

The Glass Dome



Women lawmakers have struggled to gain more than a quarter of all legislative seats.

BY KATIE FISCHER
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A woman will lead this organization over my dead body.”

Shortly after the chairman of NCSL's nominating committee made this pronouncement at an annual meeting of the organization in Seattle, the Women's Network was born.

The year was 1985. Hairstyles, eyeglasses and shoulder pads were big. But the number of women in influential government positions was not. There were only three women leading foreign nations, 24 in Congress, two in governorships and 1,101 (14.8 percent) in all 50 state legislatures.

The chairman's words traveled quickly through the convention center. Many of the female lawmakers there had developed strong ties with one another through informal but regular lunches during NCSL meetings. After learning of the chairman's remark, the group decided it was time to act. They believed women needed to play a greater leadership role in the organization.

Louisiana's Mary Landrieu, a state representative then, announced the creation of the Network during the business meeting. "I rise on behalf of all fair-minded men and women today," she said. "We hold the leadership responsible for appointing people who will extend the opportunity for leadership in this organization to all."

The initial goals of this bipartisan group of women were to support and promote one another in leadership positions

Some of the original members of the Women's Network, which officially formed in 1985, gathered regularly at NCSL meetings to discuss what they were working on in their states and compare their personal experiences as women in male-dominated legislatures.

in NCSL and in their home states. They also agreed to promote some public policies they felt were too often ignored by their male colleagues, such as insurance coverage for mammograms, the availability of affordable child care and research into women's health.

Thirty years later the statistics for women in state legislatures are somewhat better. Women now comprise 24.3 percent of all legislative seats, and the number of women in major legislative leadership positions has grown from 12 in 1985 to 61 today. And, since

1985, when the chairman drew his line in the sand, seven women have led NCSL, including the current president, Nevada Senator Debbie Smith.

The increase in women lawmakers overall, however, has been slow. After jumping from 8.1 percent in 1975 to 20.5 percent in 1993, the share of female legislators has grown by less than 5 percentage points since then.

The importance of having women in leadership roles continues to be a high priority for the Network. “The decisions that get made by a speaker or a senate president really drive a lot of the process and how things end up,” says Oregon Speaker Tina Kotek (D). “When you don’t have a diverse set of individuals in those rooms, you’re going to have a skewed perspective.”

Run, Baby, Run

One reason women haven’t approached parity is not that they can’t win elections; it’s that they simply are not running. When they do run, women are just as likely to win elections as men. So what’s keeping women from throwing their hats into the state legislative ring? Three main factors, according to several studies, keep women from running for office:

- They lack political ambition.
- They need to be asked.
- They don’t have well-developed fundraising networks.

A large, multi-year study by political scientists Jennifer Lawless from American University and Richard Fox from Loyola



Marymount University examined potential candidates (lawyers, business owners and executives, educators and political activists) with equal levels of participation in public speaking, service on boards and political and policy work.

Across the board, men were significantly more likely than women to have considered running for office and to have an interest in running in the future. Women were significantly less likely than men to consider themselves qualified to run.

It’s All About Relationships

Political science researchers Susan Carroll and Kira Sanbonmatsu surveyed women state legislators in all 50 states, between 1981 and 2008, and concluded that for women, candidacy is a “relation-

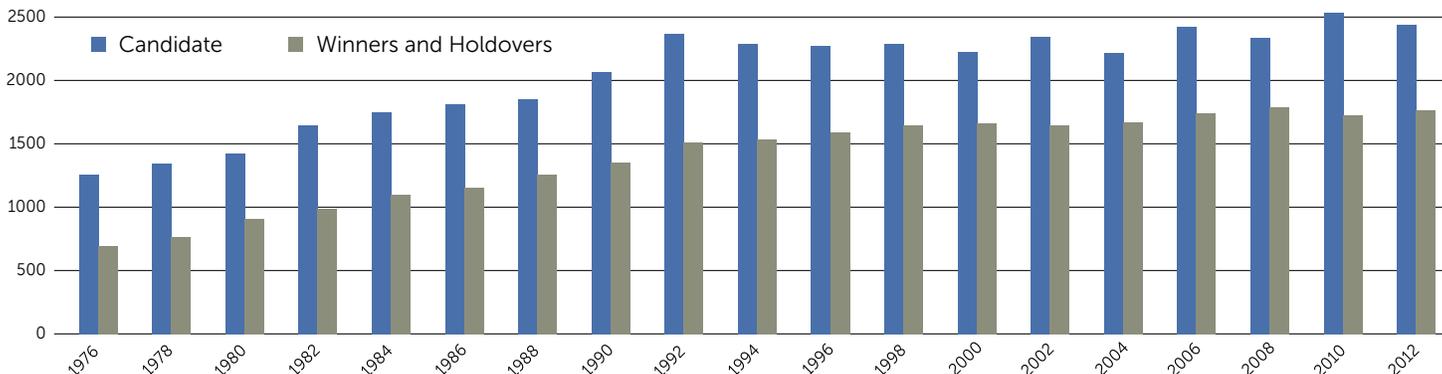
“The issue for women is ‘not yet.’ We’re socialized to wait and see, and we just have to get over that.”

