

REPRESENTATION IN THE 118TH CONGRESS

A data-driven study of federal legislators, motherhood, and caregiving.

politics of
parenthood

by



Vote mama

FOUNDATION

Contents

Introduction	3
About Vote Mama Foundation	5
About Politics of Parenthood	6
Perception of Parenthood in Congress	7
Representation	12
<i>Parenthood</i>	13
<i>Political Affiliation</i>	15
<i>Race & Ethnicity</i>	17
<i>Gender Identity & Sexual Orientation</i>	19
<i>Adult & Disability Caregiving</i>	20
<i>Ability Status</i>	21
The Care Gap	23
Barriers	26
Solutions	32
Conclusion	34
Citations	37

Introduction

For many Americans, parenthood is the first time they personally understand how deeply our nation's policies fail working families. The United States is the most expensive country in which to give birth.¹ The average cost of childcare for just one child is more than a third of the median income for a single parent.² More than half our population lives in a childcare desert,³ and moms spend more time on childcare than dads at every stage of their child's development.⁴

Our economy relies on women's labor, both outside the home (for less pay than men⁵) and inside the home (with no pay at all⁶). For women of color, particularly Black women, this has always been true.⁷ But workplace and public policy still most often rely on the faulty assumption that working families have access to an unpaid caregiver,⁸ usually a woman in their family. Further, the assumption is that her taking time away from work will not harm the family financially. As sociologist Dr. Jessica Calarco said, "Other countries have social safety nets. The U.S. has women."^{9,10}

The realities of caring for ourselves and for others are integral to the human experience. Caregiver status significantly impacts our attitudes and behaviors, how we approach problems, and how we approach policy. Parents of minor children are the largest population of caregivers in the United States,^{*} but few parents are in positions of power to craft legislation that truly supports working families.

Our legislators are charged with solving challenges most have never personally faced. Most members of Congress have never lived paycheck to paycheck.¹¹ Most do not have student loan debt.¹² Most do not understand what it is like to be unable to afford childcare. Not having enough parents in office means a less diverse Congress, and a legislative body that is disconnected from the policies that impact working families.

Caregiving is a major determinant in our lives, and must be analyzed as a key identity when evaluating the diversity of a lawmaking body. In the extensive research on the role of gender in politics, however, motherhood is rarely considered a distinct identity.



^{*}2020 American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year Estimate Public Use Microdata show that 32.8% of the adult population in the U.S. are parents with minor children, and American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) reported that 19.2% of U.S. adults were caregivers of recipients over the age of 18 in 2020.¹³

In 2022, Vote Mama Foundation launched *Politics of Parenthood*, a research series focused on the political participation of mothers in the United States. The series' [first report](#) was a data-driven study of state legislators. We found that just 5.3% of state legislators are mothers of minor children. Until *Politics of Parenthood*, there was no publicly available demographic dataset of legislators that included parental status.

In this report, we turn our attention to the representation of parents in the 118th Congress. Representation of moms is only slightly better at the federal level than at the state level—**6.8% of the 118th Congress is made up of moms with minor children.**

Informed by conversations with current members of the 118th Congress and our first-of-its-kind demographic data on the representation of parents in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives, our research suggests that there are structural and cultural barriers that impact representation of mothers with minor children.

While writing this report, our team also spoke with two candidates planning to run for Congress. Both were single mothers, and both had gone through an enormous amount of effort to plan their campaigns. Both eventually decided not to run because of their caregiving responsibilities—one because the schedule would be too grueling for her young daughters and the other because she needed to care for her elderly mother as well as her young son.

These are the voices we need in Congress—the voices of caregivers who understand the impact of our policy failures at a visceral level. These are the voices we are missing because Congress was not designed for caregivers.

“I was ready to hit the ground running and launch my campaign for a seat in Arizona’s 6th Congressional District. I was buzzing with excitement, eager to get started on this new venture. However, my excitement was quickly overshadowed when I received some difficult news about my mom’s health. Suddenly, my priorities shifted from my political aspirations to taking care of my family. Caring for an aging parent can be quite challenging, but when you add in the responsibility of caring for a dependent child, the challenges can be overwhelming.

Running for political office is not easy, but I am not afraid of hard work. From a young age, I have been working tirelessly, with my family always my top priority. Unfortunately, my dream of representing my hometown in Congress was cut short because of my responsibilities as a mom... If we want our government to truly be reflective of our country, we need to ensure that everyone has a fair shot at running for office, no matter their responsibilities outside of politics.”

— JoAnna Mendoza



photo: former candidate JoAnna Mendoza with her son

About Vote Mama Foundation

Vote Mama Foundation is the leading source of research and analysis about the political participation of mothers in the United States. We work towards gender equity by naming and dismantling the barriers mothers face running for and serving in office, normalizing mothers of young children in office, and enabling legislators to pass *truly* family-friendly policies. Vote Mama Foundation is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization.



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Acknowledgements

Vote Mama Foundation is deeply grateful to our 2023 Research Fellows: Maria Wilson and Lydia Morris for their dedicated work in data collection and cleaning, as well as their contributions to editing and fact-checking. We also thank the [Victory Institute](#), [Ballotpedia](#), [Daily Kos](#), and [Pew Research Center](#) for their work in compiling and maintaining publicly available data that was invaluable to this effort.

About Politics of Parenthood

Politics of Parenthood is a dataset of robust demographics for state and federal legislators. Variables include but are not limited to: date elected to current office, education, previous occupation, age, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, religion, marital status, ability status, parental status, age of youngest child, and caregiving status. Data are collected through extensive monitoring of news and social media and build on the work of other organizations. Our aim is to provide nuanced and accessible data suited for both research and public communication.

While data for federal legislators are much more readily available than for state legislators, there is a paucity of information available about aspects of identity that are vital to policy making, particularly parenthood, caregiving, and ability status. For this reason, we focused on including these variables. Because the dataset relies on publicly available information, however, it is not infallible or exhaustive. To the knowledge of Vote Mama Foundation, the *Politics of Parenthood* dataset is the first to include ability, caregiving, and parental status, making it the most comprehensive publicly available demographic dataset of state and federal legislators in the United States.

Who is included in the dataset?

The *Politics of Parenthood* dataset includes all members of the 118th Congress. Though the focus of this report is on federal legislators, the dataset also includes all state legislators in office as of August 2022 who use she/her or they/them pronouns.

Who is a mama?

Mamas are cis and trans women with biological children, foster children, step-children, and formally or informally adopted children under the age of 18. In this report, we also refer to mamas interchangeably as moms of minor kids or mothers of minor children. Though our research focus is on the political participation of mamas, the dataset includes parental status for all included legislators, regardless of their gender or the age of their youngest child.

What is proportional representation?

For the purposes of this report, representativeness is evaluated in terms of the population. We consider full representation to be achieved when the share of a demographic in Congress is similar to that of the adult population in the United States. Unless specifically noted otherwise, all population-level statistics in this report are derived from 2020 American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year Estimate Public Use Microdata.¹⁴ It is important to note that this definition is not intended to be a measure of ideal representation. Proportional representation may not be enough to adequately center the needs of vulnerable populations or even provide protection from outright harms—it should be our baseline, but it does not have to be our end goal.

Perception of Parenthood in Congress

The struggles of parents are universal, but they are not treated that way in Congress.

Former Representative Pat Schroeder was elected to Congress in 1972 as the mother of a 6-year-old and a 2-year-old. At the time, she was just 1 of 16 women serving in the House of Representatives; she was a trailblazer for mothers in Congress. When Schroeder first won her election, former Representative Bella Abzug told her, “I hear you have little kids. You won’t be able to do this job.”¹⁵ This warning proved prescient when Schroeder was intensely judged by the press, voters, and her colleagues for her caregiving status.

“So it wasn’t even just being a woman, it was being a young woman with little kids, and that really threw people for a loop.”

– Former Representative Pat Schroeder¹⁷



In 1973, former Representative Yvonne Brathwaite Burke became the first woman to give birth while serving in Congress.¹⁶ However, she left shortly after due to her caregiving responsibilities.

The first lactation room was not installed in the U.S. House of

Representatives until 2007, and only after Nancy Pelosi—the first woman and first mother to ever serve as speaker of the House—demanded it. Despite 1 in 4 American mothers identifying as single,¹⁹ Katie Porter became the first single mom of minors to ever serve in Congress when she was elected in 2018.

