

Perceptions of Women Elected Officials in Utah: Challenges, Benefits, and Lessons Learned

Setting the Stage

For many years, Utah has been at the bottom of the rankings for women running for and serving in elected office.¹ Although significant strides have been made in increasing the number of women serving in these roles in recent years, there is still work to be done. For example, Utah is currently ranked 32nd in the country for female representation in state and federal office,² Utah has never elected a female governor or a US Senator, and only two women have served in statewide executive offices. In addition, research in recent years has documented lower percentages of women in county and municipal elected positions compared to nationwide averages.³ Yet, American democracy is grounded in the idea of representation,⁴ and research has found that residents and communities benefit when more equal numbers of men and women work together in decision making and problem solving.⁵

Growing a state's "political pipeline" or "opportunity pool" is an important factor in improving elected female representation. This pipeline is a bench of individuals a party pulls from, either organically or formally, to run for office.⁶ Research shows that when women serve in a statewide elected office, women in those states have higher levels of political activity, knowledge, interest, and efficacy.⁷ Young women also show a greater interest in politics when there are women serving in high-profile government offices.⁸ Generally speaking, when women see other females serving in office (particularly those of their same party affiliation), they are more likely to engage in the political process and feel connected to the political system.⁹ Research confirms that female political role models can influence the choices made by other women to enter politics, which can amplify the political voices of women.¹⁰

To prepare Utah women to run for office most effectively, there needs to be a deeper understanding of women's experiences in both running for and serving in political offices. Until now, such an in-depth qualitative research study has not been conducted. The findings in this brief can be a resource for women in terms of what to expect, and it can also help individuals, groups, and entities improve the ways they encourage and support women as candidates and elected officials.

Study Background

To learn more about the experiences of women in elected public offices, the Utah Women & Leadership Project (UWLP) team collected data for an in-depth qualitative research study during May and June of 2020. Current and former female elected officials were recruited via email, social media, and through listservs of various organizations.

Data were collected through an online survey designed to capture the experiences of women running for and serving in public office. The survey asked participants to provide basic demographic information and then to answer the following questions:

1. What initially motivated you to run for public office?
2. What benefits have you experienced while running for and serving in office?
3. What challenges and/or barriers have you experienced in running for and serving in elected office?
4. What were some of the key lessons learned and personal/professional development gained from your experience in running for and serving in elected public office?

All data from these questions were carefully analyzed and coded, but only selected highlights are included in this research and policy brief.

Participant Demographics

The demographics for the 118 women who responded are summarized below (see Table 1).

Table 1: Participant Demographics

<i>Age:</i> 20–29 years old (0.8%), 30–39, (8.5%), 40–49 (34.7%), 50–59 (27.1%), 60–69 (19.5%), 70+ (9.3%)
<i>Marital Status:</i> married (88.1%), separated/divorced (2.5%), single (3.4%), widowed (4.2%), domestic partner (0.8%)
<i>Highest Educational Level:</i> high school diploma (0.8%), some college (11%), associate degree (5.9%), bachelor's degree (40.7%), master's degree (32.2%), doctorate degree (9.3%)
<i>Race:</i> White (93.2%), Hispanic/Latina (2.5%), two or more races (2.5%), Asian (0.8%), Other (0.8%)
<i>Number of Children:</i> none (8.5%), 1–2 (20.3%), 3–4 (44.9%), 5 or more (25.4%)
<i>Elected Offices Held:</i> City Council (61.9%), State Legislature (18.6%), City Mayor (11.9%), Local School Board (10.2%), County Commissioner/County Council (8.5%), Special District (3.4%), Other State (2.5%), Other City (1.7%), U.S. House of Representative (0.8%), State School Board (0.8%), Other County (0.8%) [Several women indicated they had held multiple elected offices]
<i>Years Served:</i> 0–5 (61.9%), 6–10 (24.6%), 11–15 (8.5%), 20+ (0.8%)

The Decision to Run

When Utah women were asked what motivated them to run for public office, the top three reasons listed by participants were as follows: they were asked and/or encouraged to run, they had a desire to make a difference and contribute to their community, and they were dissatisfied with the status quo.

