

# Primary Primers: Why 2020 is likely to see a record number of women elected to the US House



*We are in the final stages of another election season. Although Presidential campaign makes up much of the headlines, there are still 435 House seats up for (re)election. While the US may see its first elected female in Executive Office, and the confirmation of an additional woman on the Supreme Court, [Samantha Pettey](#) write that us that this election may see more women than ever enter the House of Representatives.*

## Impacts of the 2018 “Year of the (Democratic) Women”

Women currently hold a historic high of 23.7 percent of the seats in [Congress](#) and 29.3 percent of seats [across state legislatures](#). On the surface, this shows that there have been some important gains for women in US politics, especially when looking at Nevada where in 2019, the state’s legislature became the first to have a female majority. However, a deeper dive shows disparity across the parties. The 2018 midterm elections were a good year for Democratic women, not Republican women. Overall, Democratic women make up around 80 percent of the total women in Congress. Meanwhile, Republican women, with 20 percent of the total women in Congress, only make up a small 3 percent of the total Congress.

Another way to think about these numbers is women as a group [within their parties](#). Women account for 38 percent of Democrats in the House while Republican women only make-up 8 percent of their party in the House. This disparity across the parties is problematic because achieving gender-parity in the national government will be hard if Republican women do not make significant strides to increase their numbers.

## The emergence of women as candidates in 2020

Largely [in response to the number of Democratic women](#) to enter Congress in 2019, Republican women have made a concerted effort to include more women as candidates in 2020. This movement was arguably spear-headed by [Elise Stefanik](#) of NY’s 21<sup>st</sup> district—the youngest Republican woman elected to Congress. Congresswomen Stefanik founded and launched the [Elevate PAC](#) to help, support, and recruit Republican women through-out their campaign. The effort has thus far paid off with increasing the overall number of Republican women filing (227 in the House) and moving past their primary (133 GOP women lost their primary) and onto the general election. Thus, there are 94 Republican women running as House candidates, compared to only 53 in 2018. But just how many women may make up the Republican Party in the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress?

Despite record-breaking numbers of Republican women, Democrats continued their successful candidacy mobilization efforts from 2018; a new record was set for Democrats with 204 women running in the general election (versus 182 in 2018). Thus even with one year of newfound effort, the number of Republican women candidates does not compare to the numbers for the Democratic Party.

Check out [The Center for American Women in Politics](#) for great graphics on the information above.

## Will women set new congressional records?

There are [300 women running](#) for the House in the 2020 general election; 206 Democrats and 94 Republicans. The majority of these women are running as challengers rather than incumbents. And, while research finds that [‘when women run, they win](#), quality female candidates are at a [relative disadvantage](#) and winning as a challenger is very difficult. Winning against [incumbents](#), as a challenger, [is hard](#) since incumbents have [high success rates](#). Further, there are 43 women running in open seats and, while [open seats are the best](#) chance for women to enter office, research finds [women are still at a disadvantage](#) in these races. So, regardless of seat, research finds that women may still be at a slight disadvantage in comparison to their male counterparts.

## Expectations for Representation

How well should we expect women candidates to do in their races and how does this breakdown by party? Using [FiveThirtyEight's](#) Deluxe forecast model for the House and the Center For American Women in Politics 2020 ['Women Candidate Tracker'](#), I examine the likelihood of a woman's general election success. The [Deluxe Model](#) predicts each race by compiling data from a district's current polls, experts, historical trends, scandals, past voting patterns, etc. As I did in [my prediction piece in 2018](#), I used a model to predict a conservative chance of success. A candidate was given a chance of success in the estimate if she, as of October 9<sup>th</sup>, had *at least* a 40 percent chance of winning. Since all women incumbents, even in [toss-up seats](#), have more than a 40 percent chance of winning, I will give particular attention to the chances of success for challengers and candidates in open seats.

