STATE PILOT REPORT 2023

WHEN SHE ASCENDS

A SUMMARY OF OUR MOST VALUABLE LEARNINGS FROM MICHIGAN, MISSISSIPPI, AND WASHINGTON.
When women lead, our nation is transformed.

Critical policy decisions are made at the state level, however, women, particularly women of color, remain vastly underrepresented in state houses. The Ascend Fund launched a three-state pilot in 2021 to increase the number of women serving in Michigan, Mississippi, and Washington legislatures. We know that when women lead, our nation is transformed, and we wanted to understand how to propel more women into leadership positions.
The Ascend Fund is powered by Panorama Global, a social impact nonprofit that empowers changemakers through radical collaboration.
Thank you
Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Philanthropies

Our work to accelerate the pace of change toward gender parity in state legislatures would not be possible without a generous grant from the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Philanthropies.

JUST 32.6% OF STATE LEGISLATORS ARE WOMEN.
And critical policy decisions are made at the state level.

VAST POTENTIAL
A lot of attention is paid to the 535 members of Congress who represent us in Washington, D.C. But given the partisan gridlock plaguing politics in our nation’s capital, we determined we could have a greater impact by starting with the states.

CRITICAL GROUND
Critical policy decisions are increasingly made by the 7,383 state legislators across the country. Bills passed at the state level have a cascading influence across our communities, directly impacting the everyday lives of constituents in both positive and negative ways.

COMPOUNDING EFFECT
And while federal campaigns can cost millions of dollars, with the average successful congressional campaign costing $2.35M, dollars stretch much further in state legislative campaigns and have a greater impact.

STARTING WITH MICHIGAN, MISSISSIPPI, AND WASHINGTON
Geographic, demographic, and political diversity.

We intentionally selected three states at different points on the path to parity. In 2021, Washington was approaching parity at 42%, Michigan was making progress at 36%, and at 16% we understood parity would take persistence in Mississippi.

By selecting states at different levels of representation, we can identify barriers and test strategies in a variety of different political environments. This will provide invaluable insight for future work in expanding to more states.

To best inform this work in the rest of the country, it was also important to us to choose states that are geographically, demographically, and politically diverse – Washington is blue, Michigan is purple, and Mississippi is red.

At the current rate of change, women won’t reach gender parity in politics nationally for more than 100 years. But we don’t think they should have to wait another 100 years for equal representation and better public policy outcomes. By investing in state and local organizations in Michigan, Mississippi, and Washington, we can reduce the barriers women face when running for office and build a pathway to elected office for all women.
Our State Partners

Our state partners are implementing bold, innovative strategies to dramatically increase the number and diversity of women serving in their state’s legislature. To meet the needs of all women, we intentionally prioritized organizations that reach a diverse audience of women across race, sexual orientation, political party, socio-economic status, and geographic location.

MICHIGAN

MOTHERING JUSTICE
Mothering Justice empowers mothers of color to influence policy on behalf of themselves and others.

RISING VOICES FUND
Rising Voices Fund supports and funds the infrastructure to organize Asian American women and young people for power in the state of Michigan.

EQUALITY MICHIGAN
Equality Michigan is a statewide lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer political advocacy organization.

SHE HOLDS THE KEY
She Holds the Key works to remove barriers and provide support for center and center-right-leaning women seeking elected office and appointments in Michigan.

GLPA-LEAD
GLPA-LEAD Education Fund trains, supports, and develops diverse leaders to effectively implement policy and manage organizations across Michigan.

MISSISSIPPI

MISSISSIPPI BLACK WOMEN’S ROUNDTABLE
The Mississippi Black Women’s Roundtable is a civic engagement network of black women and girls who focus on increasing voter participation and civic engagement.

NEW LEADERSHIP MISSISSIPPI
Mississippi University for Women’s NEW Leadership Mississippi educates college women about the important role that politics plays in their lives and encourages them to become effective leaders in the political arena.

WOMEN’S FOUNDATION OF MISSISSIPPI
The Women’s Foundation of Mississippi is a public foundation that works to eliminate the social and economic barriers faced by women and girls throughout the state.

ACLU OF MISSISSIPPI
The Mississippi affiliate of the American Civil Liberties Union dedicates their time and resources to promoting and defending the civil liberties of citizens across the state through legislation, litigation, and advocacy.

