

AAUW 

IT'S MY
VOTE!

AAUW ACTION FUND



CIVIC ENGAGEMENT GUIDE

2026

WHEN WOMEN VOTE,
WE CHANGE THE
CONVERSATION.

Elected officials at every level make decisions that shape women's access to education, economic security, and civil rights. This year, speak out for gender equity at the polls and in your community.

When women vote, we change the conversation — and we change what leaders think is possible. Use this nonpartisan guide to turn your values into action:

- **Get informed** on the issues that impact women and girls.
- **Ask better questions** at town halls, debates, and candidate forums.
- **Start conversations** with friends, family, and neighbors.
- **Host a branch or community discussion** to talk through what's at stake.

Your voice matters — and your participation can help shape what comes next.

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AAUW Stands for Social Justice & Civil Rights

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PUBLIC EDUCATION

Public schools are the foundation of America's education system and a cornerstone of our democracy, preparing young people for civic participation and opportunity. Educating around 91% of K-12 students¹ requires adequate funding, strong student protections, and accurate instruction that isn't censored.

Many states have expanded vouchers or "education savings account" programs that redirect taxpayer dollars from public schools to private or religious schools. A new federal tax credit for private-school scholarships is also set to increase public-supported funding for private schools in states that opt into the program.

AAUW stands for equitable, high-quality public K-12 education by opposing public funding for schools that sidestep civil rights standards and ensuring curriculum is accurate, evidence-based, and free from censorship or political bias.

WHY THIS MATTERS

- **Girls' opportunities depend on what schools provide.** When resources are stretched, programs that support girls' success (including counselors, advanced coursework, athletics, and safe-school initiatives) are often among the first to be reduced.
- **Choice depends on geography.** Nineteen percent of all public school students in rural areas lack access to private schools,² meaning voucher programs offer them no real alternative.
- **Protections can differ by school type.** Students transferring to private schools with vouchers lose many rights guaranteed in public schools, like disability accommodations. Private schools can also deny admission based on students' sexual orientation, gender identity, or academic standing.

WHAT'S AT STAKE

- **Education budgets:** Public school funding and resources (staffing, counselors, special education, transportation) strengthen neighborhood public schools, which serve nearly all children. Funneling public funding to private schools strains local budgets and reduces those supports.
- **Accountability and student protections:** Requiring any school that receives public dollars to meet federal transparency and nondiscrimination standards protects students who use vouchers at private schools. Without these safeguards, oversight and protections weaken.
- **Curriculum and instruction:** Policies that keep classroom decisions free from censorship or political pressure protect students' access to accurate, complete instruction. When political interference shapes curriculum, the quality and integrity of education for all students suffers.

QUESTIONS TO ASK CANDIDATES

- How will you strengthen public schools so they can serve every student well, including students with disabilities and students facing harassment?
- If public dollars support private schooling in any form, what standards will you require for transparency, nondiscrimination, and student protections?
- How will you support curriculum and instruction that keep classroom decisions from being driven by censorship or political pressure?

HIGHER EDUCATION ACCESS, AFFORDABILITY, & COMPLETION

Higher education is a key driver of economic security — through two- and four-year degrees, community college, career and technical education, and workforce training that leads to high-quality credentials.

Access depends on affordability and practical resources for students who are working, caregiving, or returning to school. Yet the price of higher education has skyrocketed over the past half century,³ without increased federal and state investment to help students and families meet rising costs.⁴

AAUW stands for affordable, inclusive higher education that yields high-quality credentials or degrees, reduces barriers to completion, and addresses student loan debt burdens, especially for women and borrowers of color.

WHY THIS MATTERS

- **Student loan debt hits women harder.** Women hold the majority of the country's student loan debt and face greater difficulty paying it back due to wage gaps. Black women carry the highest average student loan debt burden, compounding the financial barriers they already face in the workforce.⁵
- **Progress is real, but gaps remain.** Hispanic/Latina women are nearly twice as likely to have a bachelor's degree today as in 2003, yet their attainment is 23% vs. 43% for non-Hispanic/Latina women.⁶
- **Caregiving affects completion.** Nearly three-quarters of student parents are women, and time, cost, and care responsibilities can make it harder to complete school.⁷

WHAT'S AT STAKE

- **Funding and student aid:** Increasing need-based aid and investment in public colleges expands access and reduces costs for students. Tightening loan limits can price students out and shift more burden to families.
- **Student loan repayment:** Flexible repayment options and borrower protections can help people manage payments and avoid default when income changes. Repayment changes that reduce flexibility or lengthen paths to forgiveness can raise lifetime costs and keep borrowers in debt longer.
- **Freedom to teach and research:** Higher education works best when faculty can choose materials, methods, and research based on professional standards — not political pressure. Government control over curriculum or research can narrow learning and discovery.

