Women in State Government: A Recruitment Priority

By Heather Perkins

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In recent years, the rate at which women enter into state-level offices has slowed following several decades of gains in the late 20th century. Efforts to recruit women for elective and appointive positions will be critical in determining what the future holds for women in state government.

About the Author

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In the history of our nation, women are relative newcomers among state elected and appointed officials. Women first entered state-level offices in the 1920s, following passage and ratification of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution which granted women suffrage. However, significant growth in the numbers of women in office occurred only after the emergence of the contemporary women’s movement during the late-1960s and early-1970s. Since the mid-1970s, as data collected by the Center for American Women and Politics show, women have greatly increased their numbers among elected and appointed officials in state government. Nevertheless, progress has slowed in recent years, and nationwide statistics show little or no growth in the numbers of women serving in serving in state-level offices since the turn of the century.

Women’s numbers among state officeholders changed only slightly following the 2016 elections. Women’s representation among the 7,383 state legislators serving throughout the country inched up from 1,806 in late 2016 to 1,830 in early 2017. Although the elections resulted in only a small increase in numbers, the 2017 figure does represent a new record number of women state legislators.

At the statewide level, the 2016 elections had no effect on the overall picture. Before the election, there were five women governors and 70 women serving in other statewide elective offices. Although a few of the faces changed, these numbers remained the same following the election and decreased by one when Gov. Nikki Haley of South Carolina resigned in early 2017 to become U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. In contrast to the record number of women serving in state legislatures, fewer women hold statewide elected positions in early 2017 than at the turn of the century.

Governors

Since the founding of our country, only 39 women (22 Democrats and 17 Republicans) have served as
state governors (Table A), and only one woman has served as governor of a U.S. territory (Puerto Rico). Almost half of the states, 22, have never had a woman chief executive. Arizona is the only state to have had four women governors as well as the only state to have had a woman succeed another as governor. New Hampshire has been governed by three different women, although one of the governors, Vesta Roy, served for only seven days following the death of an incumbent. Alabama, Connecticut, Kansas, Oregon, Texas and Washington each have had two women governors.

The first woman governor, Nellie Tayloe Ross of Wyoming, was selected in a special election to succeed her deceased husband in 1925. Fifteen days later a second woman, Miriam “Ma” Ferguson, was inaugurated as governor of Texas, having been elected as a surrogate for her husband, a former governor who had been impeached and consequently was barred constitutionally from running again. Ferguson’s campaign slogan was “Two governors for the price of one.” The third woman to serve as a governor, Lurleen Wallace of Alabama, campaigned on the slogan, “Let George do it,” and was similarly elected to replace a husband who was prohibited by term limits from seeking an additional term in office.

The first woman elected in her own right (i.e., without following her husband) into the governorship was Ella Grasso, who presided over the state of Connecticut from 1975 to 1980. Twenty-five of the women governors, including Grasso, who have served since the mid-1970s were elected. The other 11 became governor through constitutional succession; four of these 11 were subsequently elected to full terms.

Six women (2D, 4R) serve as governors in 2017, falling far short of the record nine women who served simultaneously in 2004 and again in 2007. One woman governor, Kate Brown (D-OR), was re-elected in 2016. Three current women governors—Mary Fallin (R-OK), Susana Martinez (R-NM), and Gina Raimondo (D-RI)—were not up for reelection in 2016. The fifth and sixth women governors, Kay Ivey (R-AL) and Kim Reynolds (R-IA), succeeded to office when incumbent governors resigned in early 2017.

Martinez, a Latina, and former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley, an Indian American, are the first two women of color to ever serve as governor of a state.


Other Statewide Elected and Appointed Officials in the Executive Branch
States vary greatly in their numbers of statewide elected and appointed officials. For example, Maine and New Hampshire have only one statewide elected official, the governor, while North Dakota has 13.

The first woman to ever hold a major statewide office was Soledad C. Chacon (D-N.M.) who was secretary of state in New Mexico from 1923–26; Delaware, Kentucky, New York, South Dakota and Texas also had women secretaries of state in the 1920s. The first woman treasurer, Grace B. Urbahns (R-Ind.), served during this same period, from 1926–32.

