

The Status of Women Leaders in Government – State of Utah: A 2024 Update

Setting the Stage

Organizations thrive more abundantly when both men and women hold leadership roles and work together. Gender inclusivity in leadership benefits not only Utah’s businesses but also its government organizations, such as state legislatures, city councils, and state and local bureaucracies.¹

American democracy is based on the concept of representation.² Governments mirror this idea by encouraging agencies to employ a workforce that shares the demographic characteristics of the community it serves.³ In fact, the presence of a diverse public workforce “implies equal access to government positions promoting empowerment and connection with government in diverse communities, [and] can also signal the inclusion of group interests, attitudes, and experiences in government decision making and build government legitimacy.”⁴ This mandate applies to all levels of government in Utah, including the municipal, county, and state levels.

Yet, research has shown that Utah’s socially conservative culture reinforces gender-based expectations and that those expectations play out in the experiences of Utah’s women leaders.⁵ Utah is one of the nation’s most religiously homogenous states,⁶ and while less than half (42.0%) of Utahns identify as active in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,⁷ the tenets and culture of the faith greatly influence Utahns’ daily lives. Further, gender-based role expectations are not confined to the religious or personal spheres; instead, they permeate broadly throughout Utah’s culture and influence the career experiences of the entire state’s workforce. Yet, amidst the strong influence of traditional cultural norms and expectations, there has been slight progress in terms of gender parity on some fronts and sectors in the state (see previous research [briefs](#) and [snapshots](#)). Acknowledging this context sets the stage for exploring how gender-based expectations may impact women in Utah government.

Study Background & Overview

In 2020, the [Utah Women & Leadership Project](#) published research to determine how reflective the leadership of Utah’s government organizations are of the communities they serve. The core question was “How are women represented in formal leadership roles within governments in Utah?” The goal was to document a baseline of the number of women in leadership roles that could be used in the future to learn where progress has been made. This brief is the first of a series intended to provide an update to the research done in 2020 that focuses on women leaders who work in the public sector for the State of Utah; the brief will be followed by similar research measuring county and municipal levels.

Initial data for this research study were collected by submitting a records request via the state’s online portal to the Department of Human Resources (DHRM) for the following: a list of leadership positions; the gender of the person currently in each leadership position; whether the position was considered appointed, merit, or time-limited/part-time; and the position’s level of leadership. DHRM provided information on 4,557 leadership positions, representing 22,474 employees across 41 agencies. While 4,557 leadership positions were identified, some of the positions were vacant, or the gender of the person in the position was classified as protected. As a result, the final analysis included 4,535 leadership positions.

Researchers supplemented these data by gathering information on each agency’s budget and number of employees. In addition, researchers analyzed state agencies by the type of responsibilities and policies they oversee. The results of these additional analyses provided valuable insights into the current status of Utah women leaders.

Findings Overview

Overall, 41.4% of supervisory, managerial, and leadership positions in the State of Utah government are held by women, up from 39.3% in 2020. For comparison, according to a 2016 report from the Council of State Governments (based on the most recent data they had, which was from 2007), women in state governments nationwide held 32.2% of positions that included major policy-making responsibilities.⁸ Also, in the United States in 2017, women of color held 14.6% of all department head and top adviser positions in governors’ offices (up from 6.3% in 2007).⁹ In Utah, the percentage of women of color holding similar policy-making positions in Utah remains unavailable. Overall, there continues to be no recent state- or national-level data available with which to compare our Utah findings.

To gain clarity regarding the levels of leadership women held in the State of Utah government, each leadership position was categorized into one of four levels: Cabinet (top leadership, including C-suite executives, elected state officers, and department directors), Executive (deputy directors, division directors, judges, and court administrators), Senior (“middle management,” including deputy/assistant division directors, general counsel/attorneys, and court clerks), or Front-line (supervisors, managers, administrators, coordinators, and analysts). The four categories mirror the terminology frequently used in the private sector and match the categories used for the 2020 data (see Table 1).

