



## How the Underrepresentation of Women in Pennsylvania Politics Affects Public Policy

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By all possible measures, Pennsylvania does poorly in giving women a voice in political representation. The Center for American Women in Politics currently ranks the state 39th for women's involvement in the state legislature, where women account for just under a fifth of legislators in 2017. The state has never had a woman governor or U.S. Senator, and has had no women in its recent Congressional delegations. Female representation in local office and on school boards is slightly higher than at the state level, but women do not approach parity, except in a few elected judicial contingents.

### Why Not More Women?

It should be no surprise that female representation in Pennsylvania government is hard to increase, because institutional rules favor the status quo. Male officeholders and aspirants have the advantage of incumbency and also benefit from the proclivities of strong political parties, a professionalized legislature, and limited electoral competitiveness.

Nonetheless, there is some evidence that women are increasingly throwing their hats into the ring. My data collected from 2017 municipal primaries in Pennsylvania showed that women accounted for 54% of candidates statewide. In Philadelphia County, almost 70% of the candidates were women. There were gendered patterns, however, with relatively few women running for executive and higher-ranking positions. What is more, it is too soon to tell whether more women running for office will lead to more women elected in 2017.

Across the commonwealth, women are relatively abundant on elected school boards, where they hold 38% of the positions. Although this is significantly lower than the national level of 44%, it is a sizeable pool of Pennsylvania women who have run for and won elective offices in their communities. These women could still be seen as potential future candidates for higher elective offices. However, consistent with other research, my survey of Pennsylvania's school board directors shows that women on elected school boards are much less likely than their male colleagues to be encouraged by others in the personal or political networks to run for higher elective office. Such women are also less likely to report having been recruited to run for any office. Recruitment matters – especially in a state like Pennsylvania with strong parties, powerful candidate endorsements, and closed primaries.

### Female Underrepresentation Hurts Legislative Effectiveness

Women's underrepresentation should matter to both parties in the commonwealth because research shows that women lawmakers perform unusually well as members of legislative bodies. My study of bill sponsorship

in the Pennsylvania General Assembly found that, on virtually every measure of effectiveness, the handful of women state senators and representatives who do hold office are more effective than their male colleagues. Women legislators are more likely to sponsor legislation dealing with women's issues, and they are more likely to have co-sponsors on legislation they introduce, work across party lines, and, ultimately, have their bills enacted and signed into law. In a time when the Pennsylvania General Assembly faces difficulty in accomplishing anything because of hyper-partisanship, the magic formula for better governance might just be electing more women to serve.

## Female Legislators Can Advance Policies Affecting Women

More equal female presence could also matter for policies that disproportionately affect women. Without a critical mass of women to champion issues of concern to women, many such issues are either ignored or fail to be addressed. My recent research on family and medical leave and childcare, two high-profile women's issues, reveals how much such reforms are needed in the state.

- Dozens of states have expanded **paid family and medical leave** to build on the 1993 federal Family and Medical Leave Act, but the Pennsylvania legislature has made almost no effort in this area. As a result, new parents or those with aging parents or loved ones with serious and/or chronic illnesses – who are predominantly women – struggle to balance the needs of their families with their jobs. Not only has there been inaction at the state level, the state legislature has attempted (so far unsuccessfully) to restrict municipalities from expanding family leave coverage in their jurisdictions. As in other states, lower-income workers suffer most, because they cannot afford unpaid leave and have fewer employer-provided benefits. In Pennsylvania, a majority of these workers are women.
- Pennsylvania also falls behind many other states in the provision of **affordable, quality childcare**. Single mothers in the state pay – on average – about 40 percent of their income for childcare, and programs to relieve this burden are hit-or-miss and often have lengthy waitlists. In a survey of voters I conducted in 2015, a majority of Pennsylvanians indicated that they believed families should pay much less of their income for childcare and said that the state government had at least some obligation to help. Although politicians have frequently campaigned on issues such as universal pre-kindergarten programs, little progress has been made.

In sum, my research on Pennsylvania politics and policy reveals that female officeholders and the needs of women citizens are far from adequately represented. Women are underrepresented in virtually every elected position in the commonwealth, and there is evidence that females are not being actively recruited to run for public offices. The lack of women in higher office in turn harms the quality of governance in the state. Pennsylvania's legislature is less effective than it could be with a stronger female presence in both parties; and the underrepresentation of women also reduces attention to the growing needs of Pennsylvania women in their vital roles as workers and family caregivers.

Read more in Jennie Sweet-Cushman, "**FMLA in PA: Analysis of Family and Medical Leave Policy in the State.**" *Commonwealth, a Journal of Political Science* 17, no.1 (2015): 14-35; Jennie Sweet-Cushman and Ashley Harden, "**Is This the Care We Need: An Examination of Childcare Policy in Pennsylvania.**"

*Commonwealth, a Journal of Political Science* 19, no. 2 (2017); Jennie Sweet-Cushman, Ashley Harden, and July 27, 2017

<https://scholars.org>

Hali Santiago, "**Few but Mighty: Women and Bill Sponsorship in the Pennsylvania General Assembly**," Pennsylvania Center for Women and Politics, May 2017; and Jennie Sweet-Cushman, "Where Does the Pipeline Get Leaky?: The Progressive Ambition of School Board Members and Personal and Political Network Recruitment" (under review).