1. **Asked or Encouraged to Run:** Of the 118 participants, 44 (37.3%) specifically noted that they were encouraged or asked to run by a mentor, elected official, or community leader. Participants stated they were “asked to run,” “recruited to run,” “strongly encouraged to run,” and that “nudges from friends and colleagues initially planted the seed.” This aligns with national research that shows women are more likely to run when encouraged, recruited, or asked to.¹¹ One participant shared, “I didn’t consider running until someone called me and suggested I run. I filed the next day.”

A survey of state legislators conducted by the Center for American Women and Politics shows that while 43% of male legislators decided to run for office on their own, just 26% of female legislators said that the decision to run for office was their idea. In making the decision to run, 53% of female legislators said they had been encouraged to run by someone else, while 23% of men claimed that their bid for elected office was suggested by someone else.¹²

2. **Make a Difference:** The second theme that emerged was the desire to make a difference and contribute to their community. Forty-four participants (37.3%) discussed wanting to have a real impact on their community, to address local and state issues, and to have a seat at the decision-making table. One participant stated, “I saw that my city needed change. In speaking to residents, many felt they weren’t being listened to by the council at the time. I truly believed I could be the voice they were missing.” Another said, “I really do want to make a difference and have a seat at the table in making policy for the state.” These women believed that they can and do make a difference, with one participant sharing, “I believed then and believe now that I can make a difference not only for my constituents but residents across the state.”

3. **Dissatisfaction with Status Quo:** Forty-two (35.6%) participants referred to frustration with decisions that had been made, policies that were or were not implemented, or a lack of leadership. One female elected official said, “I was motivated because the same people had served in the same position for years and years, and I felt they did not represent me or others like me. I thought, if I did not run, who would? It was not an act or desire for power or recognition, but rather trying to bring different and important views into the considerations on issues before our municipality.” Another participant stated, “I felt the current representatives were out of touch . . . and not reflective of the current

demographic of educators and parents.” Several women noted wanting to see more female representation, with one current official stating that she “wanted more representation of women in office for my children. It was important to have a voice at the table.”

In addition to these top three reasons, 18 (15.3%) shared prior experiences they had serving in their community in an unelected capacity that led them to the decision to run, while 17 (14.4%) mentioned running with a specific policy goal in mind. Eleven (9.3%) women said they ran because of the example of a mentor in their life, and another 11 (9.3%) said they ran because they felt they had relevant and needed experience. Nine women (7.6%) mentioned how important it was to have their family’s support, and seven (5.9%) stated that they felt the timing was right in their life (e.g., they were retired, or their children were grown).

Benefits

Next, the 118 former or current elected officials shared perspectives on the benefits they experienced while running for and serving in office. The top three benefits included building relationships and networking; increasing knowledge through continual learning and gaining a greater understanding of the process; and having the ability to influence policy change while giving back to the community.

1. **Relationships & Networking:** Overwhelmingly, the top benefit was relationships, according to 62.7% (74) participants. Chances to meet new people and to build relationships with fellow policy makers, staff, community leaders, and constituents were a major benefit. One respondent stated, “I have met neighbors and residents that I never would have met. It has been a joy increasing my circle of friends.” Other participants said they “loved meeting so many people from all different backgrounds” and appreciated the “relationships they developed.”

In conjunction with relationships, networking was mentioned specifically by 28 (23.7%) participants who had opportunities to interact with community members, leaders, and other influencers who were helpful personally and professionally, as well as in their capacity as elected officials. One participant said, “The relationship-building has extended my network and helped me feel even closer to my community.” Another shared, “Because of your position, it is a natural platform that elevates your ability to influence and create change. Additionally, it puts you in a place where you can network with other legislators across the country to develop and create legislation.” Thirteen women (11.0%) highlighted specific opportunities that had come from the relationships built during their public service. Some of these opportunities included serving on various boards and commissions, attending national conferences and workshops, joining organizations, and having post-service employment.