National and global researchers have documented the leaky leadership “pipeline”: comparable numbers of men and

women start as front-line employees, yet fewer and fewer women, particularly women of color, progress through the leadership ranks.¹⁰ The problem is not simply the total number of women in the public sector workforce; it is how those numbers, over time, are distributed across the levels of leadership. The present Utah data reflect the leaky leadership pipeline that persists in the United States and across the globe.

Table 1: Percentage of Women Leaders in Utah State Government by Leadership Level

Leadership Level	Female	Male	% Female
Cabinet	7	16	30.4%
Executive	54	126	30.0%
Senior	126	198	38.9%
Front-line	1692	2316	42.2%
Total	1879	2656	41.4%

To put this in context for Utah, the overall workforce data for Utah shows 44.0% are women and 56.0% are men.¹¹ While women make up almost half of the state’s government workforce, their representation in leadership roles varies. Women comprise 42.2% of front-line leadership positions (up one percent from 41.2% in 2020). The largest increase in women leaders was in the senior leadership roles, where 38.9% of the positions are held by women (compared to 28.8% in 2020). This increase, however, is offset by a shift down from women in higher leadership levels, where they now comprise 30.0% of executive leadership positions (down from 37.4% in 2020). On a positive note, we found an increase of women in cabinet-level roles, with 30.4% of the positions held by women (up from 27.1% in 2020). While there has been some positive movement, overall, these trends support the notion that women are still less likely to become leaders in Utah State Government than men are.

To put the Utah data in perspective, research in 2006 by the Center for Women in Government and Civil Society showed that women comprised 29.7% of department heads (executive level) and 41.0% of top advisors in governors’ offices (cabinet level).¹² At that time, their research ranked Utah 31st on the total percentage (21.9%) of women policy leadership positions in state executive, legislative, and judicial branches.¹³ However, because there are no recent comparable data, we are not certain where Utah ranks in 2024 with other states or with the national government.

Agency Categories, Clusters, & Typologies

The data provided by DHRM included 41 agencies, divisions, or entities that oversee various areas of the state’s responsibilities and duties. The 2020 data represented 53 agencies; in the intervening years, several state agencies have been realigned, merged, renamed, or otherwise modified, which accounts for most of the difference in the number of agencies from the 2020 data.

In our examination of the data, agencies were analyzed in a variety of ways. First, larger agencies that included a substantial number of employees in leadership roles were reported separately (e.g., Courts, Health & Human Services, and Workforce Services), while smaller agencies were grouped based on their having similar functions. For example, the Senate, House of Representatives, Legislative Research & General Counsel, Legislative Fiscal Analysts, Legislative Auditor General, and Legislative Services were clustered under the heading “Legislative.” Results of this analysis are shown in Table 2 as Agency Categories.

It should be noted that, for the purposes of this study, Public Education relates to state-level positions in public education (K–12) as well as the Schools for the Deaf and Blind. It does not represent leadership positions within higher education organizations and excludes specific schools and school districts at the K–12 levels.

Table 2: Percentage of Women Leaders in Utah State Government by Agency Category

Agency or Division	Female	Male	% Female
Public Education	79	36	68.7%
Cultural & Community Engagement	32	18	64.0%
Health & Human Services	635	389	62.0%
Workforce Services	162	115	58.5%
Finance & Tax	78	71	52.3%
Courts	186	170	52.2%
Alcoholic Beverage Services	37	39	48.7%
Economic Development and Commerce	57	65	46.7%
Legislative	11	13	45.8%
Attorney General	33	50	39.8%
Public Safety	101	218	31.7%
Dept. of Government Operations	80	189	29.7%
Corrections & Criminal Justice	158	382	29.3%
Environment & Agriculture	150	470	24.2%
Transportation	65	346	15.8%
National Guard & Veteran/Military Affairs	12	83	12.6%
Other*	3	2	60.0%
Total	1879	2656	41.4%

*Includes Capital Preservation, Career Service Review Office, and the Navajo Trust Administration.