That same year, Tammy Duckworth became the first senator to give birth in office. And it was only thanks to a Senate rule change that just 10 days after she gave birth, Duckworth became the first senator to ever cast a vote on the Senate floor alongside her child.²⁰

For most of congressional history, there has not been guidance on how lawmakers are meant to perform their duties both without being separated from their children and without allowing the business of Congress to go uninterrupted.

“As a father to three young children, it can be challenging to balance caregiving with my work responsibilities in Washington and San Antonio. During the week-long House Speaker vote earlier this year, I had my eight-month-old daughter with me, and it was shocking to realize just how ill-equipped facilities at the Capitol are for working moms and dads. Thankfully, I have a great support system, but we must do more to make Congress a welcoming place for parents. Members of Congress were elected to be our district’s voice, and elected officials who understand the needs of folks in their district are their best advocates. I co-founded the Congressional Dads Caucus to help push for real solutions like affordable childcare and paid leave because every family deserves the opportunity to succeed.”

—Representative Joaquin Castro (TX-20)



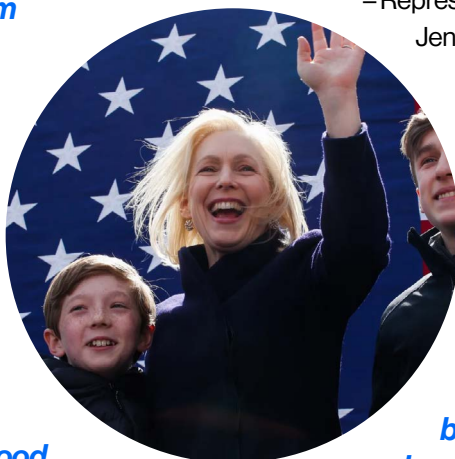
The unprecedented start of the 118th Congress demonstrated the challenges our lawmakers face while caring for young children and doing the public’s work. The days-long voting procedure to elect the next speaker of the House meant lawmakers not only had their children with them but also cared for them during the proceedings. For lawmakers with young kids, “the labor of parenting in America spill[ed] over into the halls—and offices—of Congress.”²¹ Cloakrooms were transformed into play spaces and changing rooms, and several members cast votes while holding their infants.

Our nation witnessed in real time why Congress is inaccessible to parents with minor children: there was no normal schedule, no consideration for how the voting stalemate would impact childcare, and seemingly no concern about how parents could remain on-call for however long voting would take. Representative Wesley Hunt (TX-38) returned to Texas after his wife suffered complications during labor and gave birth to their son prematurely. After a brief visit with his wife and son, he had to return to the House floor to cast another speaker vote. **The House speaker hold-up was a glaring example of how elected leaders are supposed to compartmentalize their role as parents in order to be taken seriously as legislators.**

Although there is still no blueprint for serving in Congress as a parent, Dr. Jennifer Lawless, a politics professor at University of Virginia, argues, “We are seeing candidates embrace their parental roles and make the case that it’s because they have children and because they are mothers, that they have unique experiences that position them to better represent a large portion of their constituents.”²²

“I ran for Congress with a toddler, ran for reelection when I was pregnant with my second, and raised them both while serving in the Senate—I know how challenging it is to be a working parent. It’s an important perspective that has informed my work and it’s why I fight so hard for the care economy: paid family and medical leave, affordable child care, accessible and expanded early childhood education. More working parents in Congress and state legislatures means a deeper understanding of the struggles of everyday families and better solutions to the problems we face.”

– Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (NY)



“My kids are the reason I ran for Congress. I wanted to help create a better country and better future for my two boys to live in, and every time I see them after a long week of votes or busy day on the campaign trail, I’m reminded of why I chose this path and what I’m fighting for. Despite the barriers we face, moms bring a unique and essential perspective to legislating, and I fully support encouraging more moms to run and serve in elected office.”

– Representative
Jennifer Wexton (VA-10)

“The hardest part about my day is getting up with three children 5 and under and getting them dressed, fed, and out the door to daycare and school. After that, everything about my day gets easier. I’m burdened and privileged to be able to be a parent to those babies while serving in Congress. Burdened because let’s be real, Congress without kids was challenging for me. A privilege because serving in Congress while raising 3 little kids gives me the perspective on and the forum to fight for issues like child care, paid family leave, and equity in education access.”

– Representative Eric Swalwell (CA-14)

Parents in Congress are joining together to bond over their unique experience as both caretakers and legislators and to advocate for policies that matter to working families. In 2018, Representative Debbie Wasserman Schultz (FL-25) created the first Moms in the House Caucus and invited 25 mothers of young children serving in the U.S. House of Representatives to join and advance policies that uplift American families like paid leave and affordable childcare. Upon the creation of the Moms in the House Caucus, Wasserman Schultz said, “It’s wonderful that we have a critical mass of moms with school-aged children and we can be there for one another and have a platform to advance an agenda important to women and families, and at the same time, we shouldn’t need that support network because it shouldn’t be any different to be a mom than to be a dad in Congress. Only it is, and you have to deal with reality.”²³




“With immense pride, my colleagues and I are launching the first-ever Congressional Dads Caucus to advocate for the needs of working families. The formation of this Caucus is rooted in a simple idea: Dads need to [sic]do our part in advancing policies that will make a difference in the lives of so many parents across the country...This is how we set an equitable path forward for the next generation and build a brighter future for our children—including my five-month-old son, Hodge.”

– Representative
Jimmy Gomez (CA-34)²⁵

“I want to show you one thing that I’ve kept, which is a note from my 4-year-old that says ‘Hi daddy, I love you, I will give you hugs and kisses when you get home, from Alessia.’ I keep that right by my desk every day, just as a reminder of what really is important in life. And it may be that we are here trying to represent our districts, represent the people of the United States in the best way possible—including advocating for important legislation like the Child Tax Credit, like universal child care, like paid family leave—but what really keeps us grounded and motivated and focused is our children.”

– Representative Dan Goldman (NY-10)²⁶

For the first time ever, fathers in Congress have formed a coalition to fight for everyday families. In January 2023, Representative Jimmy Gomez (CA-34) launched the Congressional Dads Caucus. Representative Joaquin Castro (TX-20) said of its creation: “Historically, women legislators—especially mothers—have been the champions for paid leave, affordable childcare, and other policies that support working families. They deserve an extraordinary amount of credit, but they should also be able to count on male legislators to be partners in their fight from the beginning.”²⁴



“I didn’t leave Congress because I did not enjoy it. I enjoyed it very much, but by the time my daughter got old enough to go to school in first grade, it just was going to be impossible, so I had to make some choices. And that’s when I decided to come back to Los Angeles.”¹⁸

**Former Representative
Yvonne Brathwaite Burke**

Representation

There are more women serving in Congress than ever before, including a record number of women of color.²⁷ In 1973, only 16 women served in the 93rd Congress.²⁸ 50 years later, 155 women are serving in the 118th Congress. Despite women being 51.3% of the adult population, women hold only 28.7% of congressional seats. Men make up 48.7% of the adult population but hold 71.4% of seats.

The 118th Congress is the most racially and ethnically diverse in history,²⁹ though white men alone hold the majority of seats. While this Congress has also broken records for LGB* representation,³⁰ there are only 13 openly lesbian, gay, or bisexual members.

We are all recipients of caregiving, and at some point in our lives, the vast majority of us will provide care for another person. Without including parents and caregivers, a decision-making body cannot hope to provide policy solutions for the types of problems that will eventually affect us all. The same is true of political research; the lived experience of parents and caregivers—and the diversity among them—must be included.

So who are our members of Congress? And what lived experiences do they bring to the table?



photo: Representatives prepare for class photo of newly-elected members of the 118th Congress. ³⁰

*LGB is used here instead of LGBTQIA+ because there is only lesbian, gay, and bisexual representation in the 118th Congress. ³⁰

Representation: Parenthood

Key Findings: Mothers of minor children are grossly underrepresented in Congress. Only 6.8% of all Congress members are moms with minor children, and just 1.1% of Congress members are moms with children under the age of 6.

