

# The Status of Women in Utah Politics: Counties, Mayors, City Councils, and Boards of Education

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Several national reports earlier in the past decade ranked Utah last or near last in terms of women being in positions of decision making and leadership, including a 2013 Center for American Progress report titled “The State of Women in America: A 50-State Analysis of How Women Are Faring Across the Nation” (Chu & Posner, 2013). These and other rankings most often use the following four criteria: 1) gender wage gap, 2) educational attainment, 3) women in management roles, and 4) women serving in state legislatures. Research released through the Utah Women & Leadership Project and the Utah Women & Education Initiative has also confirmed that Utah has been below the national average in these areas (see <http://www.uvu.edu/uwlp/research/briefs.html>), although more recently, some improvement has been seen (McCann, 2019).

The lack of women serving in public office in the state of Utah has been troublesome for many reasons, including the negative affect it has had on decision making at all levels of municipality, county, and state governance. Not having equal representation of men and women in elected positions means that our residents are not receiving the representation needed for all voices to be heard. In addition, Utah does not and will not receive the hundreds of benefits research has uncovered related to more diverse and inclusive leadership teams and governance boards (Madsen, 2015). Decisions

by local and state elected leaders impact the physical, social, emotional, intellectual, environmental, financial, and even spiritual health of individuals and families who live in Utah.

Because of this, it is important to understand the current status of women in Utah politics, and this report specifically highlights gender data on counties, mayors, city councils, and boards of education. Tracking progress through updated status reports is an important way to help decision makers and other influencers clarify what is working and to determine and refine best steps moving forward. The following sections report on the areas previously outlined by highlighting national data and then comparing it with Utah data. The research methods related to collecting the data have been integrated into each section below.

## Counties

Nation: Despite often being overlooked, county government plays an important role in the lives of individuals and the governing of counties within the state. The National Associations of Counties (NACo) points out that county leadership does in fact matter as counties deal heavily with transportation and infrastructure, community health, criminal justice, and public safety (National Association of Counties, 2015). In addition, county leaders deal with important community issues such as agricul-

ture, workforce development, energy, land use, and education (National Association of Counties, 2019). Working with NACo’s research team, we collected data from a gender study they conducted of county elected officials in 2015. According to NACo, women made up roughly 12.7% of county boards and just 7.8% of county executives. Interestingly, women held 38.2% of elected county row officer seats (e.g., clerk, auditor, treasurer, recorder, assessor, sheriff, controller, district attorney, register of wills, coroner). Overall, in 2015 women made up 24.8% of elected county positions nationally (National Association of Counties, n.d.).

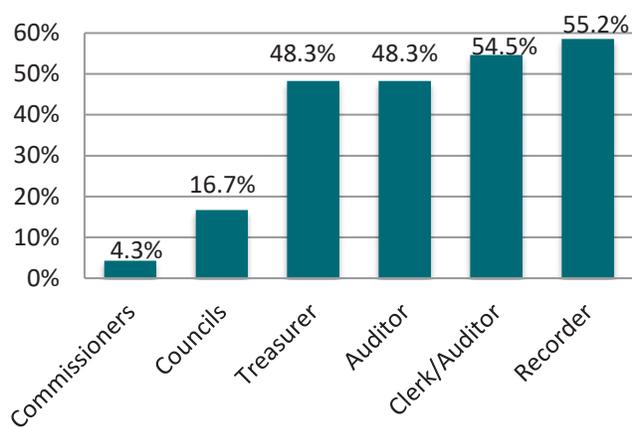
Utah: For Utah, we collected 2016 county data from links listed on the Utah Association of Counties website. We then compared the 2016 database with the lieutenant governor’s online election results site to determine the number of county officials elected in 2016. These results were then verified through contacting county clerks’ offices. Of the 29 counties in the Utah, 23 have elected commissioners, while just six have elected county councils (Cache, Grand, Morgan, Salt Lake, Summit, and Wasatch). In addition, each county elects a clerk/auditor, treasurer, recorder, and assessor. In 2017, of the 69 county commissioners in Utah, 66 (95.7%) were men and three (4.3%) are women, serving in the counties of Beaver, San Juan, and Sanpete. Of the six county councils with a total of

42 seats, 35 (83.3%) council members were men, while seven (16.7%) were women. It is also interesting to note that of the 42 elected county council positions, eight of them are “at-large” positions, representing the entire county; seven (87.5%) of these were held by men, and just one (12.5%) was held by a woman (Salt Lake County).

