

# SUPPORTING AND ELECTING WOMEN: WHY THE MAJORITY MATTERS

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## Introduction

In the United States, women are 51% of the population, and 60% of the voting population but are vastly underrepresented in government. Women interested in elected office often face barriers that disincentivize them from running for office. That said, women have a proven track record of success when it comes to winning elections and serving as legislators who show up for their constituents and pass impactful legislation. The New Majority NYC was established in 2021 to see if a focused and intentional effort to achieve authentic gender representation in the NYC Council was possible. By building political power for women and improving contextual receptiveness in the City, the organization proved that yes, it is. In 2021, New York City became the first major city in the United States to achieve gender parity in its legislature with the election of 31 women, a majority women of color, to the 51-member body.

This paper will review the landscape of women's underrepresentation in the US, the confidence gap, and will define 'contextual receptiveness' as the key to closing the gap. It will then examine how The New Majority NYC improves contextual receptiveness to achieve authentic representation in NYC and why electing women matters. The conclusion emphasizes the mission is not to elect women for the sake of gender, but for the sake of the communities they support.

## The Underrepresentation of Women in Politics

The promise of representative democracy remains elusive as women continue to be underrepresented in the United States. Despite making up 51% of the population and 60% of voters, according to the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University, in 2023 women held 28% of seats in Congress, 25% of the US Senate, and 28.7% of House. In 333 elected statewide executive offices, such as Governor or Attorney General, only 30% of positions were either led or co-led by women. Of 7,383 seats in State legislatures nationwide, 31% were held by women. At the local level, only 25% of cities are represented by women, and of the largest counties in each state, only 33% are led or co-led by women (CAWP, 2023).

### The Confidence Gap

American University researchers Jennifer Lawless and Richard Fox have studied the representation gap and determined that the primary factor contributing to the gap is that fewer women choose to run for office. Much of the disparity in representation can be attributed to women not believing they are qualified enough to run for office. Lawless and Fox determined in 2012 that a “confidence gap” prevents women from pursuing political careers. The study revealed only 57% of women believe they were qualified or very qualified to run for office compared to 73% of men, despite equal levels of political experience. Even when women were recruited and invited to enter into politics, they were wary of their own merits and unsure of their ability to do the job. According to Senator Susan Collins of Maine, the lack of confidence comes up more than any other issue when women are considering running for office. She notes that “over and over again, I have had potential female candidates say to me that they just don’t feel they’re quite ready, that they need more experience” (Miller, 2016). The confidence gap has resulted in qualified women not running for office.

### **Motivating Women to Run: Contextual Receptiveness**

The confidence gap is externally motivated and based on slowly evolving societal norms, subtle biases and stereotypes. The extent to which a political context is perceived as welcoming to women as political leaders is measured in terms of “contextual receptiveness.” Contextual receptiveness is also evolving and fungible. The political environment can encourage or discourage women from running for office (Wagner, 2019).

Research shows that states with high positive contextual receptiveness tend to have more women representatives in the House of Representatives. Increasing contextual receptiveness is the key to motivating more women to run. The factors that most influence contextual receptiveness are (1) the level of support for women's political leadership; (2) the prevalence of gender stereotypes in politics; (3) the presence of role models for women in politics; and (4) the level of media coverage of women in politics. (Wagner, 2019). Not surprisingly, the confidence gap is closely related to the issue of contextual receptiveness; a more welcoming political environment makes it easier for women to run. And when women run, women win.

### **When Women Run, Women Win**

Even though women run for office at lower rates than men, when they do run, they win at nearly the same rate as male candidates. According to a CUNY report that analyzed recent cycles of mayoral elections in the United States, 16.2% of female candidates won, compared to 17.6% of male candidates (Miller, 2016). Gender does not greatly impact rates of success. In other words, when women run, women win.

### **Benefits of Women's Representation**

When women lead, the community benefits. Studies regarding women in the private sector conducted by Harvard Business Review indicate that women leaders tend to have more engaged teams and inspire better job performance. Furthermore, the departure of women leaders can lead to declines in job satisfaction and performance among employees and declines in revenue losses for the organization. Women

leaders save organizations at least \$1.4 million per 1,000 employees annually by avoiding costs due to lost productivity and employee replacement (Afton et al, 2022).

