Research & Policy Brief

UTAH WOMEN & LEADERSHIP Project

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

Setting the Stage

Organizations increasingly thrive when both men and women hold leadership roles and work together. This is true not only in 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 is true at 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 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 question asked 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 had been made. This brief is the second of a series intended to provide an update to the 2020 research, which focused on women leaders who work within Utah's 29 counties. The first brief in the series provided an update on the State of Utah[8] and will be followed by an update at the municipal level.

Data for this research were collected through several methods. First, a formal government records (GRAMA) request was made to each of the 29 counties using the Open Records Portal website.[9] When necessary, additional emails or phone calls were made directly to county staff responsible for responding to records requests. Occasionally it was necessary to rely on the county's website to identify leadership positions as well as the gender of the person currently in that role. However, our preference was to collect data directly from county staff. The information requested from each county included a list of leadership positions; the gender of the person currently in each leadership position; whether the position was considered elected, appointed, merit, or time-limited/part-time; and the total number of employees for the county.

Consistent with the 2020 research, the data we received from each county was supplemented by analyzing the data by multi-county districts (MCDs) and class size. In addition, each leadership position was reviewed and categorized based on the responsibilities and policies for the agency with which it was associated and according to the level of leadership based on the title. The categories ranged from elected officials to supervisory roles. The results of these additional analyses provided valuable insights into the status of women leaders within Utah's 29 counties.

While some of the positions were vacant, in total we obtained information on 2,810 leadership positions, representing 17,941 employees across Utah's 29 counties. Fortunately, gender representation was available for all 2,810 positions reflected in this study.

Findings Overview

Overall, in 2024, 45.7% of all supervisory, managerial, and executive leadership positions within county governments are held by women, up from 42.5% in 2020. In comparison, it is slightly higher than the 41.4% recently reported for State of Utah employees. Admittedly, the leadership composition of each county is different; however, it does compare well to the census data from 2023 that show women in the US hold 42.0% of all management occupations.[10] We were unable to locate recent comparable data specifically for women in county government from other states. Table 1 lists the percentage of women leaders in Utah's 29 counties.

The county with the highest percentage of women leaders was Emery at 60.9% (down from 73.6% in 2020), followed by Tooele (58.8%), Morgan (56.3%), Salt Lake (53.2%), and San Juan (51.0%). The counties with the lowest percentage of women in leadership positions were Piute (12.5%), Juab (18.2%), Box Elder (23.4%), and Sevier (27.3%). This shows

a statically significant difference among counties in terms of the presence of women in leadership roles.

Table 1: Percentage of Women Leaders in Utah by County

County	Female	Male	% Female
Beaver	15	15	50.0%
Box Elder	15	49	23.4%
Cache	28	56	33.3%
Carbon	18	26	40.9%
Daggett	11	14	44.0%
Davis	123	138	47.1%
Duchesne	29	30	49.2%
Emery	28	18	60.9%
Garfield	18	18	50.0%
Grand	28	34	45.2%
Iron	11	16	40.7%
Juab	4	18	18.2%
Kane	14	17	45.2%
Millard	19	23	45.2%
Morgan	18	14	56.3%
Piute	1	7	12.5%
Rich	4	7	36.4%
Salt Lake	619	545	53.2%
San Juan	26	25	51.0%
Sanpete	5	10	33.3%
Sevier	12	32	27.3%
Summit	40	44	47.6%
Tooele	30	21	58.8%
Uintah	18	18	50.0%
Utah	74	168	30.6%
Wasatch	12	27	30.8%
Washington	36	75	32.4%
Wayne	6	8	42.9%
Weber	23	52	30.7%
Total	**1285**	**1525**	**45.7%**

National and global researchers have documented the leaky leadership "pipeline," meaning that while there are comparable numbers of men and women starting out as front-line employees, there are fewer and fewer women, particularly women of color, as they progress through the leadership ranks.[11] The problem is not simply the total number of women in the public sector workforce; it is how those numbers are distributed across the different levels of leadership. The current Utah data reflect the leaky leadership pipeline that persists in the United States and across the globe.

To gain clarity regarding the levels of leadership women held in Utah's 29 counties, each leadership position was categorized based on its title into one of four levels: Elected official,

Executive (chief deputies to elected officials and department directors), Senior ("middle management," including division directors, assistant or deputy directors, and managers), or Front-Line (supervisors, managers, administrators, coordinators, and analysts) (see Table 2).