Additional elected county positions for 2017 revealed that, of the 33 county clerk/auditor seats, 18 (54.5%) were held by women, and 15 (45.5%) by men. There were more than 29 positions, as some counties split the position of clerk and auditor, while most combined the two into one position. The position of county treasurer was split fairly evenly, with 48.3% of seats held by women and 51.7% held by men. Women held 16 of 29 (55.2%) county recorder seats. The position of county auditor was held by 15 men (51.7%) and 14 women (48.3%). We were able to collect county data from both 2016 and 2017 and reviewed the election results to see how many seats were gained and lost. Five seats held by women in 2016 were filled by men in 2017.

Overall, the legislative bodies of county commissions and councils in Utah were overwhelming held by men (91%), while 52.5% of the predominantly full-time elected positions of clerk/auditor, treasurer, recorder, and assessor were held by women. See Figure 1 for a summary of county offices held by Utah women in 2017.

**Figure 1: County Seats Held by Utah Women, 2017**



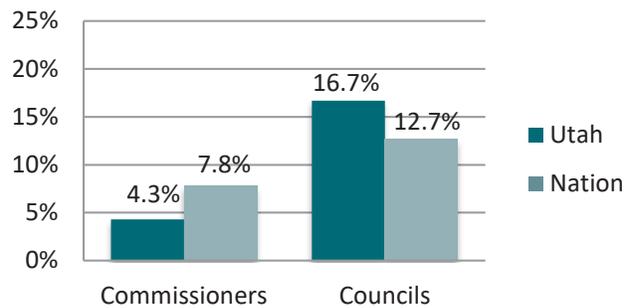
Compared with the 2015 national data, it may appear that in 2017, Utah was slightly ahead of the national trend, with 31.2% of all county elected official positions held by women, compared to the nation at 27%. However, it is important to note that our data did not include many of the male-dominated positions (e.g., sheriff, attorney), and that most counties in Utah do not have the more male-dominated county row officer seats that are often included in counties across the United States. Hence, it is difficult to compare Utah to the nation accurately.

In 2017, of the 29 counties, only three had exclusively male county elected officials from top to bottom (Davis, Utah, Washington). Twenty-two of the 29 counties had two or more females serving in county elected positions. Yet, of the 23 counties that elect commissioners, just three counties had a female commissioner, and all represented rural areas. Of the six county councils, five had at least one female county council member (Cache, Grand, Morgan, Salt Lake, and Summit), while the Wasatch County Council was all male.

### Mayors

Nation: According to the National Foundation for Women Legislators (n.d.), the number of women serving as mayors, on city councils, and as county commissioners is slightly on the rise. In 2019, the percentage of female mayors of cities with a population of at least 30,000 (1,412) increased to 20.9%, an increase since 2016 (when there were 1,391 women mayors) (Center for American Women and Politics [CAWP], 2016 and 2019). Three Utah mayors were included on the 2016 list: Paula Larsen (Kearns), JoAnn B. Seghini (Midvale), and Jackie Biskupski (Salt Lake City). In 2019, 6 Utah mayors are women: incumbents Biskupski and Larsen, along with Michelle Kaufusi (Provo), Dawn Ramsey (South Jordan), Kristie Steadman Overson (Taylorsville), and Debbie Winn (Tooele) (former Mayor Seghini retired in 2018 after more than 30 years in Utah politics). Among the 100 largest cities in the United States, 20 had women mayors (20%) in 2016, which is a slight increase from the number we listed in our

**Figure 2: County Seats Held by Women (Utah vs. Nation)**



2014 report. It appears that 52 (21.8%) of the 238 U.S. cities with a population over 100,000 had women mayors in 2016 (The United States Conference of Mayors, n.d.). As of March 2019, per the U.S. Conference of Mayors, of the 288 mayors of the U.S. cities with populations 100,000 and over, 59, or 20.5%, were women (CAWP, 2019a).

