



Poised to Run

Women's Pathways to the State Legislatures

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Center for American Women and Politics

RUTGERS

EAGLETON INSTITUTE OF POLITICS

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Executive Summary

1. Women Need to be Recruited

Women need to be encouraged to run for office. Women are more likely than men to run for office because they were recruited rather than deciding to run on their own.

Women legislators are more likely to say that they decided to seek elective office after receiving the suggestion to run, whereas men are more likely to say that the decision to run was entirely their idea. Thus, women candidates more often need to be recruited because they usually do not decide to run on their own. Recruitment is also important because many women encounter efforts to discourage their candidacies. About one-third of women say that someone tried to discourage them from running—most often an officeholder or political party official. For women to successfully reach office, they need to be recruited to run and they need encouragement and support in order to overcome any negative recruitment efforts.

2. Political Parties Matter

It is critical that women candidates attract party support. Women who reach the legislature usually do so with the support of their parties.

Most women who successfully reach the legislature usually do so with party support. A majority of both women and men state legislators report that party leaders supported their candidacies. In fact, parties appear to matter even more to the success of women than to men: women are more likely than men to say that party support was very important to their decision to run. Women are also more likely to cite their party, rather than an organization, as the most influential source of encouragement for their candidacies. Because party support is so critical for those women who successfully attain office, it is important for both political parties to expand their efforts to recruit and support women candidates. This is especially true for the Republican party, since the numbers of Republican women in the legislatures lag so far behind those of Democratic women. In addition, more concerted efforts are needed to identify and recruit women candidates of color.

3. Organizations Help Women Run

Organizations are encouraging women to run for office, but they have not been the most important source of encouragement for women's candidacies. Organizations, including women's organizations, could be more active in candidate recruitment.

Organizations play a larger role in women's decisions to run for the legislature than in men's—perhaps because women need more organizational support than men do. Moreover, women are more likely than men to cite a women's group as an organization that was important to encouraging their candidacy. Nevertheless, organizations are not the most important agents in recruiting women candidates. The most influential sources of recruitment are parties and officeholders—not organizations. Thus, organizations, including women's groups, could do more to encourage and

support women's candidacies. In particular, more efforts to reach Republican women are needed; organizations seem to play a larger role in Democratic women's candidacies than in Republican women's, which may be one factor that helps explain why so many more Democratic than Republican women hold state legislative office.

4. More Women Can Run

The pool of women candidates is larger than is commonly believed.

It is commonly assumed that women and men enter politics in the same way, and those who recruit candidates tend to look for female candidates in the same places where they look for male candidates. But we find that women are more likely than men to come from health and education fields, while men are more likely to come from business and law backgrounds. We also find that women are more likely than men to run for office because of public policy issues. Consequently, those interested in electing more women might increase the number of women candidates by looking to women employed in female-dominated occupations and women who are actively engaged in working on public policy issues, as well as women in male-dominated fields such as law and business. Those interested in electing more women should also recruit women of various ages. Younger women may be ready to run because they do not yet have pressing family responsibilities, while older women may be ready to run because their children are grown and their family responsibilities have lessened. Indeed, we find that women legislators first ran for their current office at an average age of 50.

We also find that women do not need to have a longstanding plan for a political career or follow a set of carefully calculated steps in order to reach the legislature. Holding a lower level office is not a prerequisite. Many women and men successfully reach the legislature without prior officeholding experience. Just under half of female state representatives and more than one-third of their male colleagues had no elective or appointive experience before serving in the legislature.