Table 2: Percentage of Women Leaders in Utah's County Governments by Leadership Level

Leadership Level	Female	Male	% Female
Elected Official	99	209	32.1%
Executive	212	302	41.2%
Senior	254	437	36.8%
Front-Line	720	577	55.5%
Total	**1285**	**1525**	**45.7%**

Analysis focused on determining women's representation in leadership roles. Researchers found that women comprise 55.5% of front-line leadership positions (up from 49.8% in 2020), 36.8% of senior leadership roles (almost the same as 2020 at 36.9%), 41.2% of executive leadership positions (up slightly from 38.8% in 2020), and 32.1% of elected roles (up from 29.2% in 2020). Following national trends, these data suggest that the higher one goes in county government, the less likely it is that women will be in leadership. That said, the higher percentage of women in executive leadership vs. senior leadership is unexpected. A deeper analysis of equity efforts or cultural dynamics within counties could uncover more details about these phenomena. Also, see the Appendix for a table that lists the percentage of women leaders in each county by leadership level.

To put Utah's statistics in perspective, 2022 data show that women leaders represent less than one-third (31%) of top leadership positions,[12] which could be compared to the "executive" level in Table 2 (41.2%). In addition, a 2014 national report showed that women held 19.8% of all top managerial positions in city and county government.[13] With these comparisons, Utah counties may be faring well. Yet, we do not have recent comparable national statistics, so we are unsure whether this is the case. Nonetheless, we find these data encouraging.

Multi-County Districts, Class Size, and Typology

Researchers then analyzed the data based on the clustering of counties into multi-county districts (MCDs). MCDs include Bear River (Box Elder, Cache, and Rich counties), Central (Juab, Millard, Piute, Sanpete, Sevier, and Wayne counties), Mountainland (Summit, Utah, and Wasatch counties), Southeastern (Carbon, Emery, Grand, and San Juan counties) Southwestern (Beaver, Garfield, Iron, Kane, and Washington counties), Uintah Basin (Daggett, Duchesne, and Uintah counties), and Wasatch Front (Davis, Morgan, Salt Lake, Tooele, and Weber counties). Table 3 lists the percentage of women leaders in each region.

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Table 3: Percentage of Women Leaders in Utah's County Governments by Region (MCDs)

Region	Female	Male	% Female
Bear River MCD	47	112	29.6%
Central MCD	47	98	32.4%
Mountainland MCD	126	239	34.5%
Southeastern MCD	100	103	49.3%
Southwestern MCD	94	141	40.0%
Uintah Basin MCD	58	62	48.3%
Wasatch Front MCD	813	770	51.4%
Total	**1285**	**1525**	**45.7%**

When counties were grouped by MCDs, the highest percentage of women in leadership (51.4%) was found in the Wasatch Front MCD (Davis, Morgan, Salt Lake, Tooele, and Weber counties). This is a change from 2020, when the highest percentage was found in the Southeastern MCD at 52.2%. The lowest percentage of women in leadership (29.6%) was found in the Bear River MCD (Box Elder, Cache, and Rich counties), which was also the lowest in 2020 at 27.6%. Further data analysis shows a statistically significant difference between gender and region in Utah.

A similar approach was taken to explore the number of women leaders based on the population of the county. This was done by using the categories of county class established in Utah Code (see Table 4).[14] The only first-class county currently in the state is Salt Lake County. Second-class counties are Davis, Utah, Washington, and Weber counties. The third-class counties are Box Elder, Cache, Iron, Summit, and Tooele counties. The fourth-class counties are Carbon, Duchesne, Juab, Millard, Morgan, San Juan, Sanpete, Sevier, Uintah, and Wasatch counties. The fifth-class counties are Beaver, Emery, Garfield, Grand, and Kane counties. Finally, the sixth-class counties are Daggett, Piute, Rich, and Wayne counties.

Table 4: Percentage of Women Leaders in Utah County Governments by County Class

County Class	Female	Male	% Female
1st class (population of 1,000,000+)	619	545	53.2%
2nd class (population of 175,000–999,999)	256	433	37.2%
3rd class (population of 40,000–174,999)	124	186	40.0%
4th class (population of 11,000–39,999)	161	223	41.9%
5th class (population of 4,000–10,999)	103	102	50.2%
6th class (population of 4,000 or less)	22	36	37.9%
Total	**1285**	**1525**	**45.7%**

Analyzing the data this way showed that the first-class county (Salt Lake County) and fifth-class counties (Beaver, Emery, Garfield, Grand, and Kane) were more likely to have women leaders. In fact, both had at least half of their leadership positions held by women (53.2% and 50.2%, respectively). In comparison, women who work in second-class counties (Davis, Utah, Washington, and Weber counties) are less likely to hold a leadership role (37.2%).

