

# IT'S MY VOTE



## I WILL BE HEARD



A A U W   A C T I O N   F U N D

## Voter Issue Guide

When Women Vote, We Change the Conversation

## **AAUW Action Fund Voter Issue Guide**

**Since 1881, the American Association of University Women (AAUW) has been the nation's leading voice promoting equity for women and girls. AAUW and the AAUW Action Fund encourage voters to get involved in the political process, and to better understand the impact that legislative action—or lack thereof—can have on all the spheres of their lives, including women's economic security, education, and leadership opportunities.**

And still, the 2020 election is different. More challenging. Over the course of 139 years, AAUW has not faced the obstacles we now confront: fighting for a safe and just election during a time of such great crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic is unlike anything we—our society and democracy itself—have ever faced. Persistent and underlying inequities, ever at the forefront of our mission, are now being compounded by global health and economic crises. Meanwhile, voting access and election practices are as inconsistent as pandemic response policies.

From our paychecks to paid leave, access to reproductive health care to access to education, there is so much at stake each time women head to the polls. In this current moment, that is true now more than ever. Politicians and policy makers at all levels of government routinely make decisions about issues that directly affect us and our families. But more often than not, those conversations lack women's voices. As we enter this season of political punditry and campaign promises, we must identify those who would best represent our values and those who would roll back our rights. To create real change, women must be part of the conversation, and the most powerful way for us to chime in is at the polls.

**It's as simple as this: When women vote, we change the conversation.**

Between now and Election Day, let's start conversations about the issues that affect our families and communities. We need to ask tough questions, jump-start the discussion, and determine where our candidates stand.

This Voter Issue Guide provides nonpartisan information about the policy concerns that are critical to women and their families. Use it to prompt conversations with neighbors, family, friends, and fellow voters about what's at stake in this election. Take it to virtual town halls and candidate forums

to follow along with the debate. Consult it to develop questions to ask your candidates and your elected officials to get them on the record on the issues that matter most.

As the 2020 Election Day approaches, we ask you to consider candidates through the lens of these six key gender equity issues:

1. Voting Access
2. Pay Equity
3. Paid Sick and Family Leave
4. College Affordability
5. Campus Sexual Harassment and Violence
6. Health Care Access and Reproductive Rights

**Above all, make your voice heard on Election Day — and beyond.**

## **Voting Access**

Voting is a fundamental right, yet the increased public health concerns this election season, as well as increased voting restrictions and suppression, threaten access to it. These barriers have a disproportionate impact on people of color, women, voters with disabilities, and both young and old voters.

In the 1960's, voter suppression came in many forms: literacy and citizenship tests, identification cards, poll taxes. Today, persistent and renewed restrictions—especially in the wake of the 2013 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Shelby County v. Holder* that rescinded key protections in the Voting Rights Act—come in the form of voter identification laws, closure of polling places in predominantly Black counties, registration record purges, and lack of access and flexibility in voting.<sup>1</sup> Increased attention on unsubstantiated “voter fraud” also saps resources from real barriers to voting.

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1 Brad Bennett, “55 years after ‘Bloody Sunday,’ voting rights are still under attack,” Southern Poverty Law Center (February 29, 2020), <https://www.splcenter.org/news/2020/02/29/weekend-read-55-years-after-bloody-sunday-voting-rights-are-still-under-attack>.

AAUW believes in open and fair elections and nonpartisan voter education efforts that will promote equitable political participation and representation in appointed and elected office. We need vigorous enforcement of and full access to civil and constitutional rights, including expanding voting rights. In order to ensure that every voter is able to practice their right to vote in a safe, accessible, and secure way, election processes must adapt. AAUW therefore advocates for expanding election practices through online registration and voting, early voting, vote by mail, and maintained in-person voting with public health protections in all polling places.

### Listen for these terms:

- Voter registration
- Voter suppression/restrictions
- Polling place modifications/  
health safety
- Voting Rights Act
- *Shelby County v. Holder*
- Get Out the Vote (GOTV)
- Vote by mail
- Early voting
- Online registration/voting
- Voter fraud

### Ask your candidates:

Voting is one of the most fundamental rights in a democratic society, but restrictions enacted in the past decade have made it harder to exercise that right. As an elected official, how do you plan to expand and enforce voting access for all?