2. **Opportunities to Learn:** Of the 118 participants, 55.1% (65) shared that one of the major benefits they enjoyed was the opportunity for continual learning, including an increased understanding of procedural processes. From learning legislative processes and studying city, county, and state code, to researching complex issues and creating policy, it was clear that running for and serving in an elected position provided opportunities to learn and grow. Some referred to the initial learning curve and fast-paced learning environment. One participant stated that it was rewarding to learn “how to navigate government to achieve policy goals,” while another said serving in elected office was “like earning a master’s degree as a state legislator.”
3. **Influence Policy While Giving Back:** The third emerging theme related to the benefits that women experienced while running for and serving in office was the ability to influence policy change and, in so doing, to give back to their communities. Fifty-seven (48.3%) women highlighted this as a benefit. Participants mentioned having “a seat at the table” and having an active role in the decision-making process. Women found it “incredibly rewarding” to be able to drive, influence, create, force, nudge, and advocate for change and to have a voice in policy decisions that affect constituents and their communities. One participant stated that her “voice has been amplified.” Another felt she had a “tremendous amount of influence on the course of government.” These elected women saw the value of playing an active role in making improvements to their communities.

In addition to these benefits, 14 (11.9%) participants noted the opportunity of involving their children and/or partners or spouses in the process of running and serving, 11 (9.3%) mentioned increased confidence, and 10 (8.5%) stated that setting an example for others to follow was also a benefit for them.

Challenges & Barriers

The top four challenges the elected women shared were experiencing gender bias; being subject to public criticism, rumors, and personal attacks; meeting the time commitment; and facing the challenges associated with running for office.

1. **Gender Bias:** The most common challenge, cited by 40 women (33.9%), related to gender bias and specifically focused on being treated differently because they were women. They spoke of navigating the “old boys club” or having to “break through” the “good ol’ boy” network. Women shared experiences of being talked over or down to, feeling “dismissed” and “mansplained,” and being asked inappropriate and personal questions. Participants reported feeling “discounted,” “discredited” and “overlooked,” and noted that they had been mistaken as secretaries because of their gender. Others named inappropriate touching from male colleagues as replacements for handshakes—with attempts for hugs or kisses on their cheek, hand, or back. One woman said she had comments on her weight and was told she would be more effective if she would try flirting with her male colleagues. Another participant

shared, “Men have patted my arm and told me to calm down when all I have been doing is stating my opinion.”

Participants also shared experiences of being judged for serving while having children still living at home and of being asked how they would balance family and elected duties, whether or not their husband supported them, who would watch their children, and how they could even consider running with “young kids at home.” One woman shared that it was assumed she was unable to fulfill her duties because of her family. Another woman was judged for not having children. In reference to child rearing, one participant offered, “Sexism is alive and well, and in my experience, it comes from women just as much, if not more, than the men!” Another summarized her experience, “I absolutely was treated differently as a woman, and that was incredibly frustrating. As much as I enjoy policy making, I don’t know that I’ll ever want to do elected office again. It was that awful.”

2. **Criticism, Misinformation, & Personal Attacks:** Thirty-nine (33.1%) participants shared that they had received criticism, particularly on social media, for the way they voted on the issues they supported. One woman stated that she felt that women were under a “magnifying glass of criticism.” Thirty (25.4%) participants felt that a lot of misinformation was spread on social media, exacerbating this challenge. Seventeen (14.4%) former or current officials described mean-spirited and accusatory interactions with people both in-person and online, and they advised others who serve not to “read the comment section.” In addition to social media, participants stated that neighbors, friends, and people they encountered while doing their day-to-day personal errands were upset with them over decisions and/or votes.

