

## **The Representation of Women in the U.S. Congress**

On November 7<sup>th</sup>, 2018, Americans celebrated the most diverse Congress they had ever elected in history. The 116<sup>th</sup> Congress included 127 women, 100 of whom, for the first time, were sworn into the House of Representatives. Notably, the first two Muslim women, Ilhan Omar (D-Minn) and Rashida Tlaib (D-Mich), were elected to the House of Representatives, and Sharice Davids (D-KS) and Deb Haaland (D-NM) were the first Native American women elected to Congress.

The 2018 midterm elections witnessed a dramatic rise in activism and political participation by women candidates and voters. Inspired by the #MeToo movement which seeks to raise greater awareness for sexual assault survivors, many these voters and candidates were frustrated by a number of men holding power despite allegations and evidence of sexual harassment and assaults against them. Following Donald Trump's Presidential Election and Dr. Christine Blasey Ford's testimony during Brett Kavanaugh's Supreme Court confirmation hearing, women's political engagement reached new heights.

This recent diversity of representation in Congress can be attributed to historical milestones seeking to advance women's rights. As women's roles in society expand, the number of women in public offices rise gradually. At the same time, policymakers and activists began to deconstruct institutional barriers to women's suffrage and racial equality, paving ways for more women to run for state and national leadership positions. In 1920, the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment was ratified, giving franchise to women across the nation. Additionally, the removal of race-based distinction in the 1960s-immigration policy indirectly contributed to the rise in the representations of women of color in public offices. Beginning in the 1970s, women's political groups and political action committees began to raise public awareness about women's issues and fund more women candidates. Most importantly, the Voting Rights Act and subsequent interpretations of the Act eliminate formal and informal barriers to voting and give majority-minority districts the opportunity to elect a candidate of their choice. These acts have been critical to office-holding by women of color. In 1992, which was known as "Year of the Women," a record number of women ran in response to public attention to women's underrepresentation in Congress and to Anita Hill's testimony during Clarence Thomas sexual harassment hearings.

However, as of 2020 the U.S. had a slightly lower percentage of women representing its population in elected office compared to the rest of the world in 2018 (24.3%). Across the partisan line, only 21 Republican women served in Congress compared to 106 Democratic women in 2020. Women still face obstacles to running for office, such as misogyny in politics, increased expectations for women to be caregivers while earning income for the family, and lack of access to informal social, educational, and economic credentials that men usually possess such as PAC funding. For women of color, the struggles in their political careers are more

pronounced because of systemic racism, xenophobia, discriminations against non-Christian politicians, and socioeconomic stratifications intertwined with race. Although the current Congress celebrates the greatest representation of women in history, there is still an overrepresentation of men in Congress.

*Written by Bao Tran '23, Clarke Forum Student Project Manager*

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Information gathered from Roxane Gay's, The New York Times Company's, Elizabeth D. Herman's, and Celeste Sloman's *The Women of the 116<sup>th</sup> Congress: Portraits of Power*; Kira Sanbonmatsu's "Women's Underrepresentation in the U. S. Congress" in *Daedalus*, vol. 149, issue 1, Winter 2020, p. 40-55; Emma Newburger's "These are the women making history as the 116<sup>th</sup> Congress is sworn in" in *CNBC* (<https://www.cnbc.com/2019/01/03/these-are-the-women-making-history-as-the-116th-congress-is-sworn-in.html>); "Women on the Campaign Trail" in History, Art, & Archives (<https://history.house.gov/Exhibitions-and-Publications/WIC/Historical-Essays/Assembling-Amplifying-Ascending/Women-Decade/>); Bethany Groff Dorau's "Diversity and Political Representation: Overview" in *Points of View: Diversity & Political Representation*, 2019, p. 1-3; Laurel Elder's "The Growing Partisan Gap among Women in Congress" in *Society*, 2020, 57, p. 520-526, and "Learn about ten notable Congresses in Women's fight for equal representation" in *Britannica.com* (<https://www.britannica.com/study/history-of-women-in-congress>).