—OREGON SPEAKER TINA KOTEK

ally embedded decision.”

In other words, women’s decisions about holding office are less likely to be influenced by personal ambition than by the “beliefs and reactions, both real and perceived, of other people.” Women more often will consider how a political campaign and job would “affect the lives of others with whom the potential candidate has close relationships,” the researchers found.

Women in Legislative Elections 1976-2012



Source: Center for American Women and Politics

But, the idea that family considerations outweigh personal political ambition for women more than they do for men may be changing. Lawless and Fox’s research found that family structures and responsibilities—marital and parental status, type of household and child- and elder-care responsibilities—made no difference in a potential candidate’s interest in running for public office. Former Massachusetts Senate President Therese Murray (D) notes that before she stepped down in 2014, she had begun to notice that younger male members were “far more involved with their families” as both partners and parents.

Statistically, however, among state legislators today, women are still less likely than men to have minor children living at home.

The college years appear to be a decisive time for developing political ambition, according to additional research by Lawless and Fox. Although high schoolers of both sexes show similar levels of interest in future candidacy, a gender gap begins to open among college students. Interest stagnates among women, while it increases

among men.

Women are more likely to say that working for a charity is the best way to bring about social change, whereas men say the best way to accomplish change is running for office, the researchers found. Young men are also more likely to be exposed to the idea that running for office is a viable

option for them, whether in political science classes, in campus political groups or among peers. Competitiveness among male students is encouraged through organized sports, which they are more likely to participate in than girls. Boys, much more than girls, are also more likely to care about winning.

A Little Network History

What was formalized in 1985 as the Women’s Network had existed in some capacity since NCSL’s founding in 1975. At early NCSL meetings, Maryland Delegate Pauline Menes convened groups of women to discuss issues they were working on and frustrations they were experiencing.

The first official chairwoman, Washington Representative Shirley Hankins, was named in 1985, and by 1987 it became clear a dedicated staff person was necessary to conduct all the fundraising, planning and outreach work the group generated. So former Iowa Representative Sue Mullins was hired as the first executive director.

Newsletters kept track of women in leadership positions and encouraged women to get their colleagues involved with the organization. In the 1990s, the Network hired its second executive director, former Kansas Representative Nancy Brown, and offered a series of leadership development seminars. In 2000, the name was changed to the Women’s Legislative Network of NCSL, and in 2002 the organization became a core program of the NCSL Foundation for State Legislatures and was fully staffed by NCSL.

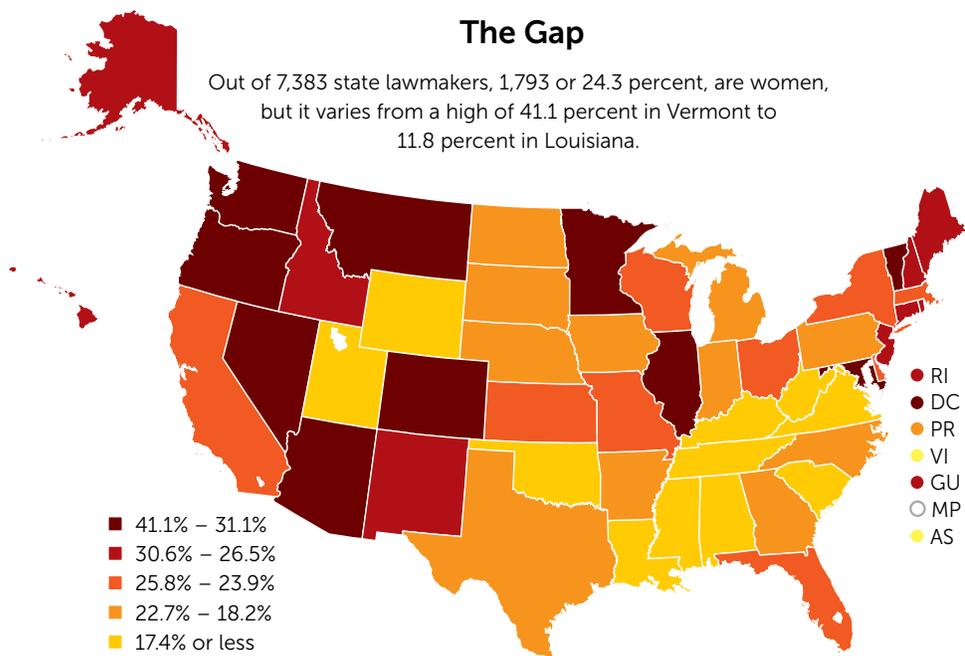
Today, the Network’s mission is to promote the participation, empowerment and leadership of women legislators. It continues to offer leadership training and networking opportunities.

