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Candidates Matter: Gender Differences in Election 2016

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After election 2016, women remain less than one-quarter of elected leaders at all levels of office. Through decades of work and research on why women’s underrepresentation exists and persists, experts have identified the most direct hurdle to reaching greater gender parity in government: a persistent dearth of women candidates. Of course, women confront multiple barriers and challenges in seeking candidacy that result in gender disparities on primary and general election ballots. Women are not free from gender-based challenges once they become candidates, but research has repeatedly shown that when women run, they win at the same rates as their male counterparts in comparable races, even if they take different (and perhaps more difficult) paths to electoral success.

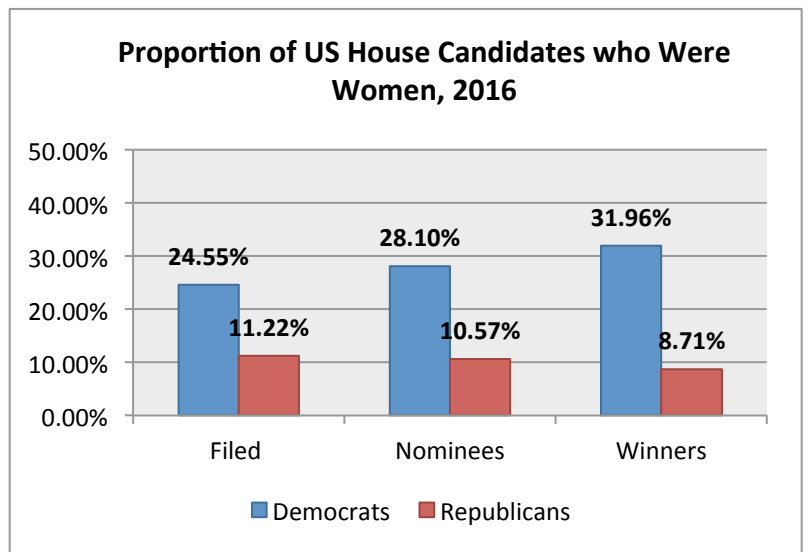
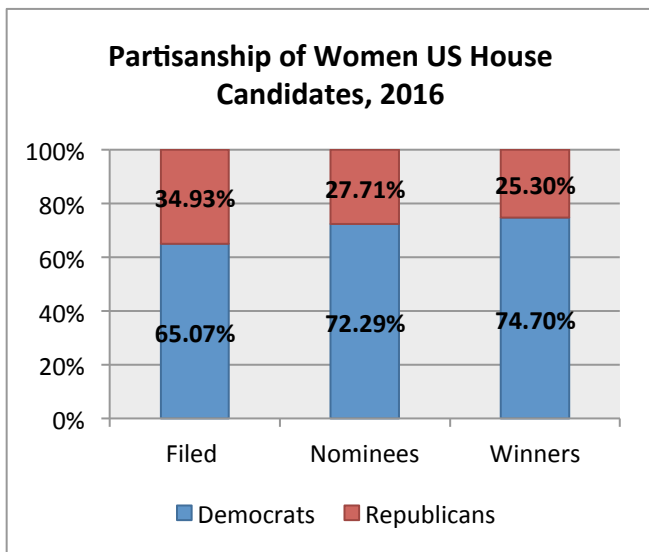
We looked at gender and party differences in candidate numbers and success in election 2016 to better understand why women made so little progress in representation. Our data demonstrates, consistent with research to date, that there appears to be no consistent gender disparity in candidate win rates; the real gender disparities exist in the proportions of women and men running at each phase of the electoral process. These conclusions are consistent across party, though the dearth of women candidates is particularly acute in the Republican party.

While researchers will have to take a more complex look at candidate success in 2016 with attention to contextual variables not included here, this first pass at the data affirms the myriad efforts to strategically recruit and support potential women contenders for political offices at all levels in upcoming elections.

US House

The number of women filing to run for the US House in 2016 (272) fell short of the record high that filed in 2012 (298). In 2016, 167 women were nominees for House seats (meaning they won their party’s primary election), one more than the previous record of 166. Of those nominees, 83 women won their races, one fewer than the 84 women who won in 2014.

Republican women remained a minority of women candidates running and winning House seats in election 2016. They were 35% of the women who filed as major party candidates for House races, 28% of women nominees, and just one-quarter of the women who won in November 2016.



Note: Only major party candidates are included in counts. Source: Center for American Women and Politics, Rutgers University

Democratic women, while a majority of all women running for the House, represented just one-quarter of all Democrats who filed for House contests in 2016, though they were 32% of all Democratic winners. Republican women fared worse within their party; they were 11% of Republicans who filed for House seats and just nine percent of all Republican House winners in 2016.

