

Hitting the Glass Dome

Female legislators are no longer an anomaly, but they still are under-represented at the statehouse.

BY KATIE ZIEGLER

Rose Ann Vuich, elected in 1976, was the first woman to serve in the California Senate. Whenever one of her colleagues addressed the chamber as “gentlemen of the Senate,” she rang a bell to remind them of her presence. Her election also necessitated the remodeling of the Senate wing to add a women’s bathroom.

Today, more than 30 percent of the members of the California Senate are women, and they don’t need bells to be recognized. During the last election cycle in particular, women in politics on the national stage made headlines more than ever before. Public opinion polls indicate most Americans think men and women make equally effective leaders. But nationwide, women haven’t joined the ranks of state legislators as quickly as expected. Just 24 percent of all legislators are women, an increase of fewer than four percentage points in 16 years.

So is there a glass dome in state capitols? Why aren’t there more female legislators?

Debbie Walsh, the director of the Center for American Women and Politics, has a simple answer: “When women don’t run, women don’t win.”

Studies comparing state legislative candidates running as incumbents, challengers, and for open seats show that women win their races as often as men.

“In the early 1980s through the mid-1990s, we saw slow, steady growth both in the numbers of women running and women winning,” says Walsh. “Since 1995, there’s been a plateau in the numbers of women running for state legislatures around the country, which has resulted in a stagnation in the numbers of

Katie Ziegler is a policy specialist with NCSL’s Women’s Legislative Network.



REPRESENTATIVE
PEGGY WELCH
INDIANA

women holding office. We are not seeing the growth that we anticipated 25 years ago.”

Indiana Representative Peggy Welch agrees there is no bias at the ballot box. “I think we’ve moved beyond the glass ceiling, in that people don’t think about whether it’s a woman or a man when deciding for whom to vote. But there are barriers to women’s participation in the process that have a lot to do with their family responsibilities.”

POLITICAL AMBITION

Women are now 57 percent of all college students and about half of all law and medical school students. Women are reaching, albeit slowly, the top levels of the business world.

“As women acquired the same credentials as men and entered the high-level professions that typically precede political careers, we thought we’d see steady gains in the numbers of women running for office,” says political scientist Jennifer Lawless. “But we haven’t seen that.”

Lawless and colleague Richard Fox conducted an extensive, multi-year study of potential candidates and found “there is a substantial gender gap in political ambition; men tend to have it and women don’t.”

“Ambition,” in this instance, is defined as having considered running for office. The survey pool included high-level men and women from the major professions that yield candidates for the legislature and Congress: law, business, education and political activ-

ism. In this group of equally qualified individuals, men were nearly 35 percent more likely than women to consider themselves potential candidates. This gap persists across several relevant factors: party, age, occupation, income, race and region.

Lawless and Fox delved into some of the reasons behind this gender gap and found that women are less likely than men to:

- ◆ Be recruited to run for office.
- ◆ Perceive a fair political environment.
- ◆ Have the freedom to balance work and family obligations with a political career.
- ◆ Be willing to endure the rigors of a political campaign.

Lawless says “women and men with the exact same résumés don’t self-assess the same way. Women are more likely than men to let



self doubts hold them back from running.”

ROLE OF PARTIES

In the current hyper-partisan political climate, state parties play a significant role in recruiting and vetting candidates for the legislature. Kira Sanbonmatsu, a professor of political science at Rutgers University, studies the relationship between political parties and women’s candidacies for state legislatures. It may seem that parties would have a positive influence on the numbers of women running, as they can make targeted recruiting efforts to reach out to under-represented candidates.

Sanbonmatsu, however, rejects this conventional wisdom. “Where parties are more involved in the selection of candidates, fewer

women are the parties’ nominees and thus state legislators,” she says.

Gatekeeping activities—when a party asserts control and nominates a favored candidate—mean women are less likely to wind up on the ballot because of persistent doubts about women’s electability. This supports Lawless’s and Fox’s conclusion that the public holds significant misconceptions.

“A substantial barrier to entry for many female potential candidates is the perception that women are not as likely as men to win elections or as able to raise sufficient funds,” they report in their study.

Even in an era of media saturation, the message simply isn’t getting through that women don’t face a bias at the ballot box or when raising money, particularly at the state

legislative level.

“We need to hold on to the vision of electing strong women leaders to office,” Welch says. “Other countries have better track records than the United States of electing female prime ministers and other high-level leaders.”

In addition to raising awareness that women are viable contenders, recruitment also is key. While women are less likely than men to be recruited to run for office, they are just as likely as men to respond positively and consider candidacy when they are recruited.

