

Our American States | An NCSL Podcast



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Women in state Legislatures | OAS Episode 15 | Aug. 10, 2017

Welcome to Our American States, a podcast of meaningful conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, the politics that compel them, and the important work of democracy. For the National Conference of State Legislatures, I’m your host, Gene Rose.

On this edition of Our American States, we’re going to take an in-depth look at women state legislators: find out how many are in office today, how it’s changed in recent years, and whether there is a future where the number of female state legislators matches the percentage of the population in the United States, which is a little bit more than 50 percent.

We’re going to get those statistics from a national legislative group that provides support for women legislators, and then we’ll talk with South Dakota Representative Kristen Conzet, who is ending her term as president of the Women’s Legislative Network, and she’ll share her personal experience of how she came to be a state legislator.

Our first guest is Katie Ziegler who is the program manager for the Women’s Legislative Network. Welcome to the program, Katie.

Katie: Hi Gene, great to be here.

Gene: So Katie, tell us about your work at the Women’s Legislative Network, who the members are, and what the network’s mission is.

Katie: The Women’s Legislative Network is part of NCSL and it includes every female elected state legislator in the country and the territories. They are all our members. And I work with them to

plan programs and events to further the network's mission, which is supporting the participation, empowerment and leadership of women legislators.

So we do things like a series of professional development workshops working on leadership skills, communication, negotiation, media. We also put together policy briefings, networking events. Really all of our programs are about bringing women from different states together to find common ground on issues, learn from one another, be mentors to one another, and make new friends.

Gene: Do you know how long women have been serving in state legislatures, Katie? Do you know who the first elected female state legislator was?

Katie: Yes. Well, given that I am in NCSL's Denver, Colorado, office, I'm proud to report that Colorado is the pioneering state in that it was the first state to have women elected to the state legislature. And it's even better than that actually. In 1894, three women ran for the legislature and won: their names were Clara Cressingham, Carrie Clyde Holly and Frances Klock. And they ran just as soon as they could after women were granted suffrage in the State of Colorado by a previous election, and I'll note that this was the first election in which men voted to extend suffrage to women.

We've looked into this and have really determined that these were, in fact, the first women elected to a legislative body in the world, these three women in Colorado. So we're very proud of them.

Gene: So nationally now, how many women serve in the state legislatures?

Katie: In 2017 there are I'll say about, because things always change a little bit with special elections, but 1,830 women serving in the 50 states. And that is out of 7,383 state legislators in total. So that means women are 24.8 percent of all state legislators.

Gene: Over the last six to 12 years, how has the percentage of women who are serving in state legislatures changed?

Katie: Well, actually Gene, the way to frame that is: How has it not changed? For some perspective, the election in 1992 is often dubbed the "Year of the Woman," and that is because on the national scene, that was when more women were elected to the U.S. Senate than ever at one time. It was a watershed year for the U.S. Senate. It was also a watershed year for women in state legislatures because that was the first time the national percentage of women reached 20 percent.

So 1992, 25 years ago, women were 20 percent of all state legislators. Here we are in 2017 and the share is at 24.8 percent, and I emphasize that decimal point because over all this time, there has not been that 5 percentage points increase to reach that level of 25 percent, one-quarter of all seats. If you look at the trend line of women serving in state legislatures, there's a really noticeable leveling off in the mid-to-late-90s going into the 2000s.

Gene: So is there a reason why those numbers haven't changed, Katie?

Katie: It's something that a lot of people have wondered about and the piece of data that is really so conclusive that we keep coming back to is looking at the numbers of women running. The number of women candidates is really the deciding factor because there has been research showing time and again that when you compare races of equal circumstances, candidates as incumbents, candidates running for open seats, candidates challenging an incumbent, women are just as likely to win as men. So it's not at the ballot box at the state level that there is a barrier for women.

But the number of women candidates has not grown over these 25 years dramatically either. There's been a subtle increase each year, even in these last several election cycles, but women aren't running in the numbers to then translate to increases of women in office.

Just looking at the why, because that then influences what people are doing to try to change that, there has been some really extensive research done by a couple of political scientists names Jennifer Lawless and Richard Fox, and they have worked on this issue for a number of years and come at it from a number of directions. Fundamentally they see huge differences in terms of what they term "political ambition" between men and women.