The Voting Rights Act has protected the right to vote against suppression tactics since 1965, but has been rapidly eroded over the past ten years. If elected, what will you do to rectify the oppression of disenfranchised voters?

## Pay Equity

The gender pay gap is the difference in men's and women's median earnings. According to U.S. Census data, on average, women working full-time take home about 82 cents for every dollar earned by men

working full-time.<sup>2</sup> Women of color fare even worse: Black women make 62 cents, Hispanic women make 54 cents, Asian women make 90 cents, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander women make 61 cents, and American Indian or Alaska Native make 57 cents to every dollar made by a white, non-Hispanic man. It is a real and lasting problem that impacts the economic security of women and their families. Despite civil rights and employment discrimination laws and advancements in women's educational and economic contributions, the pay gap persists. It affects women from all backgrounds, at all ages, and of all levels of educational achievement.

AAUW believes pay equity is not just a matter of fairness, but the key to allowing families to make ends meet. The gender pay gap is persistent, and it can only be addressed through a multipronged approach. We need policies to change entrenched structures that perpetuate the pay gap, provide women with the tools to challenge discrimination, and supply employers with the resources and tools to understand and comply with the law. AAUW advocates for strong pay equity legislation, targeted executive actions, clear regulations, and strong enforcement to protect employees and assist employers as they strive to follow the law.

### **Listen for these terms:**

- Equal pay for equal work
- Wage gap
- Pay discrimination
- Equal Pay Act
- Pay gap
- Fair pay
- Comparable worth
- Salary history
- Pay transparency
- Paycheck Fairness Act

### **Ask your candidates:**

The gender pay gap persists across all racial and ethnic groups, at different levels of educational attainment, and it is found in every state and virtually every occupation. Would you support passage of legislation to strengthen

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<sup>2</sup> "The Simple Truth About the Gender Pay Gap: Fall 2019 Update," American Association of University Women (2019), <https://www.aauw.org/resources/research/simple-truth/>.

and improve the effectiveness of existing civil rights laws aimed at closing the pay gap between men and women? How would you specifically address the pay gap for women of color, many of whom suffer the largest pay gaps?

An employer's reliance on salary history can introduce bias into the hiring process because, if a prior salary has been tainted by discrimination, it will carry forward into the next job. This practice contributes to and perpetuates the pay gap many women and people of color face in their careers. Several cities and states have passed legislation or are considering legislation that prohibits employers from relying on a potential employee's salary history to determine future pay. Federal legislation is also pending in Congress. Would you support the passage of a salary history ban? What additional provisions do you believe are crucial to closing the gender pay gap?

## **Paid Family and Medical Leave, Parental Leave, and Sick Days**

Unlike the majority of developed countries worldwide, the United States does not guarantee paid time off for illness, family care, or parental leave. While the COVID-19 pandemic has shed light on this important issue, our protections are still wholly inadequate. When a loved one has a health crisis, or when a child is born or adopted, far too many workers are forced to take unpaid leave, risk their jobs, or even exit the workforce altogether. Other workers have to go to work sick since they have no options for time off. This hurts everyone.

AAUW advocates for increased access to a high standard of benefits and comprehensive policies, paid family and medical leave, paid paternal leave, and paid sick days. While passage of the federal Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) 27 years ago was an important first step, significant coverage gaps mean about 40 percent of the workforce is not eligible for leave under the FMLA.<sup>3</sup> Many more cannot afford to take unpaid leave without undermining their families' economic security. AAUW believes our policies must enable workers to perform well, which also benefits employers and the economy.

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3 Jacob Alex Klerman, Kelly Daley, and Alyssa Pozniak, "Family and Medical Leave in 2012: Executive Summary" Abt Associates Inc. (September 12, 2013), [https://www.dol.gov/asp/evaluation/completed-studies/Family\\_Medical\\_Leave\\_Act\\_Survey/EXECUTIVE\\_SUMMARY\\_family\\_medical\\_leave\\_act\\_survey.pdf](https://www.dol.gov/asp/evaluation/completed-studies/Family_Medical_Leave_Act_Survey/EXECUTIVE_SUMMARY_family_medical_leave_act_survey.pdf).