Several more years passed before a woman became lieutenant governor. Matilda R. Wilson (R-Mich.) served briefly as lieutenant governor of Michigan in 1940 when she was appointed to fill an expiring term. However, the first woman elected as a lieutenant governor was Consuelo N. Bailey (R-Vt.) who served from 1955–56. An additional three decades passed before a woman became attorney general of a state; the first was Arlene Violet (R-R.I.) who served from 1985–87.

As evident from Figure A, the proportion of women among statewide elective officials (including governor) has grown substantially since the 1970s. From 1975 to 1983 the increases were small and
incremental. There was a period of significant growth from 1983 to 2000, with the number and proportion of women serving statewide tripling, reaching a record of 92 women constituting 28.5 percent of all statewide elected officials in 2000. Since 2000, the numbers and proportions have declined. Fewer women, 75, hold statewide offices in 2017 than in 1995 when there were 84 women.

In early 2017, women hold 24.0 percent of the 312 statewide elective positions. In addition to the six women governors, 12 women (5D, 7R) serve as lieutenant governors in the 43 states that elect lieutenant governors. This is considerably fewer than the record high number of 19 women who served as lieutenant governors in 1995.

Other women statewide elected officials include: 13 secretaries of state (7D, 6R), 10 state auditors (6D, 4R), eight chief education officials (7R, 1 nonpartisan), eight state treasurers (4D, 4R), seven attorneys general (4D, 3R), two public service commissioners (2R), two state comptroller/controllers (2D), one corporation commissioner (R), one commissioner of insurance (D), one commissioner of labor (R), one railroad commissioner (R), one agriculture and commerce commissioner (R), one public utilities commissioner (R), and one commissioner of public lands (D).

Only seven women of color serve in statewide elective positions. In addition to one Latina who serves as governor, women of color serving in statewide elective office include two African-Americans (the lieutenant governor of Kentucky and the state treasurer of Connecticut); three Latinas (the lieutenant governor of Illinois, the secretary of state of Rhode Island and the comptroller of Illinois); and one Asian American (the state controller of California).

Women may be slightly better represented among top appointed officials in state government than among statewide elected officials, although it is not possible to know for certain since the most recent data available are from 2007. According to nationwide data collected in 2007 by the Center on Women in Government and Civil Society at SUNY-Albany, women constituted 32.2 percent of department heads with major policymaking responsibilities (including heads of departments, agencies, offices, boards, commissions and authorities) who were appointed by governors. This proportion represented a substantial increase over 1997 when women constituted just 23.2 percent of
department heads. Women were even better represented in 2007 among top appointed advisors in governors’ offices, with women holding 41.9 percent of these positions—a slightly higher proportion than the 39.5 percent of positions held in 1997. Women of color are likely still a rarity among appointed officials, with women of color constituting just 6.3 percent of all department heads and top advisors in governors’ offices in 2007.

Justices on Courts of Last Resort
The first woman elected to a state court of last resort was Florence E. Allen, who was elected to the Ohio Supreme Court in 1922 and re-elected in 1928. Nevertheless, it was not until 1960 that a second woman, Lorna Lockwood of Arizona, was elected to a state supreme court. Lockwood’s colleagues on the Arizona Supreme Court selected her in 1965 to be chief justice, making her the first woman in history to preside over a state court of last resort. She was followed by Susie Sharp of North Carolina who in 1974 became the first woman to be elected by popular vote to be chief justice of a state court of last resort.

In 2003 Petra Jimenez Maes, who currently serves on the New Mexico Supreme Court, became the first Latina chief justice of a state supreme court. Similarly, in 2005, Leah Ward Sears of Georgia became the first African-American woman to preside over a state court of last resort.

According to the National Center for State Courts, 125, or 35.7 percent, of the 350 sitting justices on state courts of last resort in early 2017 are women. Of the 53 chief justices of these courts, 19, or 35.8 percent, are women. Women comprise a majority of justices on courts of last resort in 11 states—Arkansas, California, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Mexico, New York, Tennessee, Washington, West Virginia and Wisconsin. Women constitute at least 40 percent of the justices (but less than a majority) on an additional 14 courts of last resort.

