

## **TACKLING WOMEN'S UNDERREPRESENTATION IN U.S. POLITICS: COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES FROM EUROPE**

**SASKIA BRECHENMACHER**

The United States has fallen behind most established democracies with respect to women's representation in politics. Women remain underrepresented at the federal, state, and local levels. The current uptick in women running for office, while encouraging, is unlikely to close this gender gap. To accelerate the pace of progress, U.S. reformers could learn from European experiences and push for measures that tackle broader institutional barriers to equal political representation.

### **A Transatlantic Perspective**

- In the United States, women generally win elections at the same rate as men—but they are less likely to run for office. The majoritarian electoral system, a strong incumbency advantage, gender-specific fundraising hurdles, and weaknesses in party recruitment reinforce this imbalance.
- In contrast, in many European democracies, proportional representation rules, party-driven candidate selection, and public election financing have provided a more conducive institutional context for women's advancement. Several European parliaments have also taken first steps to take stock of and improve internal measures of gender equality.
- In addition, European gender equality advocates have successfully lobbied for party-level gender quotas and targets to ensure the systematic recruitment of female candidates. After initial pushback, parties accepted these measures largely due to high levels of internal and external pressure as well as strategic electoral calculations.

### **Steps to Ensure Equal Access to Political Office in the United States**

**Expand ranked-choice voting in multimember districts**—beginning at the municipal and state levels—to push party officials to recruit a more diverse slate of candidates and weaken the incentives for negative campaigning.

**Institute mandatory or voluntary recruitment targets for political parties and well-resourced party mechanisms** to identify, recruit, and support women candidates—particularly at the primary stage and in open-seat races. This step would signal high-level commitment to gender parity and ensure the continuous recruitment of qualified female candidates.

**Establish gender parity targets for political action committees and provide fundraising support** to female candidates in primary campaigns to help overcome current inequities in candidate financing, particularly on the Republican side. In the longer run, shifting to public financing at the local level may also benefit women candidates and candidates of color.

**Collect systematic data on gender equality and women's experiences** to identify current barriers to women's advancement in Congress, state legislatures, and executive branches of government.

**Advocate for internal gender equality plans** that set out specific commitments to make legislatures and other branches of government more gender-sensitive—for example, by improving sexual harassment accountability procedures and prioritizing gender parity in leadership posts and committee assignments.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Saskia Brechenmacher is an associate fellow in Carnegie's Democracy and Rule of Law Program, where her research focuses on civil society, governance, and institutional reform in post-conflict societies and hybrid political regimes.

#### **CONTACT**

Meshal DeSantis  
Senior Media Relations Coordinator  
+ 1 202 939 2371  
mdesantis@ceip.org

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