## Listen for these terms:

- Paid sick days
- Parental or maternity leave
- Work-life policies
- FAMILY Act
- Pregnancy discrimination
- FMLA
- Paid time off or personal time off (PTO)
- Healthy Families Act
- Earned leave
- Workplace flexibility

## Ask your candidates:

As the COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare, when working people have to choose between their jobs and caring for their loved ones, it hurts our families, our communities, and our economy. What policies would you support to provide parental and medical leave for employees during and beyond a crisis?

A growing number of paid sick time laws have been passed in cities and states around the country. Would you support passage of policies that would require companies to allow employees to earn a minimum number of paid sick days each year?

## College Affordability

Higher education is no longer a luxury—it's a necessity. In May 2016, jobs that required some form of postsecondary education accounted for nearly 37 percent of employment.<sup>4</sup> As the education requirement for employment grows, so has the cost. Between the years 2006–2016, the cost of attending a public undergraduate institution rose 31 percent, while the national average wage index has only risen 25.8 percent.<sup>5</sup>

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4 “The Economics Daily: 37 Percent of May 2016 Employment in Occupations Typically Requiring Postsecondary Education,” U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics (June 28, 2017), <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2017/37-percent-of-may-2016-employment-in-occupations-typically-requiring-postsecondary-education.htm>.

5 “Tuition costs of colleges and universities,” U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2019), <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=76>; “National Average Wage Index,” U.S. Social Security Administration (2019), <https://www.ssa.gov/oact/cola/awidevelop.html>.

AAUW research has found that women take on disproportionately higher amounts of student debt while enrolled in college, and Black women graduate with the most debt of any group. The gender pay gap contributes to women needing two years more than men to repay those loans. As a result, women hold almost two thirds (\$929 billion) of the country’s \$1.46 trillion student debt. This isn’t just a student problem; it’s a gender inequity problem, and it impacts us all.<sup>6</sup>

AAUW believes that higher education must be made more easily accessible to all students—and that students should not have to mortgage their futures in the process. In the face of rising tuition and decreasing state investment, meaningful grant aid such as the federal Pell grant program is particularly important. Further, as rising tuition rates have prompted two thirds of all graduates to borrow money to attend college, loan repayment and forgiveness programs must be made more accessible to borrowers.

**Listen for these terms:**

- Student debt
- Tuition repayment
- Student loans
- Pell grants
- Loan/debt forgiveness
- Income-based repayment
- College affordability

**Ask your candidates:**

Student loan debt is a \$1.46-trillion problem in the United States. AAUW advocates for increased funding for college affordability programs, income-driven repayment programs, student loan forgiveness programs, and expanded Pell grants. At a time when state funding cuts to public colleges and universities are at a historic high, while tuition rates rise and acceptance rates decline, what policies would you as an elected official support to make college more affordable and loan payments more manageable for borrowers?

On average, women in the U.S. carry more student loan debt, and take longer to pay it off, than men. Black women and Latinas especially struggle financially while repaying college loans. What can be done to make changes to our student debt system in order to reduce the burden on women?

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6 “Deeper in Debt: Women and Student Loans” American Association of University Women (May 2019), <https://www.aauw.org/research/deeper-in-debt/>.



## Campus Sexual Harassment and Violence

When college campuses are hostile because of sexual harassment and violence, students aren't safe. When students don't feel safe, they cannot learn. AAUW's own research revealed that two thirds of college students and nearly half of students in grades 7–12 experienced sexual harassment.<sup>7</sup> Research also shows that incidents of sexual assault are shockingly prevalent on college campuses nationwide.<sup>8</sup> In addition, more than one in five college women experiences physical abuse, sexual abuse, or threats of physical violence at the hands of an intimate partner.<sup>9</sup>

AAUW advocates for school climates free from discrimination, including harassment, bullying, and sexual violence. AAUW supports ensuring the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice enforce our federal civil rights laws prohibiting sex and race-based discrimination in education and don't roll back protections for students. We also advocate for schools to take proactive steps, such as conducting climate surveys and providing prevention programming to educate students, faculty, staff, and Title IX coordinators. We also stress the importance of training appropriate administrators on the relevant laws and how to respond effectively. Finally, AAUW urges Congress to pass legislation that requires states and schools to develop policies for K–12 schools that prevent bullying, sexual harassment, and violence and that implement procedures to effectively respond to such behavior.