These benefits extend to the public sector, with different measures of success. The more women elected to governmental office, the healthier the population. A 2019 study found that a 10% increase in women in government was associated with a 0.68% decrease in total mortality rates, a 1% decrease in male mortality rates, and a 0.44% decrease in female mortality rates (Muntaner & Ng, 2019). These trends are due to women's greater focus on health and social spending. Research shows that women in office have a greater focus on issues like violence against women, health care, and family policy (Muntaner & Ng, 2019). Representation clearly leads to greater attention to the needs of everyone. During the 2020 COVID pandemic in the United States, female governors had fewer state fatalities from the virus (Wittenberg-Cox, 2021), and in countries led by women, death rates were lower than in countries led by men. The authors attribute the results to the women leader's "proactive and coordinated policy responses" (Henley, 2020).

## The New Majority NYC

The New Majority NYC builds political power for all women in New York City by electing candidates that align with the organization's mission and values. By creating a welcoming and supportive environment for women in the political arena, The New Majority NYC improves the contextual receptiveness for women in the City to engage in electoral politics. The tools used by our organization range from early endorsements to mentorship and network building to training and education.

The New Majority NYC leverages endorsements to improve receptiveness by both endorsing in Primary elections and intentionally coming out one as the first organization to endorse in every election cycle. This is a strategic choice to encourage other organizations to follow and boldly declare support for women who have successfully passed the endorsement process. The strategy of early endorsements is unique to The New Majority NYC and has a tremendous impact on candidate recognition and the contextual receptiveness of NYC to women candidates. The endorsements also create positive media attention, and improved receptiveness.

Having support when running for office is critical. No one can win an election alone, and it is vital that women candidates have support and people power in their campaigns. In the 2023 New York City primary elections, The New Majority NYC contributed over 400 volunteer hours to thirteen endorsed candidates with contested primaries. Members, young leadership, mentors, broader community, and board members were directly involved in campaign activities like handing out literature, knocking on doors, attending rallies, and making phone calls.

The New Majority NYC mentorship program is a crucial form of support for women candidates. Each first-rank endorsee is paired with a New Majority NYC mentor who has previously held elected office. When navigating the difficult, complicated landscape of New York City politics, an experienced guide to turn to can make all the difference in a candidate's confidence. The New Majority NYC aims to create an

environment where all qualified women who care about serving their constituents can feel like they have the support to run.

The first female president of Mauritius, President Ameenah Gruib-Fakim, notes that “whenever a woman rises, we need to ensure that she stays there because she becomes that role model, she becomes that mentor to the younger people that younger girls can look at” (Collignon & Cowper-Coles, 2022). The “advancement and cultivation of women’s leadership” is a bottom-line issue for the organization. All endorsed candidates are asked to identify mentees to lift up after them. Once candidates are elected and experienced, they become mentors. This dynamic creates an ever-expanding web of mentorship which is pivotal for developing the “contextual receptiveness” necessary for women’s electoral success. Essentially, the more women are elected, the more mentors there are, and the better the receptiveness for women candidates.

The New Majority NYC hosts events that connect candidates, endorsees, and Council Members with experts and professionals involved in issues that align with New Majority NYC values. For example, The New Majority NYC has hosted events such as “The Rise of Latinas in Politics” and “Let Women Work,” which focused on connecting endorsed candidates with others interested in addressing the issues they care about, like Hispanic political power and labor. This not only builds relationships and grows the women’s networks, but it also helps lead the city toward powerful, positive change.

Support does not stop with the election. In addition to empowering women to win elections, The New Majority NYC also enables women to become the best legislators for their constituents as possible. The New Majority NYC hosts workshops and educational classes for newly elected Councilwomen and their staff to ensure they continue to develop confidence and effectiveness in their roles. To this end, The New Majority NYC has hosted classes that strengthen women’s ability to lead as

successful public servants, such as “Land Use 101” and “Your Council Office and Your Budget: Setting up for Success.”

At current electoral rates She Should Run, estimates that the United States will not reach gender parity for more than 130 years. We cannot wait that long. Adequate contextual receptiveness will not simply materialize unless we create it. That is what The New Majority NYC does, and the work has paid off.

