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Invited Paper

100 Years after Suffrage: Just How Far Have Women Come?*

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ABSTRACT

Women earned the right to vote 100 years ago with the ratification of the 19th Amendment, effectively ending the suffrage movement that had transpired over generations. Their hard-won victory doubled the American electorate and provided women with an essential right of citizenship of which they had long been deprived. Not all women were welcomed at the polling place, though, and the exclusion of women of color, particularly in the Jim Crow South, revealed yet another barrier to eventually be struck down. In the 100 years since women earned their right to vote, they have begun “outvoting” their male counterparts and emerged as candidates for office in every branch and at every level of government. Despite great success, women are still underrepresented in public office, however. This article examines the role of women in politics from the decades prior to suffrage to the months leading up to the 2020 election and reminds us that although women have made tremendous strides, there is still a long way to go.

KEYWORDS Gender Politics; Women; Suffrage; Elections; Voting

To say that 2020 was a historic year feels almost like an understatement. Such a claim in other circumstances might seem hyperbolic, but the events and moments that occurred at the threshold of the decade proved to be exceptional. COVID-19 ushered in an international pandemic, thrusting public health concerns to the spotlight while inciting debates over responsibility, economics, and government involvement. Social unrest, precipitated by a series of unjustified murders of African Americans, grew in the Black Lives Matter movement, manifesting in marches, protests, and, in some cases, riots across the country. At the same time, the nation prepared for a heated election under increasing political polarization, the first ever in which the impeached incumbent sought reelection.

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All of these events will undoubtedly shape our memory of the year. While some may linger and others fade, the chaos and confusion can serve as an effective, if surprising, bond of solidarity, uniting us through the common experience amid a time of crisis and concern. These experiences, however formative and impactful, will likely be remembered in their simplest form. They will not adequately capture the shifting dynamics that seemed so unsteady in the moment as time unfolded, nor will they include the sullen weight of going from a world of what could have been to what presently is. It was in this space, this forgotten moment, that the women of the world watched and waited. And they still today watch and wait.

In addition to all of the other topics that dominated headlines, 2020 marked the Suffrage Centennial. On August 18, 1920, the U.S. Congress ratified the 19th Amendment, which enabled women to vote, a right that generations of women had fought for since the ratification of the U.S. Constitution yet never lived to see. Abigail Adams, best known for her marriage to our nation's second president but also an admirable intellectual in her own right, famously reminded her husband to "remember the ladies" as he joined the Founding Fathers in penning the guiding law of the land (Adams 2004). Early suffragists, including Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, assembled at the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 to address the perils of women's exclusion from government. It was here that they began to coalesce into a larger organization.

More than half a century later, the National American Woman Suffrage Association, under the direction of Susan B. Anthony and later Carrie Chapman Catt, joined forces with the more radical National Women's Party, led by Alice Paul and Lucy Burns (O'Connor 1996). By 1918, some states had already given women the right to vote, and facing a critical election, President Woodrow Wilson pledged to support an amendment to change the federal law. Two years later, Tennessee became the last of the 36 states necessary to ratify the 19th Amendment and confirm it into law (O'Connor 1996).

One hundred thirty-two years had passed from the effective establishment of the nation to the enfranchisement of more than half its population. The suffrage movement was far from one unified, monolithic push; instead, it culminated in a series of collaborations and conflicts, illustrating both the best and worst aspects of our society. While the movement and those who supported it fought for women's rights, it often did so without regard to other glaring inequalities. It was overwhelmingly white (even at the critical Seneca Falls Convention, Frederick Douglass was the sole person of color), and it comprised and thus overwhelmingly focused on educated and upper-class women. The ugly racist division that separated the suffrage movement was revealed upon the ratification of the 15th Amendment, which allowed men of color, but yet not women, the right to vote. Ida B. Wells, a true pioneer in journalism, successfully battled racist claims about women of color and served as a foremother for the civil rights movement that would transpire over the subsequent decades (Wells 2020). Some suffragettes were queer, though how well-known and influential their sexual orientation was at the time remains unclear (Salam 2020).