The agency with the highest percentage of women leaders was Public Education, at 68.7% (up from 61.1% in 2020). Other agencies that had over 60.0% women in their leadership and management ranks included Cultural & Community Engagement at 64.0% (up from 60.5% in 2020, then identified

as Heritage & Arts), and Health & Human Services at 62.0% (both were at 61.1% in 2020, when they were separate agencies). In 2020, the Courts had the highest representation of women leaders at 67.0%, but in the intervening years the percentage dropped to 52.2%.

While women hold a majority of leadership roles in some agencies, that should not divert attention from the lack of women leaders in other agencies. For example, women leaders are not as prevalent in Environment & Agriculture, currently at 24.2% (an increase from 21.5% in 2020). Transportation has also seen a slight increase to 15.8% (from 14.2% in 2020), and so has the National Guard/Office of Veteran and Military Affairs at 12.6% (up from 9.9% in 2020).

Not surprisingly, statistical tests show significant differences between agencies and agency categories in terms of the representation of women in all levels of leadership roles (see Appendix for details by agency category). These results echo national data that show women in 22.0% of leadership roles in transportation and in 30.0% of leadership positions in environment and agriculture agencies, while women hold 60.0% of leadership positions within health agencies and 66.0% in human service agencies.¹⁴

A second analysis of the data sought to document the State’s clustering of agencies into similar budget categories, as found on the State’s [Compendium of Budget Information](#) website, referred to in this research as Budget Grouping (see Table 3). Continuing to follow national trends, the top two clusters with the highest number of women in leadership positions are Public Education at 67.5% and Social Services at 61.3%. Both are considered redistributive agencies (see upcoming definitions for terms), in which it would typically be expected to see more women. Conversely, agencies considered regulatory (such as criminal justice, agriculture, and natural resources) or administrative show fewer women in leadership positions.

Table 3: Percentage of Women Leaders in Utah State Government by Budget Cluster

Agency or Division	Female	Male	% Female
Public Education	79	38	67.5%
Social Services	797	504	61.3%
Business, Economic Develop. & Labor	165	214	43.5%
Executive Offices & Criminal Justice	485	831	36.9%
Natural Resources, Agriculture & Environmental Quality	150	468	24.3%
Infrastructure & General Government	146	537	21.4%
Executive Appropriations	25	96	20.7%
Total	1879	2656	41.4%

Agency typology provided a third way to analyze where women leaders are located within the State of Utah. Public sector research has consistently pointed out how gender plays

a significant role in the way government organizations are structured and staffed. Grouping government agencies by typology—that is, the types of responsibilities and policies they oversee—is another way to highlight the gendered environments in government organizations.¹⁵ For this study, each state agency was identified by one of the four common typologies: administrative, distributive, redistributive, or regulatory.¹⁶

A considerable body of research by public administration scholars has identified “masculine” agencies as primarily being administrative (providing general infrastructure support), distributive (addressing issues pertaining to the general population, including agencies such as transportation and energy), and regulatory (focusing on implementing control and regulatory policies, including agencies such as business and economic development, labor, defense, transportation, taxes, budget, criminal justice, natural resources, agriculture, and environmental quality). Agencies characterized as “feminine” are mainly redistributive (reallocating money and services), including agencies such as education, social services, healthcare, the arts, and veteran’s affairs. At present, because departments and divisions tend to adopt “masculine” and “feminine” divisions of labor, where a woman works often affects her career progression.¹⁷

The State of Utah’s data on the distribution of female leadership according to agency typology clearly reflects a statistically significant gendered division of labor (see Table 4).

Table 4: Percentage of Women Leaders in Utah State Government by Typology

Typology	Female	Male	% Female
Administrative	94	204	31.5%
Distributive	65	346	15.8%
Redistributive	909	571	61.4%
Regulatory	811	1535	34.6%
Total	1879	2656	41.4%

These data illustrate that, as predicted, redistributive agencies have the majority of women in leadership positions, at 61.4% (a slight increase from 60.1% in 2020). State agencies considered to be distributive show only 15.8% of leadership positions held by women (up slightly from 14.6%). Regulatory agencies show 34.6% of women in leadership roles; however, that number includes Finance & Tax (52.3%) and the Courts (52.2%), two areas in which it was uncharacteristic to see such high percentages of women in leadership. The numbers in these two agencies are certainly anomalous for Utah, and additional analysis may provide beneficial insight into how these agencies have succeeded in advancing so many women into leadership positions.