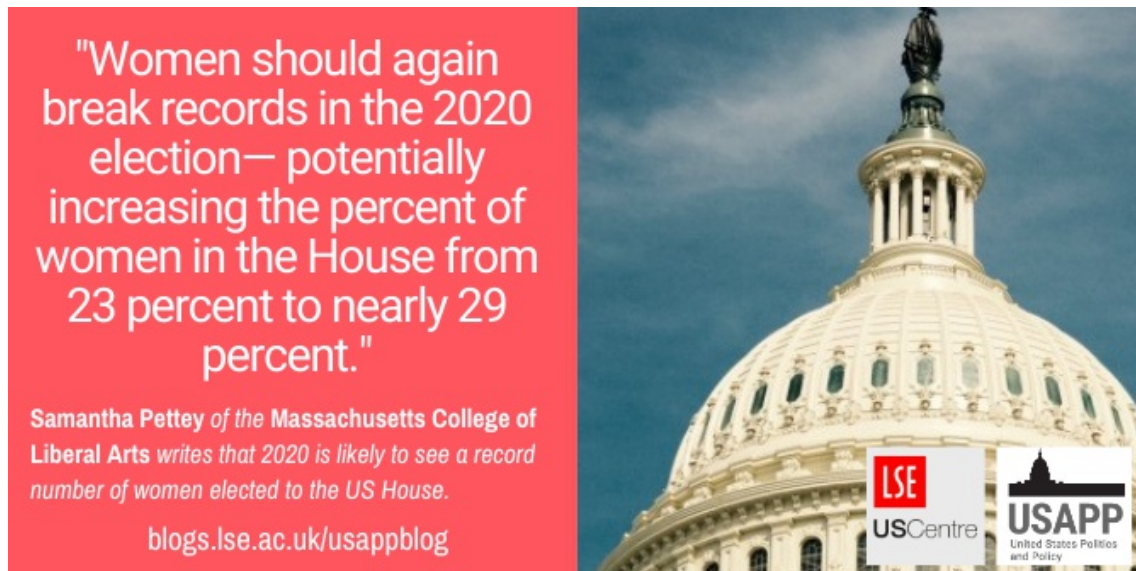
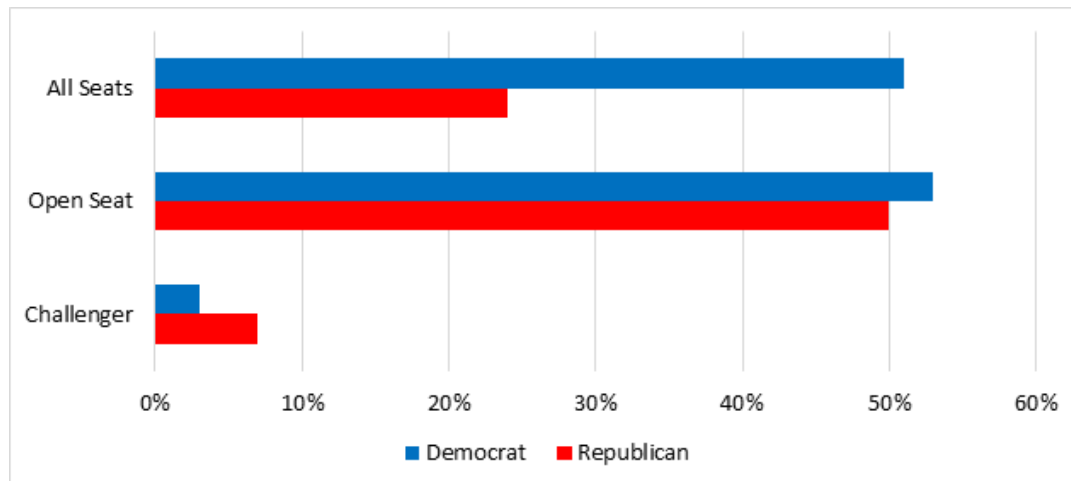


Photo by [Jomar Thomas](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Examining all the races, including incumbents, I find that women are expected to win just about 42 percent of races. Yet, the overall results show that Democrats are expected to win 51 percent of their seats and Republicans only 24 percent of their seats. This difference is because incumbents, the easier races to win, are a bigger part of the Democratic group of women running and challengers are the biggest group of Republicans. Incumbents make up about 42 percent of Democratic women's total seats versus only 12 percent of Republican women's seats.

Figure 1 below takes a closer look at the open seat and challenger races. As the research above suggests, women are expected to win a larger portion of seats in open seat races, rather than challengers. Overall, 52 percent of women are expected to win in open seats versus only 5 percent of the female challengers. Republican women are expected to win about 7 percent of seats as challengers, which is slightly higher than Democrats who are only expected to win 3 percent of seats that are challenging incumbents. But, Democrats are expected to do better than Republicans in open seat races. Democrats are expected to win 53 percent of their races versus Republican women who are expected to win about 50 percent of open seats.

### Figure 1- Predicted General Election Success for Women Candidates



A different perspective of this is to examine these predicted success rates in relation to how the number of women will change in Congress. For Republicans, I expect about five women will win as challengers and seven will win in open seat races. This could increase the number of Republican women in the House from 11 to 23; an increase of more than 50 percent. I expect Democratic women to win about 3 of the seats as challengers and 15 open seats. These numbers would increase the Democratic female delegation from 85 to 103; about a 20 percent increase. Given both parties are expecting to see an increase in women winning in the November election, women should again break records in the 2020 election—potentially increasing the percent of women in the House from 23 percent to nearly 29 percent.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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Samantha Pettey is an Assistant Professor of Political Science in the department of History, Political Science and Public Policy at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts. Her research interests are a blend of gender politics and US institutions. Specifically, she is interested in how state legislatures' institutional factors help and/or hinder women's emergence and success in office. At the Congressional level, her research and interests focus more broadly on campaigns and elections.