As 2020 marks the centennial of this effort, the recognition and remembrance of the suffrage movement should be thoughtful and intentional. "Celebration" implies a positive, joyous success, an assumption that after August 1920, all women were able to

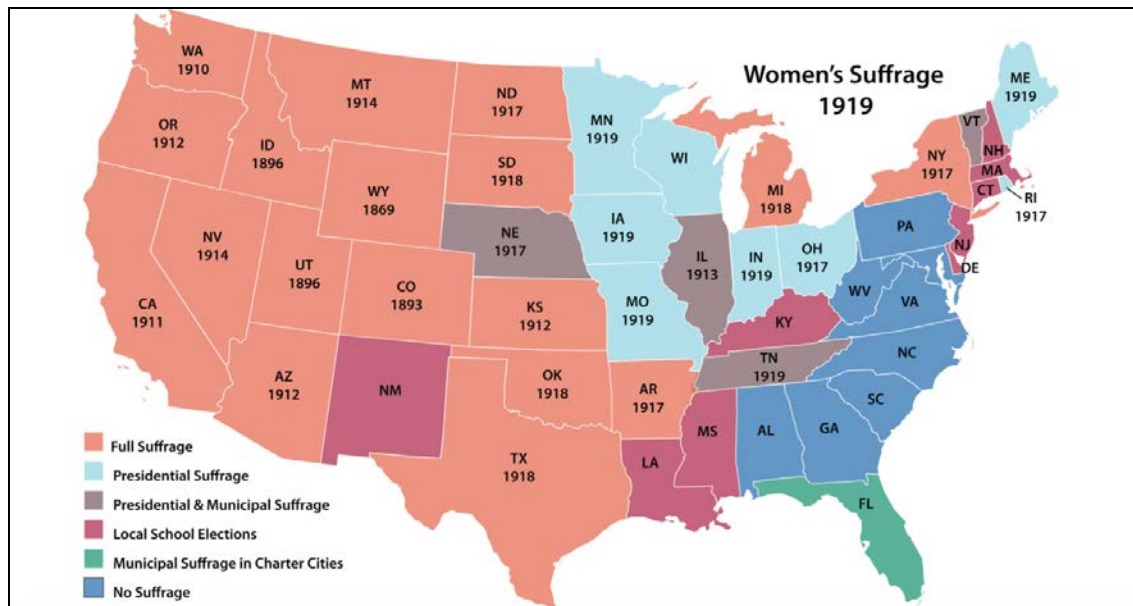
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exercise their right to vote. Many women did participate, casting their ballots in some cases for the very first time. The reality was far more complicated than the memory, however. Some women had actually been able to vote legally long before the national government abolished the sex barrier to enfranchisement. Others were effectively prevented from participating for decades after 1920.

The nuances of American election laws enable states to dictate some of the qualifications to vote. This is still true today, as states can determine specific residency requirements, whether a voter needs to provide an ID and what that ID should include, and whether voters need to register before the election and, if so, how long before. Each of these components may seem small or insignificant independently, but combined, they can have a tremendous effect on voter turnout and participation. They can be controversial, as well. Recent debates over variations in state voter-ID laws challenge whether such a policy disenfranchises already underrepresented populations or prevents mass voter fraud in the system.

Before the 19th Amendment was passed, a number of states had already permitted women to participate in state or local elections. States on the west coast and in the mountain west had overwhelmingly permitted suffrage; some areas, including Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, and Idaho, had enabled women to participate in elections before the areas had even become states (Buechler 1990). In the years leading up to the adoption of universal suffrage, other states followed suit. California provided women the right to vote in 1911; Arizona, Kansas, and Oregon enabled women's suffrage in 1912; and Illinois followed in 1912 (Buechler 1990).

Figure 1. Map of Women's Suffrage Status in 1919



Source: Waxman (2020).

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Yet even after the 19th Amendment was adopted and women were granted universal suffrage, not all of the barriers to political participation were dismantled. Native American women were not granted citizenship and voting rights until the passage of the Indian Citizenship Act in 1924, and Chinese women were barred from citizenship and voting until the Magnuson Act in 1943 (Holland 2007; McCool, Olson, and Robinson 2007). Even where legal barriers no longer existed, avid obstruction remained. Women of color, particularly African American women, faced discrimination at the polling place, making it hard and, in some cases, virtually impossible to cast their ballots.