Among the 541 members of the 118th U.S. Congress (including non-voting members), just 37 are moms with children under the age of 18. Only 3 of these moms are serving in the Senate, where they are outnumbered by dads of minors 7:1. In fact, there are 3 times more men named John* in the Senate than there are moms of minor children.

While 24.2% of all members of Congress are dads of minor children, only 6.8% are moms of minor children. 15.1% of adults in the United States are

dads of minors, and 17.8% are moms of minors.** Among all Congress members, dads of minors are overrepresented at more than one and a half times the rate they appear in the population, while moms of minors are underrepresented at about one third of the rate in the population.

In order to achieve proportional representation, Americans need to elect 59 more moms of minor children to Congress.

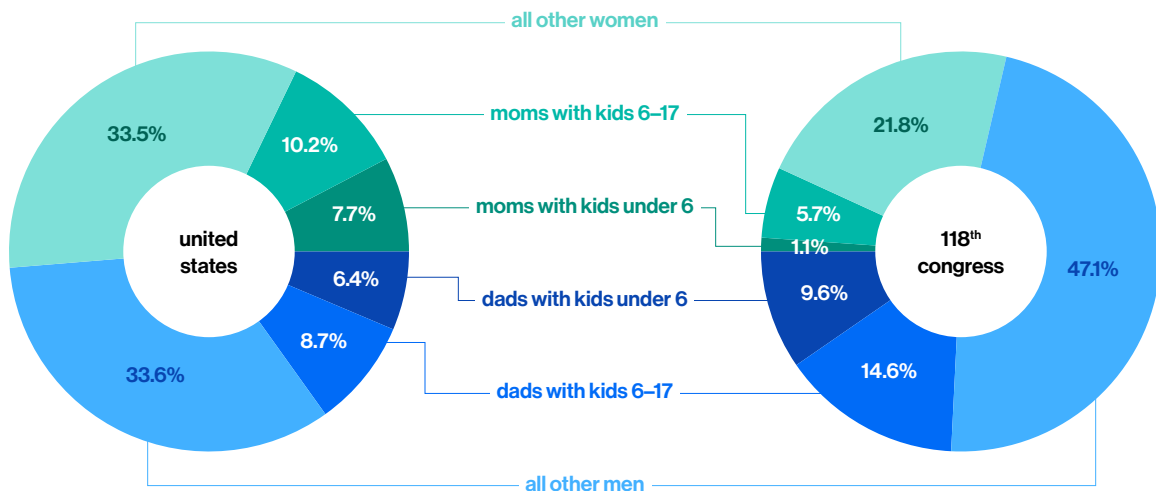


Figure 1: Adults in the U.S. and members of the 118th Congress by gender and parental status

*There are 10 men named John or Jon serving in the Senate.

** Parents of minors in the adult population are defined as adults living with related minor children.

There is a baby boom in Congress, but not for women. Since the start of 2022, 6 Republican and 5 Democratic congressmen have had children, but not a single congresswoman has given birth or adopted a child. While there are only 6 congresswomen with kids under the age of 6, there are nearly 9 times as many congressmen with kids under 6.

11 congressmen welcomed newborns in the last year alone, but only 11 women have ever given birth while serving in Congress.³¹ There is 1 more single mom than single dad in the 118th Congress, despite there being 94 more dads of minors than moms of minors. The only single parent of minors in the Senate is a dad.

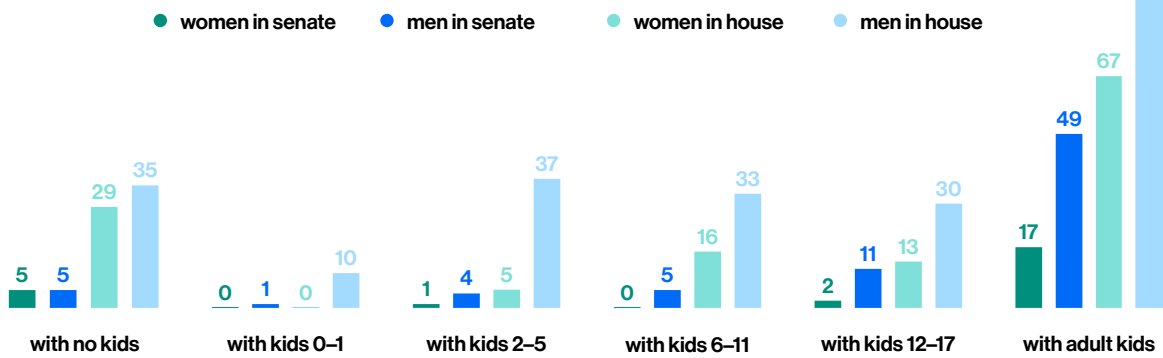


Figure 2: Number of parents in the 118th Congress by chamber and age of youngest child.

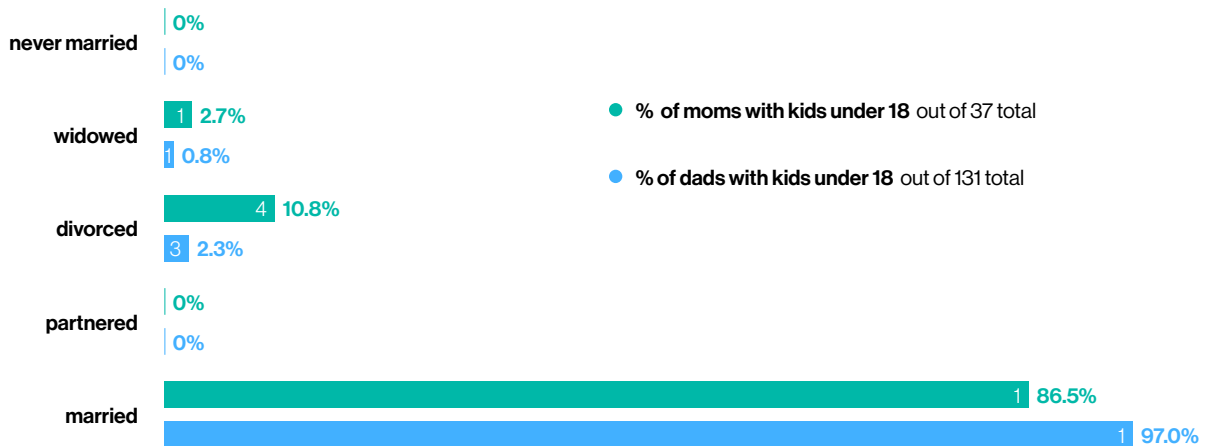


Figure 3: Congress members' marital status as a percent of parents of minors by gender.

Representation: Political Affiliation

Key Findings: There are twice as many Democratic moms of minor children in the 118th Congress than there are Republican moms of minor children.

In Congress, a distinct majority of women are Democrats (71.0%), while a distinct majority of men are Republicans (59.6%).

This holds true for parents of minor children—67.6% of moms with minor children are Democrats while 60.3% of dads with minor children are Republicans.

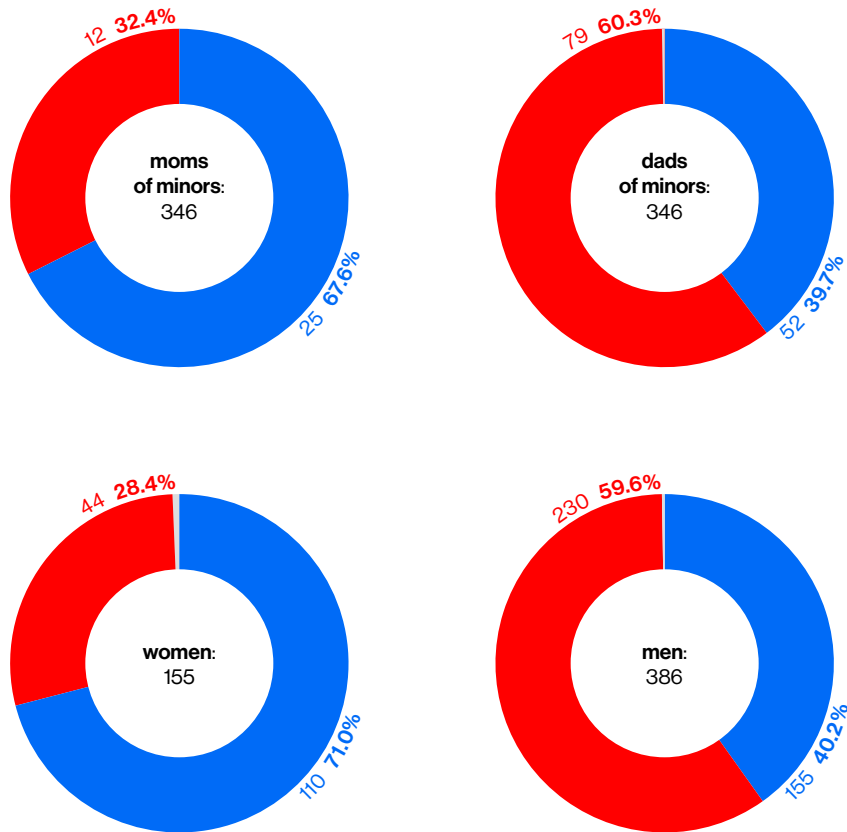


Figure 4: Members of the 118th Congress by political affiliation.

