



Women's Council
· Wisconsin ·

WOMENSCOUNCIL.WI.GOV

FOR RELEASE

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JULY 2021 MARKS THE CENTENNIAL OF WOMEN HOLDING PUBLIC OFFICE IN WISCONSIN

Madison, WI (July 12, 2021) – One hundred years ago this week, the landmark 1921 Wisconsin Equal Rights Act was enacted - the first equal rights bill in any U.S. state. Two years after becoming the first state to ratify the 19th Amendment, Wisconsin was again being recognized nationally.

“TO REMOVE DISCRIMINATIONS AGAINST WOMEN AND GIVE THEM EQUAL RIGHTS BEFORE THE LAW.”

State legislation had allowed women to serve on School Boards since the 1860s, but they were barred from other elected or appointed public offices. Twenty years earlier, in 1902, then-Governor LaFollette was advised regarding a question about appointing a woman to a vacant local elected office, that “... until the privilege is extended to women by legislative enactment, she cannot participate in any branch of government or hold public office.”

That legislative enactment arrived as part of the 1921 Wisconsin Equal Right Act. The provision to “hold office” passed largely unremarked at the time, appearing fifth of seven in a list of new civil “rights and privileges” extended to women. But apparently women took notice, wasting no time gaining seats in a wide variety of elected and appointed office across the state.

Women in Elected Office Then

By 1923, Wisconsin had elected its first “Lady Mayor” (Crandon), county board supervisor (Brown County), “Aldermen” (Clintonville, Janesville, Marshfield, Mellon, Phillips, Platteville, Waukesha, Wausau), and dozens of village trustees and municipal clerks and treasurers, as well as many local appointed public offices. See, Wisconsin Women Council, [“Wisconsin Women Roared into Public Office in the 1920s.”](#)

In 1924, three women were elected to the Wisconsin State Legislature as the first “Assemblymen.” It took another 50 years to elect the first woman to the State Senate, 52 years to elect the Legislature’s first woman of color, and more than 75 years to send a woman to Congress from Wisconsin.

Women in Elected Office in Wisconsin Now

A century later, more than 3,100 women serve in elected office across Wisconsin, including (at last census) 26 mayors, about 400 county board supervisors, 450 city council members and 650 village trustees. Yet there is still work to be done. Even as women are running for and holding public office in unprecedented numbers, the representation gap is a long way from closing. For example,

- Women make up 50 percent of Wisconsin's population, but less than 30 percent of state and local elected offices, and hold only about 12 percent of elected leadership positions.
- Ninety-four percent of women in elected office in Wisconsin are found in local government, but account for only about one-in-four City Council members and one-in-seven Mayors.
- Women sworn into the 2021 Wisconsin State Legislature accounted for 31 percent of legislative seats, a new record, surpassing the old record of 29 percent first set in 1989. Women of color face an even larger representation gap, accounting for just eight percent of Wisconsin legislators. In this Centennial year, the Legislature seated its first Asian woman and has never elected a Native American woman.

The 1921 Wisconsin Equal Rights Act, overall, did not live up to the hopes of reformers, having included loopholes that undermined some reforms. Nonetheless, on the heels of suffrage, it presaged a modern era for American women and set Wisconsin women on a new path as government leaders. The next century of women in elected office in Wisconsin starts today. What we do with that is up to all of us.

Watch for additional media and publications in the coming weeks celebrating the Centennial of Women and Public Office in Wisconsin. Learn more about women and elected office, including data, video, and reports, on our website at <https://WomensCouncil.WI.gov>.

About the Women's Council

The Wisconsin Women's Council, established in 1983, is Wisconsin's statutory commission on the status of women and girls. The Council promotes initiatives that empower women, serves as a clearinghouse for information on programs and resources, provides research and advocacy, and promotes unique partnerships to address barriers and inequalities affecting Wisconsin women. The Council operates under the guidance of a 15-Member Board appointed by the Governor and Legislative leaders. For more information about the Wisconsin Women's Council, visit our web site at <http://womenscouncil.wi.gov>.

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