5. Resources are Important

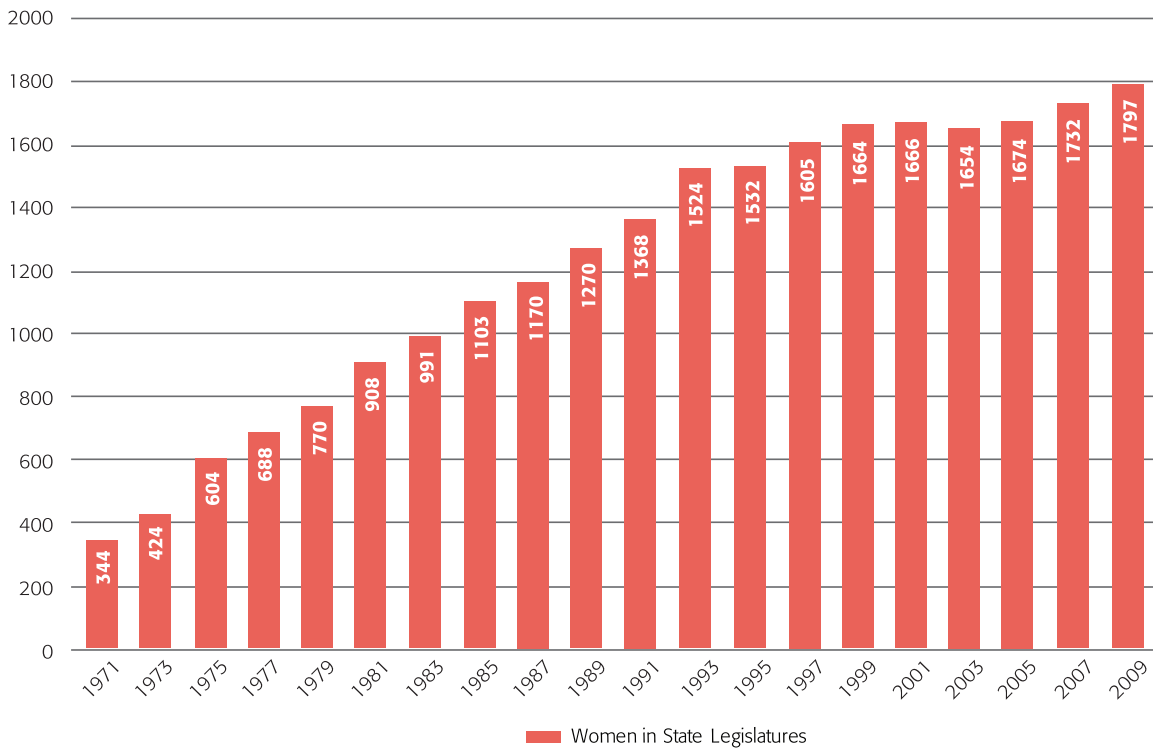
More funding and training can help women win.

One of the largest gender differences we find in our study concerns fundraising: most women believe that it is harder for female candidates to raise money than male candidates, while the overwhelming majority of men believe it is equally hard for both men and women. Thus, fundraising remains a concern for women, especially women of color, despite evidence from studies that show women candidates can raise as much—or more—money as men. We also find that women are more likely than their male colleagues to have attended a campaign training or workshop. These findings suggest that additional fundraising and training support may be critical to increasing the number of women in office.

Introduction

More women serve in state legislatures today than ever before. Yet women continue to be dramatically underrepresented compared to their presence in the population. Women constituted 54% of voters in the 2008 elections, but only 24% of state legislators. Moreover, after almost thirty years of small but steady increases, the number of women state legislators has leveled off in the past decade (Figure 1). Why have the numbers plateaued long before women achieved parity with men among legislators? How can more women be elected to office?

Figure 1
The number of women serving in state legislative office has leveled off in recent years (1971-2009).