9.4% of Democrats in Congress are moms of minor children, but only 4.4% of Republicans in Congress are moms of minor children.

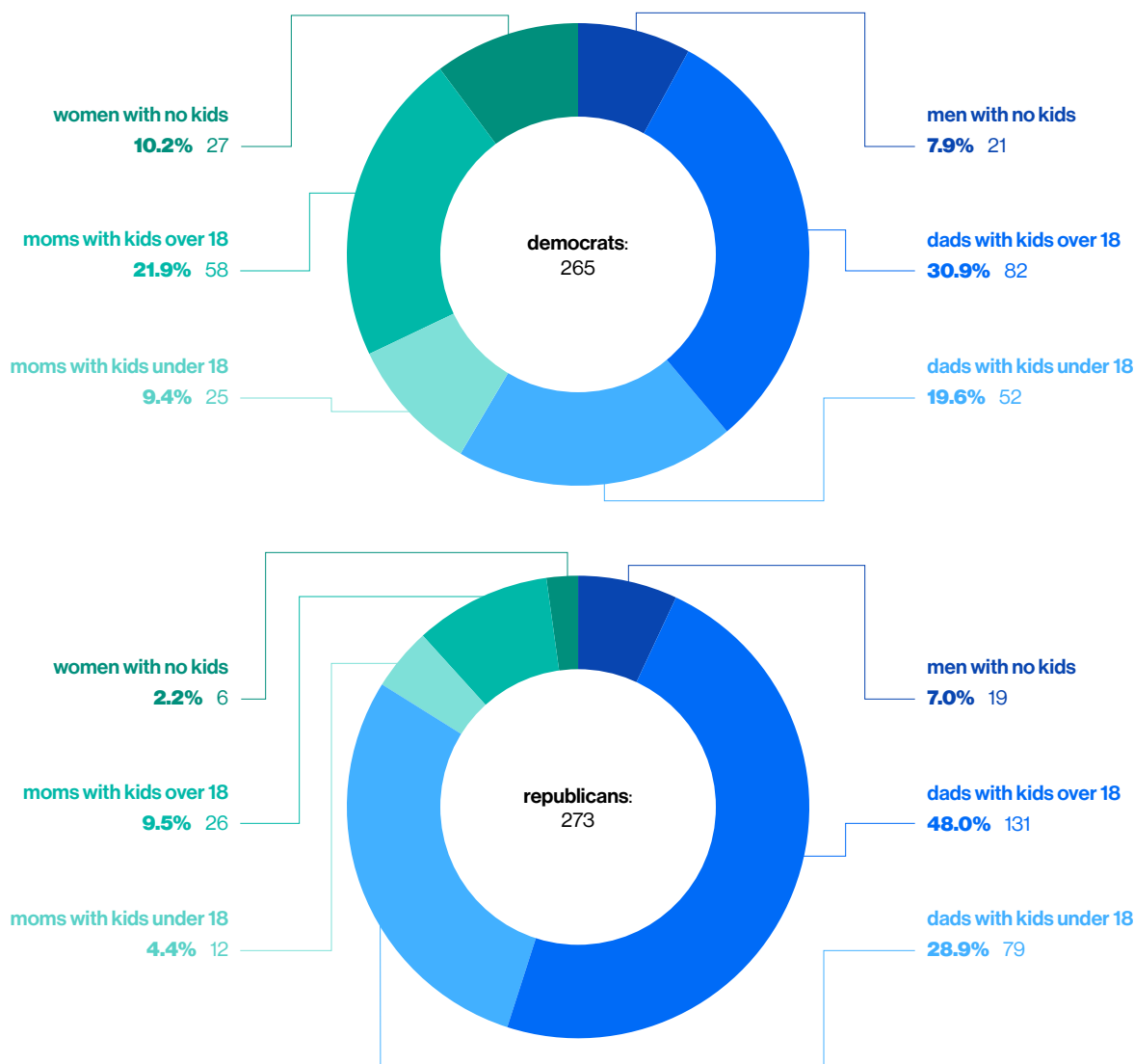


Figure 5: Democrats and Republicans in the 118th Congress by gender, parental status, and age of youngest child.

Representation: Race & Ethnicity

Key Findings: Women—including moms of minors—serving in Congress are racially diverse, but moms of color still only make up 3.0% of Congress.

While only 28.6% of Congress members are women, 43.4% of all Congress members of color are women. Women without children are the only group that is not majority white when Congress members are grouped by gender and parental status.

Dads of minors in Congress are not representative of the diversity of fathers in the United States population. 73.3% of fathers of minors in Congress are white, but only 54.7% of fathers in the population are white.

Despite women and moms in Congress being more racially diverse than men and dads, there are still only 16 moms of color with minor children in Congress.

Women disproportionately account for the racial and ethnic diversity in Congress.

Congress members of color are more representative in terms of gender and parenthood than white Congress members. All other racial and ethnic groups are closer to gender parity than white Congress members—only AAPI (Asian American and Pacific Islander) and Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) Congress members have reached gender parity. Of all racial and ethnic groups, white Congress members have the lowest percentage (4.7%) of moms of minor children.

	white/euro	latinx/hispanic	black/african american	aapi	multiracial	indigenous	jewish	mena
% of american adults	11.7%	4.1%	2.8%	1.4%	0.4%	0.4%	—	—
% of congress members	4.1%	0.7%	1.3%	0.6%	0.4%	0.2%	0.4%	0.2%
# moms of minors in congress	22	4	7	3	2	1	2	1

Table 1: Number of moms of minors in the 118th Congress by race and ethnicity. Moms of minors as a percent of the 118th Congress overall. Moms of minors as a percent of the total adult population of the United States. i.e. there are 3 AAPI moms of minors in the 118th Congress, which is 0.6% of Congress. AAPI moms of minors are 1.4% of the adult population in the United States.*

*Except for the white/euro group, each group includes people who identify as that race alone or in combination with other races. The white group includes people who are white alone and are not Latinx. The Census Bureau does not collect data on Middle Eastern/Northern African (MENA) or Jewish ethnicity, and MENA and Jewish respondents are coded as white. Though they may not actually identify as white, MENA and Jewish Congress members are also included in this group in order to avoid the appearance that the percentage of white Congress members is closer to the percentage of white adults in the U.S. than it may actually be, since we do not know what proportion of white-coded ACS respondents are MENA or Jewish. MENA and Jewish members of Congress are included without comparison to the population in the final two rows.

