



LeadHERship in the Federal Government

Leadership and Gender Differences in the Federal Government and Beyond

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About the Partnership

The Partnership for Public Service is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that works to revitalize the federal government by inspiring a new generation to serve and by transforming the way government works. The Partnership teams up with federal agencies and other stakeholders to make our government more effective and efficient.

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Introduction

Through its [Public Service Leadership Institute](#), the [Partnership for Public Service](#) develops leaders, from aspiring supervisors and top-level senior executives to political appointees, who work to build a better government and a stronger democracy. In a world of complex problems, we need leaders who can spark innovation and drive systemic change, act as stewards of vital public resources, empower employee success and ensure that agencies meet the diverse needs of those they serve.

One of the important resources we use to strengthen leaders' capabilities is the Public Service Leadership 360 assessment tool which helps leaders gain insights into their performance and evaluate themselves against the skills and competencies needed to lead in government. The tool has been used by almost 2,000 federal leaders to date.

After two years of data collection, we analyzed our 360 data and conducted interviews with federal leaders to better understand certain patterns in leadership experience. Specifically, we examined the differences and similarities between how women and men understand and experience their roles as public service leaders, and explored the intersections between race, ethnicity and gender in public service leadership.

Our goal in analyzing and interpreting this data is two-fold:



To identify and interpret trends in federal leader scores provided by the Public Service Leadership 360 assessment tool, with a specific focus on gender, race and ethnicity – comparing how leadership competencies are rated across these demographics.



To identify barriers and challenges faced by women leaders in the federal workforce.

By providing these insights we contribute to the ongoing research and process of understanding why these gender gaps persist, to enable solutions that address the societal structures or barriers that contribute to these disparities.

The gender gap is not a new problem

Decades of research have demonstrated the workforce gender gap, both broadly and among leaders specifically. Researchers regularly report on the existence of gender gaps in all areas of work, and the problem has persisted for decades across all sectors¹.

While recently progress has been made, women are still significantly underrepresented in leadership positions in all sectors around the world. This is especially true for women of color, who now account for only 4% of the C-suite level, or top-level corporate positions, in the U.S. despite making up 20.3 % percent of the country's population^{2,3,4}.

The public sector has shown similarly slow progress. In 2021, women made up just 27.3% of the U.S. Congress, and the country has yet to elect a woman president¹. According to [FedScope data](#) updated in March 2022, out of a total of 8,187 Senior Executive Service (SES) members, 39% were females (3,173) compared to 61% males (5,014).

To achieve the Biden administration's goal of building a federal workforce that reflects the diversity of the United States, it is critical to understand women's experiences in government leadership roles⁵.

¹ World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Report 2021.

² LeanIn "Women in the Workplace report" 2021

³ United States Census Bureau, 2020.

⁴ Catalyst, Quick Take. "Women of color in the United States." Retrieved from: <https://www.catalyst.org/research/women-of-color-in-the-united-states/> (2022)

⁵ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/06/25/executive-order-on-diversity-equity-inclusion-and-accessibility-in-the-federal-workforce/>



Leadership in context

Leadership studies demonstrate that gender gaps in the workplace are not due to women leaders' lack of ability. On the contrary, research from the corporate world shows that women outscore men in 17 of 19 capabilities that differentiate excellent leaders from average or poor ones⁶. Our own research indicates the same tendency in public service leadership (see "Analysis of Federal Government Leadership Assessment Scores by Gender" to be published early September, 2022).

While gender disparities in leadership may exist for many reasons, a critical factor is that the concept of leadership has historically been grounded in specific conceptions of gender and race—with white men seen as the standard^{7,8}. Accepting an idea or image of leadership that does not include all individuals may result in implicit biases and organizational structures that make it challenging for women—and women of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds more specifically—to advance their careers and become leaders.

Today, for example, individuals of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds make up about 38% of the federal workforce—a number that roughly matches their 40% makeup of the overall U.S. population. But racial and ethnic disparities persist in federal leadership positions, with only 23% of career Senior Executive Service members categorized as individuals of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds⁹.