The final push for suffrage occurred amid the Great Migration, the mass exodus of African Americans from the U.S. South to the north and west. From 1910 through roughly 1930, African Americans moved in droves from the rural plantation fields of the South to the urban industrial centers across the Upper Midwest, Northeast, and West. Prior to 1910, nearly 90 percent of African Americans resided in the South; after the Great Migration, an estimated 50 percent remained. The movement has been regarded as “one of the largest and most rapid mass internal movements in history. . . . For blacks, the migration meant leaving what had always been their economic and social base in America and finding a new one” (Lemann 1991).

With half of the African American population still living in the South, the threat of Jim Crow laws effectively prevented their participation in politics for generations. The sex barrier preventing women from voting in elections no longer existed, but the race barrier, legally abolished with the adoption of the 15th Amendment, had been swiftly undermined by the use of discriminatory techniques, both from local registrars, who exercised considerable power in decisions of who could participate, and from the extended white community, bolstered by the KKK and other local white-supremacist groups (Riser 2010). Registrars would use literacy tests (which often neither truly gauged one’s understanding of civics nor aptly tested literacy but could easily be used as a tool to deem an individual incompetent and incapable of voting); poll taxes (costly sums that required voters to pay in order to vote, effectively preventing voters from lower socioeconomic groups from participating), which were legal until ratification of the 24th Amendment; complicated registration forms (intended specifically to overwhelm and intimidate), and other tactics to discourage African Americans from registering (Riser 2010). The KKK and community groups relied on threats and violence to prevent African Americans from voting.

These barriers made it challenging for people of color, both men and women, to participate in elections until the Civil Rights movement. The signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, coinciding with the ratification of the 24th Amendment, successfully dismantled many of these hurdles. Women of color in the South before this had theoretically been granted the right to vote, without bias toward their skin color or sex, yet the Jim Crow laws that ruled the land often inhibited them from doing so. While women of color were actively involved in the major movements of protest, they often found themselves excluded from the inner circles of both the Civil Rights movement and the women’s right movement. Women were routinely pushed to the periphery of the Civil Rights movement, in which men dominated leadership, and the women’s rights movement tended to champion white heterosexual women. Leaders such

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as Fannie Lou Hamer (who founded the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and mentored Diane Nash and Rosa Parks, among others) and Ella Baker (cofounder of the National Women's Political Caucus and the Freedom Democratic Party) emerged despite these obstacles and led the charge on gaining enfranchisement for people of color across the South (Barnett 1993; Lee 2000).

For these women, the 19th Amendment still served as an important milestone toward their own suffrage, but it did not yield the ultimate goal of enfranchisement that it had for white women and women of color in other parts of the country. The ugly truth of American politics was that although many women could participate in elections after suffrage was achieved, myriad informal yet deeply effective barriers remained. Our nation's troubled history with race continued to perpetuate systematic injustice for women of color, despite the legal recognition of their enfranchisement via the 15th and 19th Amendments. Some barriers to participation that adversely affect women of color and women from lower socioeconomic-status (SES) backgrounds, such as the impact of voter-ID laws, still remain. Only 8 percent of white voters do not have government-issued photo ID, compared to an estimated 25 percent of African American voters, according to a report conducted by the Brennan Center for Justice (2006; American Civil Liberties Union 2017). While concerns about voter fraud and the integrity of the election system should always be considered, equal accessibility to participation likewise is a critical component to a healthy democracy.