They've worked with pools of respondents in the surveys and polls that they've done of people with equal levels of expertise, equal levels of professional success. They've talked to attorneys and business owners and educators, professions and backgrounds that typically lead to political candidacy, and across the board they found that women are much less likely than men to think they are qualified to run for office. Again, this is from a pool of equally qualified people, but there's a difference in perception there.

They also find that women are less likely than men to have received the suggestion to run for office, to be asked to run from anybody, and that being asked is really important, particularly for women. It's much more likely that men are self-starter candidates, meaning that the idea comes from them, and that women are recruited. Specifically I've heard anecdotally from a lot of legislators over the years just how many times it took being asked for them to consider running in the first place. So being asked is important and women aren't being asked, haven't traditionally been asked at the same rates as men.

Other factors that are important are: women have been more likely to perceive a biased electoral environment; they think there's a bias against women candidates and that stops them from wanting to get involved; women are less likely to think they will be able to raise the funds necessary to campaign compared to men. So there are these factors that are out there that women perceive and those have traditionally prevented them from throwing their hats in the ring.

But we have seen in response to this data and these really overwhelming clear conclusions about these factors, there have been a number of groups that have been working over the last several election cycles to make that "ask," to get out there and tell women that they are qualified, give them the tools that they need to run for office, to run a campaign, and put them together with other women so that they can support one another.

Just a few examples... There's a program called Ready to Run that is run out of the Center for American Women in Politics in New Jersey. There's a national program called Vote Run Lead.

Those are both nonpartisan. There are programs affiliated with political parties as well: Emerge America, Emily's List, those typically work with Democratic women; the National Federation of Republican Women and another group called Project Go Pink, as in GOP Pink, which are working with Republican candidates.

So these groups are out there and have been out there for some time trying to change the tide and trying to get more people in the political pipeline to hopefully become candidates down the road.

Gene: When it comes to the number of women state legislators in the country, is there a difference between Republicans and Democrats just in terms of the numbers?

Katie: There is a difference; it's a significant difference. Right now in 2017, of all women state legislators, about 61 percent of them are Democrats and 39 percent of them are Republicans. That's a split that has narrowed over the last several election cycles as state legislatures across the country have become... more of them have Republican majorities now than several years ago. The share of Republican legislators has grown somewhat.

Gene: Are there states where there are higher percentages of women legislators?

Katie: Yes. In 2017 there are four states that all have right around 39 to 40 percent female legislators, and those are: Vermont, Nevada, Colorado and Arizona. All of those states have had high numbers for quite a few years, and Colorado in particular has been among the states with the highest ratios for a couple of decades now.

Gene: Are there any projections on what the future holds? How likely is it that women will fill half the seats in America's state legislatures?

Katie: There are a lot of pieces to consider there. It's an exciting question. I know our listeners have seen the news stories lately about a surge of interest among women in running for office. There has been increased attention. A lot of the groups that I mentioned that are doing these trainings have reported much higher levels of interest than they've had in the past. And so maybe that means that the political pipeline is, in fact, filling up with more female candidates.

At the state legislative level, it's really too soon to tell how many of these people will, in fact, choose to run for a legislative seat, and what the 2018 elections may look like.

In the bigger picture though, as far as what the future holds and certainly approaching full parity as far as matching the female population of this country, getting to that 50 percent, it's a much longer-term game. But I think going back to some of the research that I mentioned earlier, there are really important things that we can do and we can all be working on to, again, feed that pipeline with women to run for office in the future.

I'm going to talk about some other research, again by these political scientists, Lawless and Fox, and they stepped back a little bit and they looked at young men and women in high school and in college, students, and talked to them about their interest in future political careers. They found something really interesting, which is that among high school students, the young men

and women were sort of equally interested in political office; that level of interest was pretty low, but there wasn't a real difference between genders there.

Among college students, there suddenly was this big divergence in that young college men were 80 percent more likely than women to have seriously considered running for office in the future. It painted a picture of where this gap is emerging among young people as they are leaving the educational system, going out into the workforce, and there's some work to be done there. They delved into it a little bit to find out that young men are more likely than young women to just be socialized by their parents, by their teachers, by their peer groups – they're more likely to just be amongst people talking about politics and the potential for getting involved in politics.

And so I think that data points to the responsibility among all of us to be mindful of how we talk about these things and to expose young men and young women and girls and boys to the importance of political participation, both in running for office as well as just general civic knowledge of exercising the right to vote, being informed about the process, and we need to talk about it with everyone, girls and boys. So that will feed the pipeline down the line.