Legislators
Even before women won the right to vote across the country in 1920, a few women had been elected to legislatures in states that had granted the franchise to women. By 1971, the proportion of women serving in state legislatures had grown to 4.5 percent, and over the years this proportion has increased more than fivefold. As Figure B illustrates, the proportion of women among legislators grew steadily throughout the 1970s and 1980s. However, the rate of growth slowed in the 1990s, and like the pattern for statewide elected officials, the numbers and proportions of women legislators nationwide have leveled off since the late 1990s. The proportion of women legislators has increased by only 2.4 percentage points since 1999.

In early 2017 women hold 441, or 22.4 percent, of all state senate seats and 1,389, or 25.7 percent, of all state house seats across the country. Despite the slow growth in women’s numbers, there is some good news in 2017. The 1,830 women who serve in state legislatures in early 2017 marks a new record, surpassing the previous high of 1,809 women who served in 2010.

Great variation exists across the states in the proportion of legislators who are women. Vermont ranks first among the states with 40 percent of women among its legislators, followed by Nevada (39.7 percent), Colorado (39 percent), Arizona (38.9 percent) and Illinois (36.2 percent). Except for Minnesota and Illinois, the states ranked in the top 10 in the proportion of women in their legislatures are in the West or Northeast. Despite this geographic concentration, no easy explanation exists for why these states have risen to the top. Scholars who have statistically examined the variation among the states in the representation of women in their legislatures have found no simple patterns.
At the other extreme, Wyoming with only 11.1 percent ranks last among the 50 states in the representation of women among its legislators. Accompanying Wyoming in the bottom five states are Oklahoma (12.8 percent), West Virginia (13.4 percent), South Carolina (13.5 percent) and Mississippi (13.8 percent). Eight of the 10 states with the lowest proportions of women are Southern or border states. Only two Southern states, Georgia with 25.8 percent and Florida with 25.6 percent women, are above the national average of 24.8 percent. As these rankings make clear, the South as a region tends to lag behind the rest of the country in the representation of women within its legislatures. Nationwide, Republicans outnumber Democrats among all state legislators regardless of gender.\[14\]

However, the opposite pattern is evident among women legislators where Democrats outnumber Republicans. Among women state senators nationwide, 57.1 percent are Democrats and 39.7 percent are Republicans; among women state representatives, 61.3 percent are Democrats and 38.1 percent are Republicans.

Almost one-quarter of women state legislators, 23.7 percent, are women of color. Of the 107 senators and 326 representatives serving in legislatures in early 2017, all but 31 are Democrats.\[15\] African-American women hold 69 seats in state senates and 197 seats in state houses across 42 states. Latinas are concentrated in 26 states; they hold 26 Senate and 84 house seats. Asian-American women count among their numbers nine senators and 28 representatives in 15 states while Native American women hold three Senate and 17 house seats in 10 states.

![Figure B: Proportion of Women Among State Legislators](source: Center for American Women and Politics, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University)

**The Future**

Although women have made substantial progress over time in increasing their presence in state government, the leveling off among state legislators and slight decline among statewide elective officials since the turn of the century are troubling developments. At a minimum, these developments provide evidence that increases over time are not inevitable.

The lack of growth in numbers has implications for women’s representation not only among state legislators and nongubernatorial statewide officeholders, but also among governors and members of Congress. Even though only six states are currently headed by women, the increase in women governors has probably been the most striking positive development for women in state government
in recent years. Of the 39 women governors across the entire history of our country, 25 have served all or part of their terms during the 21st century. Of the six sitting governors, five held statewide elective office before running for governor—three as lieutenant governor, one as secretary of state and two as state treasurer. In addition, three of the current women governors served in their state legislatures, where one was senate majority leader.

Similarly, many of the women who have run for Congress gained experience and visibility in state government before seeking federal office. Of the 83 women members of the U.S. House in the 115th Congress, 40 served in their state houses, 20 in their state senates, and one in statewide elective office. Of the 21 female U.S. senators, seven served in their state houses, six in their state senates, and seven in statewide elective offices.