Survey respondents discussed developing thick skin and/or needing to have a “healthy self-esteem” because people will “tear you down.” Women shared feeling as if they had opened themselves up to criticism like they had “never before experienced.” One participant stated: “Politics is the only place that slander is legal.” Another shared that “public scorn, humiliation, and slander” were the biggest challenges of serving in elected office. Participants endured false accusations of inappropriate relationships with developers, selling or consuming illegal substances, abandoning their children, and being reported to Child Protective Services. One participant shared, “We often hear it lamented that there are too few women in politics. This is true, but it is understandable. I have had to search long and deeply to figure out why I am willing to subjugate myself to ugly rumors and innuendo as well as seemingly eternal hours studying hundreds of pages of minutes and counsel packets just so I can represent the best interest of my these same constituents who regularly vilify me.”

3. **Time Commitment:** The third challenge mentioned by 33 (27.9%) participants was the time commitment of serving in elected office. Participants highlighted the challenge of

juggling the demands of serving in an elected office, campaigning, family, and work. One participant said, “This job will take over your life, if you let it. And sometimes I do. I don’t take care of my health the way I always have, I don’t get nearly enough sleep, I’ve gained weight though I hardly have time to eat, and I’m always trying to make sure I don’t short change my family. . . . Wearing so many hats is rewarding and challenging. There are simply NOT enough hours in the day.” Commenting on her service while a mother, another respondent stated: “We need more women in politics even though it is sometimes challenging to balance home life and public service. I don’t want my kids to feel slighted, but I believe they are better for my service. They have learned valuable skills as they’ve had to figure some things out when mom is gone.”

4. **Running for Office:** Twenty-four (20.3%) of the women identified a variety of challenges associated with running for office. They listed challenges such as fundraising, opponents’ negative campaign tactics, long hours, and lack of knowledge about how to run a campaign. They also listed emotional challenges associated with running, which involved “digging deep” to find their confidence and being willing to put “yourself out there.” One participant shared, “Both of my election runs were personal crucibles that shined lights on my personal flaws and insecurities.”

Fundraising was one component of the campaign process named by 18 (15.3%) participants as the most challenging aspect, particularly for those running as non-incumbents. One elected official stated, “Fundraising is hard for all first-time candidates. Prior to receiving a party nomination, it is incredibly hard to secure big donations. For me it was a lot of grass roots, small-dollar donations, and loaning my campaign the money.”

In addition, 13 participants (11.0%) mentioned challenges associated with their party affiliation. For example, several Democrat women felt like it was more difficult passing legislation and that they faced additional challenges running in a Republican-dominated state. Conversely, some Republican women felt that they needed more party support. One woman stated, “Republican women are not as well organized or supported through party structures as Democrat women’s organizations are.” This was echoed by another woman who simply stated, “Running as a Republican woman is hard.” One participant explained, “In the minority party, you have more challenges as far as workload” with committee assignments, while another woman stated, “The biggest challenge in running for office in Utah was that I was a woman and a Democrat.”

In addition, 11 women (9.3%) identified challenges related to the time it took to learn the policy-making processes, including the task of learning the correct procedures and verbiage. Finally, some noted that the actual process of implementing change took longer than they would have liked.

Lessons & Development

Study participants shared a range of lessons they had learned and skills they had developed or improved since taking office. The top four themes were leadership skills; increased resilience; an appreciation and understanding of the importance of relationship building, collaboration, and compromise; and self-confidence.

1. **Leadership Skills:** Sixty-five participants (55.1%) identified a wide variety of leadership skills and traits that they developed, including management skills, problem solving, time management, strategic thinking, critical analysis, adaptability, accountability, listening, communication, public speaking, interpersonal skills, honesty, gratitude, patience, and organizational skills. One woman stated, “Every day you learn how to improve speaking and oral communication skills, writing skills, sharpen critical thinking skills, persuasion, creative thinking, problem solving, and find satisfaction in addressing issues that affect people every day. . . . Elected office is incredibly underappreciated as an option and opportunity for women.”