Democratic women outperformed their male counterparts in both the primary and general election, while Republican women fared slightly worse than Republican men at both stages of election 2016. Non-incumbent Republican women actually won their primaries at a rate just slightly higher than men, but fared worse than Republican men, Democratic men, and Democratic women in the general election.

2016 House Candidate Win Rates

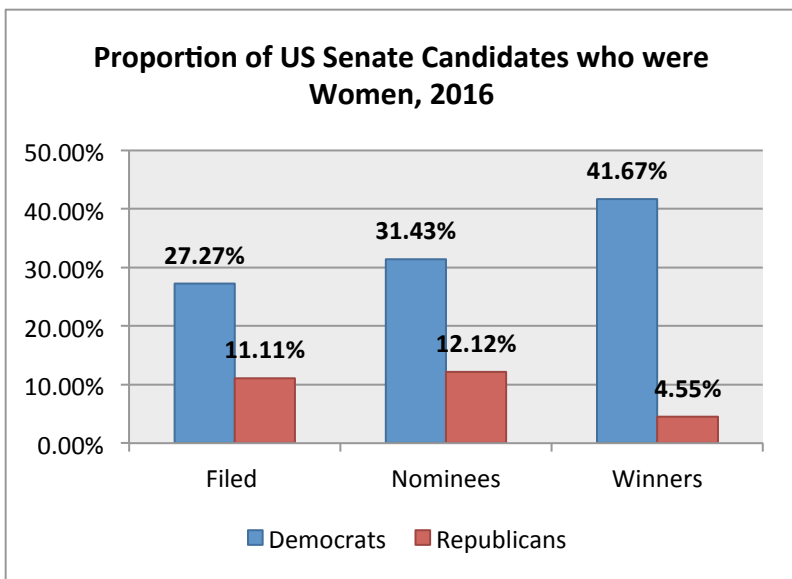
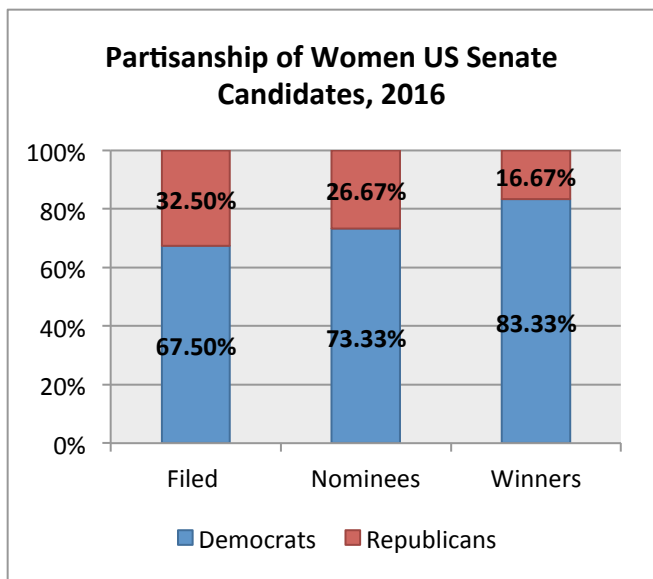
	Democrats		Republicans	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Primary	67.80%	56.43%	48.42%	51.73%
Incumbent	98.18%	99.14%	95.00%	99.00%
Non-incumbent	54.10%	44.86%	36.00%	34.48%
General	51.67%	43.00%	45.65%	56.56%
Incumbent	100.00%	98.26%	100.00%	96.98%
Non-incumbent	12.12%	9.90%	7.41%	14.21%

Source: Center for American Women and Politics, Rutgers University

US Senate

Forty women filed as US Senate candidates in 2016, four more than the previous record. Fifteen women won their primaries, falling short of the record 18 women nominees running in the 2012 Senate elections. Six women won their Senate races in 2016, joining holdovers to boost the total number of women in the Senate by one to 21 in the 115th Congress.

Democratic women were the majority of women Senate candidates at each stage of election 2016. Republican women were one-third of women who filed as major party candidates for Senate seats, 27% of female nominees, and 17% of women who won Senate seats in 2016.



Note: Only major party candidates are included in counts.

Source: Center for American Women and Politics, Rutgers University

Democratic women were also better represented among all Democratic candidates than Republican women were among their party’s 2016 candidates, though Democratic women were still a minority of filed candidates, nominees, and winners within their party. Still, Republican women were 11% of Republicans who filed, 12% of Republican nominees, and just 5% of Republican winners. Democratic women, on the other hand, were 42% of all Democratic Senate winners in a year when Democratic success was limited. Democratic women nominees competed in some of the most competitive Senate races of 2016, and five non-incumbents won.

Democratic women outpaced the success of their male counterparts at every stage and in each type of Senate contest. That success persisted among non-incumbent candidates, where 40% of Democratic women and just 6% of Democratic women won on Election Day. No non-incumbent Republican women were successful in the 2016 general election, while 22% of their male peers were elected.

