



The Our American States podcast—produced by the National Conference of State Legislatures—is where you hear compelling 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.

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### **Women Elected to State Legislatures in Historic Numbers | OAS Episode 49**

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.

In this episode of “Our American States,” we’ve talked to Katie Ziegler who is a program manager for the Women’s Legislative Network. The 2018 elections showed a significant gain of women legislators across the country. We want to get her perspective on how that happened and what this means for state legislatures. Here’s our conversation.

Gene: Katie, welcome back to “Our American States.”

Katie: Hi, Gene. Great to talk to you.

Gene: So, while we want to focus on the historic gains made by women in state legislatures, we first want to get a look at the overall political landscape. In terms of state legislatures generally, what happened in the 2018 elections, Katie?

Katie: Well, it was a year that brought change, but not a wave of change, to use a preferred metaphor we’ve been hearing. There was a gain for the Democratic party of about 300 state legislative seats, which is actually, all things considered, still pretty low for a midterm election for the party that is not of the president in the White House. Traditionally, we have seen the sort-of opposition party pick up significant seats in state legislative elections in the midterms, and we saw some change, but it was not a drastic change.

We saw that five legislative chambers were picked up by the Democrats: the Colorado Senate, Maine Senate, Minnesota House and the New Hampshire House and Senate; as well the Connecticut Senate, which had been tied, moved to Democratic control. And also the New York Senate, which had been governed by a coalition, so that Republicans were, in effect, in power even though numerically the Democrats had the greater numbers in New York. Now it has moved to solidly Democratic control based on some shifts in certain seats there.

So some modest gains for the Democrats ... There was one chamber that flipped from D to R and that is the Alaska House and, again, that actually ... in the Alaska House, I should note that was

also what we would call a coalition government in that there were some members who crossed the aisle to caucus with the Democrats and Democrats led the chamber. After the election, now it is a Republican-led chamber solidly again.

So the real news as far as party control is modest gains for the Democrats in terms of picking up some chambers, picking up some seats. The bigger party control news is that when you look at the entire state legislative map across the country, there is now only one state in which the two chambers of the state legislature are controlled by different parties. And that is Minnesota—it now has a Democratic-controlled House and a Republican-controlled Senate. It is the only what we call a split state in the nation.

And that has not happened for 100 years or a little bit more. That is really big news to show how solid this partisan control is across the country. Some states are blue, some states are red, and there's one kind of mixed state going on right now and that's Minnesota.

Gene: Let's get down to the topic at hand here. Tell us about how many women ran for state legislatures this year and whether it was different than previous years.

Katie: So it was very different. This is an exciting year for women in legislatures all the way around this election. And to talk about the candidates and the women running, I need to put that in some context in that traditionally the adage has been: When women run, women win. That was coined back in the '90s and research has held true that female candidates for a legislative seat have equal chances to male candidates when you compare equivalent races. And so that is women running for an open seat, women who are the incumbents, and then women challenging the incumbent, the sitting legislator.

There isn't a bias against the ballot box. They have equivalent chances of winning. However, with each election cycle over the last decade or more, the number of candidates running for state legislative seats who are women did not increase very much from year to year. It stayed about the same, about the same numbers, which meant that the number of women serving in state legislatures from year to year had very incremental increases. We did not see major changes with each election cycle.

But this year is different. This year was a big change and we saw about 28 percent more women running for state legislative seats than in 2016, which is a huge jump. That is a much bigger gain than at least from the data that we have looking back over election cycles. We've never seen numbers like that in increase over previous years.

So that was really exciting and there was a lot of speculation about what was going to happen and last week we saw that when women run, women win. There were more women elected to state legislative seats with this election than ever before based on our analysis.

Gene: Do you have numbers on that, how many women were elected and the partisan makeup?

Katie: Certainly. So our numbers are preliminary; it's just the week after the election right now. And so I'll just caveat that most races have not officially been certified by states yet. There are recounts pending or possible recounts still going on. And so the numbers will change a bit before January, or potentially could change a bit before January as things shake out.

But, preliminarily, it looks as though there will be in 2019 about 2,090 women serving in the 50 states, which is an increase of more than 200 women than 2018 this year.

Gene: And then the percentage of women who are in legislatures increased dramatically?

Katie: Absolutely. So the percentage is important. It's a number that a lot of people look at to determine what share of these elected legislators are reflective of the population, and for a long time that percentage of legislators who are women has not changed significantly, as I mentioned; each election cycle very incremental changes.

