

Women's Legislative Caucuses

By Leah Oliver

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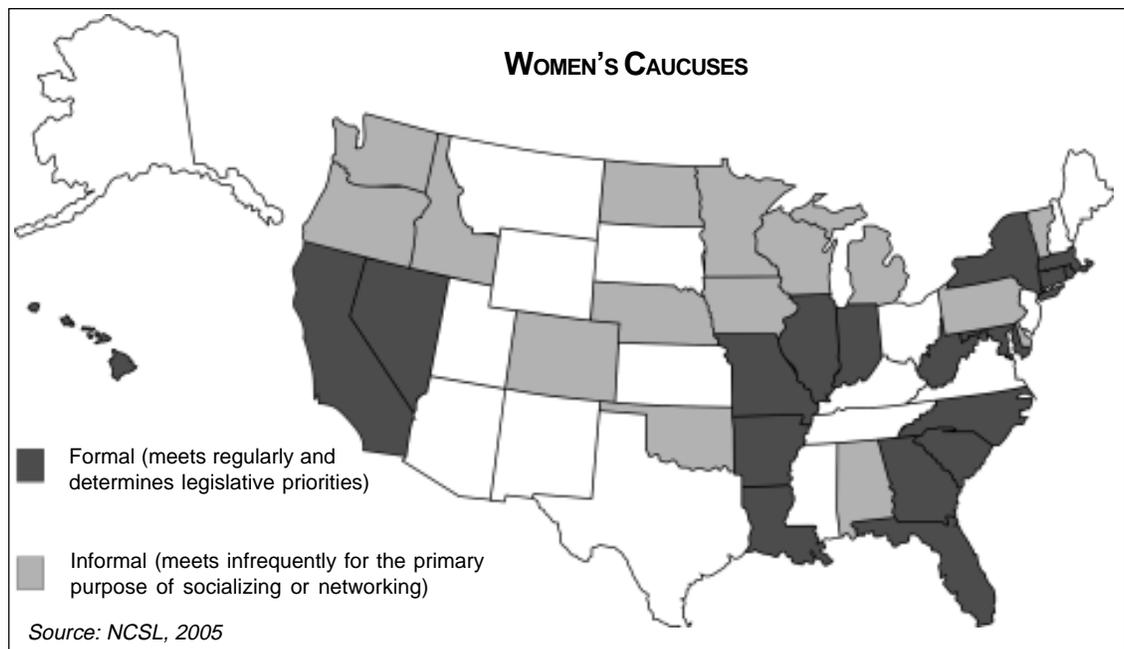
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Women's caucuses encourage collegiality, participation and cooperation among elected women in legislatures. Some specifically promote the interests of women, children and families through legislation. "Our caucus gives women legislators a vehicle for working on issues and it also helps give us an added leadership dimension," says Senator Jennie Forehand, past president of Women Legislators of Maryland and past president of the Women's Legislative Network of NCSL.

Women's caucuses exist in several state legislatures, but can come and go over time in response to political shifts. As an alternative to formally organized caucuses, women legislators in a number of states have found ways to organize informally, sometimes along and sometimes across party lines. Formal women's legislative caucuses often hire staff, hold weekly or monthly meetings during session, are policy-oriented, and may pay dues (\$10 to \$200) or raise funds. Informal caucuses are usually unstructured, primarily social, and meet once or twice per session. At least 17 states have "formal" women's caucuses whereas women in 15 other states meet informally.

Most women's caucuses are bipartisan and represent both houses. Some caucuses strongly value bipartisanship believing that cohesiveness requires full agreement on issues. For example,



Indiana's P.O.W.E.R. Caucus (Political Organization for Women's Education and Representation) has agreed not to endorse any bill without agreement of all members. However, in other states, bipartisanship may be in name only since caucus membership may consist primarily of one party. Caucus emphasis or focus may change from year to year depending on leadership, majority rule, or budget concerns. In California, for example, the chair of the Legislative Women's Caucus alternates yearly between a member of the Assembly and member of the Senate, and the vice chair is elected from the opposite house of the chair.

Caucus activities vary widely and may include establishing and promoting legislative priorities; developing a legislative agenda based on "women's issues," as defined by the caucus; providing leadership development opportunities for legislators; encouraging community and political involvement; creating task forces; hosting informational sessions; organizing letter writing campaigns; holding press conferences; raising money for other women candidates or other causes; and hosting networking activities.

- The **California Legislative Women's Caucus** hosts a "Woman of the Year" event in honor of Women's History Month. Every year, one woman from each Senate and Assembly district are invited to the Capitol and honored for their accomplishments. The women are recognized as Woman of the Year in a formal ceremony in the Senate and Assembly.
- The **Louisiana Legislative Women's Caucus** sponsors the Governor's Conference on Women; organizes "Whistle Stop Tours" throughout the state; hosts a health care conference; and manages a political action committee.
- The **Women Legislators of Maryland**, organized in 1972, was the first women's legislative caucus. It annually hosts a "Celebration of Maryland Leaders" and published a book, "Women Legislators of Maryland Then and Now."

Research by the Center for American Women and Politics shows that when women officeholders form a group and work together—formally or informally—they may be more likely to make a difference. State legislatures where women are present in greater numbers, and especially where they work together, are more likely to focus legislative attention on women, children and families. Female legislators who meet with women in their legislative chamber to discuss legislation that affects women are significantly more likely to work on bills of interest to women than female legislators in chambers where women do not meet.

According to women legislators involved in caucuses, a successful women's caucus meets regularly; is inclusive; communicates frequently and maintains bipartisanship. Other suggestions include using the caucus as a vehicle to meet with important stakeholders; sticking together—there is strength in numbers; holding press conferences; putting together a "Women's Caucus Package" and committing to supporting the bills; and selecting co-chairs from both parties. Women legislators recommend staying away from issues that are controversial or divisive.

Selected References

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Contacts for More Information

Leah Oliver
NCSL—Denver
(303) 364-7700 ext. 1486
leah.oliver@ncsl.org

Kathleen Casey
Center for American Women and Politics
(732) 932-9384 ext. 265
kcasey@rci.rutgers.edu

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