WASHINGTON

ONEAMERICA
OneAmerica is the largest immigrant and refugee advocacy organization in Washington State, organizing with and advocating for diverse communities including Latinx, African, and Asian.

PUGET SOUND SAGE
Puget Sound Sage charts a path to a living economy in the South Salish Sea and Duwamish River Valley regions by developing community power to influence, lead, and govern.

NATIVE ACTION NETWORK
Native Action Network is a Native-led nonprofit organized to promote Native women’s full representation, participation, and leadership in local, state, tribal, and national affairs.

FIX DEMOCRACY FIRST EDUCATION FUND
Fix Democracy First Education Fund focuses on voter education, voter registration, outreach, and expanding civic participation across Washington state and beyond.

COMUNIDAD LATINA DE VASHON
Comunidad Latina de Vashon was founded by Latina women to cultivate youth and adult community leaders to use their strengths to change systemic injustices on Vashon Island.

We also support national and local partners that work collaboratively to increase the number of women serving in state legislatures. For a complete list: theascendfund.org/who-we-are
In the two years that The Ascend Fund has invested in Michigan, Mississippi, and Washington, we have seen women make strides toward parity in all three states and have learned critical lessons that will continue to propel our work to accelerate the pace of change toward gender parity.

**KEY LEARNING #1**

Collaboration is key, but requires structured support.

Building a trusted network of partners that are able to learn from and collaborate with one another has been a crucial component of The Ascend Fund’s success during this initial grant period. By working collectively to develop and implement shared strategies, the field is elevated, ensuring progress moves forward—faster.

**KEY LEARNING #2**

Location matters.

The location of a state impacts both the number of women serving in office and the significance of the barriers they may face when trying to run and serve. Misogyny, sexism, racism, classism, and homophobia are prevalent in all 50 states; however, these institutions wreak absolute havoc on a woman’s ability to run in the Deep South.
While Michigan and Washington made strides toward parity, the lack of significant progress in Mississippi illustrates the overall challenge in achieving gender parity, which to date has been painstakingly slow. It’s taken 100 years for women to reach 25% representation, and without significant intervention from organizations like The Ascend Fund and our partners, it could take another century to achieve gender parity.

**KEY LEARNING #3**

*Parity takes patience.*

**MISSISSIPPI**

*Along road to gender parity.*

In the Deep South, there are deeply rooted and strongly upheld cultural norms that dictate a woman’s role in society. Women are seldom encouraged to develop a political point of view beyond their husband’s or father’s, let alone become a political leader themselves. This is evident in the relatively low numbers of women running for office in Mississippi, despite our partners’ interventions. Given Mississippi’s deeply entrenched history of structural racial and gender oppression, we recognize that it’s a long game to achieve gender parity, as this requires significant cultural and attitude shifts among current and future generations of Mississippians.
STRIDES TOWARD PARITY

Women now hold 39% of seats in the Michigan legislature.

A record 58 women out of 148 legislators are now serving in the Michigan Legislature. This includes 12 Democratic women in the Senate and 31 in the House as well as three Republican women in the Senate and 12 in the House. This is a new high: The previous record was set in 2020 when 54 women were elected.

MORE WOMEN LEADS TO A PRO-EQUALITY MAJORITY.

For the first time in nearly 40 years, Democrats hold a trifecta in Michigan with control of the Governor’s office and both houses of the state legislature. The legislature has passed legislation to protect the LGBTQ+ community, repealed the state’s abortion ban, and required background checks and the safe storage of firearms.

At The Ascend Fund, we’re committed to electing women not only because it’s what’s right, but because it’s what’s good for our democracy. Not only do women introduce and pass more bills, they also prioritize legislation that benefits women, children, and families. Women are also more likely to co-sponsor bills with other women and reach across the aisle to find bipartisan compromise. The bottom line: the more women in office, the more that gets accomplished.

BLACK WOMXN WIN MICHIGAN

Mothering Justice Launches Black Womxn Win Michigan.

In partnership with Michigan United and Detroit Action, Mothering Justice launched Black Womxn Win Michigan, a new initiative dedicated to transforming the face of political leadership in Michigan by electing the first Black woman Governor, U.S. Senator, and Mayor of Detroit by 2031.

SENATOR SARAH ANTHONY

Senator Sarah Anthony was elected to the Michigan State Senate in 2022. Prior to her election, Senator Anthony was the youngest Black woman to serve on a County Commission in the United States.

