

Gender Representation and the 2022 Midterms

Dr Amy Tatum

Key takeaways

- No significant change for numbers of women in the United States Congress following previous historic midterm results.
- Record numbers of women elected in gubernatorial races across the country, but a lack of intersectional representation.
- Important wins for trans and non-binary people at state level races that shows promise for substantive representation.

Introduction

In the 2022 midterm elections gender played a part not only in the makeup of the candidates but issues of gender dominated political discourse in the run up to election day. Abortion rights, predominantly impacting women, continued as a divisive and galvanising campaign topic and the war being waged against the trans and non-binary community was prevalent in rhetoric at the state and national level. The election results painted a mixed picture for issues of gender representation and although there were not substantial gains across the board there were significant and important wins that should be recognised.

Gender representation in all areas of politics is vital in order to encourage substantive representation within political institutions. [Substantive representation](#) means not only representing a group in terms of identity but importantly representing the *interests* of that group. In terms of women gaining political representation Professor [Sarah Childs](#) warned not to mistake women's bodies for feminist minds. Such a warning can be applied to all areas of gender representation, having the bodies in office does not assure that meaningful representation of issues will follow. However, in order to increase policies and legislation that will define, protect, and defend all genders, research has shown electing members of those groups is necessary in order to raise such issues on the political agenda. This paper explores the results of the midterm elections through the lens of gender and substantive representation.

Women in United States Congress

The [numbers of women elected to Congress](#) in the 2022 midterm elections did not reach new heights that could herald a leap forward for women's political representation. 149 women will serve in the 118 Congress which is an increase of 2 on the preceding Congress. This now means 27.9% of Congress identifies as a woman. The disparity between the two parties remains with 107 of the 149

Congresswomen belonging to the Democratic Party. In the House and the Senate there was an increase of 1 woman following these elections.



Image 1: The US Capitol, 2020

The 2018 midterm election was largely viewed as the [Year of the Woman](#) with record numbers of women winning seats nationally in both the House and the Senate. It was hailed as a direct response to Donald Trump's 2016 election win and a show of solidarity against he and his supporters' misogynistic rhetoric. Boatright and Sterling, in their book [Trumping Politics as Usual](#) argued that the language used by Trump against women had, and would have, an impact across the political spectrum and would trickle down to all political races, making misogyny more acceptable and a substantial voting motivation. The 2022 election results arguably can be seen as a response to this with less gains for women as would have been expected following the most recent trends.

The lack of repeated growth in representation for women in Congress is a disappointing midterm result and is one that potentially is concerning for gender scholars. In recent years, we have seen a rise in misogynistic rhetoric in politics, and women's roles and rights have been a constant source of political discourse. The recent abortion rulings from the Supreme Court and state legislatures have meant that women's rights have been at the forefront of these midterms however, this has not resulted in higher numbers of women in Congress. In the 1990s [Susan Faludi](#) wrote of the "Backlash", she argued when there is a perception that there have been advances in women's equality, a backlash ensues in response in order to keep any advances in check. This is to counter any threat to patriarchal dominance and creates a more hostile environment for women. Evidence of this backlash could be pointed to in order to explain the stagnation in numbers of women in Congress and an ever growing narrative around threats to masculinity and women's traditional roles within society.



Image 2: Then House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, 2019

One significant event for gender representation to come from this midterm cycle has been the end of the tenure of the first, and only, woman Speaker of the House of Representatives. Nancy Pelosi has been, arguably, the most powerful woman in United States politics and has been seen by many as a trailblazer for women in leadership and political office. In her [resignation speech after the election](#) she said, “I never would have thought that someday I would go from homemaker to House speaker”. Pelosi has been a powerful symbol of women in political leadership in the United States in the 2000s and again since 2019. She has represented women in leadership during a time of increased misogynistic rhetoric under the previous president and has been a vocal presence in domestic and foreign affairs. The response to her departure has evoked praise for her glass-shattering tenure. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez [said her leadership](#) “has had profound ramifications for the United States”, Senator Elizabeth Warren [called her](#) leadership “barrier-breaking”, and former Representative Gabby Clifford [tweeted](#) “strong women get things done!”. Speaker Pelosi’s departure from the national stage will mean an absence of women in positions of leadership in legislative politics and with it brings a return to the dominance of the male political archetype.

Governors

Outside of the executive branch of the federal government, the role of governor is one of the most prominent political positions in United States politics. Although the scope of the role differs depending on state constitutions, the role of governor is politically powerful and symbolic. After the 2022 midterm elections there will be a record number of women holding the position of state governor, the number will sit at 12, up from 9. Arkansas, New York, and Massachusetts elected their first women to the office of governor in the midterm elections. Women will now make up 24% of governors across the United States. [Research](#) has shown that in midterm elections candidates for governor can bypass more national trends and through targeted media campaigns, focusing on social media, can “counteract or exploit” gender stereotypes. Arkansas’ Governor-elect Sarah Huckabee Saunders, the state’s first woman governor, created a social media campaign that emphasised both her communal and agentic traits. Her [Instagram](#) bio reads “Christian. Wife. Mom. Arkansan.” with her feed

focusing heavily on her pro-gun stance and her role as caring, loving homemaker. Huckabee Saunders navigates the gendered terrain but balancing her role as a wife and mother, with her more agentic policy stances. By evaluating the campaigns the women holding gubernatorial office ran, so could there be important clues for women seeking executive office at the federal level and provide key insights into voter responses to women candidates.