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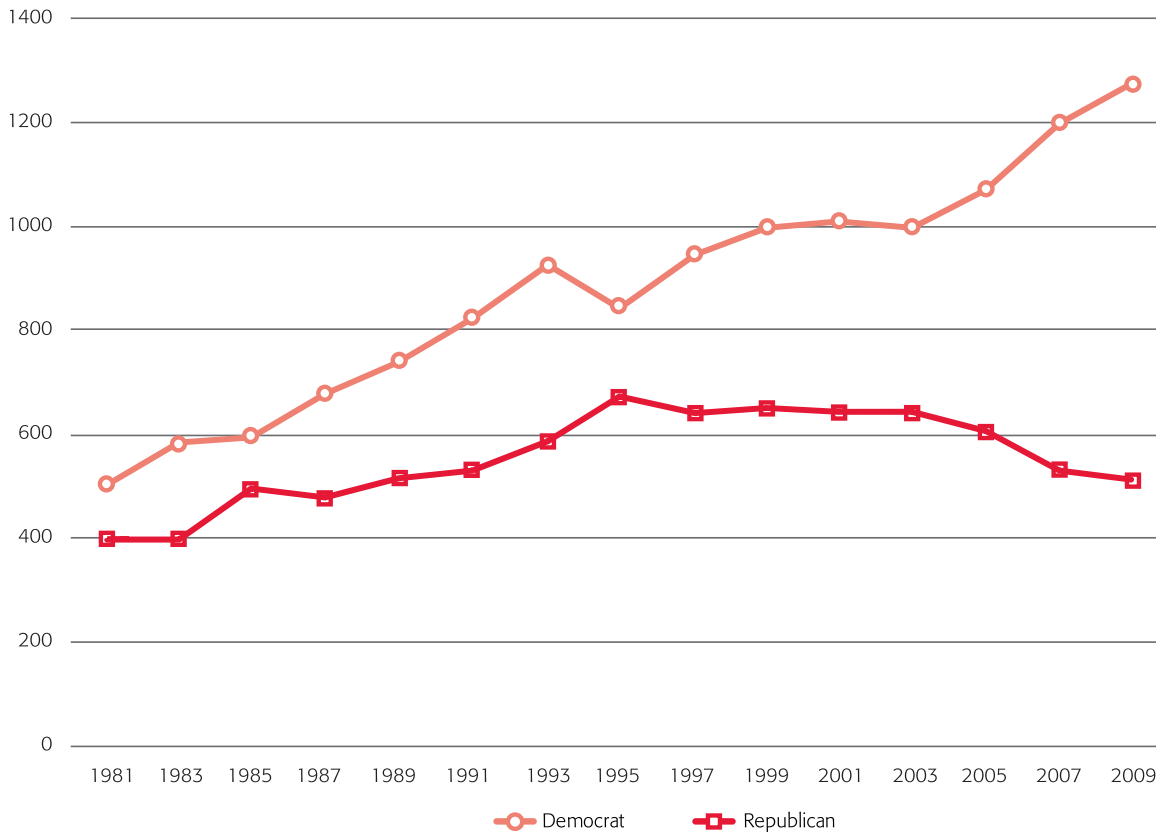
We answer these pressing questions with the 2008 CAWP Recruitment Study, comparing the responses of today’s legislators with those who served in 1981. The 2008 CAWP Recruitment Study is the most comprehensive survey of state legislators’ routes to office ever conducted.¹ This study was made possible by the generous funding of the Barbara Lee Family Foundation, with matching funds from the Susie Tompkins Buell Foundation, Wendy McKenzie, and other donors. We are grateful for their support.

Our report provides an unprecedented look at how women reach the legislatures and how women’s election to office has changed over time. Using data from a nationwide survey of legislators, we compare women with their male colleagues in their decisions to seek office, previous political experience, and personal background. We also compare

¹ Please see the appendix for details about the methodology used for the 2008 and 1981 CAWP Recruitment Studies.

women by political party, which is especially important because the number of Republican women legislators has declined while the number of Democratic women has increased (Figure 2).² Where appropriate, we also discuss results from our study that differed for women of color. Women of color are only 5% of all state legislators and 20% of women state legislators.³

Figure 2
The numbers of Democratic women legislators have continued to increase while the numbers of Republican women legislators have declined (1981-2009).