New Mexico Representative and Network President Jane Powdrell-Culbert is optimistic about the organization’s future. “I hope to see growth, and I hope to see even more leadership training. We’ve got to help the new women coming into legislatures define themselves in order to get them ready to take on bigger roles.”

The Network will celebrate its 30th anniversary at the Seattle Legislative Summit in August with a gala reception and several sessions. Don’t wait to be asked, just come!

The Gap

Out of 7,383 state lawmakers, 1,793 or 24.3 percent, are women, but it varies from a high of 41.1 percent in Vermont to 11.8 percent in Louisiana.



Source: NCSL

Survey Says ...

A survey by the Center for American Women and Politics found that nearly twice as many female as male elected legislators reported that they “had not seriously thought about running until someone else suggested it.”

“Women need to be asked; men are more self-starters,” Oregon’s Kotek says. “A lot of the literature says this, and I’ve found it to be completely true.”

But that’s not true for all women. Tennessee Speaker Beth Harwell (R) was interested in politics from an early age. She remembers watching the Watergate hearings with her grandmother. “My grandmother’s hero was a senator from North Carolina, Sam Ervin, and my hero was a senator from Tennessee, Howard Baker. And I told my grandmother that someday I was going to meet those folks.” While a student at Vanderbilt, Harwell did meet Ervin,



who was kind enough to write a note to her grandmother. Harwell became a professor of political science, and “decided that I was going to put a little of that book knowledge to practical use and see if I could actually run for office myself.”

Likewise, Murray’s love of politics started early. She first worked on a political campaign at age 12 making phone calls for Ted Kennedy. “I really caught the bug then. ... I never thought I’d run myself for office. I’d been asked many times in my district.... Eventually I did run, against a 20-year incumbent, and I won.”



“As more women get into places of leadership, there will be more opportunity to move women up.”

—FORMER MASSACHUSETTS SENATE PRESIDENT
THERESE MURRAY

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—TENNESSEE SPEAKER BETH HARWELL

The Road Less Traveled

Carroll and Sanbonmatsu say “the pool of women eligible to run is both wider than commonly perceived and more than sufficient for women to achieve parity in state legislatures.” Those who feel the country needs more women in state legislatures, they argue, “need not wait for a social revolution.” Maintaining and expanding current programs is all that is needed, they believe, to recruit and train enough good women to run for office.

They point out that there is no one “women’s pathway” into politics with respect to women’s educational and occupational backgrounds and motivations. But women legislators are somewhat more likely than men to say that a specific public policy issue motivated them to run, beyond their desire to serve the public.

That was Kotek’s experience. What ultimately drew her into public service was her advocacy work. When a seat opened in her district, she decided to run in part because “the issues I was working on—poverty and kids’ issues—were not getting enough attention.”

For New Mexico Representative Jane Poudrell-Culbert (R), the current president of the Women’s Legislative Network,

the pathway into politics was paved by a simple mistake. “I signed in on the wrong sheet,” she says.

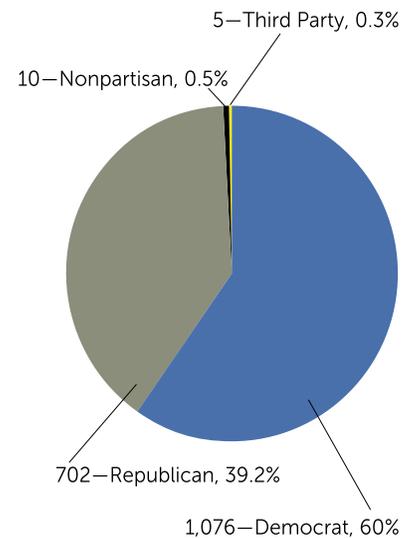
“I was at a luncheon for prospective candidates, and I signed on the candidate sheet. Shortly after that, I was called and asked to really consider running. I figured I had the time to run a campaign, and I knew the issues and I felt like, the worst that could happen is I would lose. And, 14 years later, the rest is history.”