QUESTIONS TO ASK CANDIDATES

- How will you expand access to high-quality credentials (including community college, apprenticeships, two- and four-year degrees) and help students complete them?
- How will you increase need-based aid and investment in public colleges, so students aren't priced out?
- What is your approach to student loan repayment and borrower protections, so debt doesn't become a lifelong barrier?

STUDENTS' RIGHTS & EQUAL OPPORTUNITY IN SCHOOLS

Strong civil rights laws and enforcement are essential to ensuring equal opportunity for every student. Key federal protections include Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (sex discrimination), Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (race, color, national origin), Title IV of the Civil Rights Act (equal educational opportunity), and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (disability). These protections matter most in how they are implemented and enforced in schools day-to-day.

AAUW stands for strengthened civil rights protections and enforcement in schools so all students can learn, play, and thrive in safe environments.

WHY THIS MATTERS

- **Safety and belonging affect learning.** One in three teenagers report being bullied each year — with women and girls, students of color, LGBTQ+ students, and students with disabilities facing higher rates than their peers.⁸ Harassment affects attendance, grades, and long-term opportunity.
- **Rules only matter if they're usable.** Inconsistent enforcement or weaponization of civil rights laws against schools with inclusive policies erode protections for all students, regardless of intent.
- **Enforcement gaps leave students without recourse.** Staffing instability doesn't just create backlogs — it means students are met with closed cases and no investigation. In 2025, half of the U.S. Department of Education's civil rights enforcement staff were barred from working, and the office dismissed 90% of the 9,000+ discrimination complaints it received.⁹

WHAT'S AT STAKE

- **Survivor-centered support:** Clear requirements for schools to respond promptly and fairly to sexual harassment and assault — including supportive measures and protection from retaliation — help students stay safe and stay on track. When policies are vague or support is limited, students may be left without clear, usable help.
- **Fair discipline:** Discipline policies with strong guardrails and oversight can reduce disproportionate punishment for girls of color and other students and keep them engaged in learning. Harsh or uneven practices can push students out of the classroom and widen inequities.
- **Explicit protections for LGBTQ+ students:** Enumerated protections that clearly cover sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression provide more consistent safeguards for LGBTQ+ students. When protections are not explicit, enforcement can vary widely across schools and districts.

QUESTIONS TO ASK CANDIDATES

- How will you make sure schools respond to sexual harassment and assault in ways that keep survivors safe and supported?
- What will you do to reduce disproportionate discipline for girls of color and keep students in class and learning?
- How will you support explicit school protections for LGBTQ+ students (on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression)?

PAY EQUITY

Equal pay for work of equivalent value is about more than fairness in a paycheck. It shapes women's economic security over a lifetime, from paying bills today to building savings and retiring with dignity. When women are paid less, they lose income now and lose opportunities that depend on that income later.

AAUW stands for comprehensive solutions that close the many pay gaps women face by raising pay in jobs where women are concentrated, preventing discrimination, and maintaining transparency tools that make inequities visible.

WHY THIS MATTERS

- **Pay gaps add up over time.** Women working full-time, year-round earn 81 cents for every dollar earned by men, amounting to hundreds of thousands of dollars in lost wages over a 40-year career.¹⁰
- **There isn't one pay gap, there are many.** Pay disparities differ by race and ethnicity, age, education level, disability status, parental status, and hours worked. Those lower earnings follow women into retirement.
- **Factors behind the pay gap are complex.** Even after accounting for education, college major, job tenure, occupation, and hours worked, women are still paid less than similarly educated and experienced men.¹¹

WHAT'S AT STAKE

- **Pay transparency and data:** Disclosing salary ranges and strengthening pay data reporting by gender and race/ethnicity help reveal disparities and drive enforcement. Limits on transparency or data collection make pay gaps harder to identify and fix.
- **Fair pay across job types:** Standards that cover work of equivalent value (similar skill, effort, and responsibility), even with different titles, can reduce undervaluation of women-dominated work. Narrow "same job" tests can leave those gaps in place.
- **Salary history and enforcement:** Policies limiting salary-history use and strengthening enforcement and anti-retaliation protections help stop discrimination from repeating and give workers real recourse. Weak enforcement and loopholes allow inequities to persist.

QUESTIONS TO ASK CANDIDATES

- How will you support pay transparency measures, such as disclosing salary ranges and strengthening pay data reporting by gender, race, and ethnicity, so inequities are visible?
- How will you support policies that require equal pay for jobs of equivalent value, not only identical job titles, so women-dominated work isn't chronically underpaid?
- What steps will you take to strengthen pay discrimination protections, such as limiting reliance on salary history and ensuring enforcement capacity, so workers have real recourse?