### Listen for these terms:

- Campus/school safety
- VAWA
- Campus sexual assault
- Clery Act
- Title IX
- Violence against women
- 1 in 5
- Survivors

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7 "Drawing the Line: Sexual Harassment on Campus" Association of University Women Educational Foundation (December 2005), <https://www.aauw.org/files/2013/02/drawing-the-line-sexual-harassment-on-campus.pdf>; "Crossing the Line: Sexual Harassment at School" American Association of University Women (November 2011), <https://www.aauw.org/files/2013/02/Crossing-the-Line-Sexual-Harassment-at-School.pdf>.

8 Tyler Kingsdale, "Sexual Assault Statistics Can Be Confusing, But They're Not The Point," The Huffington Post (December 15, 2014), [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/12/15/sexual-assault-statistics\\_n\\_6316802.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/12/15/sexual-assault-statistics_n_6316802.html).

9 "College Dating Violence and Abuse Poll," Break the Cycle (2014), <http://www.breakthecycle.org/dating-violence-research/college-dating-violence-and-abuse-poll>.

## Ask your candidates:

In 2017, the U.S. Department of Education rescinded guidance on Title IX that provided many protections for students. AAUW stands with survivors, and we remain committed to protecting and defending Title IX and to pursuing its vigorous enforcement. Would you push back against efforts by the current administration to weaken civil rights laws and undermine Title IX?

Achieving full and equal educational opportunities for all students requires that student survivors have strong protections under the law. What should colleges and universities do to better address the issue of college sexual harassment and assault?

## Health Care Access and Reproductive Rights

AAUW believes that everyone is entitled to high-quality, affordable, and accessible health care, including a full range of reproductive health and family planning options. One in ten women access health care through Medicaid, the national health insurance program for low-income people. It covers 35 percent of nonelderly women with disabilities, 23 percent of adult women with any mental illness, and in 2016 alone, Medicaid financed 42 percent of all U.S. births. Approximately six in ten of those mothers are working parents.<sup>10</sup> As such, access to health care is critical to women's economic security.

Unfortunately, lawmakers at both the state and federal levels are increasingly advancing undue restrictions. Some state governments have rejected the health care reforms in the Affordable Care Act, and Congress enacted barriers like the Hyde and Helms Amendments, which block federal funding from family planning services. These actions limit the fundamental rights of vulnerable communities to control their own reproductive lives.<sup>11</sup> For health care to be more than just an abstract right, all people must have real access to a full range of affordable options.

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10 "Medicaid's Role for Women," Kaiser Family Foundation (March 18, 2019), <https://www.kff.org/womens-health-policy/fact-sheet/medicaids-role-for-women/>.

11 "In Real Life: Federal Restrictions on Abortion Coverage and the Women They Impact," Guttmacher Institute, January 2017, <https://www.guttmacher.org/gpr/2017/01/real-life-federal-restrictions-abortion-coverage-and-women-they-impact>.

AAUW supports choice in the determination of one's reproductive life and increased access to health care and family-planning services. AAUW also supports medically accurate and age-appropriate comprehensive sexual education. AAUW trusts that every woman has the ability to make her own informed choices regarding her reproductive life within the dictates of her own moral and religious beliefs. Further, AAUW believes that these deeply personal decisions should be made without government interference.

**Listen for these terms:**

- Health care reform
- Health care is a human right
- Freedom to choose/decide
- Reproductive health
- Pro-choice
- Right to life
- Maternal health
- Planned Parenthood
- Comprehensive sexual education
- Title X
- Affordable Care Act
- Abortion
- *Roe v. Wade*
- Hyde and Helms Amendments

**Ask your candidates:**

Among other barriers enacted against health care coverage, ten states have proposed making a work requirement for Medicaid eligibility that would cause 800,000 people to lose their health insurance. If elected, what would you do to protect all people's fundamental right to health care and prevent barriers to access?

AAUW believes that reproductive freedom is tied to women's economic security. As an elected official, would you support legislation that protects individuals' access to affordable quality reproductive health care, including abortion care?



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