Republican women were slightly more likely than their male counterparts to make it through their Senate primaries, though the difference in win rates is small. In the general election, however, only one-quarter of Republican women were successful, compared to nearly three-quarters of male Republican Senate nominees. This disparity is particularly large because of the dearth of Republican women nominees; just four Republican women were on general election ballots in 2017, and only one, an incumbent, was successful.

2016 Senate Candidate Win Rates

	Democrats		Republicans	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Primary	40.74%	33.33%	30.77%	27.88%
Incumbent	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
Non-incumbent	38.46%	27.27%	18.18%	10.71%
General	45.45%	29.17%	25.00%	72.41%
Incumbent	100.00%	100.00%	50.00%	95.00%
Non-incumbent	40.00%	5.56%	0.00%	22.22%

Source: Center for American Women and Politics, Rutgers University

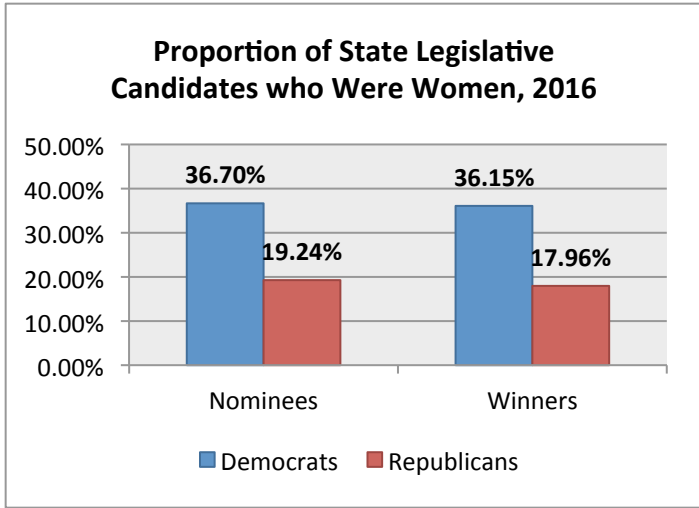
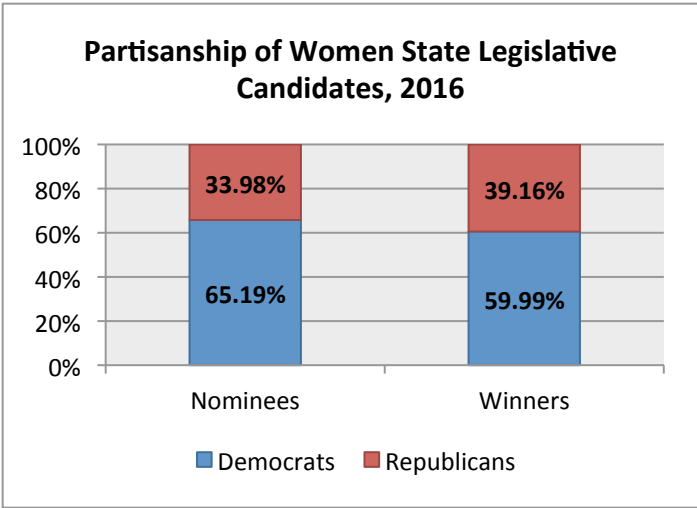
State Legislature

At the state legislative level, our candidate tracking begins at the general election stage, where 2,649 women were on the ballot. Democratic women bested their previous high for state legislative nominees by about 100 in 2016, while Republican women fell short of their previous high, set in 1992, by 14. Republicans were just 34% of all female nominees but 56% of male nominees on state legislative ballots in 2016.¹

Both Democratic and Republican women were underrepresented as a proportion of their party’s nominees, but Republican women fared significantly worse. Women were 37% of Democratic nominees for state legislative contests in 2016, while women were 19% of Republican nominees.

Democratic women were also a larger proportion of their party’s winners in 2016; 36% of Democratic winners and 18% of Republican winners for state legislative seats were women. But, in a year where Republicans fared better than Democrats in state legislative contests nationwide, Republican women nominees still won their races at a higher rate than their Democratic counterparts. Of the 900 Republican women nominees for state legislative offices in 2016, 600 – or two-thirds - won their races. In contrast, 53% of Democratic women nominees were successful. Republican women fared better than Democratic women in races for open state legislative seats in particular; nearly two-thirds of Republican women nominees won open seat contests, while 44% of Democratic women nominees were elected.

¹ Candidate counts exclude third party non-incumbent candidates, but includes non-partisan candidates from Nebraska.