This year, 2018, this legislative session, it was just over 25 percent legislators who are women, which was the first time it had ever reached that 25 percent mark. For some context, it reached 20 percent with the 1992 election. So it's taken a very long time to go from 20 to 25 percent. It looks like in 2019 it will be at about 28 percent women, which is a really big jump on the trend line.

Gene: And then the partisan makeup of that, Katie, is it evenly split?

Katie: It is not. That's an interesting question and for some context, first of all, the partisan makeup of women legislators for this legislative session in 2018, of women in the 50 states, and this is excluding Nebraska, which I'm sure our listeners know, is a legislature where members serve on a nonpartisan basis; but of the female legislators with a party, in 2018 about 61 percent of those women are Democrats and about 38 percent Republicans.

So after this election in 2019, that gap has widened significantly. It will be approximately 67 percent Democrats and 31 percent Republicans. So that's a really huge shift.

Gene: So what about certain states—are there ones that have more women representation than others right now?

Katie: Yes, it is looking that way and, in fact, there will be a couple of really noteworthy states that will start off their legislatures next year with the very unique circumstance of having a chamber with majority female members. It's looking like the Colorado House and the Nevada Assembly will both have a majority of women in that chamber, greater than 50 percent.

This has happened once before in the states in the New Hampshire Senate back in 2009 and 2010. That biennium, the majority of senators in New Hampshire were women. But it hasn't happened since and having two at once is a big deal.

As far as the landscape in other states, this increase in the number of women was really widespread throughout the country, that we saw many states increase their share of female legislators by a significant amount. States that saw their numbers increase by 5 percentage points or more include Alaska and Iowa, Maine, Maryland, Michigan, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island and Utah.

So you see some geographic diversity there. Those are red states and blue states. There are increases across the map, which is pretty exciting.

Gene: So, with this increase in the number of women legislators, do you anticipate a rise in terms of the number of women in legislative leadership?

Katie: It's a really great question and remains to be seen a little bit in that there will be some leadership positions that won't be chosen until organizational sessions later this year or potentially until January. But as far as the presiding officer positions, which generally do get selected soon after the election, it looks as though there will be at least 13 women in presiding officer positions, and that is the speaker of the House or the president/president pro tem in the Senate.

And some of those states with new women in those positions include the Arizona Senate; the Colorado House will have a new female speaker. I'll note that Colorado has had now three female speakers in a row. That may be a record for a state; I need to look back at our information; but it's certainly exciting for Colorado.

Other states with women in presiding officer positions: the Minnesota House, the Massachusetts Senate, the New Hampshire Senate and the New York Senate. These are new leaders coming into those positions.

So we'll be watching that to see if there is an increase in women in leadership positions for next year.

Gene: As it turns out, Katie, there was a New York Times article this morning on the day that we're doing our interview and it contained the following comment: "Compared with years past, when women had to be actively recruited to run, many volunteered including many without traditional political credentials." Is that what you've heard in the past from women legislators, that previously they had to be actively recruited?

Katie: Absolutely. That has been, again, setting 2018 aside, that has been the conventional wisdom and it's been born out in research as well as anecdote from women all across the country that women have not traditionally been self-starter candidates in that they may be politically active already, they may be working in their community door-knocking for other candidates, volunteering for campaigns, donating to campaigns, but then not necessarily taking that next step to declare candidacy themselves.

And there has been a lot of look into why that has been and what can be done to change it. So there's been a very concerted effort over the last several years to provide more opportunities to recruit women and to ask them to run. There have been a number of groups that have been started over the last, I'd say even over the last 10 years or so, but have certainly ramped up in these last few years, that recruit women and train women to run campaigns, many on a nonpartisan basis, to help women feel qualified to run and to step in when those opportunities open up in their districts or in their communities; to remove that barrier of a potential candidate feeling unqualified.

And that is what a lot of the research has born out time and time again: that comparing men and women in equivalent levels of professional experiences, very similar backgrounds, from the kinds of community work and the kinds of professions that often lead to political candidacy,

there was a pretty stark difference between the men and women in that research in that men were more likely to have considered running for office than women, were more likely to consider themselves qualified for a position, and more likely to have started making a plan to do so. Whereas the women in that research were just not likely to have taken those steps and to have thought about it in that kind of really specific, dedicated planning.