Utah: In 2016, the Utah League of Cities and Towns (NLC) listed 242 municipalities in the state. All but about 30 had websites with mayor information, and calls were made or emails sent to the remaining city or town offices. Of the 242 municipalities studied, 22 had women as mayors (9.1%), reflecting an increase from the 7% we reported in 2014 (Madsen & Backus, 2014). Of those 22 mayors, three represented cities with populations of 30,000 or more; in Utah, 29 cities have populations of that size, which means that 10.3% of mayors of those cities as of 2016 were women. Most female mayors in Utah serve cities with populations of 10,000 or less. See Table 1 with details regarding female mayors by municipality population.

**Table 1: Women Mayors in Utah by Municipality Population, 2016**

Municipality Population	No. of Female Mayors	Total No. of Mayors	% of Female Mayors
100,000+	1	4	25%
30,000–99,999	2	25	8%
20,000–29,999	1	8	12.5%
10,000–19,999	1	21	4.8%
5,000–9,999	3	27	11.1%
Less than 5,000	14	157	8.9%
Total	22	242	9.1%

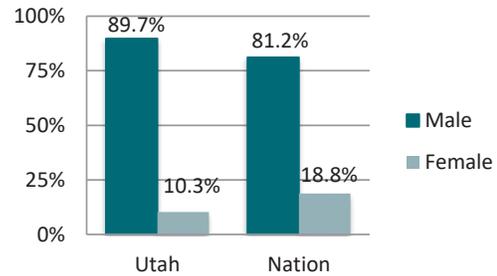
Available national data track the gender of mayors only in cities with populations of 30,000 or more, so Figure 3 represents a national average comparison with Utah in terms of mayoral seats in municipalities with that populace.

### City Councils

Nation: Unfortunately, the National League of Cities (NLC) no longer tracks gender data and has not done so for quite some time. However, we were able to find data on the gender balance of city councils of the 15 largest cities in the country for 2016. According to Next City, “men [were] in the majority on all councils studied, though by a relatively small margin in D.C. (where the council is 46 percent female) and in San Diego, Pittsburgh and Detroit (all 44 percent)” (Kinney, para. 8, 2016). Los Angeles had the worst gender imbalance by far with only 7% female members, with San Jose as the second worst at 18% female membership. This article noted that the loss or gain of one female member makes a big difference in percentage. The author found that the overall share of women city council members in these specific cities declined from 33% in 2010 to 30% in 2016 (Kinney, 2016).

In terms of more national historical data on city councils, the NLC reported that representa-

**Figure 3: Mayor Seats by Gender with Populations of 30,000 or More (Utah vs. Nation, 2016)**



tion of women on U.S. city councils increased between 1989 and 2001. They found that the “proportion of women grew from 21 to 25 percent in small cities, 25 to 36 percent in medium-sized cities, and 33 to 36 percent in large cities” (National League of Cities, n.d.). However, between 1979 and 1989, there was actually a drop in gender diversity on city councils from 32% to 26% (NLC, n.d).

Utah: For Utah, we collected data from every municipality in the state that had a council (N=241). We gathered information from websites, and then emails and calls were made to obtain the data that were not available online. In Utah, 24.1% of city/town council seats were held by women in 2016 (see Table 2 for council member numbers and percentages by municipality population). The four largest cities in Utah had the fewest women represented (11.5%), while all other population ranges had between 21.2% and 27.5% females serving in elected positions.