PAID LEAVE

No one should be forced to choose between their family's health or economic security. At some point in their careers, most workers will need time away to care for themselves or loved ones. Unlike most developed countries in the world, however, the United States does not guarantee paid family and medical leave or paid parental leave.

AAUW stands for expanding access to paid family, medical, sick, and safe leave (including time to address violence) so women can stay in school and at work and build long-term economic security.

WHY THIS MATTERS

- **Paid leave is the exception, not the norm.** Most workers in the United States do not have paid leave through their employers.¹² Federal job-protected, unpaid leave fails to cover 44% of workers, with many families unable to afford taking unpaid leave, even when they are eligible.¹³
- **Caregiving pressures fall unevenly.** Black and Hispanic/Latina women have less access to paid parental leave and receive fewer weeks of fully paid leave than white women¹⁴ – and gaps in affordable childcare can make it even harder to stay working and keep earnings stable.
- **Safety is part of economic security.** Safe leave policies help survivors of domestic violence, stalking, or sexual assault get medical care, counseling, or legal help without losing their jobs. When leave isn't available, people can be forced to choose between safety and a paycheck.

WHAT'S AT STAKE

- **Paid leave for every worker:** State and federal paid leave and paid sick days programs help workers take time for health and family needs without losing income. Lack of guaranteed time off leaves it up to employer choice, where many workers have none.
- **Access to affordable childcare:** Childcare assistance and investments that stabilize the childcare workforce can increase the supply of slots and reduce cost barriers, helping parents stay in school and at work. Pulling funding can force care centers to close and leave families without viable options.
- **Job protection and fairness at work:** Policies that ensure people can take leave without retaliation or job loss support working women and families. Without protection, caregiving can derail earnings and advancement.

QUESTIONS TO ASK CANDIDATES

- How will you support paid leave for all workers, regardless of their job, the size of their employer, or location?
- How will you address caregiving burdens and support paid sick and safe leave so women don't have to choose between safety, health, and a paycheck?
- What will you do to make childcare more affordable and easier to find, especially for rural families and families working nontraditional hours?

CONTRACEPTION & ABORTION CARE ACCESS

Access to affordable contraception and abortion care is vital to women's ability to control their lives, their bodies, and their futures. The ability to decide if and when to start a family improves women's economic security and educational attainment. In 2022, however, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the constitutional right to abortion established under *Roe v. Wade* nearly 50 years earlier.

AAUW stands for reproductive freedom, including access to affordable contraception and abortion care for all women regardless of location or income.

WHY THIS MATTERS

- **Access has changed quickly.** Since 2022, 18 states have banned or restricted access to abortion. One in three women live in a state where abortion is not accessible.¹⁵
- **Where you live shapes your options.** Geographic barriers fall hardest on women with the fewest resources. Those who cannot travel, take time off work, or afford out-of-state care face the greatest risk of going without.
- **Access does not look the same for all women.** 60% of Black women and 59% of American Indian or Alaskan Native women ages 18–49 live in states where abortion is banned or restricted, compared to just over half of white women.¹⁶

WHAT'S AT STAKE

- **Coverage and affordability:** Policies that expand coverage reduce cost barriers for contraception and abortion care. Further limiting funding and maintaining insurance restrictions place care out of reach for many people.
- **Medication abortion access:** Policymakers can respect FDA-approved medication abortion and protect access to mifepristone. Restrictions through misinformation-driven pressure and legal/political targeting can deter providers and shrink access, especially where clinics are limited.
- **Legal clarity and protections:** Laws that provide clear, consistent rules for patients and providers help people get the care they need. Vague or conflicting rules chill care (including contraception) and leave patients and clinicians uncertain about what is allowed.

QUESTIONS TO ASK CANDIDATES

- How will you support policies that keep contraception and abortion care affordable and accessible, regardless of income or location?
- What steps will you take to reduce disparities in access to reproductive health care for low-income women and women of color?
- How will you protect access to medication abortion, especially in places with few clinics?

PREGNANCY & PARENTING PROTECTIONS

Pregnancy and parenting should be compatible with staying in school and advancing at work. Yet people who are pregnant or parenting continue to face practical barriers from unaffordable childcare and uncertain accommodations to unaddressed pregnancy discrimination.

AAUW stands for policies that ensure pregnant and parenting people can access and complete their education and advance in the workplace through strong protections and practical supports.