Agency typology provided another way to analyze where women leaders are located within Utah's 29 counties. 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 leadership position was categorized based on the agency with which it was associated into 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 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, 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, the type of agency in which a woman works often affects her career progression.[17]

National data show that women in local government make up 75.0% of employees in redistributive agencies, 31.0% in regulatory agencies, and 22.0% in distributive agencies, showing a clear segregation based on agency type.[18] An analysis of agency typology showed that counties in Utah clearly reflect a gendered division of labor (see Table 5).

Table 5: Percentage of Women Leaders in Utah State Government by Typology

Typology	Female	Male	% Female
Administrative	225	349	39.2%
Distributive	9	108	7.7%
Redistributive	563	280	66.8%
Regulatory	488	788	38.2%
Total	**1285**	**1525**	**45.7%**

Utah's data rankings are similar to the national data across all governmental agencies: redistributive agencies have the majority of women in leadership positions at 66.8% (up from 61.2% in 2020). In contrast, county agencies considered to be distributive showed only 7.7% of leadership positions held by women (down from 13.2% in 2020). Further data analysis

shows a statistically significant difference between gender and typology in Utah county governments. This aligns with data found in the State of Utah agencies, with women holding 61.4% of leadership positions in redistributive agencies and only 15.8% of leadership in distributive agencies.

Overall, the leadership typologies 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 and Classification

National research suggests women are more likely to be leaders over smaller organizations, have fewer people to supervise, and have less financial responsibility.[19] To determine whether that applied to county governments in Utah, analysis was done to determine the number of women leaders in counties based on the total number of employees in the county (see Table 6).

Table 6: Percentage of Women Leaders in Utah's County Governments by Number of County Employees

Number of Employees	Female	Male	% Female
0—99	40	54	42.6%
100–199	92	103	47.2%
200–299	131	201	39.5%
300–699	183	264	40.9%
700–1,499	220	358	38.1%
1,500–8,300	619	545	53.2%
Total	**1285**	**1525**	**45.7%**

Researchers found that county governments that had 1,500–8,300 employees had the highest percentage of women in leadership at 53.2% (up from 49.4% in 2020), and the only county included in this range was Salt Lake County. Interestingly, county governments that had 100–199 employees (Beaver, Emery, Juab, Kane, San Juan, and Sanpete) ranked next at 47.2%. County governments with the lowest percentage of women leaders were those that had 700–1,499 employees (Davis, Utah, and Weber) at 38.1%.

Finally, researchers tried to determine whether the classification of a leadership position had any connection to gender (see Table 7). The position classifications were elected, appointed, merit, and time-limited/part-time. In government agencies, appointed positions are assigned by a high-ranking 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 their political connections. Finally, time-limited/part-time position designations indicate specific parameters regarding the position, either by tenure or hours worked.

Table 7: Percentage of Women Leaders in Utah's County Governments by Position Classification

Position Classification	Female	Male	% Female
Elected	97	209	31.7%
Appointed	161	249	39.3%
Merit	906	1057	46.2%
Part-time/Time-limited	121	10	92.4%
Total	**1285**	**1525**	**45.7%**

While the largest percentage of women leaders were classified as part-time/time limited at 92.4%, a considerable percentage were identified as merit (46.2%, up from 45.6% in 2020). County governments in Utah were found to have a considerable number of women in appointed positions (39.3%, down from 40.4% in 2020). In comparison, the data found for the State of Utah showed 43.8% of women in appointed positions. Because these are considered to be positions of trust and authority, they provide women an opportunity to influence public policy.

Recommendations

By looking more closely at women's representation in leadership positions within county governments, we can see where local governments are doing well and where there are opportunities to improve the diversity of the workforce. A more diverse local government workforce provides Utah's county leaders with a greater range of perspectives when identifying and implementing public policies and can be a valuable tool in creative problem solving and complex decision making. Strategies implemented by some Utah counties have already led to greater diversity in the leadership ranks; however, there is room for improvement. In addition to the recommendations published in the recently updated State of Utah research and policy brief,[20] we offer the following ten recommendations:[21]

1. Begin establishing a "tone from the top" that is firmly committed to supporting and advancing women, with an eye to advancing women of color. Embed inclusivity in the organization's behaviors, attitudes, culture, and goals.
2. Make a visible commitment, such as the ElevateHER Challenge and publicize this decision. Apply to be a Utah 100 Company Championing Women.
3. Explore gender representation at all levels of leadership by collecting and sharing the data, both inside and outside of the organization.
4. Provide training to staff that offers strategies and tools to support best practices in inclusion and belonging in the workplace (e.g., hiring, performance evaluations, promotions, and committee participation).