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We have long known that electing women to public office has important consequences for American democracy. Previous research by CAWP demonstrates that both female and male legislators believe that women legislators have a special responsibility to represent women’s concerns within the legislature and that the presence of women has enhanced the representation of women in society and increased the access of other underrepresented groups to the legislature. Women often bring to politics and government life experiences, policy perspectives, and issue concerns that differ from those of men.

² The decline of Republican women state legislators is not simply the result of Republican losses in recent state legislative elections. Instead, the proportion of all Democratic state legislators who are women has increased while the proportion of all Republican state legislators who are women has decreased.

³ Because women legislators of color tend to be Democrats, we limit our analysis to a comparison of racial differences among Democratic women legislators. Our sample includes an insufficient number of Republican women of color to permit statistical analysis.

Moreover, understanding the pathways to the legislatures is critical because some of today's women legislators are likely to be tomorrow's statewide and federal leaders. About half of the current women members of the U.S. Congress and about half of women who ever served as governors previously served in the state legislatures.

As of the end of 2009, women are 22.1% of state senators and 25.0% of state representatives. Because running for a seat in the lower house of the legislature is often an entry-level office, we analyze the experiences of state representatives and state senators separately in this report.⁴ Our interest in how women reach the legislature leads us to focus most of our report on how women achieve their positions as state representatives.

Where appropriate, we compare our 2008 results with the 1981 CAWP Recruitment Study—a groundbreaking study on the paths to the legislatures that served as the model for our 2008 study. Unless otherwise indicated, all statistics are from the 2008 study.

In this report, we also draw on interviews that we conducted with about two dozen women state legislators from a diverse set of states.⁵ These interviews were designed to supplement and help us understand the results from the surveys. All quotes that appear in our report are drawn from these interviews.

⁴ Among state representatives in our study, 62% of women and 51% of their male colleagues ran for state representative as their very first elective office. In contrast, only 36% of women and 32% of men serving in state senates ran for senate as their first elective office.

⁵ In these semistructured phone interviews, we asked women for their general perspectives on women's election to the state legislatures. We also asked for their interpretations of some of our key survey findings. The interviews were conducted from late October through December 2009. The interviews lasted from 30 to 60 minutes in length.

1. Women Need to Be Recruited

Women need to be encouraged to run for office. Women are more likely than men to run for office because they were recruited, rather than because they decided to run on their own.

A common explanation for the low numbers of women in public office is that women simply lack political ambition. After all, surveys of the general public typically find that women express somewhat less interest in politics than men, and women are much less likely than men to run for office. However, we find that women can be successful in reaching public office without necessarily having planned a political career. But women need to be recruited precisely because they do not usually plan to run for office.

We find in the 2008 CAWP Recruitment Study that most women state representatives ran for their first elective office because of encouragement, which echoes the findings of recent studies of candidates and potential candidates (Table 1). We call those who needed encouragement before running “pure recruits”: they had not seriously thought about becoming a candidate until someone else suggested it. Almost twice as many women as men state representatives (53% compared to 28%) were pure recruits. In contrast, women were far less likely than men to be “self-starters” who said that the initial decision to run for elective office for the first time was entirely their idea. Only about a quarter of women state representatives (26%) compared to nearly half of their male colleagues (43%) were self-starters. And fewer women than men reported that their own initiative played even a partial role in the decision to run; 22% of women compared to 29% of men reported that the decision to seek office was a mixture of their own thinking combined with the suggestion of someone else.

“I think women desire to serve, have a heart to serve, but . . . sometimes they may need that little extra push.”

Table 1
Women were more likely than men to run for their first elective office because they were recruited.

	Representatives		Senators	
	Women %	Men %	Women %	Men %
I had not seriously thought about running until someone else suggested it.	53	28	46	26
I had already thought seriously about running when someone else suggested it.	22	29	25	33
It was entirely my idea to run.	26	43	28	42
N =	528	437	166	113

2008 CAWP Recruitment Study.

“In thinking about your initial decision to seek elective office the very first time, which of the following statements most accurately describes your decision?”