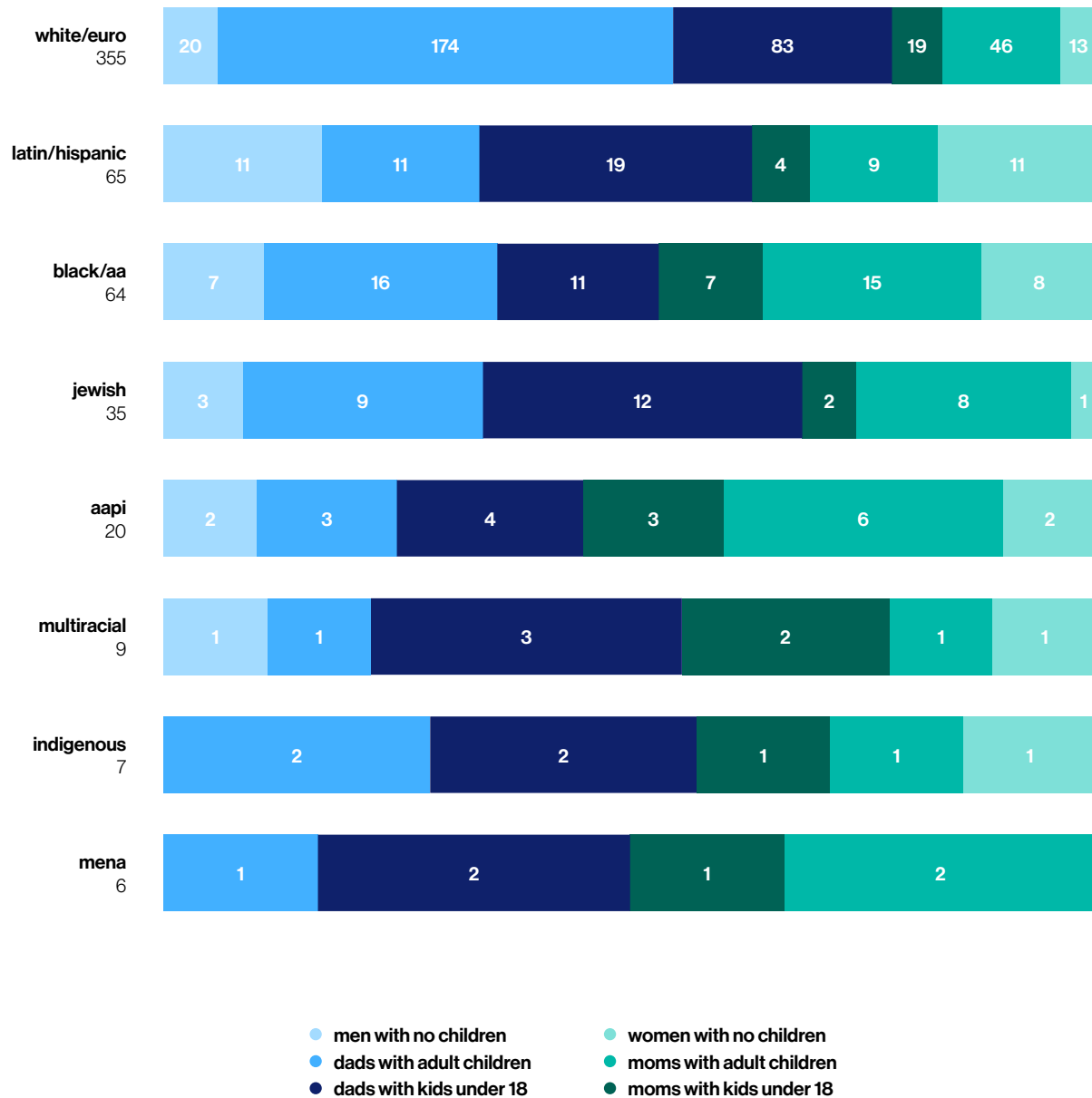


Figure 6: Number of Congress members by gender and parental status, depicted proportionally among each racial/ethnic group.

*Except for the white/euro group, each group includes people who identify as that race alone or in combination with other races or ethnicities. The white/euro group includes people who are white alone and are not Latinx, Jewish, or MENA.

Representation:

Gender Identity & Sexual Orientation

Key Findings: There is only 1 openly LGBTQIA+ parent of minor children in the 118th Congress.

Over 8% of the adult population in the United States is LGBT,* according to the 2021 Household Pulse Survey,³² but only 2.4% of Congress is openly lesbian, gay, or bisexual. LGB** representation has tripled in the past 10 years to a record level in the 118th Congress³³—but there are still only 13 members. **There has never been an openly trans or nonbinary person elected to Congress.**³⁴

Using 2014–2016 ACS data, UCLA’s Williams Institute found 16.2% of same-assigned-sex couples were parents of minor children,³⁵ but only 7.7% of LGB Congress members are parents of

minor children. **Of the 13 LGB Congress members, just 1 is a mom of a minor child. There are no bisexual parents or gay fathers.**

LGBTQIA+ people, particularly trans children, are in an extremely precarious position in the current policy environment. We cannot be certain what percentage of the United States population are trans or nonbinary parents or what percentage of parents have trans or nonbinary children. The 2021 Household Pulse Survey was the first time in history that the Census Bureau attempted to count the number of LGBT people in the United States, but the ACS and the U.S. Census, which we and many other researchers rely on for population-level statistics, still do not collect data on gender identity or sexual orientation of respondents or their children.³⁶ Instead, the two largest surveys administered by the Census Bureau rely only on sex assigned at birth. Though we cannot draw comparisons to the population at large, we found that of the 467 parents of both minor and adult children in Congress, just 2 (0.4%) have shared that their children identify as transgender or nonbinary.



photo: Rep. Becca Balint with her wife, Elizabeth³⁰⁰

*The Household Pulse Survey did not attempt to collect statistics on identities other than lesbian, gay, bisexual, or trans, though respondents were given options to select “Something else,” “None of these,” or “I don’t know” for gender and sexuality questions.

**LGB is used here instead of LGBTQIA+ because there is only lesbian, gay, and bisexual representation in the 118th Congress.

Representation: Adult & Disability Care

Key Findings: We know of only 9 Congress members (1.7%) providing care for one or more adults and 4 Congress members (0.7%) currently providing care to minors with disabilities in 2023.

In their 2020 report, *Caregiving in the U.S.*, AARP found that a total of 19.2% of adults were caregivers of one or more adults.³⁷ According to the National Alliance for Caregiving, more than a quarter of unpaid adult caregivers are in the sandwich generation (i.e. people who are providing unpaid care for an older adult while simultaneously parenting a minor child).³⁸ We were only able to find 51 (9.4%) members of the 118th Congress who have shared that they have been caregivers of other adults at any point in their lives. Of these congressional caregivers:

- 8 were caregivers of their parents when they themselves were minors or young adults, and 3 cared for younger siblings at the same time.
- 9 are *currently* caring for: 2 spouses, 5 adult children, 2 parents, and 1 sister. 4 are also parents to minor children without known disabilities.

AARP reported that in 2020, 5.7% of adults in the U.S. population cared for minors with disabilities.³⁹ 3.9% (21) of Congress members have spoken about their children who have or had disabilities or major health events that required additional medical or educational support. In the 118th Congress, there are twice as many dads of children with disabilities than moms of children with disabilities, but the rate among moms is higher: 5.8% of all moms and 4.0% of all dads.

This is the first time this data has been collected on members of Congress—presumably because of our culture of silence around caregiving, disability, and end of life. It is likely that there are caregivers on whom public data was not available. However, we have attempted to be as inclusive as possible with our criteria.*

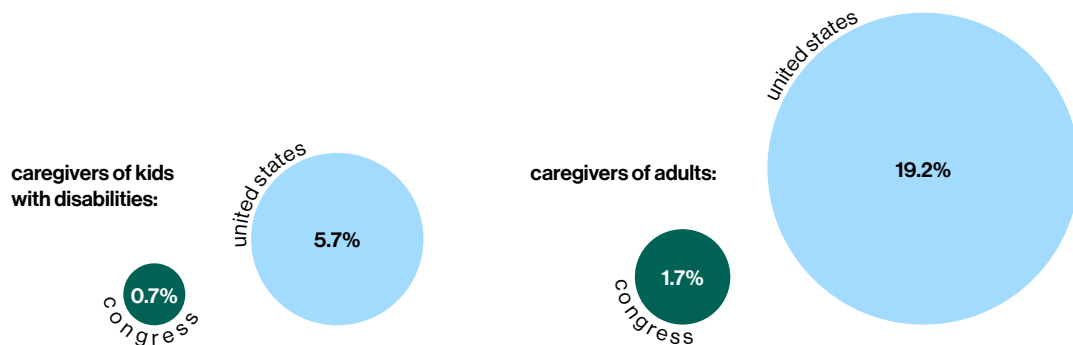


Figure 7: Percentage of caregivers in the 118th Congress compared to caregivers in the United States by age of dependent.

* A congressmember was counted as a current or former caregiver if 1) they have spoken about their current or former identity as a caregiver, 2) they have spoken about major impacts to the structure of their lives due to disability or end of life process of a loved one, 3) there is news coverage related to their care for a person with a disability, serious illness, or at end of life, particularly a close family member, or 4) they have experienced the death of a spouse, if the death was not sudden and unexpected.