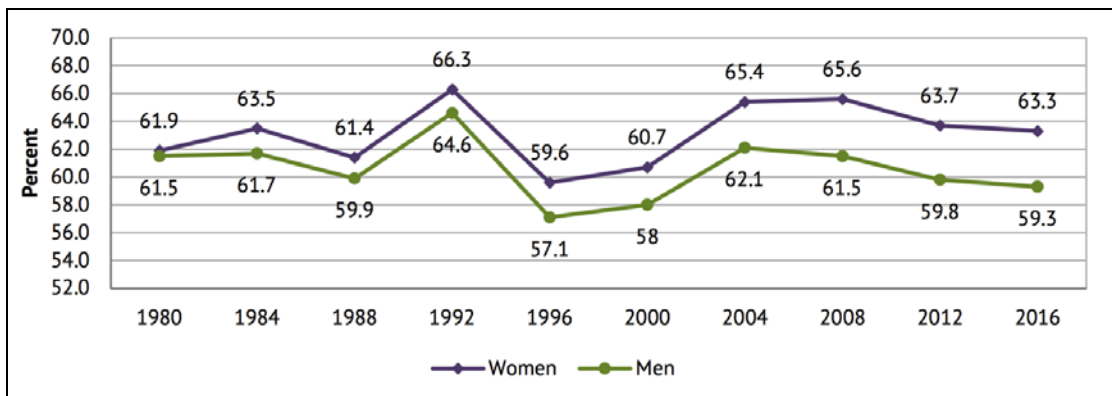
In the 100 years since the 19th Amendment was added to the U.S. Constitution, women as a whole have made great strides in political participation, both as voters and as candidates. When women were originally enfranchised, concern arose over their political motivations and partisan alliances: how would these women vote? (Corder and Wolbrecht 2006). The question was more than interesting; in fact, this was the first and only time the country had enfranchised more than half its population, in effect doubling the electorate and potentially creating quite the change. Panic rose in parties and campaigns alike, which now presumably had to reach out to twice as many voters. Though the suffrage movement had aligned with the temperance and prohibition movements, the issue of how women would vote in terms of partisan support and ideological preference was unclear. Campaigns tried to appeal to female voters through policies such as prohibition, children's issues, and education (Dumenil 1995).

For the first election after enfranchisement and for many after, women seemed to vote similarly to men (Andersen 1996). As political science and research became more sophisticated, a voting gap developed between the preferences of female voters and those of male voters. This metric is identified as the difference between the preference of men and women for a specific candidate (i.e., if 60 percent of women prefer one candidate while 50 percent of men also like the same candidate, there is a 10 percent gender gap). The gender gap has emerged as an important attribute among the American electorate and is an essential part of most campaign strategies. Attitudes on major salient political issues such as abortion, guns, and war all reveal marked differences between male and female voters (Cooperman 2018; Brooks and Valentino 2011; Gallup 2020).

Women voters account for a larger percentage of the population and also a larger percentage of the electorate. Data collected from the U.S. Census suggest that

women have outvoted men (i.e., the proportion of women who have voted has been larger than the proportion of men who have voted) since 1980 in presidential elections and since 1986 in congressional (off-year) elections, when female voters just edged out male voters in turnout: 48.4 percent compared to 48.2 percent (Center for American Women in Politics 2019). The most recent numbers show an even wider margin, at 55 percent of women voting relative to 51.8 percent of men, revealing a consistent trend in the growth of the female electorate over the past 30 years (Center for American Women in Politics 2019).

Figure 2. Voter Turnout in Presidential Elections: Proportion of Eligible Adult Population Who Reported Voting



Note: Data from the U.S. Bureau of the Census, “Current Population Reports,” Series P-20, “Voting and Registration in the Election of November 1964,” and subsequent reports for all years through 2018.

Source: Chart reprinted from “Gender Differences in Voter Turnout” (September 6, 2019) with permission from the Center for American Women and Politics, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University.

The change in the electorate eventually sparked the change in representation, though this change was slow and took decades to truly take hold. Interest in the women’s movement and issues died down after the passage of the 19th Amendment. Although some groups continued to persist in their work, the bulk of suffrage supporters, satisfied with their accomplishment, turned their focus elsewhere. Women could now vote for candidates for office and could also run as candidates for office. Some, such as Jeanette Rankin from Montana, who was elected to the House of Representatives in 1918 (Josephson 1974), had actually achieved this milestone before suffrage, yet female candidacies had a slow start.

The first generation of women politicians primarily began as fill-ins to complete the terms of their deceased husbands or fathers. Some of these women ran for reelection to continue their terms, with mixed success. In 1924, Nellie Tayloe Ross became the first woman elected governor in Wyoming after her husband, incumbent William B. Ross, died in his second year in office (Carroll 2004). Ross ran for reelection in her own right

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in 1926 but lost. Miriam A. Ferguson of Texas was the second woman elected to governor, inaugurated only one week after Ross in 1924. She succeeded her husband, who was banned from serving in public office after impeachment and conviction, and successfully ran for and won two more terms in office (Wheeler 1999). For women like Ross and Ferguson, their marriages may have been the initial segue into political life, but their interest and, in some cases, careers, in politics lasted longer than their husbands'.