Communication was a key leadership skill mentioned by 37.3% (44) of the participants as being critical for an elected official. Other responses underscored the importance of listening to constituents, interacting with voters, and providing both accurate information and regular updates to constituents. When addressing complex and heated issues, respondents discussed the importance of talking less and listening more, as well as keeping an open mind and maintaining civil dialogue. One woman stated, “Fair representation involves listening and engaging.” Another said, “I have learned that the most important aspect of public service is in effective communication with those who elected you.”

2. **Resilience:** As participants discussed the challenges they faced and the lessons they learned, resiliency was mentioned by 39.8% (47) of the women. They discussed the need to develop thick skin and to be “tough” and develop a deep emotional resiliency to public criticism and personal attacks. Women referred to the need for bravery, courage, and boldness, as well as working to “overcome fears.” To emphasize the need for thick skin, 17.8% (21) of participants specifically said, “You can’t make everyone happy.” One elected official said, “I have grown as a leader. I’m bolder, my skin is thicker. . . . This office comes with automatic haters, whether they know you or not. And that’s hard!” She also stated that she believes that one of her favorite quotations on leadership by Steve Jobs is true: “If you want to make everyone happy, don’t be a leader—go sell ice cream.” Another woman stated, “Breaking glass ceilings hurts and is painful. . . . It’s worth the pain, and eventually you become more resilient and care less what others say and think of you.”

Some participants believed that resilience also related to discussions regarding policy debates. Respondents emphasized the importance of not taking votes personally and the need to recover quickly from setbacks. Several women discussed the need for grit and determination. One stated, “Determination and a little bit of grit get you a long way,” while another wrote, “I absolutely love what I do, but it is the hardest thing I have ever done.”

3. **Relationships, Collaboration, & Compromise:** Thirty-seven (31.3%) study participants made it clear that among the lessons learned were building valuable relationships with constituents, colleagues, and staff; collaborating with colleagues and stakeholders; and acknowledging the necessity of compromise. The women felt they received benefits and personal growth through developing genuine friendships, partnerships, and mentorships, and of having other “women in your corner.” Women emphasized that “relationships are key” and that “success is determined by the relationships you make and the alliances you form. Governing successfully is a collaborative effort.” Participants highlighted the importance of expressing gratitude for all of the people with whom they worked and the overall need to “establish and foster genuine relationships.”

Some participants also mentioned the need to stand their ground and to accept the reality and value of compromise. One elected official stated, “Compromise isn’t selling out, it’s sharing. We are sharing this world with lots of people who think differently than we do, and compromise is admitting that every voice matters.” The theme of relationship-building and compromise is reinforced in research that shows women tend to “look for win-win instead of win-lose solutions” and are more comfortable with compromise.¹³

4. **Increased Self-Confidence:** Finally, 35 (29.7%) of the female elected officials shared their realization of how valuable their perspectives and voices were in the decision-making process. These women were comfortable in having a seat at the table and shared the importance of trusting your gut, being authentic, speaking up, being comfortable asking questions, and staying true to oneself and one’s values. Increased confidence was noted by participants who said that they had learned to “speak up and speak out.” One woman observed, “I have seen that my different perspective has proven to be invaluable in many situations.”

Advice

In addition to the experiences, lessons learned, and personal development these women shared, many offered advice to women running for and serving in public office. The following lists include a condensed summary of the top pieces of advice shared by Utah’s elected women who responded to the study. This includes 10 representative quotations from participants about “What to Do” and 10 quotations related to “What Not to Do.”

What to Do:

1. Be transparent and honest.
2. Be yourself, do your best, and have no regrets.
3. Stay true to your values and trust your gut.
4. Talk straight, keep it brief, and stand your ground.
5. Be prepared with the facts; read, research, and ask questions.
6. Be tough and develop a thick skin—there will always be those who will criticize your efforts.
7. Remain professional even if others do not; the system (political parties) may not support you but do it anyway.
8. Take some time off if you are struggling, even just a walk or an escape to a movie.
9. Be brave and bold, flexible but consistent, kind and humble, and gracious and grateful.
10. Remember that while making yourself subject to public scrutiny is challenging, the example you set for others is powerful.