Stereotypes about who leaders are and how they behave as well as preexisting leadership norms may be partially responsible for workplace gender differences. The "role congruity theory" proposes that actions and behaviors perceived as desirable for a leader must align with cultural beliefs about a specific group's typical social role. The more congruence between the

⁶ Zenger, Jack, and Joseph Folkman. "Women score higher than men in most leadership skills." *Harvard Business Review* 92.10 (2019): 86-93. <https://hbr.org/2019/06/research-women-score-higher-than-men-in-most-leadership-skills>

⁷ Baldner, Conrad, and Antonio Pierro. "The trials of women leaders in the workforce: How a need for cognitive closure can influence acceptance of harmful gender stereotypes." *Sex Roles* 80.9 (2019): 565-577.

⁸ Liu, H. (2021). *Redeeming leadership: An anti-racist feminist intervention*.

⁹ Partnership for Public Service Fed Figures 2021.

two, the more an individual is assessed as a competent leader. Due to gender stereotypes and cultural norms, attitudes toward women leaders are less positive than they are toward men, and it is more difficult for women to become leaders and to be perceived as successful in leadership roles^{10,11,12,13}. For example, women are often seen as warm, comforting and communal, which may be perceived as incompatible with stereotypical attributes of strong leaders, such as assertiveness and competence⁶.

Our approach to exploring these topics

We authored a series of briefs that focus on women's experiences as public service leaders based on the values and competencies of our [Public Service Leadership Model](#). The model highlights four key competencies for federal leaders to succeed in their roles: becoming self-aware, engaging others, leading change and achieving results. The model also includes two unique values that are core to government leadership: stewardship of public trust and commitment to public good¹⁴.

¹⁰ DeHart-Davis, Leisha, et al. *Gender Imbalance in Public Sector Leadership*. Cambridge University Press, 2020.

¹¹ Hutchinson, Jacquie, Beth Walker, and Fiona Haslam McKenzie. "Leadership in local government: Factors affecting the appointment of CEOs." (2014).

¹² Scheurer, Elizabeth Coleman. *Role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders: An empirical investigation*. Diss. Xavier University, 2005.

¹³ Eagly, Alice H., and Steven J. Karau. "Role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders." *Psychological review* 109.3 (2002): 573.

¹⁴ McDonald, Conant & Marshall 2020

Overall, the briefs will:



Unpack the core competencies and values of the Public Service Leadership model, with examples of key gender differences and similarities in scores across 20 sub competencies, four competencies and two core values.



Explore the idea of self-confidence as a key component of becoming self-aware and demonstrating leadership self-efficacy, “an individual’s confidence in their ability to carry out necessary leadership behaviors.”



Examine diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility in leadership and patterns in experiencing and exercising leadership that exist at the intersection of gender, ethnicity and race based on our data analysis.



Provide advice and suggestions summarized from women leaders in government on how to help create and cultivate a type of federal leadership that is hospitable to women and allows all leaders to thrive.

To arrive at our findings, we analyzed data collected through the Public Service Leadership 360 assessment tool from December 2020 to April 15, 2022. This data included 15,327 sets of scores that rated leaders’ competencies and sub-competencies on a scale of one to seven (with one being low and seven being high) and answers to open-ended questions about leadership attributes for 1,123 federal employees.

Additionally, from April-June 2022, we conducted 13 research interviews with women in leadership positions at different federal agencies and organized a focus group with eight participants-- all members of the [Executive Women in Government](#) organization.



Why is this important?

Understanding the unique experiences of women in federal leadership positions will enable the Partnership and other organizations in the government effectiveness space to better tailor their support, resources and opportunities to their target audiences. Such efforts are key to reducing leadership gaps based on gender or race and ethnicity. Furthermore, this work will provide additional data for the government to improve its support, resources and opportunities for women in public service.

Additionally, we will seek to understand if common perceptions, stereotypes, or definitions of leadership contribute to these gaps. This analysis will enable us to explore how and where existing social structures may continue to inhibit women leaders and leaders with diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds, and to make recommendations on how to change oppressive structures and patterns of thought and behavior.

The more we can use data to empower and support all leaders--actual and potential--in our federal government, the better it will serve the public and our country.

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