**Table 2: Women Council Members in Utah by Municipality Population**

Municipality Population	No. of Females	Total No. of Seats	% of Females
100,000+	3	26	11.5%
30,000–99,999	34	126	27.0%
20,000–29,999	11	40	27.5%
10,000–19,999	28	102	27.5%
5,000–9,999	28	132	21.2%
Less than 5,000	164	685	23.9%
Total	268	1111	24.1%

Our analysis showed that as of 2016, there were 58 councils with no women; yet, and there were no clear patterns in terms of population size. One of those councils, West Jordan, is one of the four largest cities in Utah (hence 25% of these municipalities had no women), while four of 25 cities with populations of 30,000–99,999 had no women (16% of them). Two of eight cities (25%) with populations of 20,000–29,999, four of 21 (19%) cities with populations of 10,000–19,999, nine of 27 (33.3%) with populations from 5,000–9,000, and 38 of 156 (24.4%) with less than 5,000 people had councils with no women. It appears that 112 councils in Utah had one woman serving in 2016, while 58 had two women, 12 had three, and only one—Marysvale—had all four seats held by women. Overall, as of 2016 24.1% of all council members in Utah municipalities were female, which put Utah below the national average of data gathered historically in 1979 (32%), 1989 (26%), 2001 (25–36%), and 2016 (30–33%).

Only one town or city in Utah's history has had an all-female mayor and city council. According to Southern Utah News (2012), "Kanab made history in 1912, when its newly-elected mayor and city council took the oath of office making it the first time in the history of the United States where the town board and mayor were entirely comprised of women."

### Boards of Education

Nation: In January 2014, the National Association of State Boards of Education (2014) provided a list of each state's board of education membership by gender. It appears that, in 2014, 48.6% of state board members across the country were female. The states with the highest percentages of females at that time were Colorado (85%), South Dakota (78%), Alabama and Nebraska (75%), and Louisiana (72%). The states with the lowest percentages of females on boards of education were Missouri (16.7%), Mississippi (22.2%), and Oklahoma and West Virginia (25%).

Only two sources of national data have reported the gender of school district board members

historically. First, a 2002 report (Hess, 2002) stated that 38.9% of board seats nationally were held by women at that time, with larger districts having higher percentages than smaller districts. However, a more recent 2010 National School Boards Association study (Hess & Meeks, 2010) reported that 44% of school district board seats across the United States are now held by women. Although a more recent report has not been published, this number has most likely increased since 2010; indeed, as of 2019, the NSBA still reports this percentage (NASB, 2019). The Hess & Meek study also found that male board members dominated in small districts, where men constituted nearly two-thirds of board members, but they made up just under half in large- and medium-sized districts.

Utah: In Utah, eight of 15 (53.3%) State Board of Education elected seats in 2016 were held by women; however, from 2017 to the present, that number has increase to 11 of 15 (73.3%). This is a significant increase from past years and puts Utah as one of the highest states nationally for the percentage of women on a state school board. Currently the Utah State Charter School Board of Education has five of seven (71.4%) seats held by women, but these positions are appointed, not elected.

Utah has 41 school districts throughout the state, and each district has an elected board of education, typically with either five or seven seats. We collected data about these boards via websites, emails, calls, and then followed up by checking the lieutenant governor's election results website after the 2016 elections (Utah Lieutenant Governor's Office, n.d.). The 2016 data reflect that, of the 234 total district board of education elected seats in Utah, women held 112 (47.9%). For 2017, the number of women decreased, but only by one (N=111, 47.4%). As of 2019, the Utah school district school boards that have the highest percentages of women include the following: Logan City (100%), Salt Lake City (71.4%), Emery (80%), Grand (80%), Murray (80%), Davis (62.5%), and Granite (71.4%). It does appear that the larger districts have more women, and the districts that

have no women are rural; yet, some rural districts do have a strong percentage of women serving, so no pattern emerged.

Overall, Utah is above the national average in terms of the percentage of women serving on the state board of education (73.3% vs. about 50%) and is at least average, if not slightly above, for women holding district board seats.

### Moving the Needle

National statistics have shown that women win elections at the same rate as men, but that fewer actually run (Real Women Run, n.d.). The bottom line is that women will not get elected unless they run for office—if their names are not on the ballot, they cannot get votes. Dr. Jennifer Lawless, Director of the American University's Women and Politics Institute, stated in a USA Today article that “the issue isn't that [women] don't have the credentials or the background anymore. The issue is that that's not sufficient to get them to run for office” (Moore, 2013, para. 10). She explained that, according to studies, there are still just not enough women running for office. This phenomenon was confirmed again in a 2016 article published in The New York Times, titled, “The Problem for Women Is Not Winning. It's Deciding to Run” (Miller, 2016). This is true both nationally and in Utah; it remains one of many key challenges related to why Utah does not have more women serving in elected public office.