Activists who are interested in increasing the number of women serving in office often refer to a political pipeline through which potential women candidates for higher office come forward from among the pool of women who have gained experience at lower levels of office. Clearly, the pipeline has worked well in recent years in the case of governors and members of Congress. But what if the pool of women candidates in statewide and state legislative offices continues to stagnate or decline? The number of politically experienced women with the visibility and contacts necessary to run for governor or a seat in the Congress is unlikely to grow.

While several different factors may be responsible for the recent leveling off in the number of women in elective offices in the states, a lack of effective recruitment certainly is one of the most important. Statistics on the number of female candidates over time seem to clearly point to a problem with recruitment. Even though more women ran for state legislative seats in 2016 than ever before, more seats were uncontested by a woman than were contested. There were 5,915 seats up for election in state legislatures in 2016 but only 2,602 women general election candidates. Clearly, a major factor contributing to the leveling off in the number of female officeholders is a lack of greater numbers of female candidates.

Research has found that women who run for office are less likely than their male counterparts to be self-starters. Women more often than men seek office only after receiving encouragement from others. In a 2008 nationwide study of state legislators, scholars at the Center for American Women and Politics found that only 26 percent of female state representatives, compared with 43 percent of their male counterparts, said it was entirely their own idea to run for their first elective office. In contrast, 53 percent of women state representatives, compared with 28 percent of men, said they had not thought seriously about running for office until someone else suggested it. Similarly, a study of major party candidates in state legislative races conducted a few years earlier found that only 11 percent of women, compared with 37 percent of men, were self-starters who said that it was entirely their own idea to run for the legislature. In contrast, 37 percent of women, compared with 18 percent of men, reported that they had not seriously thought about running until someone else suggested it. Another recent study of people in the professions from which political candidates are most likely to emerge (i.e., law, business, politics and education) found that notably fewer women (43 percent) than men (59 percent) had ever considered running for office.

Findings such as these suggest the future for women in state government will depend, at least in part, upon the strength of efforts to recruit women for both elected and appointed positions. Legislative leaders, public officials, party leaders and advocacy organizations can help by renewing their commitment and augmenting their efforts to identify and support potential women candidates, especially in winnable races with open seats or vulnerable incumbents. Recruitment efforts may well be key to determining whether the number of women officials continues to stagnate or again begins to move steadily upward as in earlier decades.
Notes

1 All statistical information in this essay, unless otherwise noted, has been provided by the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP), Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University. Additional information is available at www.cawp.rutgers.edu [6]. This essay would not be possible without the tireless efforts of Gilda Morales and Chelsea Hill, who oversee the collection of data on women officeholders for CAWP. I also would like to thank Linda Phillips from CAWP and Blake Points Kavanagh from the National Center for State Courts for their assistance with the data for this essay.

2 Sila Calderon (Popular Democratic Party) served as governor of Puerto Rico from 2001 to 2004.


4 Gruberg, 190.

5 Women did serve as superintendents of public instruction in a few states earlier than this.

6 These 75 women serving in statewide elective office include 42 Republicans, 32 Democrats, and one nonpartisan.

7 These numbers do not include: officials in appointive state government positions; officials elected to executive posts by the legislature; officials elected as commissioners or board members from districts rather than statewide; members of the judicial branch; or elected members of university Boards of Trustees or Boards of Education.

8 Gruberg, 190, 192.


10 Information provided by the National Center for State Courts and current as of February 2017.

11 Unlike all the other statistics in this essay, these numbers from the National Center for State Courts include the District of Columbia as well as the 50 states.

12 This includes the D.C. Court of Appeals, which is the court of last resort for the District of Columbia. Texas and Oklahoma both have two courts of last resort (a Supreme Court and a Court of Criminal Appeals); in both states the Court of Criminal Appeals has more than 40% women and is counted here.


14 According to the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), as of March 1, 2017, 56.6 percent of state legislators nationwide were Republicans and 42.4 percent were Democrats. The remaining seats were vacant or filled by nonpartisans or independents. Calculated from data in table “2017 State & Legislative Partisan Composition.” http://www.ncsl.org/portals/1/documents/elections/Legis_Control_2017_March_1_9%20am.pdf [8].

15 Of these, 29 are Republicans, one is a Progressive, and one represents the Working Families Party.