### ———— The Majority Council's Accomplishments ————

With help from The New Majority NYC, women on the New York City Council reached a majority, with 60.8% of seats in 2021, outperforming and outpacing all other major US cities. However, achieving the majority is just the beginning.

Under Speaker Adrienne Adams, Councilwomen chair 70%, or 25 of the 36 NYC Council committees. The first-ever women-majority council has tackled issues previously overlooked by creating policies that benefit historically marginalized and underrepresented communities in the City. By addressing matters of equity and opportunity, healthcare, community safety, education, and housing accessibility, the new majority council has inspired long-awaited change not before seen from less representative councils.

To foster equity and opportunity, the new majority council secured \$60 million to increase salaries of human service workers, 46% of whom are women and women of color (Geringer-Sameth, 2021). The new majority council also improved the Salary Transparency Law to provide clarity for job seekers and help eliminate inherent bias in setting employee salaries to ultimately make an easier pathway for marginalized communities to gain employment. The council secured \$170 million within the city budget to expand the Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP), a long-standing program that was created to improve school attendance, academic achievement, and employment of low-income youth. While the program had suffered devastating cuts during the pandemic, the new woman-majority council reaffirmed the



importance of investing in youth and, in turn, the City at large. Additionally, they passed a five-bill package to increase the diversity of FDNY's firefighters through recruitment and retention policies that support women and people of color. This is the most substantial effort to date by the City to address historic discrimination and lack of diversity in the FDNY.

Within the first year of the majority, the council prioritized child care and maternal health, passing a package of eight childcare bills designed to expand access for working families and advance professional opportunities for women. This was a priority for the council. Additionally, they passed an eleven-bill legislative package to address persistent disparities in maternal and birthing health that disproportionately impact Black and Latina women and birthing people. The statistic that Black women are eight times more likely than white women to die of pregnancy-related causes illustrates a long-standing, tragic problem that has been unaddressed until now. The new majority council prioritized addressing this devastating statistic for the first time in New York City history. Moreover, the council enacted the historic NYC Abortion Rights Act with twelve separate pieces of legislation that safeguard and expand access to abortion and reproductive healthcare, including the first and largest abortion access fund in the country.

To tackle community safety, the Speaker secured \$5.1 million in funding to provide each council district with \$100,000 to expand crime victim services and community safety programs. In the wake of the Twin Parks fire in 2022, the worst fire since 1990 that took the lives of 17 New Yorkers, including eight children, the council passed six pieces of legislation addressing fire safety within 18 weeks of the fire (NYC Council, 2022).

To advance community education, the new majority council established the first-ever CUNY Reconnect Initiative, a \$4.4 million pilot program to bring back 10,000 working-age students who left CUNY with credits but without a degree. This initiative aimed to strengthen economic opportunities for New Yorkers, especially

women of color, who make up a disproportionately large group of these students (NYC Council, 2022). Once again, the new majority council effectively created opportunities for previously underrepresented New Yorkers.

Finally, the council passed the "Support Survivors" package during Domestic Violence Awareness Month. These two pieces of legislation require city agencies to establish a housing stability grant assistance program and to create an online portal and resource guide for survivors, who are disproportionately women. By allocating resources for domestic violence survivors, the council has provided the help survivors need to ensure their safety.

### Conclusion

While women's representation in government across the United States is increasing, the rate of change is too slow. To accelerate change, organizations like The New Majority NYC are improving the contextual receptiveness of electoral politics for women and removing confidence gap barriers through mentorship, media attention, and strong networks. NYC now has a majority women City Council. With these accomplishments, we can now begin to understand why it matters to have women legislators.

Women in government across the world and the United States have proven that when women lead, constituents are better off. Women lead with more proactive and better-coordinated policy responses to crises like the COVID-19 pandemic globally and the attack on abortion rights in the United States. The new majority council members in New York City have proven that when women, and especially women of color, hold office, they work to serve historically marginalized and underrepresented communities. They move faster, making bold investments in long-neglected areas of the City. Women in political leadership target issues concerning women's health, domestic violence, housing, education, and sustainability, focusing on the people

that the issues tend to affect the most. The work to support women is not just a matter of identity. It is the work of lifting up the communities they serve.

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