



The Maryland Women's Caucus

### Did You Know?

- When the first women's state legislative caucus was established, not all 50 states allowed women to serve on juries.
- Martha Hughes Cannon was the first woman elected to a state senate (Utah) in 1896—after running against and defeating her own husband.
- Vermont and Arizona have the highest percentage of female legislators at 40 percent each, while Wyoming has the lowest at 11.1 percent.

## Women's Legislative Caucuses

BY NATALIE MORGAN

Despite the [narrowing](#) wage gap and [record number of women running for office](#), the representation of women in state legislatures is lacking. For the first time in U.S. history, women represent more than a quarter of all state legislators, at 25.4 percent. While this is a [noteworthy](#) increase from prior years, many female legislators work within bipartisan women's caucuses to ensure that this trend continues.

By [definition](#), a caucus is "a group of people united to promote an agreed-upon cause." For women's caucuses, that cause is often centered around women's issues. In general, caucuses come and go over time and are

limited to a specific chamber or party. This brief examines active bipartisan women's caucuses in state legislatures.

Due to changes in politics, politicians and policies, bipartisan women's caucuses frequently vary from each other in several areas—primarily formality and member composition. While some caucuses are formally organized, hosting regular meetings with caucus leadership, others are significantly more casual, sporadically meeting for dinner. Women's caucuses also differ in member composition. Although the bipartisan groups are open to all female legislators, in a number of states, only women from one side of the aisle are active members.

In addition to organization and composition, women's caucuses differ in their missions. Some—such as those in Hawaii, Maryland and Massachusetts—focus their efforts on promoting policy changes. Others—such as caucuses in Arkansas, Illinois, Louisiana and Wyoming—address initiatives surrounding general female empowerment. Even with considerable variation, bipartisan women's caucuses exist to support and empower women, and they remain a powerful resource for female legislators.

### State Action

At least 29 states have bipartisan women's caucuses. The first formally organized such caucus was established in Maryland in 1969.

Its **purpose** was to “develop and support legislation assisting women, encourage greater participation of women in ... government, and to communicate and cooperate with other women’s organizations.” When the caucus was founded, the state had only 12 female legislators—it now has 61. Since its founding, the caucus strives to promote policies that support women and their families.

In 2018, the Maryland women’s caucus promoted The Rape Survivor Protection Act, prioritized preventing sexual harassment in the Maryland General Assembly and other workplaces, and endorsed expanding access to affordable, quality child care in the state. The women’s caucus deemed its efforts successful after **passing 10**

**pieces of legislation** that protect the rights of women, children and sexual assault survivors. The caucus also issued a report, “Sexual Harassment Policy Recommendations,” which revealed incidents of harassment inside the General Assembly. Based on the report, along with the experiences of victims, the caucus developed and implemented procedural changes, such as **requiring an independent investigator** when sexual harassment or retaliation complaints are made against a legislator.

The Massachusetts Caucus of Women Legislators **was established** in 1975 to “enhance the economic status and equality of women and to encourage and support women in all levels of government.” The caucus has followed a path similar to Maryland’s, establishing six legislative priorities: pay equity, sexual assault and domestic violence, the Pregnant Workers Fairness Act, the Commission on the Status of Women and Girls, mental health education, and access to contraceptives.

In Illinois, the **Conference of Women Legislators** has chosen not to take ideological positions on

policy and instead uses the caucus to provide a discussion forum for female legislators. These bipartisan discussions often revolve around issues such as the budget, health care, child care, elder care, education, business and economic development, crime prevention and the environment.

Other legislative caucuses, including those in Arkansas, California, Louisiana and Wyoming, focus on empowering and recognizing women around the state. In Arkansas, the women’s caucus started **#ARGIRLSLEAD** to “promote positive self-image and leadership for young girls across the state.” The campaign allows female legislators to inspire young women by sharing their own stories.



Logo for Arkansas’ #ARGIRLSLEAD campaign.

With the **Woman of the Year** award, created in 1987 by Assemblywomen Bev Hansen (R) and Sally Tanner (D), the California women’s caucus recognizes a woman from each Assembly and Senate district with a formal ceremony at the Capitol.

In **Louisiana**, the women’s caucus creates public service announcements and offers scholarships for young women in high school and college.

Wyoming’s women’s caucus offers the annual **Leap into Leadership** seminar. Covering topics ranging from campaigning to compassion, the caucus program strives to strengthen the leadership capacities of Wyoming women.

Ultimately, while the size, shape and structure of women’s caucuses have changed since their creation, the fundamental goal of female empowerment has not. Even as wage gaps narrow, and more women run for office, overall representation of women in state legislatures remains disproportionate. Whether policy-focused or social, state legislative women’s caucuses continue their role as a vital tool for female legislators.

## Additional Resources

- [Women’s Legislative Network of NCSL](#)
- [Women in State Legislatures 2018](#)

## NCSL Contact

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