



Politics has never been overly welcoming to women. That is why, as the first black female Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm put it, "if they don't give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair."

While much progress has been made in the name of gender equality, the battle continues. Despite being a majority of the voting population, women are grossly underrepresented at all levels of government. In fact, female representation has actually declined since 2009.

A New York City initiative called 21 in '21 wants to change all that.

21 in '21's goal is to have at least 21 women in the New York City Council's body of 51 members by 2021 to start leveling out the gender playing field within government. While this is definitely a good start, it still falls far short. The 21 in '21 effort prepares female candidates through supporting, training, and networking, as a means of increasing the gender diversity of that legislative body, which oversees a \$93 billion budget. Holding a City Council seat is considered by many as the first step in women running for higher offices like governor, the State Legislature, and Congress. Just look at former Council member Melinda Katz who went on to become a State Assembly member, Queens Borough President, and now has a great shot at becoming the next Queens District Attorney. Or Letitia James who served for a decade on the City Council before becoming the City's Public Advocate and then New York State's first female and first African American Attorney General.

Unfortunately, the number of women in the City Council has declined from a high of 18 in 2009 to its current number of 11. When almost 79% of the Council's members are men, male points of view dominate at City Hall. And in New York State government, the numbers aren't much better. Out of 63 Senators, only 17 are female, and out of 150 Assembly members, only 40 are female. If the majority of New Yorkers — 52% — are female, why are so many men still making decisions on behalf of women?

"21 in '21 is ready to help shape the future of our female leaders in New York City and help make the suffragettes movement from more than a century ago a reality now to create true, equal power," said Local 1180 President Gloria Middleton, the first African American and the first female to lead the 9,000 active member union. "There are so many issues pertinent to women that are being discussed and addressed predominantly by men. This is just wrong. The tide started turning after the election of the misogynistic #45 as president, and now more women across the nation are standing up and announcing their intent to run for office. In order for women to have equal rights, we need to have an equal say, and the only way for us to have equal say is for us to have equal representation."

She said women's life experiences are different than men's, and it is these unique experiences that make women great candidates. "We know what it's like to be discriminated against simply because we are women. We know how much harder we have to work than men to break the glass ceiling. We know what it's like to have to juggle families, children, and a career," Middleton said. It's the latter that's often the largest hindrance. "How many balls can women successfully juggle?" she asked.

Scott Levenson of The Advance Group, a political consultant for Local 1180, said entering a field predominantly and historically controlled by men is not so easy. "The problem is finding women who can win. That requires skills and determination. The male-dominated political world can be extremely tough to enter as a woman, not to mention navigate, and there are structural as well as societal obstacles in the way of women attaining equal power," he said.

According to 21 in '21, "in the face of societal hurdles" such as a slim pay check and family responsibilities, "many women haven't run for office despite studies showing that women win as often as men."



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— Gloria Middleton, CWA Local 1180 President

Middleton reminds us that the time and cost it takes to run a successful campaign are often a hinderance to women who are not only working fulltime, but also raising families. This makes the battle even more important. No issue is gender-exclusive, and decisions made in the City Council affect us all. In order for all voices to be represented, we must seek equal representation and make the City Council reflective of the world we live in. It's time to "reinvent the boys club of politics", as Middleton put it, and make it the peoples' hub it is meant to be.

Women taking an interest in politics is not even limited to New York City or state. Emily's List, a national organization dedicated to helping women win elected office, said more than a year ago that 30,000 women had at that point contacted them about running for office after the 2016 elections. During the two years of the 2016 election cycle, the group was contacted by 920 women, which was a record at the time, according to an article in *The New York Times*. The movement has definitely been ignited by the Women's March, the #MeToo and Time's Up movements, and the allegations of sexual abuse against President Trump.

"That would be the silver lining in his presidency," Middleton said. "His attacks on women, his name calling, misogyny, sexual harassment allegations, and crude comments all brought about the resurgence of women into the political realm. In essence, his election served as a serious call to action. His outspoken misogyny can become nicely ironic for female empowerment, if used as a tool of encouragement for women to speak out and stand up for ourselves."

Indeed, the tides have begun to turn: women are running for office in record numbers. In order to reach the goal of having 21 female New York City Council members in 2021, 10 new women must be elected — a rather large number when only six have even tossed their names into the ring so far. It is time to make New York equal to all who call it home.

The New York City Council Women's Caucus recently issued a report that identified one of the main causes of the gap between genders on the City Council — the "political ambition gap." According to the report, women are often forced to choose between their careers and their families, which limits the pool of female applicants for political office. Women also tend to underestimate their qualifications as a candidate while overestimating the barriers to victory. Middleton said that while it's validating to have the report state what a majority of women already knew, the bigger question is what to do with that information.

While there has definitely been progress in the past several years, men still dominate local, state, and national politics. Part of the problem, at least in New York State, could be attributed to the fact that a municipal employee, like those represented by Local 1180, who wish to run for office on a municipality's council, must take a leave of absence from their jobs prior to filing a nomination form. That leaves far too many highly-qualified women ruling out a run for political office if they are the sole or majority breadwinner of their family, as a leave of absence equates to a leave of income.

Levenson said that New York City's electoral system's financial assistance can at least assuage the financial burden of running a campaign, but does nothing to make sure a candidate still has a personal income. The Campaign Finance Board matches every dollar donated to a campaign up to \$175 at an eight-to-one ratio. That means every \$10 donation becomes \$80, making it somewhat easier for women from every neighborhood and every background to vie to represent their communities in the Council. As previously mentioned, the majority of the voting population is already female, so the path is set for women to once again make history in politics, and 21 in '21 wants to make sure this dream becomes a reality.

There is no better time than right now for women to run for City Council, as there will be three dozen term-limited Council members in 2021. "In order to be successful, though," Middleton says, "we not only need female candidates, we need women to support them and work on these campaigns. To paraphrase an age-old quote, 'Behind every great woman, there's a great woman.' Let's help our empowered female pioneers running for office, encourage even more women to run for City Council, and break ground for women in and out of politics, for today, tomorrow, and the future of equality yet to come."

In fact, this concept is in our New York roots, dating back to January 1, 1919, when New York's first female legislators arrived at the State Assembly. The first two female assembly members, Ida Sammis from Long Island and Mary Lilly from New York City, proudly took their seats among a sea of men. Without open arms to welcome them to the men's club, their folding chairs were provided to them by the Sergeant at Arms as they had not brought their own.

Let us maintain the tradition of pioneering gender equality and women's rights, as proud New Yorkers have done before us. More women in elected office can become a reality, and Local 1180 will do whatever it can to ensure the goal of 21 in '21 is met. ■