



Rethinking Women's Political Power

Purpose and Methods

- **State Political Ecosystems:** The interconnected systems, networks of individuals and organizations, and overall environments in which both formal and informal politics occurs.
- Interviews conducted with 192 political actors across five states – Georgia, Illinois, Nevada, Oklahoma, and Pennsylvania between November 2021 and June 2023.



Key Findings

- **Rethinking Political Power:** To maximize women's political voices and influence in their full diversity, it is necessary to rethink our definition and measures of political power.
- **Problem Definition:** In order to address gender inequality within political ecosystems, women's lack of political power must be defined as a problem in need of solution.
- **Building Support Infrastructure:** Existing support infrastructures for women are helpful but insufficient to see gains in women's political power across sites, groups (racial/ethnic, partisan, class), and stages of the political process.
- **Structural Barriers and Opportunities:** Structural realities related to money, work/family responsibilities, white and male dominance, and party strength and influence offer both persistent barriers and opportunities for increasing women's political power.
- **Social/Political Barriers and Opportunities:** Social/political realities resulting from cultural evolution, critical moments in U.S. politics, and the expansion of women's political leadership have offered opportunities for women's political empowerment, while persistent sexism, racism, and heightened toxicity both inside and outside of political institutions present distinct hurdles to women in politics.



Rethinking Political Power

- Reframe the conversation from numbers to power, from titles to influence and outcomes.
- Expand:
 - Definitions of political power
 - Measures to evaluate women's political power
 - Sites to increase women's political power
- Political power is not concentrated in any one role/position, including solely in elective positions, in state political ecosystems.
- Holding elective office does not yield the same amount of political power and influence for all officeholders – including women.



Rethinking Political Power

“There is this system of white male patriarchy in the legislature that permeates regardless of whether or not we’re the most diverse legislature.”



Selena Torres (D-NV)
State Assemblywoman



Rethinking Political Power

“There’s racism in the legislature. There’s racism within the lobbying groups where they’re like, ‘I don’t like that legislation.’ And you’re like, ‘How is it different that [a white woman is] carrying it? Is it less threatening?...We’re seen as it’s a threat to carry legislation that moves the needle for minority communities. And it’s insane that that can even be the case.”



Dina Neal (D-NV)
State Senator



Rethinking Political Power

“To me at this point, as a Democrat and a woman in a huge supermajority legislature, it feels like martyrdom.”



Merleyn Bell (D-OK)
Former State Representative
*Interview conducted in February 2022
before Bell left the legislature.*



Rethinking Political Power

- Expand focus to unelected positions of political power.
- Train women on how to exercise, not simply attain, power, and establish alternative sites for resources – money, votes, and vocal and coordinated support – that women leaders can rely on when they stand up against the status quo.

- Appointed positions on public boards and commissions at local and statewide levels
- Individuals in both appointed and high-level staff positions at state agencies and/or regulatory authorities
- Legislative staff
- Campaign and party staff and operatives
- Political consultants
- Registered lobbyists
- Individual donors
- Major industries, including their political action committees
- Tribal governments and tribal community and industry
- Voters
- Grassroots advocates/activists
- Unions
- Civic institutions, including schools, churches, think tanks, non-profit organizations, and community foundations
- Political parties, including party organizations, party campaign committees, and elected party leaders
- Critical actors

Problem Definition

Republicans are:

- Less likely than Democrats to identify systemic and distinct barriers to women's political representation and power within their states' ecosystems;
- More likely than Democrats to cite women's doubts and/or preferences as the primary cause for their political underrepresentation;
- Less likely to support and engage in targeted interventions to increase diversity among candidates and officeholders; and
- More likely to doubt that nonpartisan or bipartisan efforts to increase women's political power are meant for/helpful to them.



Problem Definition

- **Value proposition:** The lack of gender parity in political leadership is undemocratic and yields inferior or unfair outcomes.
- **Electoral Proposition:** The lack of gender diversity among candidates is bad for party optics and/or misses opportunities for electoral advantages.
 - Limits on political power
 - Relies on perceptions of electability
 - Context-dependent



Problem Definition

- Think creatively about how to engage Republicans in work that will increase women's political power.
 - Less explicit focus on women-targeted messages and approaches
 - Pressure in non-targeted infrastructure to address barriers to women
- Put more women and people of color in positions of political authority – including party leaders, chamber leaders, and leading practitioners – to increase likelihood that gender and intersectional disparities are problematized and addressed.



Building Support Infrastructure

- Support infrastructures for women in politics are under-resourced and heavily reliant on volunteers, including women political practitioners doing this work alongside their full-time careers.
- Infrastructure needs include mental health supports and financial assistance beyond campaign donations.



Building Support Infrastructure

- Support infrastructures do not serve *all* women.
 - Dearth in supports for:
 - Officeholders
 - Unelected women
 - Republican women
 - Asian, Black, Latina, and Native women
- Many women's political organizations are led and/or resourced by white women.



Building Support Infrastructure

When I look for gatekeepers...it's white women. Your gatekeepers are white women. Look at every organization...any program that trains people how to run for office is run by white women. ...It's like we have to prove to the white women and not necessarily that they are holding office. They are running these spaces that become key when you want to run for office. ...Going back to infrastructure, where will Latinas go? Where do we go? Anything Latino or Hispanic is run by Latino men and...[we] might as well go with the white women and give them the sense of the white savior. ...And to them, sometimes it feels like we're some sort of charity work to help a Latina that wants to run for office. ...And then you walk into these spaces and [there's a] disconnection. ...They just don't understand how the system works for us, Latinos and immigrants. ...[It] goes back to what does [the] infrastructure look like for Latinas or for women of color? ...It's almost like I have to put up with [white-women-led organizations] if I want to run for office because they put it like 'the sisterhood.' We have each other's back, we help each other. ...So yes, they have a board that...looks diverse but it's still white women teaching women of color how to be leaders in our community."



Cecia Alvarado (D-NV)
Democratic Political Consultant

Building Support Infrastructure

- Invest in programs and organizations that serve women at specific intersections of race and gender.
- Fostering racial/ethnic inclusion in existing women's political organizations beyond increasing diversity of program participants or contributors; re-allocate power over organizational decision-making, planning, and resource distribution.
- Engage in dialogue with diverse communities of women, especially those who feel underserved by the existing supports that target women and/or for whom gender-targeted support is not a priority.
- Create coalitions that enhance reach, capacity, and coordination among organizations and individuals committed to increasing women's political power.





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Briefing for Women's
Political Organizations

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