Representation: Ability Status

Key Findings: In the 118th Congress, only 3.9% of members have publicly disclosed a disability. Nearly half of those with disabilities are also parents of minor children.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 26% of adults in the United States have disabilities they report cause them “serious difficulty.”⁴⁰ Despite broader inclusion criteria,* we found that only 3.9% of the 118th Congress have spoken publicly about their own disabilities or chronic health issues. In part because of the lack of positive emphasis on disclosing disability status, we cannot be certain that we have included all members of Congress with disabilities or that the legislators

we have included do in fact identify as disabled.

However, we can be certain that people with disabilities are not fully represented.

People with disabilities are often caregivers not only for themselves but for others. According to ACS data, 17.4% of U.S. adults with disabilities are parents of minor children, and the CDC has found that 33% of all caregivers also report having a disability themselves.⁴¹ Of the Congress members with disabilities, nearly half are also parents of minor children and 1 is a caregiver for their spouse.


Several legislators only disclosed their disability or caregiver status to defend themselves politically.⁴² For others, their disability or caregiver status is an integral part of their public identity.

By including caregiver and disability status as necessary demographics in assessing the representativeness of our legislative bodies, we hope that they will be taken as strengths rather than coerced justifications.



photo: Sen. Tammy Duckworth enters Capitol building with her 10-day-old daughter, MalieSM

* Legislators were counted as having a disability if we found statements about or other evidence of current long-term impacts to functioning at home or at work, serious lifelong conditions, or permanent injuries.



“Government at any level was not designed for women, let alone mothers. When I ran for Congress, I was constantly questioned on the campaign trail. ‘Who will take care of the kids?’ ‘Have you thought about how this will impact your family?’ I don’t think men running for office get asked these questions.”

Representative Becca Balint
Vermont, At-Large

The Care Gap

The focus on motherhood in politics is nascent, despite gender equity being a widely researched topic in the political sphere. The motherhood penalty,⁴³ a term to describe the disadvantages working mothers face relative to men—and women without children—in regards to pay and perceived competence, has been extensively examined in the labor force.

While there has been comparatively little discussion on how the motherhood penalty presents itself in politics, our data supports previous research that a similar phenomenon contributes to poor levels of representation for women and moms of minor children.

The results of Brookings Institute's *2021 Citizen Political Ambition Study* were nearly identical to its findings 20 years ago—nearly 60% of the men interviewed had considered running for office, while nearly 60% of the women had not.⁴⁴ Along with the ambition gap,⁴⁵ studies have examined gender bias in politics,⁴⁶ that women feel less qualified,⁴⁷ and that women are less likely to be encouraged to run in the first place.⁴⁸

When women run, they win at the same rates as men,⁴⁹ so why aren't more women running? Caregiving.

The reality is that women, particularly women of color, continue to bear the brunt of caregiving responsibility in America.⁵⁰ By the time American women are 45 years old, 85% are mothers,⁵¹ and on average, women in the United States do 90 more minutes of unpaid labor each day than men.⁵² When you add that up, it amounts to 7 more years over a woman's lifetime spent on childcare, cooking, cleaning, and other domestic labor. 70% of moms in the United States will be their household's primary breadwinner at some point during their first 18 years of motherhood.⁵³ Research has shown that even among the most politically ambitious women, breadwinners are considerably less likely to run for office.⁵⁴

Caregiving creates cultural, financial, and logistical barriers that are more likely to impact women than men running for and serving in office. As Silvana Koch-Mehrin, the founder of Women in Parliaments Global Forum said, "female politicians tend to start their careers later, have fewer children, spend more time caring for their families, and arrange their lives to have shorter commuting times than their male counterparts...Family commitments still constitute a major source of concern for women."⁵⁵

We don't have an ambition gap as much as we have a care gap.



photo: Rep. Katie Porter with her daughter, Betsy at the bus stop.⁵⁶

In the 1980 CAWP Recruitment Study, the Center for American Women in Politics found a majority of women legislators (a much larger proportion than men) rated the age of their children as “very important” to their decision to run for office, and they were less likely to have young children than their counterparts who were men.⁵⁶ In the 2008 CAWP Recruitment Study, these results had not changed.⁵⁷ Further studies have shown that women tend to wait to run for office until their children are school-aged.⁵⁸

We found that there are about 2.5 times more men serving in the 118th Congress than women. This ratio is fairly consistent across groups of congressmen and congresswomen by parental status; however, we see considerable differences in 2 groups. For members of Congress who do not have children, the gender gap is much narrower—less than a quarter of that among men and women overall. For parents of children under the age of 6, dads outnumber moms nearly 9:1.

The system is not designed for caregivers. Men are expected to work like they have no caregiving responsibilities,* and as author Amy Westervelt wrote, “we expect women to work like they don’t have children, and raise children as if they don’t work.”⁶¹ No one should have to choose between their work and their family—but for some women, serving in Congress or having children can be a mutually exclusive choice.⁶²

Being a parent or caregiver is often a fundamental motivator for political action,⁶³ and it should not contribute to the inaccessibility of political office. Our political system, which pressures parents and caregivers to diminish—or give up completely—that crucial aspect of their identity, is a system in which we pressure our politicians to diminish their humanity.

The system is broken, and the first step in fixing it is naming the problem.

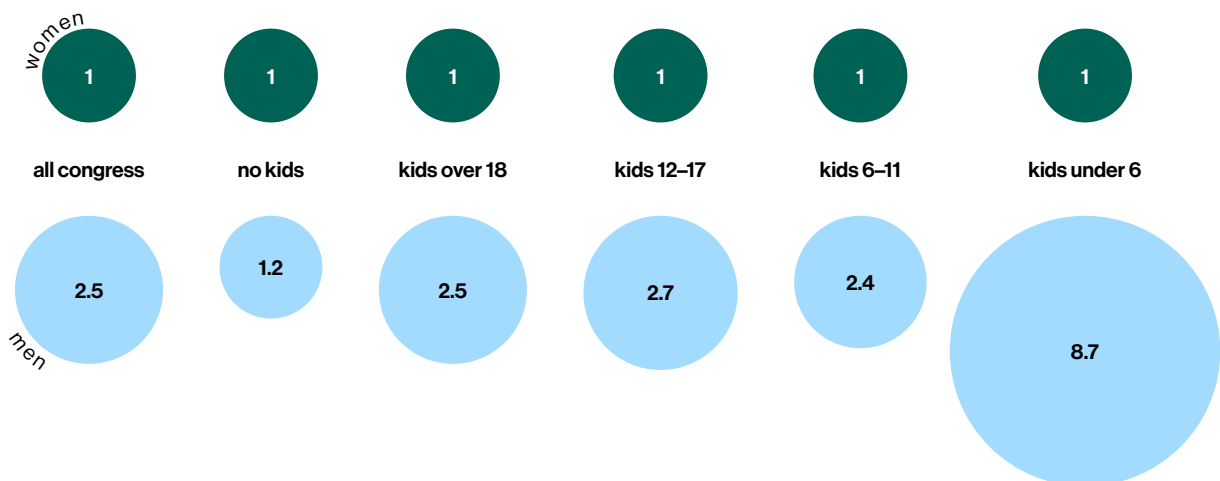


Figure 8: Ratio of women to men serving in the 118th Congress by parental status and age of youngest child.

* A 2016 survey⁵⁹ by Pew Research Center found that 49% of respondents said employers put more pressure on fathers to return to work quickly after the birth or adoption of a new child compared to 18% who said employers put more pressure on mothers. The average length of parental leave for American fathers is just one week.⁶⁰

“You would think that more than a hundred years after the first woman was elected to Congress, we’d have made significant strides in making sure that this institution allows mothers to thrive. But that isn’t the case. Moms in Congress face a dizzying number of challenges when it comes to being both good legislators and good parents. And if you’re like me, a single woman who would like to one day become a mom, the obstacles to having a child while in office can feel almost insurmountable. We have to do better if we’re going to make sure that Congress is a place where women can serve without having to make agonizing choices about their future families.”