Over the following decades, more women sought public office in their own right. The women's liberation movement of the 1960s paved the way for a new generation of female leadership, though the change was neither sudden nor substantial. Men still dominated government positions, particularly elected offices. Political scientists, studying the interest and ambition of candidates seeking elected office, regarded politics as a man's game and "the nature of man [as] the political animal" (Lane 1959), yet the end of the 20th century witnessed a remarkable increase in the presence of female officeholders in the United States. In 1971, the year the Equal Rights Amendment was reintroduced by Michigan Representative Martha Griffiths, women held just 3 percent of congressional seats and 7 percent of statewide elected offices (Center for American Women in Politics 2020; "Martha Griffiths and the Equal Rights Amendment" 2020). Nearly 50 years later, women comprise 23.7 percent of Congress and occupy 28.9 percent of statewide elected offices in 2020 (Center for American Women in Politics 2020). Another record-breaking year of women running for public office, the 2020 election cycle also bodes well for yet another increase in female representation (Dittmar 2020; Erdody 2020).

Women have made their mark at every level of government and in nearly every branch. The sole high public office that has yet to have a female occupant remains the presidency, and even then, it has not been for lack of effort. Geraldine Ferraro became the first woman nominated by a major party for the vice presidency in 1984 (Sarah Palin followed suit for the Republicans in 2008), and Hillary Clinton was the first woman to lead a major party ticket for the presidency in 2016. Presidential nominee Joe Biden's selection of Kamala Harris—the first woman of color nominated by a major party to join the ticket as a candidate for vice president—in August 2020 marked another historic moment. As Hillary Clinton said when yielding to Barack Obama as the party's presumptive nominee for president in 2008, "Although we weren't able to shatter that highest, hardest glass ceiling this time, thanks to you, it's got about 18 million more cracks in it, and the light is shining through like never before, filling us all with the hope and the sure knowledge that the path will be a little easier next time" (PBS 2008).

Though the path for women's electoral success may be easier, the barriers facing women and people of color have not vanished. Obstacles unique to gender and to race make it harder for women to confidently declare their candidacies and to ultimately be successful in those candidacies. Social obstacles such as the gender imbalance in domestic chores (e.g., housework and child care) mean women face greater challenges in balancing personal and professional responsibilities. This served as a major issue historically, as politics was viewed as a man's domain while the house and family were the woman's. Although some of our societal values and expectations have evolved, gender inequity still remains. As Lawless and Fox (2010:10) note, "the traditional

division of household labor and family responsibilities means that, for many women, a political career would be a third job.”

Institutional features can likewise serve as barriers, even if unintentionally. Single-member districts seem to yield fewer female victories compared to multimember districts, which are found sparingly in the United States but are utilized in 10 state legislatures (Darcy, Welch, and Clark 1985; King 2002). Term limits have been found to have a mixed effect on female representation, removing incumbents and creating opportunities through open seats, but in the process getting rid of both sexes (Carroll and Jenkins 2001). Other mechanisms, such as proportionality, plurality, and quota systems, have all resulted in greater numbers of women officeholders in other countries but have not been adopted or even seriously considered in the United States.

Political parties can hinder or help cultivate female candidacies. Though they have traditionally served more as a barrier to entry, parties are now dedicating substantial resources to nurture women as leaders. The old adage that one must climb the ladder and pay one’s dues gave men a natural advantage of making it to the high levels of party ranks. Without domestic obligations weighing them down, young men got involved in politics early in their lives and more efficiently earned power and prestige relative to their female counterparts, who often entered the arena later, after their children had grown, and thus struggled to make it as far up the ladder. Now both major parties have committees and leadership programs uniquely tasked with grooming women interested in running for public office, recognizing the potential of recruiting these future candidates (Lawless and Fox 2010:89–111). Creating an effective pipeline and identifying talent in law, education, government, and business enables the parties to effectively recruit candidates.