“The information and connections that The Ascend Fund provides are incredibly valuable and continue to open our eyes to the possibilities of our organization.”

Dawn Grannell, Executive Director, She Holds the Key
Modest Progress Toward Parity

Women hold just 15.5% of state legislative seats.

Following the 2023 election, just 27 women out of 174 will serve in the Mississippi Legislature. This includes two Democratic women in the Senate and seven in the House, as well as seven Republican women in the Senate and nine in the House. Two Independent women will serve in the House as well.

Severe Underrepresentation for Black Women in Mississippi.

Mississippi has consistently ranked in the bottom ten states for women’s political representation and representation is particularly egregious for Black women. Mississippi is one of the states with the starkest disparities between Black women’s representation in the population and their political representation.

This disparity did not change in the 2023 elections. The number of Black women serving in the legislature remained at ten, just 5.7% of the legislature. The MS Black Women’s Roundtable is working to increase the representation of Black women in the Mississippi legislature through training, civic engagement, and launching new programming such as Mississippi Women in the Lead, a joint cohort in partnership with The Women’s Foundation of Mississippi’s Women’s Policy Institute, and One Voice of Mississippi’s Mississippi Black Leadership Institute.

“We have seen tangible successes. We are genuinely excited about the promise of what this community-led coalition can further grow into.”

JARVIS DORICH, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, ACLU OF MISSISSIPPI

Representative-Elect Timaka James-Jones

Representative-Elect Timaka James-Jones won her primary against seven-term Representative Rufus Straughter, was unopposed in the general election and will assume office this January. Prior to running for office, Representative-Elect James-Jones was the first female African-American Justice Court Judge of Humphreys County and the first female African-American Circuit Court Clerk and County Registrar in Humphreys County.

Parity Takes Persistence

Women hold just 15.5% of seats in the Mississippi legislature.

The number of women in the Mississippi legislature increased from 25 to 27 following the 2023 election, but at the current rate of change, women are not on track to reach parity until 2160.

MS Women’s Political HQ

Providing resources for women to run—and win—in Mississippi.

To accelerate the pace of change toward gender parity, with the support of our partners in Mississippi, we launched the MS Women’s Political HQ—a website with Mississippi-focused resources to help women successfully run for office.
Women are on track to reach parity within the decade. With the accelerating rate of change, we project that Washington will achieve parity in the State House and Senate by 2026 if not 2024.

Women in Office Now

A training initiative by Fix Democracy First.

With support from The Ascend Fund, our partner Fix Democracy First launched Women in Office Now, offering free training and support to women in Washington State who are interested in running for office.

Record Number of Women Elected

Women now hold 46% of seats in the Washington legislature.

A record 67 women out of 149 legislators are serving in the Washington Legislature. This includes: 15 Democratic women in the Senate and 35 in the House as well as five Republican women in the Senate and 12 in the House. Women will now make up 45.6% of legislators. The previous record of 62 women (42%) was set in 2021.

Maintaining progress toward parity.

For more than a decade, from 1993 to 2004, Washington’s State Legislature ranked 1st in the nation for women’s representation. But progress faltered from a high of more than 42% in 2000 to just 32% in 2011. Women now make up 45.6% of the state legislature and should reach parity within the next two cycles, but work doesn’t end then. We must break down the barriers that prevent women from continuing to serve and run for office, such as low legislative pay and unaccommodating schedules.

STATE SENATOR CLAUDIA KAUFFMAN

When Senator Kauffman was first elected in 2006, she was the first Native woman to serve in the state senate. Kauffman co-founded Native Action Network (NAN), an Ascend partner that promotes Native women’s full representation, participation, and leadership in local, state, tribal, and national affairs.

“Irish Friday, President, Native Action Network

“Because of funding from Ascend, we were able to design the annual training program specifically for Native American women to develop the knowledge, skills, and network to successfully navigate the political arena of their choosing. We had overwhelming feedback that reinforced the need for a program like this.”
To reach parity in all 50 states, we must continue to invest in women’s political leadership and break down the barriers they face when running for office. Join us in helping make this vision a reality – to learn more or explore an investment in The Ascend Fund, please contact jennifer.cho@panoramaglobal.org.
The Ascend Fund is powered by Panorama Global, a social impact nonprofit that empowers changemakers through radical collaboration.

ascend@panoramaglobal.org / theascendfund.org / @theascendfund