Representative Lauren Underwood
Illinois, 14th District

Barriers

FRunning for and serving in Congress is not for the faint of heart: 18 hour days, non-stop travel back and forth between districts and the nation's capital, constituent meetings, town halls, knocking on doors, pancake breakfasts, fundraisers, committee meetings, hearings, votes, and what seems like a never-ending election cycle. All this is immeasurably more daunting for caregivers, particularly women who have or want to have young children.

“I am the proud mother of two young children and recently became the first Black woman to represent Virginia in Congress, but I spent nearly eighteen years in the Virginia General Assembly serving the people of the greater Richmond area. As the first member of the Virginia House of Delegates to be pregnant and give birth while in office over a decade ago, I am aware of the challenges and expectations working mothers face. I had fellow legislators ask me if I would retire when I became a mother—something they did not ask a male colleague who became a father two months later. The answer was no, but the question shined a light

on the societal expectations and barriers too many women, particularly women of color, face. My husband, David, and I are true partners in parenting, and that is invaluable as I navigate motherhood and my career. Still, the congressional and state legislative schedules rarely align with school and childcare schedules. The lack of adequate paid family medical leave and sufficient affordable, quality childcare impacts us and so many families. As I delve into my congressional career, I am ready to continue pushing for family friendly policies as I balance legislating and being a mother to my two kids.”

– Representative Jennifer McClellan (VA-04)



photo: Rep. Jennifer McClellan gets a hug from her daughter, Samantha, at her election victory party¹⁰⁸

Barriers: Scheduling

The Congressional Management Foundation analyzed how members of Congress spend their time and found that representatives work an average of 70 hours per week when the House of Representatives is in session and 59 hours per week when it is not.⁶⁴ Because their schedule can require late night or weekend votes, members of Congress are not guaranteed a period of regular, uninterrupted time for themselves and their families. In fact, members reported spending just 9% of their time with family and friends regardless of whether or not their chamber was in session.

Fundraising is a significant contributor to the grueling hours current legislators—and first time candidates—must work. It takes millions of dollars to run a successful congressional campaign,⁶⁵ and House members have to campaign to keep their seats every 2 years. Our political culture expects candidates to give up their personal lives and time with their families to become fundraising machines.

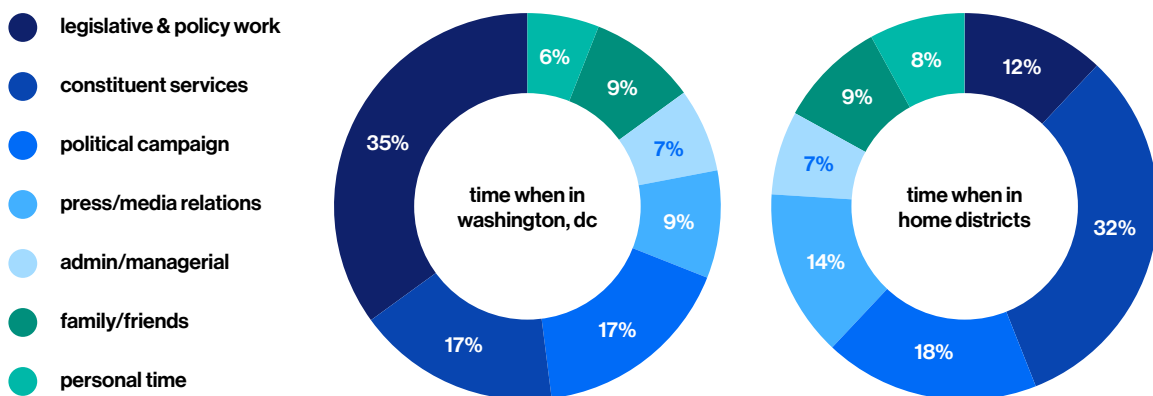


Figure 9: Members' time when in Washington, D.C. compared to when in their home districts by activity type.

“Parenting when you’re an elected official is a challenge. A member of Congress has a ton of constraints on their time, and it takes a lot of effort and planning to get the time that I need with my family. Here’s the thing, though—there needs to be more parents and mothers in Congress. I bring my perspective and insight as a woman and mother when I’m representing West Michigan. When you are raising kids, it gives you a unique perspective as to what is really important. Climate change, education, and gun violence all inform what I do, and all carry an extra weight of importance when I know these issues have a disproportionately large impact on my kids.”

– Representative Hillary Scholten (MI-03)

“Being a mother and a member of Congress is an intense balancing act—between votes, school drop-offs and pickups, basketball games, and caucus meetings, there is little time to waste. Although it can be very challenging, it sets an example for my two boys on what can be accomplished when you are willing and motivated, and it also shows women around the country, with similar aspirations, that it can be done.”

– Representative Grace Meng (NY-06)

Non-incumbent candidates give up their salaries to work around the clock just to get to election day, and federal candidates have only been allowed to spend their [Campaign Funds for Childcare](#)* since 2018. While federal incumbents do have the benefit of a salary, their campaign work—which often means 30 hours per week on fundraising calls alone—must be done in addition to their work as legislators.⁶⁶ This creates a barrier that disproportionately impacts caregivers, particularly working-class moms of young children who do not already have access to wealth or another person to help shoulder caregiving responsibilities.⁶⁷

A job that leaves only 2 hours per day to spend with family is not accessible to parents or caregivers, especially when the schedule could mean leaving your kids or dependents at any time, day or night.



photo: Rep. Grace Meng being sworn into Congress alongside her sons, Brandon and Tyler¹⁶

* Campaign Funds for Childcare policies allow candidates to use the funds they raise for their campaigns on childcare expenses directly related to their work as candidates—for example, to pay for a babysitter or other childcare arrangements while campaigning. Vote Mama Foundation is the only organization working with state legislators to authorize the use of Campaign Funds for Childcare for state and local candidates in all 50 states.

Barriers:

Commuting to the Capitol

30 years ago it was the norm for members of Congress to move their families to Washington, D.C.⁶⁸ But in 1994, Newt Gingrich, then speaker of the House, urged members to keep their families in their districts. Members who did not were accused of no longer being connected to their constituents.

It is now a political liability for parents to keep their children with them in Washington, D.C.⁶⁹

Members are faced with this decision: either keep their families in their districts and say goodnight to their kids on FaceTime or weather the political attacks for moving their family to the capital,⁷⁰ only to leave their kids on the weekends to return to their districts. For primary caregivers, particularly single parents, this choice is even more difficult.

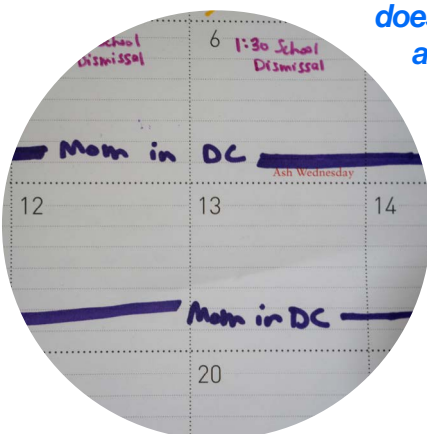
“If people really took a step back, I don’t think that they would be as quick to criticize that decision [to move her children, including her son with Down syndrome, to the capital].

They would recognize that it does kind of make sense, and it’s necessary to keep some of your family together.”

– Representative Cathy McMorris Rodgers (WA-05)⁷¹

“Leaving the family here and being separated every weekday for back to back weeks, that’s the most challenging thing for me and for them as well. I’ve always been very involved—coaching them in sports, dropping them off at school, and being there for the plays and the rehearsals. And now I’m missing some of that, and it’s hard...So now I’m very intentional about the time. The last week that I was here, when we had a week to be here in the district, I did a one on one with each of them [his six children]...We went out and did whatever they wanted to do—we went to their favorite restaurant, we talked, we caught up—things that maybe I wasn’t as intentional about before having to split my time between two sides of the country. And I have to give a lot of credit to Laura, my wife, who is amazing in her own right...and now has really shifted gears and focused more on the family and so really holds it all together. And she’s amazing and wonderful and I wouldn’t be here without her either.”

– Representative Juan Ciscomani (AZ-06)⁷²



Barriers:

Taking Family Leave

Legislators can technically take leave without affecting their salary, but it means missing votes and committee hearings. It also means lost time on the campaign trail and risking your next election. Members of Congress do not have official limits on the amount of leave they can take and doing so does not affect their salary,⁷³ but there are logistical and cultural hurdles that make it difficult for them to take any leave. Just like millions of workers across the country, Congress members are expected to rarely or never take time off.