Reaching gender parity does not simply mean achieving equality in numbers or symbolic representation, though these are important. Numerous studies have demonstrated a positive relationship between female representatives and female citizens’ level of external efficacy and adolescent girls’ expectations of political engagement (Atkeson and Carrillo 2007; Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006). Substantive representation, or the true difference in outcome, matters as well. Research finds that women tend to emphasize congeniality and cooperation, whereas men tend to emphasize hierarchy (Kathlene 1994; Tolleson-Rinehart 1991). Women also are more likely to lead using coalition building and communication. The difference in these approaches invariably affect policy process and policy outcomes when women are serving in public office.

The difference in policy approach is as critical as the divergence in policy preference. Women have traditionally been associated with “soft” policies, such as education and healthcare, whereas men have been associated with “hard” policies, such as the economy and foreign affairs. Policy priorities for women, sometimes referred to as “women’s issues,” include topics such as gender equity, childcare, and abortion (Gerrity, Osborn, and Mendez 2007). These further illuminate the different perspective and experience that women bring to public office.

The gains and successes of women in elected office should not overshadow the continued underrepresentation not just of women but especially of women of color in the public sector. Women of color collectively comprise 18 percent of the national population yet hold only 8 percent of seats in Congress (Center for American Women in

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Politics 2012; Kerby 2012). Research shows that while women of color are incredibly successful in bids for state legislative races, they are often absent in white districts, pointing to a pipeline problem (Shah, Scott, and Gonzalez Juenke 2019).

The major lag in representation demonstrates the challenges in intersectionality that women of color face: barriers of both sex and race. Economic inequalities, coupled with social ones, further reaffirm the long way to progress for true equality in representation that remains, as women of color are sorely and systematically underrepresented in elected office. The year 2018 marked impressive gains, with the election of Ilhan Omar, the first Somali American to serve in Congress, and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the youngest woman to serve in Congress, among others. Disparities with regard to sexual orientation and gender also persist, but Danica Roem broke barriers upon election to the Virginia General Assembly as the first openly transgender state lawmaker.

Pride in the successes and gains of the present cannot be accepted without somber note of the struggles of the past and the challenges of the future. Women have come a long way in politics, first in suffrage, then in elected office. Each election seems to continue a positive trajectory of progress, but it is imperative to remember that progress is not inevitable. This year, 2020, has revealed a major crisis of inequality, one that has been brewing below the surface for quite some time but has just now emerged, striking and unavoidable.

The international pandemic incited by the spread of COVID-19 has exposed cracks in our presumed progress in gender, race, and class. Economic turmoil, marked by record unemployment, has hit hardest those in the service sector—industries dominated by women, people of color, and individuals of lower SES. Work-life balance, always precarious and unmastered, is proving challenging for women, who often serve as primary caretakers, and for lower-wage workers, who have to take care of their families while maintaining their careers simultaneously. Preliminary studies suggest many are opting out of the workforce, in some cases involuntarily, because the burden is too much to bear (Alon et al. 2020; Hochul 2020). The pandemic and subsequent mandated quarantines are resulting in greater risk of domestic violence, or intimate partner violence, which the UN estimates has increased 25 percent internationally (“Coronavirus Pandemic Exacerbates Inequalities for Women, UN Warns” 2020; Stanley 2020). The actual health impact is perhaps the only metric in which women benefit from sex-based inequality, as the estimated death rate from the disease itself is only 2.8 percent for women, compared to 4.7 percent for men (“Report of the WHO-China Joint Mission on Coronavirus Disease 2019” 2020).

The centennial of women’s suffrage has marked a century’s worth of change for the American woman, the magnitude and substance of which is arguably unprecedented to any other period in our nation’s history. This change has brought great strides but also shows how much work is left to go. Women can vote, run, win, and lead. They can do everything their grandmothers dreamed, and likely far more than those dreams could have envisioned, yet even with the initial goal of the suffrage movement met, challenges in equality of political representation and of smashing the highest, hardest glass ceiling remain. Progress is certainly not inevitable, but it is just as certainly possible. As we look back to the previous millennium and forward to the next one, we should harness the pride of triumph and victory to motivate and inform our future endeavors and successes.

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