Image 3: Boston, Massachusetts, 2016

When evaluating the historic gains women have made in gubernatorial races it is important to recognise that of the 12, 11 are white women. Only 1 governor, Michelle Lujan Grisham, is Hispanic, notably Grisham was the first Democratic Hispanic woman governor in United States history. A record 6 Black women ran for governor across the nation in the 2022 midterm election, [DeArbea Walker](#) explored the role Black women played in electing President Biden in 2020 and the impact of seeing Vice President Harris in office. Hopes were high for seeing the first Black woman governor in United States history however, this was not the midterm for such a historic win. This lack of intersectional representation of women in the position of Governor has important implications for women of colour across the United States and speaks to the barriers that face women of colour when seeking political office. When thinking of the substantive representation that the women governors provide for their constituents, this lack of representation of women of colour speaks to a lack of potential focus or understanding of the lived experiences and needs of large proportions of constituents in each state. Celebrating the wins in terms of gender representation at the state level is a must, but it would also be wrong to not recognise the enduring absence of women of colour within state executive office across the United States.

Trans and Non-binary Wins

Although there were no trans or non-binary winners in the United States Congress midterm elections, [there were important wins at the state level](#), which has been called a [Rainbow Wave](#) for the LGBTQ community. [Gay Times reports](#) there

were 1065 queer candidates on the midterm ballots and 466 of those were elected. Notably in relation to gender, New Hampshire elected its first trans man to the state senate in James Roesener, he is also the first openly trans man to be elected to a [state legislature](#). Montana and Minnesota elected their first trans lawmakers to the state legislatures in Zooey Zephyr and Leigh Fink. Sarah McBride, who became the first trans woman state senator in history, was re-elected to the Delaware state senate. Montana also elected its first non-binary state representative in SJ Howell. These ground breaking wins follow a recent [increase in anti-LGBTQ proposed legislation](#) and a rise on specifically [anti-trans campaigning](#). [Research](#) shows that LGBTQ politicians are vital in advancing the rights of the LGBTQ community, and members of the community in the United States are much more likely to be disadvantaged within society, especially within the [trans community](#). After her historic win [Representative Zephyr said](#) on her motivation to run for office, “watching bills pass through the legislature by one vote, I cried and thought to myself, ‘I bet I could change one heart, I bet I could change one mind. We need representation in that room, I’m going to try to get in there”.

As discussed previously, substantive representation for trans and non-binary people is needed in order to ensure legislatures and institutions are representing these communities. Ann Phillips calls it the [politics of presence](#) and argues representation of lived experience is vital. Such wins for trans and non-binary people at the state level represent a significant move forward for the political presence of different genders, and has the potential to provide important progress for gender trans and non-binary people.

Conclusion

Gender representation remains an issue in United States politics at all levels and in all branches of government. The recent midterm elections showed modest gains for gender representations and for many scholars studying women’s roles in United States politics specifically, they could be seen as disappointing. From an intersectional perspective the persistent lack of women of colour in political office remains a serious concern. However, it is important to recognise the state wins for women in governor’s offices, and also state wins for trans and non-binary candidates. Substantive representation of different gender identities is paramount to ensuring democratic institutions speak for differing lived experiences. In time the hope would be that the developments at state level will be reflected in federal offices and chambers. For the coming two years, in the run up to the next elections, it will be important for parties to focus on fostering inclusion and intersectional diversity in their candidate selection, and for existing office holders to be representing their communities in a meaningful, substantive way.

Image Credits:

Image 1: The US Capitol, 2020

<https://pixabay.com/photos/capital-usa-government-landmark-5043172/>

Image 2: The House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, 2019

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nancy_Pelosi_%2847999011913%29.jpg

Image 3: Boston, Massachusetts, 2016

<https://pixabay.com/photos/boston-massachusetts-city-urban-1775870/>

Bio:

Dr Amy Tatum: Amy is a lecturer in Media and Communication at [Bournemouth University](#). She has recently completed her PhD exploring women's responses to women in political leadership. Her research focuses on gender in politics, representation, media influence, and leadership. She recently published an article on perceptions of women leaders at times of crisis and has written regularly for the [LSE blog](#) on gender and politics in the United States. Research in progress includes a book chapter on American First Ladies in Vogue Magazine, and articles on women in political leadership and constructions of gender.