WHY THIS MATTERS

- **Parents have a major presence among today's student population.** Nearly one in five undergraduates are parents.¹⁷ Without clear, student-friendly policies, common needs like prenatal care or recovery after birth can mean missed classes, falling behind, or dropping out.
- **Mothers' earnings are central to family stability.** Nearly three-fourths of women with children under 18 are working,¹⁸ and 40% are equal, primary, or sole breadwinners for their families.¹⁹ When pregnancy or parenting leads to penalties, families lose earnings and stability.
- **Childcare can be the make-or-break factor.** High costs and limited availability can force impossible choices such as cutting work hours, turning down opportunities, or leaving a job or program.

WHAT'S AT STAKE

- **Protections for parenting students:** Written school policies help students stay enrolled and on track, with clear rules for excused absences, make-up work, flexibility for health needs, and time and space for lactation. Vague or uneven policies can leave students unsure of their rights.
- **Practical protections at work:** Clear workplace standards and enforcement help pregnant and postpartum workers keep working safely and protect against penalties tied to pregnancy or parenting status. Weak or confusing rules and uneven enforcement make protections less reliable.
- **Real supports vs. "headline" policies:** Policies that expand affordable childcare, paid leave, and reliable school/work protections help families maintain economic stability while staying in school and on the job. Narrow proposals that sound helpful on the surface may still leave key gaps for families.

QUESTIONS TO ASK CANDIDATES

- What will you do to ensure pregnancy or parenting doesn't force someone to leave school?
- How will you support practical workplace adjustments, like seating and breaks, and strong nondiscrimination protections so pregnancy and parenting don't derail a career?
- What is your plan to expand affordable, high-quality childcare so families can maintain income and stability?

FREEDOM FROM HARASSMENT & VIOLENCE

Women, LGBTQ+ people, transgender people, and people with disabilities face harassment, sexual assault, and gender-based violence at alarmingly high rates in workplaces, schools, and communities. American Indian and Alaska Native women, Black women, and women at the intersections of multiple marginalized identities face these harms at especially high rates.²⁰

AAUW stands for ensuring that all people are free from harassment, sexual assault, and gender-based violence in schools, workplaces, and communities, and that strong enforcement tools remain in place to protect survivors and hold institutions accountable.

WHY THIS MATTERS

- **Workplace harassment hits women hardest.** Women of color, LGBTQ+ women, and low-wage workers face harassment at disproportionately high rates. Most workers who experience it never report it: 90% never take formal action.²¹
- **LGBTQ+ people face disproportionate risks.** Federal and state policies increasingly target LGBTQ+ people – restricting gender-affirming care, reversing nondiscrimination protections, and narrowing interpretation of who is covered under civil rights law. These rollbacks leave LGBTQ+ people, particularly transgender women and girls, more vulnerable.
- **Gender-based violence has lasting consequences.** Harassment, assault, and intimate partner violence are interconnected harms that undermine women's economic security, educational attainment, and long-term wellbeing.

WHAT'S AT STAKE

- **Workplace harassment standards:** Clear standards and consistent enforcement help prevent harassment and make rights usable. When interpretation or enforcement is weakened, protections can become less clear and less effective.
- **Protections for LGBTQ+ people:** Explicit protections and strong enforcement of civil rights on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity help ensure LGBTQ+ people can learn and work in safe environments. Rollbacks expose communities to higher rates of harassment and violence with fewer legal protections and less recourse.
- **Enforcement of gender-based violence protections:** Laws like the federal Violence Against Women Act provide critical resources for survivors, including funding shelters, legal aid, and survivor support services. When programs are underfunded or enforcement is weakened, survivors face harassment and violence with fewer options for safety and recourse.

QUESTIONS TO ASK CANDIDATES

- What steps will you take to restore and strengthen workplace harassment protections, so all workers – especially women of color, LGBTQ+ people, and people with disabilities – know their rights and have real recourse?
- What steps will you take to protect LGBTQ+ people, including transgender people, from harassment and violence and ensure civil rights laws cover them fully?
- Do you support robust funding and enforcement for laws addressing gender-based violence, including the Violence Against Women Act, so survivors have access to safety and support?

VOTING RIGHTS

Our democracy works when every eligible voter can cast a ballot that is counted. However, proposals that would require documentary proof of citizenship to register to vote in federal elections risk creating barriers for millions of Americans. The Voting Rights Act's core protections were weakened by the U.S. Supreme Court's *Shelby County v. Holder* (2013) decision, and the Court continues to hear cases that could further limit the law's reach.

AAUW stands for open, fair elections that are broadly accessible to all citizens and nonpartisan voter education that promotes equitable political participation and representation.