Gene: That's very fascinating information, Katie, that you've provided us. Are there any other observations that you'd like to leave our listeners with?

Katie: I do want to mention a study that has just come out recently that I thought was really interesting which gets at another piece of this picture, and that is: Why is it important to have women in state legislatures in representative numbers? So the Pennsylvania Center for Women in Politics studied the Pennsylvania legislature from a couple of years ago, but they were comparing the male and female legislators in terms of what kinds of issues they sponsored and their legislative successes.

They did find some differences that I want to mention. These were statistically significant in Pennsylvania. In a number of cases women legislators had more co-sponsors on their bills from across the aisle than male legislators did, which speaks to collaboration and bipartisanship, which is very important to us here at NCSL. Those women were also more likely to sponsor bills under the umbrella of what is traditionally termed "women's issues," and that can include bills related to childcare, bills related to family leave, wages, generally talking about supporting women entrepreneurs, small business owners. Women were taking up those issues, and that's something we've seen for quite some time, that there are issues where women make a difference.

That being said, many, many women involved with the Women's Network and whom I have met will tell you that every issue is a woman's issue. They are in office to represent all of their constituents and they're working on topics that are important to them. That can run the gamut from A to Z.

Gene: Okay, Katie, thank you very much. We appreciate you being on Our American States.

Katie: I'm happy to be here. Thank you so much, Gene.

Gene: South Dakota Representative Kristen Conzet will join us right after this break.

BREAK

Gene: Welcome back to Our American States. We're back with South Dakota Representative Kristen Conzet. Kristen, let's talk about your personal story. When did you decide you wanted to run for public office and what led you to make that decision?

Kristin: You know, my story is a little bit different. It never occurred to me to run for public office. I was located in Pierre, South Dakota, as a child, Fort Pierre actually. The state capitol is there and I grew up around state government my entire life. I was living in Rapid City with my husband, Steve, and my daughter, Katherine, and there was an appointment to be made. Sadly it never occurred to me to throw my name into the ring for that position, even though I was keenly aware of the political climate and what was going on in my district.

I was asked to run, which if you look at a lot of the data, it doesn't occur to women to run 50 percent of the time until somebody asks them, and then they think oh, that could be an option. And so I was appointed in December of 2010 and found myself in the Pierre capitol thinking: how did I get here two weeks later... thus began my first 40 days of session in 2010.

But once I got there and I figured out the basics, I got the bug, and I knew at that point because we had term limits, that I would do my best to ensure that I was serving for nine years.

Gene: I know you talk with and meet other female legislators from across the country. What are the topics that you all talk about just in terms of getting women to run for office?

Kristin: Well, we definitely try with the NCSL women's group; we try to show that it's a possibility. As females and mothers and wives and breadwinners, we tend to think that we can't take another thing on our plate, because that's what I was thinking in the beginning: I can't leave my family. At that point my daughter was six years old and I thought, well, there's no way. But what I did find was that as soon as I put the information out there to the network of women that I know, friends and coworkers and such, they all stepped up and said: We are here to help you. We want you to do this. You don't turn down an appointment or an election as a woman. We can't afford it. We need women there.

Gene: So you've talked about some of those hurdles. What are some of the obstacles that women face that perhaps men don't when considering to run for public office?

Kristin: We tend to take everything on and think: nobody has ever run for political office and raised a family or kept a job or that type of thing. And sadly, a lot of the demographics that we see in politics in our state are that it's usually retired men who run for the positions because obviously financial strain... because you leave for two and a half months, for 40 days beginning in January through March. And then that's just the session. It's not to say all the other responsibilities that you take on.

In the beginning there was definitely some guilt in there. But if you have a good network and a support group and constituents who support you, over time you will find that they get along just fine if you're in Pierre for a few weeks.

Gene: There's a stereotype too I think that's out there, Kristin... tell me if you agree with this or not... that there are women's issues and then there are other issues.

Kristin: That's an interesting question. There are definitely issues that I would consider women's issues and men's issues. I don't want to be one of these people that divides men and women up; I'm not that person at all; that's not my personality. But I find even in South Dakota, more times than not, men have more opinions about women's issues than the women actually stepping up and stating their point on women's issues. And they're the majority.

So you have to find ways to work with them and most times it's very non-combative. It's just the idea of sharing information and sharing ideas.

