

“5050 by 2020: On Political Equality for Women”
by Tracy Velazquez, Candidate for Montana House District 66
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What began here in Montana, with the election of Jeannette Rankin as the first woman in Congress, must begin again in Montana, right here, and right now. We must demand that women have equal representation in our government. Right now, there are nineteen states in our country – including Montana - where women have no representation in the United States Congress. We have never had a woman head the executive branch of our government. And, as of this year, we now have only one woman in that critical third branch of government, the U.S. Supreme Court. And we know how important the Supreme Court is to issues like choice and protecting our civil liberties. Here in Montana, less than one fourth of our state legislators are women.

Why is this important? Because women have a different world view that must be represented. Women, more than men, think we should be out of Iraq by Christmas. Women, more than men, think the country is heading in the wrong direction. Women are more concerned than men about healthcare and retirement security. We deserve to have a voice.

Women also haven’t achieved economic equality. Here in Montana, we have the largest wage gap in America – women earn 67 cents compared with a dollar for men. Even when adjusted for experience, education, and full time status, there is still a wage gap. More women in elected office who have suffered discrimination means better and tougher policies.

Over the past three decades, American women have achieved significant incremental gains in both politics and the economy. But these are not an irrevocable guarantee of equality, and the pace of change is painfully slow. From 1985 to 1995, the U.S. increased the percentage of women in Congress from 5% to 10%. In the past ten years, this has only increased another five percentage points. At this rate, it will take 70 years to reach political equality.

Many politicians think this doesn’t matter. The National Organization of Women found otherwise. When asked about what issues they felt were neglected during the 2004 presidential campaign, 61% said women’s equality under the law was a top issue that wasn’t talked about enough. Over half of women said equal pay for women, prevention of violence against women, and appointing women to leadership positions in the administration also didn’t receive enough attention.

What can we do? We can demand change. My youngest daughter, Avery, is four years old. She will be voting in her first general election in the year 2020 – the one-hundredth anniversary of women’s suffrage. I would like her to help elect the first Congress of the United States where women are equally represented. Women around the country are launching an initiative – 5050 by 2020 – to demand equal representation by the 100th anniversary of national women’s suffrage. This will be hard work. Here are some steps we need to take to get us there.

First, we must pass Clean Election Laws. Our political process favors incumbents, largely because of their ability to raise money. Clean, publicly financed elections would reduce that advantage. Arizona and Maine have enacted clean election laws that have increased the number of women running for office.

Second, we must all work to encourage women to run for office, and support them when they do.

Finally, we must create a guarantee of equality somewhere in our political system. You can’t get to the moon in a 747, and women cannot get to 50/50 representation by 2020 at five percent a decade. We need a bold step. We propose changing the system so that each state has one male and one female senator. Enacting such a policy will force political parties to nurture and support women candidates. This will take a constitutional amendment. But so did assuring women’s right to vote 86 years ago.

Having more women’s voices in public office is not just good for women. It is good for America. Please stop by the Women in Politics table to learn more and to sign up to help make America a more peaceful and just country through equal representation of women. Our founding fathers and mothers thought that taxation without representation was cause for revolution. Let’s make Jeannette Rankin proud, and start a second revolution for Women’s Equality here in Montana today.