We find similar gender differences among state senators. For example, 46% of women state senators compared to 26% of their male colleagues ran for their first elective office because someone else suggested it. Only 28% of women state senators can be characterized as self-starters compared to 42% of men state senators. Meanwhile, 25% of women

state senators and 33% of men state senators report that the decision to seek elective office the first time was a mixture of their own thinking and someone else’s suggestion. These gender differences among state legislators also occur within both major political parties; both Democratic and Republican women were more likely than their male colleagues to run because someone suggested it.

We also find that women legislators were less likely than men to say that the single most important reason they ran for the legislature was because of a “longstanding desire to be involved in politics.” Among state representatives, 16% of women and 29% of men ran for the state house for this reason (Table 2). In contrast, women state representatives more often than their male colleagues (24% compared to 15%) said the single most important reason they ran was because they were recruited by a party leader or elected official. Both Democratic and Republican women were more likely than their male partisan colleagues to run because they were recruited and less likely to run because of a longstanding desire to be involved in politics.

Table 2
Women and men seek state legislative office for somewhat different reasons.

	Representatives		Senators	
	Women %	Men %	Women %	Men %
My concern about one or more specific public policy issues	36	27	46	36
A party leader or an elected official asked me to run or serve	24	15	15	8
My longstanding desire to be involved in politics	16	29	15	26
My desire to change the way government works	11	17	13	20
Dissatisfaction with the incumbent	6	6	8	3
It seemed like a winnable race	2	2	1	3
Other	5	6	3	5
N =	526	439	168	115

2008 CAWP Recruitment Study.

“Other than your desire to serve the public, what was the single most important reason that you decided to seek the office you now hold?”

Gender differences are also apparent among state senators. As with state representatives, women senators were more likely than their male counterparts to run because a party leader or official recruited them (15% compared to 8%) and less likely to run because of a longstanding desire to be involved in politics (15% compared to 26%).

Why is recruitment so important to women? It may stem from cultural and psychological barriers women continue to face in society and politics. As one woman legislator we interviewed argued: “In some ways men are just seen as more competent, and men see themselves as more competent. I think it is sort of an unconscious thing.” Another woman legislator argued that because women as a group have not historically been part of the entire political process, they may doubt their abilities and need additional encouragement.

Receiving encouragement is also important because many women encounter efforts to discourage their candidacies. Somewhat more women state representatives than their male colleagues (32% compared to 25%) reported that someone tried to discourage them from running the very first time they sought elective office.⁶ There is also a gender difference among state senators, but the difference is smaller (34% of women compared to 30% of men).

"It never occurred to me that I could run for office . . . I had to have other people, whom I respected, encourage me and tell me I was capable."

Particularly troubling is that women of color were even more likely than their non-Hispanic white female Democratic colleagues in the state houses to have encountered an effort to discourage them from running (42% versus 28%).⁷ However, like their non-Hispanic white female Democratic colleagues, women of color said they had not seriously thought about running until someone else suggested it (48% of women of color compared to 54% of non-Hispanic white women).

The women (and men) in our study were strong enough to persevere, running for and winning office despite discouragement. However, there may be many more potential candidates who were deterred from running because of the negative reactions they encountered.

In sum, suggestion is a powerful force motivating women to run for public office. Because women are so much less likely than men to have planned to run, far fewer of these women would probably be in state legislatures today were it not for the encouragement they received. Women need encouragement and support, not only to persuade them to run but also to counteract any efforts aimed at dissuading them from running.

⁶ The exact question wording was: "When you were making your initial decision to seek elective office the very first time, did anyone try to discourage you from running?"

⁷ The sources of discouragement efforts encountered by Democratic state representatives who are women of color were similar to non-Hispanic white female Democratic state representatives. However, women of color were more likely to have encountered an effort to discourage their candidacy from an appointed or elected official than were non-Hispanic white women (23% compared to 6%).

2. Political Parties Matter

It is critical that women candidates attract party support. Women who reach the legislature usually do so with the support of their parties.