WHY THIS MATTERS

- **Paperwork barriers impact women directly.** Proposals to require documentary proof of citizenship for federal elections would unnecessarily create barriers for the 69 million women in the United States who have changed their last names.²²
- **Some communities face more hurdles.** Voters of color, low-income voters, rural voters, voters with disabilities, and older voters continue to face barriers at the ballot box. The burden of paperwork requirements would fall hardest on those with the fewest resources to cover travel and administrative costs.
- **Weakened enforcement leaves voters unprotected.** The *Shelby County* decision removed a key check on discriminatory voting changes, leaving affected communities with fewer proactive protections and more reliance on costly, time-consuming litigation.

WHAT'S AT STAKE

- **Convenient and secure voting:** Expanding early voting, vote-by-mail, accessible polling places, and language and disability accommodations can reduce barriers for eligible voters. Restricting these options can increase travel, paperwork, and long lines, especially for voters with disabilities, older voters, rural voters, and people working nontraditional hours.
- **Rules based on evidence:** Election authorities can use proven safeguards and accurate information to protect elections. Adopting requirements like the SAVE Act's proof-of-citizenship mandate and frequent purges of state voter rolls can disenfranchise eligible voters without improving security.
- **Trust-building vs. fearmongering:** Clear, accurate voter education and transparent election administration help build confidence and participation. Misinformation and politically driven claims about elections can erode trust and fuel policies that make voting harder.

QUESTIONS TO ASK CANDIDATES

- Do you support or oppose paperwork and photo ID requirements for voting, which could disenfranchise eligible voters?
- What is your approach to combatting election mis- and disinformation and building trust in the voting process?
- What steps will you take to ensure that elections are fair and accessible for all eligible voters, especially low-income, rural, and older voters and voters with disabilities?

EQUAL RIGHTS AMENDMENT & CONSTITUTIONAL EQUALITY

All people deserve equal rights under the law. Yet the U.S. Constitution does not explicitly guarantee equality on the basis of sex. The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) would add a clear constitutional guarantee of sex equality nationwide. AAUW supports the legal argument that the ERA has met ratification requirements, but it is not widely recognized as the 28th Amendment.

AAUW stands for constitutional protection for the civil rights of all people and opposes discrimination on the basis of sex, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, pregnancy or parental status, and other characteristics.

WHY THIS MATTERS

- **A stronger baseline could improve accountability.** The ERA could influence the level of judicial review courts apply in sex-discrimination cases, including supporting the case for treating sex discrimination under the highest standard of review (“strict scrutiny”).
- **Reproductive freedom is part of equality.** Many legal advocates argue that restrictions on abortion care reinforce sex-based expectations and limit equal participation in society. The ERA could therefore strengthen legal arguments against restrictive abortion policies.
- **Sex equality reinforces LGBTQ+ protections.** Constitutional sex equality would extend baseline equal protection to LGBTQ+ people, since discrimination tied to sex can include sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.

WHAT’S AT STAKE

- **Federal recognition:** Federal policymakers can advance strategies to affirm the ERA’s ratification and support publication in the U.S. Constitution. Efforts to block or delay recognition keep the Constitution without an explicit guarantee of sex equality.
- **State constitutional protections:** State leaders can strengthen or add clear sex-equality protections in state constitutions and laws, reducing uneven protections across states. When states lack explicit protections, rights and remedies can depend on where someone lives.
- **Courts and litigation:** Court decisions shape how equality protections are interpreted and enforced in practice, including the strength of legal standards applied in sex-discrimination cases. Narrow interpretations can limit enforceable protections even where equality principles are widely supported.

QUESTIONS TO ASK CANDIDATES

- Do you support recognition of the Equal Rights Amendment as a constitutional guarantee of equality on the basis of sex?
- Do you believe discrimination on the basis of sex should be treated with “strict scrutiny,” so that unequal treatment must meet the strongest justification?
- If your state constitution does not explicitly guarantee sex equality: Do you support adding or strengthening state constitutional protections for equal rights under the law?

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Your voice and your vote matter. Share this guide and help your community make informed decisions at the ballot box.

ABOUT AAUW + AAUW ACTION FUND

Since 1881, the American Association of University Women (AAUW) has been a leading voice promoting equity for women and girls. The AAUW Action Fund advances equity for women and girls through member activism and voter mobilization.

AAUW and AAUW Action Fund's nonpartisan It's My Vote! campaign empowers members and affiliates to lead gender equity-centered voter education, registration, and mobilization in their communities.

AAUW and AAUW Action Fund
1310 L St. NW, Suite 1000
Washington, DC 20005

aauw.org/ItsMyVote



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