Overall, the leadership typology data show that women have a better chance of being promoted in predominantly feminine organizations, which are usually redistributive agencies. That is important because redistributive agencies are typically much less involved in informing public policy. Considering the significant and far-reaching decisions made by top-level

government leaders, the fact that women hold comparatively few influential leadership positions outside of redistributive agencies continues to be a concern.

Employee Number, Budget, & Classification

Analysis also focused on whether the size of the state agency—based on the overall number of employees—influenced whether the agency was supervised by a woman or a man (see Table 5).

Table 5: Percentage of Women Leaders in Utah State Government by Agency’s Number of Employees

Number of Employees	Female	Male	% Female
0–24	10	16	38.5%
25–99	45	66	40.5%
100–499	196	305	39.1%
500–999	178	117	60.3%
1,000–4,700	1450	2152	40.3%
Total	1879	2656	41.4%

Agencies that had 500–999 employees (Tax Commission, Public Education, and Alcoholic Beverage Services) had the highest percentage of women at 60.3%, a considerable increase over the 2020 research of 44.4%. The lowest percentages of women in leadership positions (38.5%) were found in the 10 agencies that had 0–24 employees (the Senate, House of Representatives, Legislative Fiscal Analyst, Capitol Preservation, Career Service Review Office, Navajo Trust Fund, Public Service Commission, School & Institutional Trust Fund Office, Inland Port Authority, and the Point of the Mountain State Land Authority). The findings are somewhat different from those of national research, which suggests that women are more likely to be leaders over smaller organizations, have fewer people to supervise, and have fewer financial responsibilities.¹⁸ A similar approach was taken to learn whether there were any distinctions on the number of women leaders based on the size of agency budgets (see Table 6).

Table 6: Percentage of Women Leaders in Utah State Government by Size of Budget

Budget	Female	Male	% Female
\$0–10M	21	43	32.8%
\$11M–\$49M	36	53	40.4%
\$50M–\$99M	130	137	48.7%
\$100M–\$899M	751	1537	32.8%
\$900M–\$9B	941	886	51.5%
Total	1879	2656	41.4%

Again, Utah does not align with national research that suggests women were more likely to be responsible for smaller budgets. Interestingly, agencies with a budget of \$900M–\$9B (Health & Human Services, Public Education, Transportation, and Workforce Services) had more than half (51.5%, up from 49.5% in 2020) of their leadership comprised of women. At 32.8%, the lowest rates of women leaders were found in agencies with budgets in the \$0–\$10M and the

\$100M–\$899M range (compared to 2020, when the lowest rates of women leaders were found in agencies with budgets in the \$100M–\$899M range).

Finally, researchers looked at whether the classification of the position had any connection to gender. Position classifications were either appointed, merit, or time-limited/part-time. In government agencies, appointed positions are assigned by a high government official and often carry a sense of trust or authority. Merit positions are gained through the process of promoting and hiring government employees based on a competitive process that determines their ability to perform a job, rather than on political their connections. The last category of time-limited/part-time indefinitely refers to specific parameters regarding the position, either by tenure or hours worked. See Table 7 for the percentage of females in each of these classifications.

Table 7: Percentage of Women Leaders in Utah State Government by Position Classification

Position Classification	Female	Male	% Female
Appointed	553	710	43.8%
Merit	1302	1887	40.8%
Time-Limited & Part-Time Indefinitely	24	59	28.9%
Total	1879	2656	41.4%

Overall, the State of Utah has a considerable number of women in appointed positions (43.8% up from 42.3% in 2020) that are recognized as positions of trust and authority and often have opportunities to influence public policy. The percentage compares to national research from 2017 that found an average of 45.7% of the top officials and administrations in state and local governments were women.¹⁹ No recent state or national comparison data could be located, which means this study will be one of the few available of its kind in the United States.

