

Maryland's Women Senators

The Pursuit of Representation — Key Takeaways from the Historical Review

52% Women in Maryland	24 Seats at population parity	16 Record women senators (2022)	≈11 Likely women senators in 2027
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Bottom Line

Maryland's Senate has made historic gains in women's representation—but those gains have proven fragile, reversible, and increasingly unequal by race and party.

The report's central finding is that women have repeatedly built representation through competitive elections and appointments, only to lose ground when departing women are replaced by men, when redistricting pits women against one another, or when women are concentrated in swing seats rather than protected in safe districts. After reaching a record 16 women (34%) following the 2022 election, the Senate is likely to fall to roughly 11 women (23%) in 2027—about the level seen more than three decades ago.

Five Key Takeaways

- Progress has never been linear. Maryland took roughly 60 years to reach four women senators and another 20 years to reach 15. Major advances in 1986–2002 were repeatedly followed by setbacks, including a 30% decline after the 1994 election and a four-seat net loss in 2006.
- The Senate has never approached gender parity. A 47-member chamber reflecting Maryland's population would include about 24 women. Even at the 2022 high of 16, women held only 34% of seats; the likely 2027 level is about 23%.
- Black women experienced the sharpest recent reversal. Maryland reached a peak of six Black women senators in 2003–2008 and between five and six between 2009 and 2023. The report projects only three in 2027, even as the overall Senate Black Caucus is expected to grow to 17 members.
- Women remain underrepresented in institutional power. Even when women reached nearly one-third of the chamber in 2003, they did not receive proportional committee leadership. The report identifies only one woman policy committee chair in most years since 1995, with 2019 as the notable year when women chaired two of four committees.
- The pipeline itself is unequal. Women are disproportionately concentrated in competitive districts, while men dominate safe seats. This means women are more exposed to expensive general elections, partisan swings, and turnover—and women of color are especially affected.

A Century of Milestones—and Unfinished Representation

The history begins with exclusion: Maryland's all-male, all-white Senate rejected women's suffrage in 1920. Mary Risteau became the first woman senator in 1934; Verda Welcome became the first Black woman senator in 1962; Louise Gore became the first Republican woman senator in 1966; and Rosalie Silber Abrams became the first woman majority leader in 1978 and first woman to chair a standing policy committee in 1983. These breakthroughs established a path to representation, but they did not create a self-sustaining system for maintaining it.

The Modern Arc: Growth, Backlash, Recovery, Decline

1986–2002: The Major Expansion

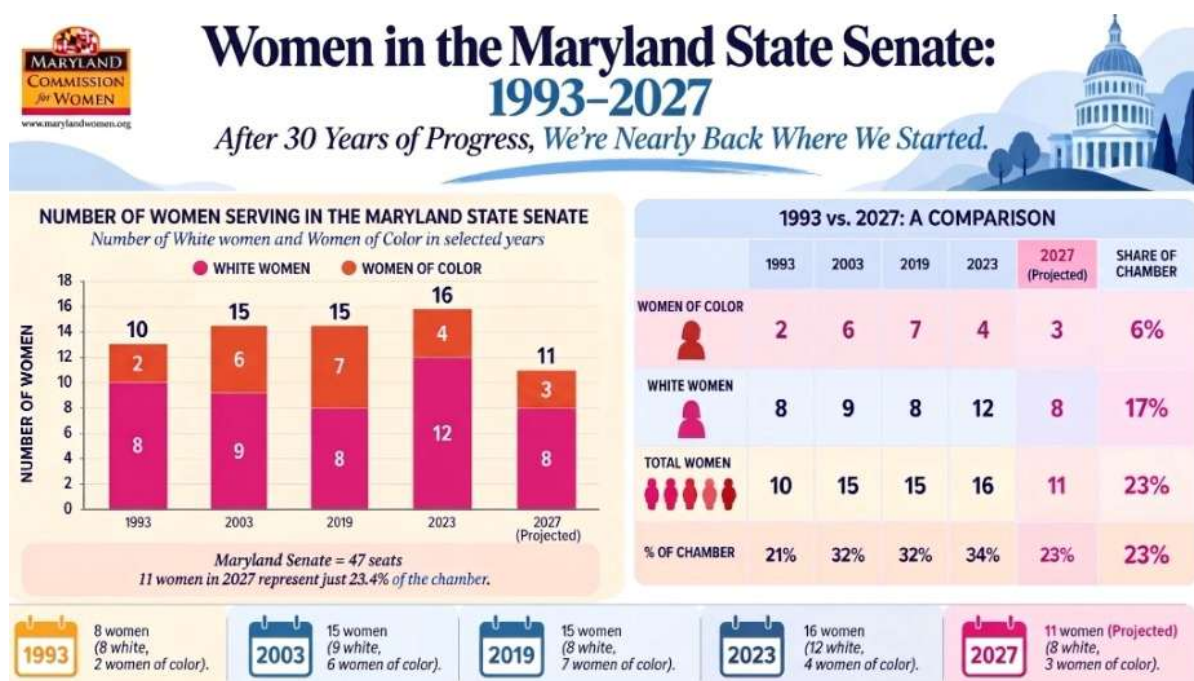
Women doubled from three to six after the 1986 elections and reached nine through appointments by 1990. Open seats created by established male senators leaving office, Barbara Mikulski’s historic U.S. Senate campaign, experienced women legislators moving up from the House, and organized women’s political networks all contributed. A severe setback in 1994 was largely attributable to lack of institutional support for women Senators, who were pitted against each other in redistricting and defeated by male candidates in primaries. However, women rebuilt over two election cycles and then surged to 15 after the 2002 elections—a 50% increase in a single cycle. That group included six Black Democratic women, six white Democratic women, and three white Republican women.