The Dollar Divide

Among state legislators, there is also a stark difference between the sexes’ perceptions of the challenges of fundraising. While 90 percent of male legislators believed that raising campaign funds is equally difficult for both men and women, only 44 percent of the women did. Women felt they had a harder time of it because they lacked the deep pockets men had. They also believe women are less comfortable asking for money on their own behalf.

“I love when I look down the financial disclosure list and I see that women have given to other candidates, whether they are

Party Breakdown of Women Legislators, 2015



Source: NCSL



“We’ve got to help the new women coming in to legislatures define themselves in order to get them ready to take on bigger roles.”

— New Mexico Representative Jane Powdrell-Culbert

male or female,” says Harwell. “Because that’s the last frontier for women. We’ve got to get comfortable with the fact that women should be contributing financially to the political process.”

What Difference Does It Make?

It isn’t easy to determine what “difference” women make to policy once they reach the statehouse. Traditionally, women in legislatures have been more likely than men to focus on bills related to women, children, families and education. But as the political landscape shifts and becomes more polarized, those issues can generate sharp partisan divides, which often override any unified women’s position.

Murray notes, however, that simply having women in the process is important. “If you’re not at the table, you don’t have

a voice. ... I’ve frequently been the only woman at the table. I’ve sat there while they’re appointing people to a commission, and I’ve stopped and said, ‘Do you know any women or minorities who might be good for this position?’ It’s not that they didn’t know them, but they didn’t think of them. Once I brought it up, they appointed them to the positions. As more women get into places of leadership, there will be more opportunity to move women up.”

Powdrell-Culbert was conscious of the difference she could make in her new role as a committee chair this session. “I was very clear on how I wanted things to run. I wanted respect for each committee member; no matter what ax you have to grind, don’t do it on my committee. I also wanted respect for the citizens who come in to speak and give their time.”

“It helps being a female,” says Harwell, the first female presiding officer in Tennessee. “I think females can, for the most part, be good listeners and have good listening skills. And that’s certainly something you need to be an effective speaker. I also take very seriously that there are young girls who may be looking to my leadership style and how I conduct myself in the political process to determine whether they’d like to be involved in politics.”

Kotek agrees that women tend to have different strengths than men: “I think women are more prone to collaborate. They’re competitive, but they also know that to win you can collaborate. And I don’t think that’s always true for men. Although I think the most successful male leaders are more collaborative. I just think it comes more naturally to women by virtue of our socialization.”

Research supports her observation. Women in state legislatures, in general, adopt more collaborative and consensus-based leadership styles than men. They tend to be more inclusive and more interested in bringing diverse viewpoints into discussions.

A large-scale analysis of leadership effectiveness that appeared in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* found that women

A Helping Hand

Many women don’t run for office unless asked. To address the problem, a number of organizations recruit women candidates and offer rigorous campaign training, which often includes discussions on how to balance public service with family and professional life, and how to get past the hurdle of feeling “unqualified.” Often, they match women with political mentors. Some of the most popular ones are:

- Ready to Run
- VoteRunLead
- Political Institute for Women
- Women’s Campaign School at Yale University
- Emerge America
- The Political Opportunity Program at EMILY’s List
- National Federation of Republican Women
- Project GoPink

are more likely than men to self-identify as less effective leaders, even though women’s colleagues rate them as very effective. In fact, women were rated by colleagues as more effective leaders than men.

Kotek makes a conscious effort to encourage other elected women to consider leadership positions. “The issue for women is ‘not yet.’ I think there’s this feeling of, ‘I need to be in office for more years before I can even think about leadership.’ My male colleagues don’t have that compunction. They think, ‘I’m elected, I should be in leadership.’ Women wait and think, ‘I have to be experienced enough.’ Well, your experience is no different from the next guy, you should do it. We’re socialized to wait and see, and we just have to get over that.”

The women legislators at the 1985 NCSL meeting weren’t willing to wait to be invited into the leadership ranks. One of their first projects was developing a “scorecard” to track how many women served on NCSL’s committees and in other organizational leadership roles. They recruited women to run for leadership positions within NCSL and in their own legislatures.

They made their voices heard, and they made a difference. 