

The Female Factor

This summer marks the 25th anniversary of the formal organization of the Women’s Legislative Network of NCSL. Women attending NCSL’s 1985 Annual Meeting in Seattle formed a board of directors and created bylaws for the organization, which includes every woman elected to a state or territorial legislature. Today the network promotes the participation, empowerment and leadership of women legislators.

There are now 1,804 women legislators serving in the 50 states of a total of 7,382 seats, or 24.4 percent

State Legislatures magazine asked Cindy Simon Rosenthal, director and curator of the Carl Albert Congressional Research and Studies Center at the University of Oklahoma, to talk about the role of women in legislatures and look ahead to the next 25 years.

STATE LEGISLATURES: How do women enhance and strengthen the legislative process?

CINDY SIMON ROSENTHAL: At the most basic level, women bring a certain legitimacy, accountability and trust to the institutions in which they serve. After all, representative government comes with an expectation that the members will reflect their constituencies. Women in legislatures make them stronger.

SL: Does having more women in a legislature lead to different policies?

ROSENTHAL: The research is very compelling that women bring different legislative priorities, perspectives and voices to the process. The issues women sponsor and advocate have transformed state legislatures’ agendas. There’s also intriguing research on women in Congress showing women actually achieve greater success getting legislation through the process and delivering benefits to their districts. The explanations vary, but the idea is that women’s emphasis on a collaboration might be partly responsible.

SL: How has the role of women in legislatures changed over the past 25 years?

Rosenthal: In some ways, the role has not changed as much as some would have hoped. We do see more women taking on leader-

ship roles in their legislatures, but since 1997 we’ve not seen a significant increase in the percentage of women serving or the number of women willing to become candidates. And the Center for American Women and Politics reports the percentage of women who serve as mayors of communities with a population of 30,000 or more has increased only slightly from 1990 to 2010.

SL: Is there a recruitment gap between men and women candidates?

ROSENTHAL: There is a “recruitment gap.” Women are less likely than men to be recruited and encouraged to run for public office by elected officials, political insiders and the parties. While both parties have this gap, since 1995, significantly more women have been elected as Democrats than as Republicans [though that may be changing in the current political cycle]. The reasons are complex. Republican women often find success in districts that are more diverse, ideologically moderate and urbanized. But these districts generate greater partisan competi-

tion and are difficult to hold in a polarized electorate.

SL: Do political mentors help?

ROSENTHAL: Absolutely! A political mentor can make a huge difference in overcoming self-doubt and providing encouragement. In survey after survey, we find women legislators express frustration that they didn’t have legislative mentors to help them learn the process and become more effective. Recruiting and encouraging women candidates are critically important steps, and a number of programs—both partisan and nonpartisan—are being offered across the country to support and prepare potential women candidates to run and serve in elected office.

SL: Can you make any predictions about women in legislatures over the next 25 years?

ROSENTHAL: While predictions over the near term are difficult to make, I am optimistic we will continue to see women rise to positions of great power and political responsibility, and we can be confident women legislators will make significant policy contributions.

CHECK OUT more on NCSL’s Women Legislative Network at www.ncsl.org/magazine.

PERCENTAGE OF WOMEN IN STATE LEGISLATURES 2010