5. Ensure diverse hiring interview panels to reduce potential bias in the hiring process, with a goal of 50% women and 50% men.
6. Analyze and change gendered language that may be used in policies, procedures, job descriptions, and other written reports and documents.
7. Train both women and men to react/respond appropriately when they encounter bias in language, behavior, or policy. Responses can be made in a professional manner and still address the issue effectively.
8. Recognize and verbally acknowledge the leadership that women provide. In addition, take the opportunity to acknowledge all contributors during discussions of projects and accomplishments.
9. Recommend women for stretch assignments and speaking opportunities. This can magnify their visibility within the organization, increase confidence, enhance social networks, and build credibility—all of which can help women be better positioned for future promotions.
10. Support and engage in your county's A Bolder Way Forward coalition to ensure that more women, girls, and their families are thriving.

Conclusion

Overall, in county governments across the state we found higher percentages of women in front-line leadership roles employed by agencies that were considered to be redistributive (such as aging and senior centers, arts, parks and recreation, libraries, 4-H, youth services, social services, and health care). We also found women were more likely to be in leadership roles if they worked for either 1st class or 5th class counties, as a part-time/time-limited or merit employee. While some counties are doing well in making their leadership more representative and inclusive, other counties show a distinct disadvantage for women who want to advance, particularly in non-traditional agencies.

Recent national discussions have created heightened awareness of the importance of listening to the voices and experiences of women, particularly women of color. The current lack of equal representation in the leadership ranks in some segments of Utah's county governments stands in stark contrast to the goal of a diverse government workforce. Acknowledging the relationship between gender and leadership can translate into behavior-changing actions.

As Utah's county governments embrace a diverse workforce and incorporate a variety of perspectives into the decision-making process, they will be in a better position to address and solve the complex challenges that face our communities. In addition, county leaders will benefit by encouraging creative solutions that consider a variety of experiences and perspectives. Identifying and mitigating persistent challenges and barriers will clear the way for enhanced opportunities for women's equal representation across county organizations and leadership levels. This shift will benefit not only women and government organizations, but also families, communities, and the state as a whole.

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APPENDIX
Counties of Utah Leadership Pipeline
Percentage of Women by County

County	% Women Front-Line Leaders	% Women Senior Leaders	% Women Executive Leaders	% Women Elected	% Women Leaders Overall
Beaver	42.9	66.7	62.5	41.7	50.0
Box Elder	5.9	22.7	50.0	18.2	23.4
Cache	43.5	29.6	31.3	0.0	33.3
Carbon	18.2	71.4	56.3	20.0	40.9
Daggett	33.3	57.1	50.0	33.3	44.0
Davis	60.9	45.9	42.7	8.3	47.1
Duchesne	42.9	0.0	55.0	36.4	49.2
Emery	90.0	33.3	40.0	44.4	60.9
Garfield	100.0	62.5	45.5	18.2	50.0
Grand	50.0	53.8	56.3	15.4	45.2
Iron	33.3	50.0	66.7	27.3	40.7
Juab	0.0	0.0	0.0	40.0	18.2
Kane	37.5	20.0	62.5	50.0	45.2
Millard	33.3	12.5	77.8	60.0	45.2
Morgan	0.0	50.0	68.4	36.4	56.3
Piute	0.0	0.0	0.0	14.3	12.5
Rich	0.0	0.0	0.0	50.0	36.4
Salt Lake	57.0	37.2	46.3	57.1	53.2
San Juan	62.5	75.0	33.3	33.3	51.0
Sanpete	0.0	0.0	20.0	40.0	33.3
Sevier	33.3	33.3	14.3	20.0	27.3
Summit	78.9	35.5	27.3	66.7	47.6
Tooele	91.7	76.9	42.9	25.0	58.8
Uintah	37.5	62.5	54.5	44.4	50.0
Utah	57.1	16.7	6.5	16.7	30.6
Wasatch	100.0	75.0	13.3	20.0	30.8
Washington	50.0	34.9	33.3	0.0	32.4
Wayne	0.0	0.0	50.0	37.5	42.9
Weber	37.5	32.0	23.5	22.2	30.7
Total	**55.5%**	**36.8%**	**41.2%**	**32.1%**	**45.7%**

Note: Large percentages may be due to counties reporting only a few individuals in each leadership role category.