Note: Counts include major party candidates, incumbent candidates of any party, and non-partisan candidates from the state of Nebraska.
 Source: Center for American Women and Politics, Rutgers University

The win rates among Democratic men and women were nearly equal in 2016 state legislative elections, though Democratic non-incumbent women fared better than Democratic non-incumbent men. Republican women also fared better than Republican men as non-incumbent candidates, but Republican men outperformed their female counterparts among all general election nominees.

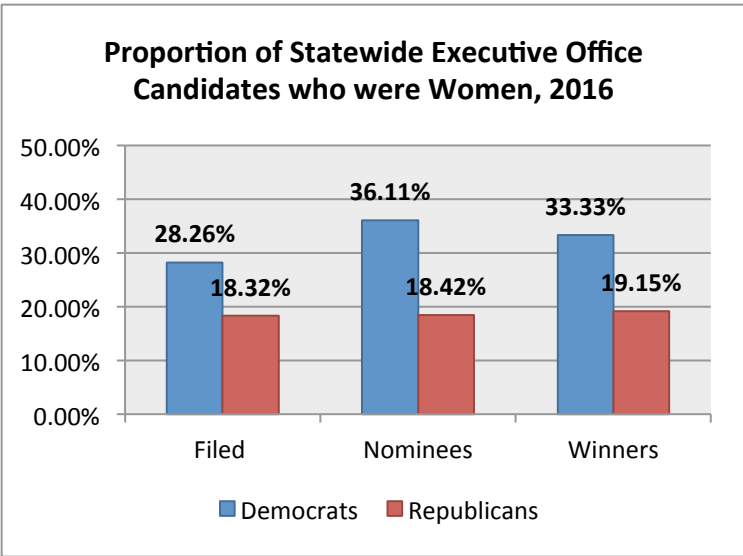
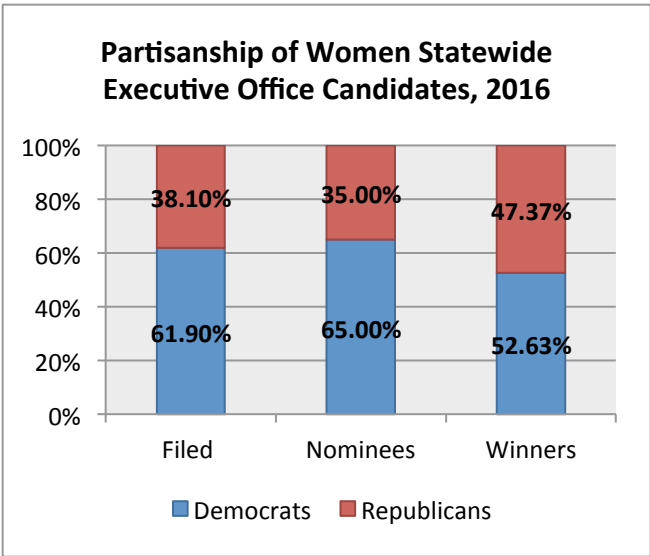
2016 State Legislative Candidate Win Rates

	Democrats		Republicans	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
General	53.21%	54.48%	66.67%	72.54%
Incumbent	94.57%	93.93%	94.50%	96.89%
Non-incumbent	23.79%	13.60%	35.83%	29.52%

Source: Center for American Women and Politics, Rutgers University

Statewide Executive Office

Despite making up a larger proportion of women in statewide elected executive office than Democrats, Republicans were a smaller proportion of women who filed, won primary contests, and won general election races for statewide executive office in 2016. The smallest partisan gap among women candidates was among winners of statewide



Note: Only major party and non-partisan candidates are included in counts. Source: Center for American Women and Politics, Rutgers University

executive office. The proportion of women among Democratic candidates, nominees, and winners of statewide executive office was greater than the proportion of women among Republican candidates at each stage of the 2016 election.

Though Democratic women were better represented among their party’s candidates, they had the lowest general election win rates among all statewide executive candidates in 2016. In contrast, nearly two-thirds of Republican women nominees won their races for statewide elected executive office, more than their Democratic or male counterparts.

2016 Statewide Elected Executive Office Candidate Win Rates

	Democrats		Republicans	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Primary	66.67%	46.46%	58.33%	57.94%
Incumbent	88.89%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
Non-incumbent	60.00%	40.45%	41.18%	51.09%
General	38.46%	43.48%	64.29%	61.29%
Incumbent	62.50%	90.00%	85.71%	93.33%
Non-incumbent	27.78%	30.56%	42.86%	42.17%

Source: Center for American Women and Politics, Rutgers University

For More Information

Find more information about women candidates and officeholders at all levels at <http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu>. Follow CAWP on Facebook ([facebook.com/womenandpolitics](https://www.facebook.com/womenandpolitics)) and Twitter ([@CAWP_RU](https://twitter.com/CAWP_RU)) for the latest news and data on women’s political representation.