



CAPITOL ALERT

## Why more California women are running for office — and winning

JENN MOLINA

BY LARA KORTE



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As a kid, Mayra Vega kept her head down.

Growing as part of a family of undocumented Mexican immigrants in Napa, Vega's parents instructed her not to draw attention to herself. Fly under the radar, they said. Don't get involved.

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“You just work hard, you save your money, and buy a house. That's what success looked like,” she said. “It was never my parents' aspirations for me to be in a leadership position. It was not something I was groomed to do or knew anything about.”

That changed when the pandemic hit.

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Children were suddenly at home with their parents. Many in her community lost their jobs. Working mothers like herself had to find a way to balance careers with childcare — or leave the workforce altogether.

They needed someone advocating for them, she said. So she ran for office.

Now, Vega is one of three women who sit on the Woodland City Council, and can count herself among the dozens of women across California who have entered municipal government over the last decade.

Since 2011 the portion of women holding seats in municipal government has risen from about 25% to 38%, according to [data compiled](#) by GrassrootsLab, a California public relations firm that tracks changes in state and local government. Women of color make up one-third of those members.

The upward trend is due, in part, to a rise in groups devoted to recruiting women to office. But volatility at the national level and outrage over the election of former President Donald Trump also drove women to run for office, the study's author said.

Political watchers say the surge in women running for local office could also lead to more women in California's Legislature and congressional delegation.

Currently, women hold 39 out of the 120 seats in the Legislature. Thanks to a widening pool of candidates and a swath of open seats within the next few election cycles, the number of women could soon equal the number of men for the first time in state history.

"There is a pipeline side to this," said Rose Kapolczynski, a longtime Democratic consultant who worked for Boxer. Prior to running for Congress, Boxer was on the Marin County Board of Supervisors. "More women running for local offices means there's a greater pool of potential candidates for the Legislature and Congress."

### **'THE BIGGEST OBSTACLE IS OURSELVES'**

Californians have never elected a woman to the governor's office.

The state, with 38% of municipal seats held by women, has better gender representation than the national average, 30.5%. Yet it ranks 9th among other states, according to data from the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP).

Hawaii is top of the list, with an even 50/50 split between men and women. Other western states, including, Washington, Oregon, Nevada and Colorado, all rank higher than California.

For decades, prior to the appointment of U.S. Sen. Alex Padilla, two women represented California in the U.S. Senate. Currently, women hold 19 of California's 53 House seats.

Part of the problem, advocates say, is a lack of confidence.

Elk Grove Mayor Bobbie Singh-Allen, for example, always knew she wanted to run for public office. She holds a law degree. She spent much of her career working in government relations. She held a seat on the school board for eight years.

But in 2020, when an opportunity appeared to run for mayor of Elk Grove, she began second-guessing herself.

Was there someone else smarter? Someone with more qualifications? Would her family suffer?

U.S. Rep. Ami Bera, an Elk Grove Democrat, gave her the final push, she said. With only three months until the election, she entered the race. She raised \$250,000. And in November, she won, making her the first directly-elected Sikh woman to hold the office in the nation.

“I think the biggest obstacle,” she said of women seeking public office, “is ourselves.”

Elk Grove Mayor Bobbie Singh-Allen speaks at a press conference at Elk Grove City Hall in March condemning hate against the Asian-American Pacific Islander community and outlining plans to increase public safety. Daniel Kim  
*SACRAMENTO BEE FILE*

Assemblywoman Janet Nguyen, R-Huntington Beach, has seen the number of women in politics grow since she was elected to Garden Grove City Council in 2004. She said women want to be involved in decisions that affect their families, communities and the future of their children.

But Nguyen has faced her fair share of roadblocks. During one endorsement interview as she ran for city council, someone asked her if, as the first woman in 35 years, she planned to paint city hall pink. As an Orange County supervisor, she hid a pregnancy to avoid scrutiny.

Now, as a legislator, she said the idea of a woman running for office is becoming normalized. Currently, three women sit on Garden Grove City Council.

“You are beginning to see more and more people who are women in office, and that looks like ‘oh, it’s a possibility that someone like me could be it,’” she said.

Assemblywoman Republican Janet Nguyen, left, R-Huntington Beach, speaks with independent Chad Mayes talk before the Assembly held its organizational session in Sacramento in December. Nguyen was first elected to the Garden Grove City Council. Rich Pedroncelli *AP*

## **GROUPS THAT SUPPORT WOMEN**

Over the last decade, California and the nation have seen a rise in groups devoted to recruiting, training and encouraging women to run for office.

Some, like Close the Gap California, Emerge California, and Emily’s List focus on left-leaning women. Other groups, like Winning For Women, target “right-of-center” women for office, though [some research suggests](#) they’re less influential than Democratic groups.

California Republican women have made significant gains in recent elections. Of the four congressional seats Republicans flipped in 2020, women won two of them. Both are South Korean immigrants.

California Chairwoman Jessica Millan Patterson heads the state Republican Party, the first Latina in the post. Before that, Patterson focused on recruiting and training Republicans for office. She graduated from the Marian Bergeson Series, a training program designed to recruit and train Republican women in California politics. Now she serves as a member of the board.