The section that follows will first focus on what Utahns can do to prepare more girls and young women to run for office later in life and then provide ideas for more immediate solutions. In terms of what Utahans can do to prepare more girls and young women to run for office, we have three suggestions. First, all children and youth can be taught to be involved in their communities, and they can learn that it is a civic responsibility to serve in the community in various ways, including running for public office. The importance of community and civic engagement can be discussed and modeled

in various settings throughout a person's lifespan. Second, we must help girls and women understand the importance of running for office, provide them with experiences that will increase their aspirations to do so, offer quality networking and mentorships, and create developmental opportunities that will help them see themselves as being able to positively influence people and policy. Finally, girls, teens, and women can attend events and gatherings around the state (see, for example, <http://www.uvu.edu/uwlp> for statewide listings and leadership summer camps for girls) that help them become aware of the issues and that can also help strengthen the confidence, aspirations, ambitions, and motivations to lead. In addition, those in positions of influence (e.g., parents and relatives; school teachers, counselors, and administrators; political, business, and religious leaders; and college and university administrators, faculty, and staff) are encouraged to attend events as well so that they can more effectively encourage, develop, and strengthen girls and women toward leadership.

Initial findings and national studies have shown that certain types of shorter-term efforts can also result in more women running for elected office and winning these elections. First, Utah women can be actively engaged in their local precincts by attending their caucus meetings and running for delegate positions. Both major parties in the state operate on a caucus system, and even with the passage of SB 54 (enabling candidates to go the petition route), running as a state delegate can provide women with opportunities to participate in the local, state, and national levels of politics. This may provide them with opportunities to interact with other like-minded individuals, run on a lower scale for an elected position, and network with influential elected leaders in the state. Caucus dates and times are posted on both the Republican and Democratic State Party websites. In addition, women can also determine the issues and causes they are most passionate about. Becoming an advocate for these issues can build leadership and networking, and it can also compel women to do more.

Second, Utah women—whether they are interested in running for office or not—can attend Real Women Run (RWR) trainings and events to learn about becoming more civically engaged. RWR is a “collaborative nonpartisan initiative to empower women to participate fully in public life and civic leadership through elected political office at all levels, appointments to boards and commissions, participation in campaigns, and engagement in the political system” (Real Women Run, n.d.).

Third, women who are interested in running for elected office at the city, county, state, or national level can also join a cohort in the Women’s Leadership Institute’s Political Development Series. This six-month interactive and instructive program teaches women the how and why of running for public office (Women’s Leadership Institute, n.d.).

Fourth, female college students can join training and development programs that provide them with tools to be more engaged in running for student body offices on their own campuses. One such program is Running Start (n.d.), which is a daylong workshop on why and how to run for public office—starting with student government. This national program, through a nonpartisan project, partners with universities around the county to host these on campuses.

Fifth, those in leadership positions can strategically recruit more women for these roles. In addition, since the majority of Utah women who run and win do so through the Democratic Party, we call on local and state Republican leaders and politicians to carefully analyze the practices, processes, culture, and opportunities that, through unconscious bias, may be preventing women from running, winning, and serving. We also call on Republican women to step forward and lead in their party as well. However, progress can be made in strengthening the impact that women can have for the state of Utah through all political parties.

This article has summarized available research on the status of women in Utah politics in Utah counties, cities (mayors and councils), and with boards of education. It was written to provide a more detailed look at the past and current state of affairs and should be beneficial as a benchmark for measuring improvement in years to come. It was also written as a call to action for Utah residents and leaders to do more to encourage and support future efforts to diversify voices on Utah’s Capitol Hill and in cities and counties around the state. Although there has been some progress in the last few years, we encourage Utah leaders and residents to do more to implement and support these efforts. We also call upon Utah women to step forward and better serve our communities by adding their important voices to govern and lead Utah and its municipalities and counties.

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