps website to bring the data and information we gathered to life, using interactive maps to highlight the story behind women's political representation and the barriers they face in achieving equity. StoryMaps is an interactive platform that uses GIS maps to visually represent data and tell powerful stories. By mapping the geographic disparities in female representation, voter access, and the effects of gerrymandering, these tools emphasize the structural barriers women face in entering politics and the urgent need to address these inequities to achieve gender parity in elected offices.



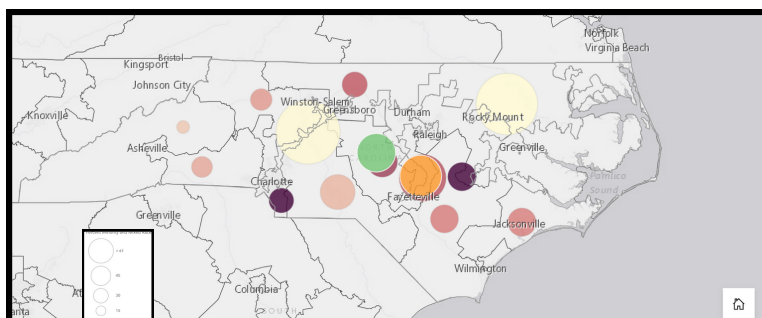
This map plots the numbers of current female vs. male elected officials in North Carolina for the 2023-2024 term. There are 59 females and 131 males, meaning female representatives only make up 31% of elective office despite making up 51% of the adult population in North Carolina.



This map represents the number of polling places in each county in North Carolina. On average, women have more household responsibilities than men, and lack of an easily accessible polling place can decrease their ability to participate politically.



This close-up view of the map further highlights the inequities in polling locations in NC.



This map highlights how gerrymandering, divided by race and income, impacts counties and women's political involvement. By manipulating district boundaries, gerrymandering reduces electoral competitiveness, deterring new candidates—particularly women, who already face societal and structural barriers—from running in seemingly unwinnable races.

CONCLUSION

As we've seen throughout our research, women remain significantly underrepresented in North Carolina politics. Right now, women hold far fewer elected offices than men, and without deliberate action, projections show it could take until 2084 to reach gender parity (North Carolina Department of Administration, n.d.). This isn't just a statistic—it's a reality shaped by systemic barriers that make running for office more difficult for women.

One of the most striking challenges is the disproportionate share of household and caregiving responsibilities women continue to carry. These expectations and cultural biases about leadership and the overall political environment discourage many women from even considering a run for office (Verge and de la Fuente, 2014). And yet, when women do run, they win at rates similar to men. This tells us that the real issue lies in getting women to see themselves as candidates and feel supported.

So, how do we address this? Our proposed solutions focus on recruitment, education, and public awareness. Programs that expose young women to advocacy and leadership opportunities can make a lasting difference (Kalla and Porter, 2022). Media campaigns can help shift public perceptions of women in leadership roles (Krook and Norris, 2014). Partnerships with organizations like WomenNC can play a vital role in actively recruiting and mentoring potential female candidates.

The path to gender parity in politics won't be easy, but it's achievable. It requires intentional efforts—by organizations, communities, and policymakers alike—to create systems that empower women to lead. By addressing the barriers we've identified and implementing solutions like these, we can work toward a political landscape that better reflects and serves the people of North Carolina.



*"...believe women. Believe them. We say, believe women when we talk about sexual assault. We say, believe women when we talk about domestic violence. Believe women when they say someone's being misogynistic on the campaign trail. **And call them out on it.**"*

Montica Talmadge, Director of Leadership Programs, Lillian's List

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS



The UNC Public Policy Capstone Team identified three strategies to help WomenNC increase women's political representation in North Carolina.

01. Establish an all-girls inclusive program

Establishing an all-girls inclusive political advocacy program could focus on equipping young women with the skills and experiences needed to engage in policy change. This program could include workshops on understanding legislative processes, developing public speaking and lobbying skills, and providing mentorship from experienced advocates (similar to WomenNC's "Femtors"). Participants could participate in local or state advocacy projects, and work toward culminating experiences, like presenting their advocacy work to North Carolina lawmakers or WomenNC events, reinforcing their leadership development, and fostering an early commitment to civic engagement.

02. Create a media-based campaign for women

To create a media-based campaign to raise awareness about gender disparities, WomenNC could develop targeted content across social media, blogs, and video platforms, focusing on facts and stories highlighting inequality in leadership and politics. The campaign could feature testimonials, data visualizations, and educational infographics to make the issue relatable and impactful for diverse audiences. WomenNC might also collaborate with influencers and local female leaders to reach a broader audience and help reshape public perceptions about women's representation in leadership.

03. Recruit more women to run for office

To recruit more women to run for office, WomenNC could form strategic partnerships with advocacy organizations, political groups, and educational institutions. The program would target potential female candidates through informational sessions, skill-building workshops, and mentorship opportunities. These sessions could cover campaign planning, fundraising, and public speaking, aiming to demystify the process of running for office. To measure progress, WomenNC could implement a tracking system, monitoring participants' growth and any subsequent candidacies. This approach ensures ongoing engagement and provides data to refine the program over time.

INTERVIEW CODE FREQUENCY

Code	Frequency
C-APPEARANCE	9
C-MICRO	9
C-OBLIGATIONS	19
C-DEROGATORY	4
C-RACE	4
C-JUDGE	17
C-REPRESENTATION	2
C-NETWORK	3
C-MISOGYNY	17
S-CHILDCARE	13
S-WAGE	8
S-LEAVE	4
S-PTO	2
S-EDUCATION	10
S-FINANCING	10
S-POLITICAL	5
S-RACE	1
S- OPPORTUNITY	6
M-ADVOCACY	3
M-EQUALITY	2
M-REPRESENTATION	9
M-COMMUNITY	11
O-PREGNANT	3
Cultural Total	84
Structural Total	59
Motivation Total	25
Other Total	3

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