“When I found out that my wife was pregnant, I went down and talked to HR and I asked them what kind of paid parental leave do I have in the government, and was told you got nothing, zero, zero days. Even though I served my country in Afghanistan and elsewhere, I had zero days. I just felt so disrespected, just felt like this was something that was just holding parents back—moms and dads—in that way.”

– Representative Andy Kim (NJ-03)⁷⁸



Despite their use during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic,⁷⁴ there are no virtual participation options or accommodations that make work accessible when members of Congress are ill,⁷⁵ have increased caregiving responsibilities, or after giving birth. For women who have recently had a child, choosing to breastfeed is a near-full-time job in and of itself,⁷⁶ which is made all the more difficult while working 70 hour weeks in Congress. After giving birth to her daughter in 2018, Senator Tammy Duckworth was asked about taking leave and why it was important for Senate rules to change to allow her to bring her daughter to the chamber floor:

“I cannot technically take leave because if I were to be under the status of ‘Leave,’ then I would not be able to vote. I need to represent the people of my state, so I decided to take time to be with my daughter and curtail my duties down to the minimum, which is key votes and sponsoring legislation. I chose to have my daughter in Washington, D.C., instead of back home in Illinois so that I can be here...Technically, I could not otherwise bring her to the floor, which means I wouldn’t be able to vote because I have to physically be on the floor to vote. There are people who will say, ‘Why don’t you just leave your daughter with a caregiver?’ I could do that, except there are times when we have what we call a votarama, where we’re voting for 10 to 12 hours straight. And my daughter needs to be fed.”

– Senator Tammy Duckworth (IL)⁷⁷

Barriers:

Parenting on the Hill

Legislative buildings are not fully accessible for parents. Members requested that changing tables be installed the same year the very first women's bathroom was installed off the House floor—in 2011.⁷⁹ In 2016, the BABIES Act required changing tables in both men's and women's bathrooms in all public federal buildings⁸⁰—there still are not changing tables in all members' bathrooms. In 2023, Representative Joaquin Castro (TX-20) had to change his 8-month-old on the floor of the members' men's bathroom.⁸¹

Congress members and Capitol Hill staff need access to safe and affordable childcare to make serving in federal office accessible to parents. The House and Senate Child Care Centers are conveniently located to congressional offices and cost much less than private daycare⁸²—but they have years-long waitlists due to insufficient capacity to provide care for all the children of Congress members and staff.⁸³ The House Child Care Center was expanded in 2019 to reduce waitlists to one year,⁸⁴ but we could find no indication that waitlists have improved for either the House or Senate Child Care Center. Without adequate on-site childcare, parents whose children need them close-by, particularly parents of infants, are again placed in a difficult position: either work and provide their own childcare simultaneously or take leave to be with their child and miss critical votes.

“I never made it off the list. I had to keep looking like everyone else does. You get on a list, you hope it works, and if it doesn't work you've got to make something happen.”

—Former Rep. Jaime Herrera Beutler (WA-18)⁸⁵

“We have nine infant slots for the entirety of the Senate and their staff. And, as we want to become a more attractive workplace for very busy parents, we've got to keep up with the increasing demand for child care.”

—Senator Chris Murphy (CT)⁸⁶



We have to address the care gap.

1. **Create a reasonable voting schedule that does not require members to leave their families at unpredictable times.**
2. **Normalize parents making the decision to live in their district or in the capital based on what is best for their families.**
3. **Allow members to vote and attend committee hearings virtually so they can perform their duties remotely when they or their families have increased care needs.**
4. **Allow federal candidates to use campaign funds to pay themselves a living wage and cover dependent care and health insurance premiums.***
5. **Create an official family leave policy to allow members to care for their families without stigma.**
6. **Install changing tables in all members' bathrooms, regardless of gender, and ensure accessibility of pumping rooms in all legislative buildings.**
7. **Expand House and Senate Child Care Centers to reduce waitlists and better meet the needs of legislators and staff.**

* The Federal Election Commission (FEC) is currently considering REG 2021-01, which would amend regulations and address this recommendation. Vote Mama Foundation's Founder and CEO testified in support of the proposed rule changes.

“Too many elected officials just don’t face the same challenges most Americans deal with every day, and as a result, Congress is often late to recognize the top issues for families. Most members of Congress don’t shop for groceries, nervously watching the prices add up at checkout. Most members of Congress aren’t living on a single income while trying to afford the extra child care necessary to be in DC. Most members of Congress don’t wake up before dawn to prepare a week’s worth of meals for their kids, before commuting 9 hours into work. The harsh reality is that Congress isn’t built for single parents, and our lack of representation will continue until Congress removes the outdated traditions and structural obstacles that make it hard for single parents to serve.”

Representative Katie Porter
California, 47th District

Conclusion

Vote Mama Foundation launched the *Politics of Parenthood* research series to answer a seemingly simple question: how many mothers with minor children are serving in elected office?

It quickly became apparent that answering this question is a complex process. Despite gender equity in politics being a widely researched topic, there has been little research on the political participation of mothers. **Until the release of Vote Mama Foundation's *Politics of Parenthood* series, there was no publicly available demographic dataset that included parental status for legislators at any level of government.**



With *Politics of Parenthood*, Vote Mama Foundation is closing this critical gap in research. Our [debut report](#) provided the first publicly available dataset with detailed demographics of women and nonbinary state legislators and their roles as parents. With this report, we provide first-of-its-kind data on the representation of parents in the 118th Congress and an analysis on the intersection of motherhood and federal representation.

This groundbreaking dataset enables us to finally begin quantifying how gender, parenthood, and child age influence the political representation of mothers with young children. The data presented here is long overdue, but it is only the beginning of our collective understanding of being both a legislator and a caretaker.

Our nation suffers without the voices of a diverse group of legislators in office. Legislators legislate based on their lived experience. If we want to elect more Congress members who understand at a visceral level how our policies affect most Americans—working people, women, people of color, people with disabilities, LGBTQIA+ people, young people—we have to modernize Congress.

Family leave for lawmakers, flexible voting schedules, and accessible legislative buildings can empower a broader spectrum of Americans, including caregivers, to run for and serve in federal office. The FEC approved the use of Campaign Funds for Childcare* for federal candidates in 2018 and is currently considering expanding this ruling to allow candidates to spend their campaign funds on dependent care, health insurance premiums, and paying themselves a living wage.^{87, 88} These structural changes have the ability to combat the care gap and the motherhood penalty in politics.

Improved representation for caregivers, especially mothers of young children, can help change our policy priorities. Policies that directly impact children and working families can go unaddressed

when not enough lawmakers in the room understand what raising a child is like under our current policy landscape. In fact, there are more millionaires in Congress than moms.⁸⁹ Perhaps if we had more parents with young children in Congress, policies like paid leave and affordable childcare might not be the first policies to hit the chopping block, they might become non-negotiables.

Only 6.8% of the 118th Congress are mothers of minor children. In order to achieve full representation, Americans need to elect 59 more moms of minor children to Congress.



Motherhood is more than just a subcategory of womanhood or parenthood. 'Mother' is an identity distinct from 'parent' or 'woman' that is integral to a well-functioning government and to achieving gender equity in politics. Moms have an underrepresented perspective that comes with unique barriers. In subsequent *Politics of Parenthood* reports, we will examine the barriers that keep mothers out of office at all levels of government in more detail. Vote Mama Foundation will continue to seek out solutions to dismantle the barriers that keep moms out of office and out of power.

* Campaign Funds for Childcare policies allow candidates to use the funds they raise for their campaigns on childcare expenses directly related to their work as candidates—for example, to pay for a babysitter or other childcare arrangements while campaigning. Vote Mama Foundation is the only organization working with state legislators to authorize the use of Campaign Funds for Childcare for state and local candidates in all 50 states.

“Do you think you would have become a senator if you hadn’t become a mother?”

“Probably not. Becoming a mother put me into the fight for other people in a deeper, more personal way. And it made me more persistent. Damn it, no parent should have that much trouble trying to support herself and her family and get care for her children.”⁹⁰

Senator Elizabeth Warren
Massachusetts

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May 2023

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