2006–2018: Replacement Patterns Erode Gains

The report argues that ordinary legislative “churn” becomes a problem when women and men who leave are not replaced by women. Women netted four losses in 2006. Departures by Gloria Lawlah, Sharon Grosfeld, Paula Hollinger, Ida Rubin, and Sandy Schrader were offset by only one newly elected woman, Catherine Pugh; Nancy King was later appointed in 2007. Subsequent vacancies also replaced Gwen Britt and Janet Greenip with men. Women did not return to 15 seats until the 2018 election.

2022–2027: Record Representation Followed By Rapid Reversal

The 2022 election produced a record 16 women senators. Yet the report documents a rapid loss of both women overall and racial diversity. Susan Lee, Sarah Elfeth, Ariana Kelly, Kathy Klausmeier, Melony Griffith, Jill Carter, Joanne Benson, Pam Beidle, Nancy King, and Dalya Attar are among the women who left, retired, moved to other office, or were defeated between 2023 and the 2026 cycle. Heading into the 2026 elections, the Senate was down to 14 women; the primaries reduced the likely post-election baseline to 11, absent women flipping male-held seats in competitive general elections.



3 of 17

Senate Black Caucus members who

0

Latina senators

0

AAPJ women senators

1

Republican woman senator

The Most Consequential Trend: The Decline of Black Women

Maryland once stood out nationally for Black women’s Senate representation. Six Black women served simultaneously in 2003, close to proportional representation relative to the state population, and there were five or six for decades. By 2027, the report anticipates only three: Mary Washington, Shaneka Henson, and Tiffany Alston.

- Baltimore City and Baltimore County together fell from five Black women senators in 2017 to one by 2023; Prince George’s County fell from two to one.
- Several Black women were replaced by men through both elections and appointments, including Gloria Lawlah, Barbara Robinson, Delores Kelley, Lisa Gladden, Shirley Nathan-Pulliam, and Melony Griffith.
- Retention also differs sharply in the report’s analysis: between 2016 and 2026, three of five new Black women senators resigned or were defeated, compared with three of 15 new Black male senators.

Appointments Once Expanded Women’s Representation—Now They Hold Women Back

Vacancy appointments historically did more than preserve women’s representation: they often increased it by placing women in seats previously held by men. In 1989–90, appointments of Sharon Hornberger, Patricia Cushwa, and Nancy Murphy helped raise the number of women from six to nine; Joan Carter Conway and Nancy King later entered through male-held vacancies. That pathway is now far less common.

In recent years, vacancies created by men are not often filled by women, while vacancies created by women are often filled by men. In 2025, 2023 and 2020 women Senators were replaced by men through the appointments process. Preventing backsliding requires replacing women with women; increasing representation also requires women to fill seats previously held by men.

A Contrasting Trajectory in the Maryland House

Progress for women has been more durable in the Maryland House of Delegates. As of 2026, women hold approximately 45% of the chamber seats. The House is led by Speaker Joseline Peña-Melnyk, the first Afro-Latina to serve as Speaker, and women chair five of the House’s eight standing committees. The contrast is significant: while the Senate is projected to fall to roughly 23% women in 2027, the House has maintained women at near-parity and placed women in a majority of its principal committee chairmanships. This dispels the myth that finding qualified women who are willing to serve in the state legislature is the primary challenge for women’s representation.

Representation Gaps in 2027

Women are 52% of Maryland's population. The report estimates that population parity would produce approximately 24 women senators, including at least eight Black women, three Hispanic/Latina women, and two AAPI women. Instead, the likely 2027 Senate has about 11 women overall and only three women of color. Maryland has never elected a Hispanic/Latina woman to the Senate, and no AAPI woman currently serves.

Four Structural Issues Emerge

- Safe-seat disparity. Only five of the 11 women's districts are described as consistently safe in a general election, while only two of 36 male-held or male-nominee districts face competitive elections. The report concludes that women are disproportionately asked to win and hold the hardest seats.
- **Replacement decisions. Succession increasingly works in one direction: vacancies created by men are less often filled by women, while vacancies created by women are often filled by men. Over time, that asymmetry increases male representation and erodes earlier gains.**
- Geographic concentration of losses. Large, diverse Democratic jurisdictions that once elected multiple women—especially Baltimore City/County, Montgomery County and Prince George's County—have shifted toward male representation even while women have gained in more competitive suburban districts.
- Leadership does not automatically follow numbers. More women in the chamber has not consistently translated into proportional control of policy committees or Senate leadership, limiting the institutional impact of numerical gains.

What would meaningful representation look like?

The report uses the concept of “critical mass”—often discussed around 30% representation—to distinguish presence from meaningful influence. The Maryland Senate crossed that threshold at points in the modern era, but did not sustain it. Its history suggests that achieving parity requires more than recruiting women for one election cycle; it requires building durable pathways into safe seats, retaining incumbents, preserving representation through appointments and redistricting, and translating numbers into leadership authority.

Key implications for policymakers and political institutions

- Treat retention as seriously as recruitment. Track who leaves, why they leave, and whether women are replaced by women and men are replaced by women—particularly in districts with a history of electing women of color.
- Examine appointment practices. Central committees and other appointing actors can preserve—or erase—representation before voters ever reach the next election.
- Build women into safe-seat pipelines. Candidate recruitment should not disproportionately place women in swing districts while men inherit safer seats and clearer succession paths.
- Measure representation intersectionally. Overall gender totals can mask steep losses among Black women, the absence of Latina and AAPI women, and the near disappearance of Republican women.
- Connect representation to power. Committee chairs, vice chairs, caucus leadership, and other institutional positions should be evaluated alongside seat counts.