Recommendations

While these data are encouraging compared to other sectors in Utah, a more intentional effort is needed to achieve greater demographic representation in Utah’s state government agencies. By looking more closely at women’s representation in leadership positions, we can see where the state is doing well and where there are opportunities to improve to reflect more closely the diversity within our communities. This updated research shows that state agencies that oversee distributive and administrative functions continue to have higher levels of gender-based separation. The demographic makeup of agency employees impacts far-reaching decisions. Broadening the state’s workforce provides a greater range of perspectives for identifying and implementing policy—and for solving complex problems.

We acknowledge that some state government leaders have begun to implement strategies to diversify leadership. The

following four recommendations are offered to promote and encourage continued positive changes within the composition of state agencies, which ultimately benefits all Utah and its residents:

1. Be more intentional about the leadership ecosystem, particularly when it applies to jobs that have traditionally been occupied by men. That includes using gender-neutral language to describe positions and responsibilities (e.g., manpower=staff, foreman=crew chief, fireman=firefighter).²⁰
2. Recognize that the increasing need for qualified talent across industries and public service roles may require implementing new strategies. By recruiting women of all backgrounds for non-traditional fields, and intentionally mentoring, championing, preparing, and promoting them into deserved leadership roles, we proactively address a workforce shortage issue.
3. Evaluate hiring processes to eliminate potentially outdated language, unnecessary minimum qualifications, and other exclusionary measures. This includes auditing job postings and interview questions and discarding practices that create barriers to entry. It also means taking a critical eye to assessment policies to ensure they are job related.
4. Commit to transparency. In order to make significant changes, tracking and sharing data regarding the leadership within organizations and how it reflects the

communities that are served, both inside and outside of the organization, is a best practice.

Conclusions

As government organizations face increasing challenges, incorporating solutions that consider a variety of experiences and perspectives can become a valuable tool for government leaders. Research shows the benefits of diverse leadership teams include improved strategic decision making, increased capacity for problem solving, enhanced resilience, increased innovation, and expanded capacity to adapt to change.

A lack of women's equal representation in the leadership ranks stands in stark contrast to the goal of a diverse government workforce that reflects the state's population. Understanding the relationship between gender and those who are in positions to influence agenda-setting strategies and public policy can translate into behavior-changing actions. Identifying and mitigating persistent challenges and barriers clears the way for enhanced opportunities for women's equal representation across state agencies and leadership levels. Having women at top levels can inspire other women to pursue their own advancement. It also increases the willingness to routinely hire and promote highly skilled, competent women. This shift will benefit not only women and government organizations but also families, communities, and the state as a whole.

¹ Madsen, S. R. (2015, January 12). Why do we need more women leaders in Utah? *UWLP*. <https://www.usu.edu/uwlp/files/briefs/10-why-do-we-need-more-women-leaders.pdf>

² Van Ryzin, G. G., Riccucci, N. M., & Li, H. (2017). Representative bureaucracy and its symbolic effect on citizens: A conceptual replication. *Public Management Review*, 19(9), 1365–1379. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2016.1195009>

³ Meier, K. J. (2023). Representative bureaucracy and social equity: Bias, perceived fairness and efficacy. *Journal of Social Equity and Public Administration*, 1(1), 23–38. <https://doi.org/10.24926/jsopa.v1i1.4814>

⁴ Smith, A. E. (2014). Getting to the helm: Women in leadership in federal regulation. *Public Organization Review*, 14(4), 477–496, p. 479. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11115-013-0240-0>

⁵ Madsen, S. R. (2015, January 12).