Wyoming Representative Rosie Berger says making these kinds of connections is one of her most important roles as a legislator. “Having the honor to serve in the House, I believe it is my duty to engage women of all

WOMEN IN LEGISLATURES

State/Territory	Women in House/Assembly	Women in Senate	Total Legislative Seats	Percentage of Women in the Legislature
Alabama	13	4	140	12.1%
Alaska	9	3	60	20.0
American Samoa	0	2	39	5.1
Arizona	16	12	90	31.1
Arkansas	25	7	135	23.7
California	20	13	120	27.5
Colorado	26	13	100	39.0
Connecticut	51	8	187	31.6
Delaware	7		62	24.2
District of Columbia	Unicameral	3	13	23.1
Florida	29	9	160	23.8
Georgia	38	7	236	19.1
Guam	Unicameral	4	15	26.7
Hawaii	18	7	76	32.9
Idaho	18	8	105	24.8
Illinois	36	13	177	27.7
Indiana	20	13	150	22.0
Iowa	25	9	150	22.7
Kansas	34	13	165	28.5
Kentucky	15	6	138	15.2
Louisiana	14	8	144	15.3
Maine	46	8	186	29.0
Maryland	48	11	188	31.4
Massachusetts	40	12	200	26.0
Michigan	28	9	148	25.0
Minnesota	43	27	201	34.8
Mississippi	21	4	174	14.4
Missouri	33	8	197	20.8
Montana	29	10	150	26.0
Nebraska	Unicameral	10	49	20.4
Nevada	13	7	63	31.7
New Hampshire	145	13	424	37.3
New Jersey	27	10	120	30.8
New Mexico	23	11	112	30.4
New York	42	10	212	24.5
North Carolina	37	6	170	25.3
North Dakota	16	6	141	15.6
Ohio	21		132	20.5
Oklahoma	12	5	149	11.4
Oregon	14	1	90	28.9
Pennsylvania	27	10	253	14.6
Puerto Rico	13	11	85	28.2
Rhode Island	17	8	113	22.1
South Carolina	17	0	170	10.0
South Dakota	13	7	105	19.0
Tennessee	16	8	132	18.2
Texas	37	6	181	23.8
Utah	18		104	22.1
Vermont	57	10	180	37.2
Virginia	16	8	140	17.1
Virgin Islands	Unicameral	1	15	6.7
Washington	29	19	147	32.7
West Virginia	20	2	134	16.4
Wisconsin	22	7	132	22.0
Wyoming	15	1	90	17.8

Source: NCSL, April 2009.



REPRESENTATIVE
ROSIE BERGER
WYOMING

ages and backgrounds in the legislative process.”

Many women, however, face a major barrier to participating in the process.

“Family responsibilities continue to impede women in a way they don’t impede men,” says Lawless. “Even very professional women are still 10 times more likely than men to be responsible for the majority of household and child care tasks.”

Welch waited to run for the Indiana House until her son was 16, and she notes that most of the newly elected women in the legislature “are at a point in their lives when they can more easily participate in public service that takes you away from home.”

There also is a significant difference between parties.

“Republican women aren’t running,” says Walsh of the Center for American Women and Politics. “In fact, if you drill down, you find that Democratic women are becoming an increasingly larger proportion of all Democratic state legislators, while Republican women are becoming a smaller and smaller proportion of Republican legislators. Republican women have taken a disproportionate hit within the Republican party.”

Seventy percent of women legislators are Democrats. The divide for all legislators is 55 percent Democrats and 44 percent Republicans.

ENCOURAGING WOMEN

Scholars agree women legislators have taken the lead on traditional “women’s issues” more often than men, issues that may not have been addressed otherwise.

As well, studies of legislative leaders and committee chairs find women influence the policy process with distinct leadership styles. Female leaders

are more likely than men to adopt a consensus-building style and focus on goals related to improving the legislative institution.

Several organizations are working to recruit and train women to run for office. The White House Project sponsors nonpartisan “Go Run” campaign trainings in at least six states and adds new locations each year. EMILY’s List and the Emerge America program host trainings for Democratic women, and the National Federation of Republican Women and several state Excellence in Public Service Series train future GOP candidates. Interest groups and state and local political organizations organize women-only trainings as well.

The Wyoming Women’s Legislative Caucus hosts “Leap Into Leadership” days at the Capitol for women from around the state to learn about the political process and how to become a candidate. Berger was instrumental in the program’s creation.


“I believe the best part of the event is the social engagement that takes place,” she says, “where the participants find out that they are worthy of running for office, whether at the local, state or federal level, and they don’t need to wait to be asked to run!”

Time will tell whether such training makes a difference. Walsh cautions that consistent effort is needed.

“Until there is active intervention to go out and change the way things are done, to recruit and support women in both parties, we won’t see the increases we’d like to see,” she says.

Advocates have work to do in the areas of child care and elder care in order to lower one of the major barriers to women’s candidacies. But Lawless is optimistic that more recruiting of women will pay off.

“Over the course of the next several election cycles,” she says, “we will see more women candidates.”

And that means more women in legislatures, because when women run, women win. 

 **CHECK OUT** more about women in legislatures at NCSL Women’s Legislative Network at www.ncsl.org/magazine.