Jessica Millan Patterson speaks to delegates after being nominated to head the California Republican Party during its 2019 convention in Sacramento. Steve Yeater AP

She Should Run, a nonprofit based in Washington, D.C., provides training and resources to any woman thinking about entering politics.

It's an idea Erin Loos Cutraro had in 2011 after working on Robin Carnahan's campaign for Missouri secretary of state. Prior to that campaign, Loos Cutraro had worked in education and the corporate sector. She was discouraged to find women were struggling to gain equal representation in politics.

"It was clear to me, out of the gate ... it was very much a man's world in terms of consultants and advisors and the real kind of institution that existed in politics," she said.

In the decade since then, She Should Run has grown to be a community that raises awareness about the gender gap in political office and offers training and guidance to women. The organization helps women understand how elections, campaigns, fundraising and the office itself works.

"We think it's important to court these women and show them how it's done and demystify that 'behind the curtain' that can be very mysterious in politics," Loos Cutraro said. "My hope is and the goal is that work becomes less and less necessary as more women are in office."

Robb Korinke, director of GrassrootsLab's client activities in Southern California, specializes in state and local government.

Korinke, who previously served four years as the executive director of the Los Angeles League of Cities, attributed the increase in women to the election of former President Donald Trump. He said Trump's victory outraged many women, mostly Democrats, leading to an increase in political action at the local level.

Groups like [Indivisible](#) launched specifically to counter Trump's agenda and elect what it calls "progressive" candidates. Emerge California, which had been training Democratic women since 2002, saw the number of applications for its training program increase "exponentially" after Trump's election, according to Executive Director Melanie V. Ramil.

"You had groups like Indivisible and others that were sort of springing up saying 'we have to resist (Trump)'," Korinke said. "And the playbook for that is local engagement."

Female city council members are more Democratic than California as a whole. As of August, Democrats made up 46.5% of all California voters, but two out of three women city council members in California are Democrats, up from roughly half a decade ago, Korinke found.

Women of color make up more than a third of the women who sit on city councils in the state.

Vega, the Woodland city council member, said Trump's comments about Mexican immigrants motivated her.

"The thing that he said about 'bad hombres' really ticked me off," Vega said, referencing a comment Trump made about [Mexican immigrants during a 2016 debate](#). "For me, the Donald Trump factor was more about showing that immigrants come in, they work hard and they serve this community, and they love this country."

Resentment against the political status quo had been building for years prior to the 2016 election, Loos Cutraro said, but it's likely Trump's victory prodded many women to take action.

"I think you have these moments, and they're often driven by hugely important news events, where women realize that no one's going to come to save them, and that they have to step in themselves," Loos Cutraro said.

## **WOMEN IN CALIFORNIA LEGISLATURE**

Women make up less than a third of California's legislators, about 32.5%, but that number could grow significantly in the coming years.

Of the 120 lawmakers in the state Senate and Assembly, 90 are set to term out over the next four election cycles. An open seat is the easiest place for a woman to get elected — incumbents, especially in the same party, are notoriously hard to beat.



Thanks to the rise in women in local office, the pool of potential female candidates is growing bigger every day.

It's a “perfect opportunity for change,” Kapolczynski said.

It's not uncommon to find former local officials in the halls of the Capitol. Senate President Pro Tem Toni G. Atkins got her start on a city council. So did Sens. Nancy Skinner, D-Berkeley, Anna Caballero, D-Salinas, Melissa Melendez, R-Lake Elsinore and many others.

Sacramento's Mayor Pro Tem Angelique Ashby is one of those looking to make the jump from local official to state lawmaker.

Ashby, who was first elected to city council in 2010 and served for several years as the only woman on the board, is vying to represent Senate District 6 after Sen. Richard Pan, D-Sacramento, terms out next year.



Sacramento Councilwoman Angelique Ashby, who announced her candidacy for the state's 6th Senate District, gets an endorsement from incumbent Richard Pan Wednesday, May 12, 2021, at Blackbird Park in North Natomas. "It's time. I'm ready," she said. BY [RENÉE C. BYER](#) ✉

The last time a woman held that seat was 2002, when voters elected Democratic Sen. Deborah Ortiz.

“You have to sort of cut through a bias, a predominate image that (voters) have in their minds, that they've always seen men as their Assembly members and senators,” Ashby said.

When she first ran for city council, Ashby said she had some self-doubts about her qualifications. Constituents, even supportive ones, were critical of her. She remembers receiving an anonymous letter suggesting she wear nicer suits with heels, and style her hair a different way.

After a decade in office, she still has self-doubts, she says, but most of the criticism is white noise.

Ashby said women often come to her with reasons they can't run for office. They're worried they won't be able to care for a family, or worried about how they'll be perceived on the political stage.


"If you, in your heart feel called to the service of being an elected official, whether it's on a school board, or in Congress ... you should go for it," she said. "And if you really like red pants, maybe wear red pants. If you also really want to have kids, then have kids."

"There's nothing in this world that's stopping you from doing all of the things that you want to do."

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