Gene: And what kind of advice do you have for women who are considering becoming involved in politics or perhaps someone who was in your position before where you didn't really think about it?

Kristin: Well, I can tell you right now, with my term coming to an end, I am actively recruiting a woman to fill this position, well-qualified people, but I'm definitely looking a little more in-depth into that.

I guess you need to make sure, like I stated before, that you have a supportive network and/or family members. And there's always the question of your employer because you are leaving. But one good thing about the way the work dynamic is now, a lot of people can telecommute or do work via the Internet. That's definitely shifted quite a bit of the dynamic.

People ask you to know a lot of topics, but you know about an inch deep on those, on every topic. I mean, I've gotten questions in legislation on Native American grass farms. Don't be afraid to say: I don't know, but I'll get the information and I'll get back to you. But find your topics I guess that you are dedicated towards and make sure that you know what you're talking about when you speak on those topics. And also be able to listen to both sides and make talking points for both sides. That's the best way to ensure that you are taken seriously when it comes to the issues.

And then lastly, a piece of advice I got in the very beginning was: Decide your point of view on an issue. For example, when you're first in the arena, nobody really cared what I thought about x, y and z. But once you get out there and you get into some positions and you start speaking publicly, you need to be able to stand firm on your issues. But then you also have to have the ability to listen to the other side and take in information. Your opinions can change. That is okay.

Gene: I kind of want to go back to something you said there just in terms of today's political climate, particularly nationally speaking where there does seem to be so much polarization.

Kristin: Yes.

Gene: Any advice that you can provide just in terms of being an R or a D on the ballot?

Kristin: If you look at the state of South Dakota, we are super majority, and I find that has its good points and its difficult points. When you have 105 seats and roughly 18 are Democrat, there

tends to be in-party fighting. When you can't fight with one sibling, you go to the other sibling, or argue, or that type of thing.

I think we need to focus on the fact that with women, we have the largest share of national and state women serving ever. It's kind of come over the past 20 to 22 years that have demanded that we, as women, and as politicians, become policymakers and be part of the discussion. So we're about roughly 25 percent right now and in 1960, we were less than 5 percent. So there has been some growth there.

But then I will quote that NCSL was saying that women took off in the 70s, but we've kind of leveled out since 2010, and I don't know what we attribute that to.

Gene: Do you have any thoughts about what is ahead just in terms of the numbers of women who are in state legislatures? Do you anticipate a change one way or the other?

Kristin: I anticipate not a massive change, but a gradual change. Considering the climate over the past like-I-had-stated 20 years, women are becoming viable participants in politics, be it local, be it community-wise, be it county, state-wise. We've made great strides. With Hillary Clinton being the first nominated woman, it makes it more achievable I think in people's minds.

Gene: Are there certain organizations that you would recommend women connect with, or do you think it's better to talk to somebody who has experience?

Kristin: I think a mixture of both. NCSL obviously is a wonderful resource and it's been a wonderful experience for me in education, connecting with other women, connecting with other legislators, sharing of information.

Locally, when I decided to run, I think it's important that if you are going to do it seriously, you submerge yourself in your district, because in the beginning you're going to focus on that; that's what's going to get you elected. So community leaders, members of both parties, community members, county/city officials – and that will help you suss out some of the issues that they're dealing with and issues that they foresee coming up, because they are usually... especially county and city officials are the experts, you know, the auditors and treasurers are experts in their fields, so they're wonderful resources.

Gene: Are there any other observations that you'd like to leave our listeners with?

Kristin: In the very beginning I had gone to an NCSL conference and I had a gentleman... it was very early on; I probably was in my second year... and he said, you know, some words of advice, and he had been in his position for 40 years. And he said: You know, I've got a few rules that I live by. And he goes: Look at yourself every morning in the mirror and, to do your job well, you have to be able to like what you see. And when you're elected, you are on the board of directors for your state, so you need to act like it.

Another one was: not only do you represent the people that elected you, but you represent the district and the people that didn't vote for you, so always keep an open mind. And then finally he said: be gracious when discussing issues with constituents that you don't agree with, because you can always use more information. So I try to go by that.

Gene: Thank you so much for being on the program today. Good luck in the future.

Kristin: Thank you. It was wonderful. Have a great day.

Music and Gene VO:

And that concludes this edition of Our American States. We invite you to subscribe to this podcast on iTunes and Google Play. Until our next episode, this is Gene Rose for the National Conference of State Legislatures. Thanks for listening.