What Not to Do:

1. Do not short-sell yourself.
2. Do not feel dumb asking questions.
3. Do not be afraid to speak up and share your perspective.
4. Do not doubt your reason for serving or your ability to do so.
5. Do not ask permission or be afraid to challenge “authority.”
6. Do not apologize for your passion; if something is important to you, then speak up.
7. Do not take things personal.
8. Do not engage in social media arguments; share your perspective without being argumentative.
9. Do not rush into decisions; weigh all sides of an issue.
10. Do not be afraid to look someone in the eye and ask them for a donation for your campaign; they are investing in the cause, the platform, and the principles you represent.

Need & Recommendations

In addition to the questions asked in our survey, participants were invited to share any additional thoughts. Twenty-two (19%) used the opportunity to underscore the importance of women serving in elected office. One participant shared, “We need good women to serve. . . . The best policy is made when both men and women have a seat at the table. Our communities need us, and I had no idea how much my life needed this experience.” Another elected official said, “More women need to get involved in the government and leadership roles. We have so much to bring to the table. Different viewpoints and problem-solving strategies are crucial to the process.” Speaking to women who feel like they stick out in a male-dominated entity, one legislator said, “Being different doesn’t mean you don’t belong, it means your voice is needed more than ever.”

Clearly, many challenges, benefits, and learning opportunities accompany running for and serving in elected office. As Utah

works toward increasing female representation in elected offices, we offer the following recommendations:

1. **Ask and Encourage Women to Run:** Participants in our study and national data both show that women are more likely to run for office when they are asked and encouraged to run. With that in mind, we encourage party leaders, community leaders, and residents to actively seek out and encourage qualified women to run for office.
2. **Be a Mentor or Sponsor:** Formal and informal mentors and sponsors are valuable for women when considering whether to run and serve. Former and current elected officials—both female and male—can make a difference by reaching out and mentoring women who are engaged in their communities and who decide to run for office.
3. **Support Women Candidates:** Supporting women candidates can help move the needle for women in politics within Utah. As one researcher stated, “If women are to achieve parity in elective office, most of the gains will have to come from the GOP.”¹⁴ To that end, we encourage all political parties to do more in terms of actively recruiting and training female candidates to run for office. We also encourage parties to work closely with existing non-partisan organizations that are already successfully providing these programs: **Real Women Run** and the **Women’s Leadership Institute**. In addition, providing financial support to female candidates is significant in helping them overcome some of the barriers of running.
4. **Support Leadership Development of Young Women and Girls:** We must continue to encourage parents, teachers, coaches, leaders, and mentors to help girls and young women develop leadership skills and resilience by sharing examples of women who are serving in their communities and by providing leadership opportunities more generally for girls and young women.

Conclusion

As Lt. Governor Kerry Healey of Massachusetts stated, “The mounting issues facing our country are complex. If we’re going to solve these problems, we can no longer afford to leave the talent of half of our nation out of the conversation.”¹⁵ As is shown by the lived experiences of the women in this study, more can be done to support women in their runs for elected office and in their service as elected community leaders at all levels of Utah government.

There are many things to consider when making the decision to run for an elected office. When female candidates enter politics with a clear understanding of the challenges, lessons learned, and advice, they are better prepared with strategies and the necessary support to address issues and concerns they might encounter. We believe that understanding the benefits of running and serving will outweigh the risks and challenges that may emerge. Utahns need more women to run and serve

in elected posts at all levels of government, and the research is clear that as we do so, we can lift all Utah residents and the state as a whole.

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¹³ Madsen, S. (2015, January). Why do we need more women leaders in Utah? *Utah Women & Leadership Project*. <https://www.usu.edu/uwlp/files/briefs/10-why-do-we-need-more-women-leaders.pdf>

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