⁶ Clarke, S. (2019, January 4). 10 things to know about Utah. *U.S. News and World Report*. <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/articles/2019-01-04/10-things-to-know-about-utah>

⁷ Cragun, R. T., Gull, B., & Phillips, R. (2023). Mormons are no longer a majority in Utah: Causes, consequences and implications for the sociology of religion. *Journal of Religion and Demography*, 10, 162–184. <https://doi.org/10.1163/2589742X-bja10019>

⁸ Carroll, S. J. (2016). Women in state government: Still too few. *The Book of States 2016*, 48, 448–455. <https://cawp.rutgers.edu/research-and-scholarship/women-state-government-still-too-few>

⁹ Riccucci, N. M. (2021). *Managing diversity in public sector workforces*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003176534>

¹⁰ Longman, K. A., & Bray, D. L. (2024). The role of purpose and calling in women's leadership experiences (pp. 202–219). In S. R. Madsen (Ed.), *Handbook of research on gender and leadership*. Edward Elgar. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781035306893.00024>

¹¹ Women in the workforce 2018–2022. (2024, February). Utah Department of Workforce Services. <https://jobs.utah.gov/wi/data/library/laborforce/women-inwf.html>

¹² Saidel, J. (2006, February). Women in state policy leadership, 1998–2005: An analysis of slow and uneven progress. *Center for Women in Government &*

Civil Society, p. 3. https://livealbany.sharepoint.com/:b:/s/web_women-in-government/EcaK-1web8RDh90_zdU3Pf4B3HvZ_YsZnXtbyc-QjzEY7w?e=jAYcNg

¹³ Saidel, J. (2006, February). p. 4.

¹⁴ Alkadry, M. G., & Tower, L. E. (2014). *Women and public service: Barriers, challenges, and opportunities* (pp. 121–122). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315698120>

¹⁵ Park, S. (2021). Gender and performance in public organizations: A research synthesis and research agenda. *Public Management Review*, 23(6), 929–948. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2020.1730940>

¹⁶ Lowi, T. J. (1985). The state in politics: The relation between policy and administration (pp. 67–110). In G. R. Noll (Ed.), *Regulatory policy and the social sciences*. University of California Press.

¹⁷ Alkadry, M. G., & Tower, L. E. (2014).

¹⁸ Riccucci, N.M. (2021).

¹⁹ Riccucci, N.M. (2021). p. 183.

²⁰ Smith, K. L. (2019, January). Beyond compliance: Recruitment and retention of underrepresented populations to achieve higher positions in local government. *International City/County Management Association*. <https://icma.org/documents/beyond-compliance-recruitment-and-retention-underrepresented-populations-local-government>

Acknowledgements: Thanks to Nubia Peña and Kolene Anderson for their feedback and insights. This report was made possible, in part, through the generous support of Melinda and Kim Colton.

Copyright © 2024 Utah Women & Leadership Project

APPENDIX
State of Utah Leadership Pipeline
Percentage of Women by Agency Category

Category Label	% Women Front-Line Leaders	% Women Senior Leaders	% Women Executive Leaders	% Women Cabinet Level	% Women Leaders Overall
Alcoholic Beverage Services	47.8%	50.0%	50.0%	100.0%	48.7%
Attorney General	40.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	39.8%
Corrections & Criminal Justice	26.2%	48.5%	40.0%	25.0%	29.3%
Courts	69.4%	0.0%	27.9%	0.0%	52.2%
Cultural & Community Engagement	68.4%	54.5%	100.0%	100.0%	64.0%
Dept. of Government Operations	30.7%	23.1%	0.0%	0.0%	29.7%
Economic Development & Commerce	46.7%	44.9%	25.0%	33.3%	46.7%
Environment & Agriculture	23.6%	31.7%	33.3%	33.3%	24.2%
Finance & Tax	62.0%	34.1%	28.6%	0.0%	52.3%
Health & Human Services	62.4%	50.0%	0.0%	100.0%	62.0%
Legislative	0.0%	0.0%	45.8%	0.0%	45.8%
National Guard & Veteran/Military Affairs	14.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	12.6%
Public Education	70.0%	40.0%	0.0%	0.0%	68.7%
Public Safety	32.4%	21.1%	0.0%	0.0%	31.7%
Transportation	14.5%	44.4%	0.0%	0.0%	15.8%
Workforce Services	58.8%	50.0%	100.0%	100.0%	58.5%
*Other	60.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	60.0%
TOTAL	42.2%	38.9%	30.3%	30.4%	41.4%

*Note: Includes Capital Preservation, Career Service Review Office, and the Navajo Trust Administration.