And so these groups that have been out there trying to change that and shift that ... so there has been that groundwork in place for a number of election cycles and we did see it bear fruit with this election with how many women participated in these kinds of programs and did throw their hats in the ring for office.

But I think that quote is absolutely true, that there were women who may not have thought about it at all prior to a year or so ago, or two years ago after the 2016 election, and decided that they wanted to get involved and wanted to run and wanted to be a part of their community and serve their community in a new way, and these groups were there ready and waiting for them.

Gene: So this is an unfair question unless you have a crystal ball that you use, Katie: What's the conventional wisdom? Is this kind of a one-time shot, or do you think these are building blocks to having more women running for office in the future?

Katie: I am going to be optimistic and say these are building blocks because we certainly, looking back at those states that have higher shares of women in their legislatures, states like Vermont and Colorado, Arizona, Washington, these are states that have all had very high percentages for the last several cycles, in many cases 10 years or more. They have had high numbers of women in office and with each election those high numbers continue.

It has become, I would venture to say, part of the political culture in those states for women to serve in the legislature, it's become normalized, and there's a network of women already in office who are making a dedicated effort to recruit more women to fill seats as they open up, or to take on incumbents, or to step in and declare their candidacy for a vacancy committee if there's a resignation. There has been this groundwork laid in these states and it has paid off in them having high numbers of women in the legislature.

So now that we have seen numerous states have a big jump in their numbers of women serving, I certainly would hope that we would see that same kind of normalization, that there's a real attention given and effort put on the part of those women in office, coming into office this next year, to keep that momentum going, to involve other women in their community, and to help them, you know, extend a hand behind them to bring more women along and get them involved in the process.

So I think the success of women in this election cycle has been very exciting and inspiring to people and I think we'll see that continue in terms of women running.

Gene: Katie, why does it matter how many women there are in state legislatures? What's the benefit? Why is this newsworthy?

Katie: Sure. I will say that really the benefit, from what we can measure and what we can see, it comes down to process rather than policy. And I say that because there has certainly been interest and attention in looking at: Does a state having more women in the legislature mean that state will pass certain kinds of policies, or prevent other kinds of policies from being enacted? ... Looking at whether that's traditional women's issues, in quotes, or looking at policies that maybe are controversial and very partisan, but that haven't been seen through a women's lens often.

There's not a clear correlation there, is what it comes down to. There's not a clear line between when a state gets more women, they enact legislation x, y or z. It's a lot fuzzier than that and that comes down to what I spoke about at the beginning of our conversation, the really intense partisan divide that our country is feeling right now. And it's there in states as well, in that the types of policies states pass really right now are determined by the party in control and not so much who the individual legislators are. Again, this is the research-based view from what I've seen.

However, in the process, there is a lot of difference that women bring to the table and this is seen in the literature as well, as far as negotiation style, leadership style, how they show up and how they enter into negotiations and problem solving. And it's been posited that women are more inclusive when entering into negotiation, more likely to bring in additional voices, additional stakeholders and have them at the table. Perhaps women, again, enter into this process with less of a win mentality and more of a willingness to work towards the compromise, or work towards a third way to solve this problem.

So I think having more women in these bodies and on legislative committees and in leadership, we may see more of a deliberative process, more of an open and inclusive process. I hope so because I think that's good for democracy. And the final reason is that it is important for this representative government we have to reflect the electorate and be representative of the population from that community that they are serving.

Gene: So, Katie, we've talked about a lot of different things. Is there anything that we've left out, any research or anything that state legislators and state legislative staff should know about?

Katie: Well, I would just say, Gene, that NCSL is so excited to welcome all of the freshmen entering state legislatures next year, and particularly I'm excited to welcome the new female legislators who will be serving, and I encourage them and their staff to get in touch with me and get in touch with NCSL's Women's Network to get connected to women in other states who are veterans, maybe have served for decades or a number of sessions.

We love to make connections between women across party lines, across state lines who have issues that they care about that they want to work on together and learn from one another and figure out the best solution for their states.

And so that's what NCSL does is make those connections, bring people together, and we look forward to welcoming all of the new legislators coming in next year and we hope to see you soon.

Gene: We've been talking with Katie Ziegler, who is the program manager for the Women's Legislative Network at NCSL. Katie, thank you so much for sharing your expertise with us today.

Katie: Thanks Gene, great to talk to you.

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.