



Women's Pathways to America's State Legislatures

Kira Sanbonmatsu, Rutgers University-New Brunswick

Women are over half of the U.S. population, yet they hold fewer than one in four seats in our country's state legislatures – with female gains leveling off in recent years. This hurts American democracy, because research shows that women in public office bring distinctive life experiences and perspectives – and give added voice to the concerns of all marginal groups. State legislatures decide many critical issues. And today's state legislators are tomorrow's candidates for governorships, Congress, and the U.S. presidency.

To learn more about how women have reached state office – and what might encourage more to run in the future – we have analyzed results from an unprecedented nationwide survey of state legislators conducted in 2008 by the Center for American Women and Politics at the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University.

Women and Men Run for Different Reasons

When asked why they decided to run for office, male state legislators are more likely to say it was entirely their own idea, citing a longstanding desire to be involved in politics. Women more often cite concern with issues and encouragement from parties, groups, or elected officials.

- A majority (53%) of female state legislators say they had not seriously thought of running until someone else suggested it, while only 28% of men credit others. More than two-fifths of men say seeking office was their own initiative, compared to 26% of women.
- Remarkably, about one-third of women legislators say that someone (such as an officeholder or party official) tried to discourage them from running. Encouragement from others appears to have been important to overcome such negative signals.

Political Parties and Organizations Help Women Run

Political parties play a central role in recruiting and supporting women candidates, including female candidates of color; and other kinds of organizations also matter.

- Among the state legislators citing recruitment and encouragement as important, parties and elected officials were identified as the most influential people. Women were more likely than men to say that party support was very important.
- Although not as important as parties, organizations also play a larger role in women's decisions to run for office than in the decisions of men to become candidates.

- Women's groups are often given credit by female legislators – and because so many women's groups favor the choice position on abortion, their role helps explain why Democratic women have more support to run for office than Republican women. Overall, females make up a smaller proportion of GOP state legislative contingents than of Democratic contingents.

Money and Campaign Support Matter

Extra support for fundraising and training for how to run a campaign may be necessary to increase the number of women candidates and officeholders.

- Studies show that women candidates can raise as much or more money as men, but most women legislators – and especially women of color – believe that fundraising is harder for female candidates. (The vast majority of men say it is equally hard for all.)
- Women legislators are more likely than their male colleagues to have attended a campaign training session.

Where Can Women Candidates be Found?

If everyone follows the same pathways to politics, then we should look for potential female and male officeholders in similar places – such as businesses and law offices. But in fact, women and men who reach state legislatures differ in prior political experiences, occupational backgrounds, and family situations. So those who want to expand the pool of female candidates need to look not just for women working in the usual places, but in other sites as well.

- Women in male-dominated professions may run for office, but it also makes sense to encourage women employed in female-dominated occupations and organizations.
- Any woman who takes a strong interest in public issues may choose to run. Women need not have had a longstanding plan for a political career or follow carefully calculated steps to reach the legislature. Almost half of female state representatives had no prior elective or appointive office-holding experience prior to running for their positions (compared to just over one-third of men who had no prior experience).
- Family considerations play a larger role in women's decisions to seek office. Having young children is less likely for women state legislators than for their male colleagues. Some women can balance care for young children with demanding public roles, but willing candidates may emerge more readily from the ranks of young women who do not yet have pressing family responsibilities, and from the ranks of older women whose responsibilities at home have become less overwhelming.