Because women tend to run for office as a result of recruitment, political parties are central to understanding women’s election to office. Parties encourage candidates to run, discourage candidates from running, and may even endorse candidates in primaries. It is often argued that interest groups and political action committees (PACs) have eclipsed the role of political parties, but we find that parties and elected officials are the most influential agents of recruitment (Table 3). We asked those state legislators who ran because they were encouraged or recruited to run about the most influential actor in encouraging them. Women and men state representatives identified similar sources of encouragement for their very first bids for elective office. For example, among women and men state representatives, a political actor—a party official and/or legislative leader or an elected or appointed officeholder—was the single most influential source of encouragement. The second most frequently mentioned recruitment source was personal: the respondent’s spouse or partner; another family member; or a friend, co-worker, or acquaintance. Least common was an organizational source of encouragement. Thus, parties and officeholders—rather than organizations—appear to be the key agents of recruitment.

Table 3
For both women and men, a political actor was the most influential source of recruitment when they ran for their first elective office.

	Representatives	
	Women %	Men %
<i>Political</i>		
A party official and/or legislative leader from my party	24	28
An elected or appointed officeholder	24	27
<i>Personal</i>		
My spouse or partner	16	11
A family member (other than spouse)	6	5
A friend, co-worker, or acquaintance	16	19
<i>Organizational</i>		
A member of a women’s organization	4	1
A member of another organization or association	8	7
<i>Other</i>		
	2	2
N =	386	247

2008 CAWP Recruitment Study.

Data are presented for those legislators who ran because they were encouraged or recruited (not self-starters).

“Who was the most influential person in encouraging you to run?”

Political parties play an important role in deterring candidacy as well. We find that the most common sources of discouragement of the legislator’s very first candidacy—for both women and men—were political sources. Among state representatives, for example, political party officials and officeholders were more often cited as sources of discouragement than were personal or organizational sources (Table 4). Thus, parties can facilitate candidacies, but they can also discourage the candidacies of both women and men.

Table 4
For both women and men, a political actor was the most common source of efforts to discourage candidacy.

	Representatives	
	Women %	Men %
Political		
A party official and/or legislative leader from my party	30	30
An elected or appointed officeholder	20	26
Personal		
My spouse or partner	9	9
A family member (other than spouse)	27	22
A friend, co-worker, or acquaintance	23	34
Organizational		
A member of a women's organization	5	2
A member of another organization or association	14	16
Other		
	7	5
N =	166	107

2008 CAWP Recruitment Study.

Columns may sum to more than 100 because respondents could check more than one actor. Data are presented for those legislators who experienced efforts to discourage their candidacies.

“When you were making your initial decision to seek elective office the very first time, did anyone try to discourage you from running? (Probe): Who tried to discourage you?”

Some have suggested that political parties are the main obstacle to increasing women’s representation, whereas others argue that political parties are the solution. We find neither statement to be entirely true: women state representatives did not suffer from lack of party encouragement nor did they benefit from a disproportionate amount of party encouragement. In both 2008 and 1981, about half of state representatives reported that party leaders actively sought them out and encouraged them to run for their current office.⁸ Among state representatives serving in 2008, a slightly larger proportion of women than men (55% compared to 50%) were asked to run for their current office by party leaders. However, gender differences were greater among state senators. In 2008, 57% of women state senators compared to 43% of their male colleagues were encouraged to run for the senate. In 1981, as well, more women state senators than male senators were sought out and encouraged to run (54% compared to 34%).

⁸ The exact question wording was: “Think back to the first time you ran for the legislative office you now hold. Did leaders from your party actively seek you out and encourage you to run for this office?”

We asked all legislators how the party reacted to their candidacy when they first decided to run for their current office. In 2008 women state representatives were slightly more likely than men to say that party leaders “generally” supported their candidacy, whereas in 1981 women were slightly less likely than men to say they received party support (Table 5). Women state representatives were less likely in 2008 than in 1981 to report that party leaders were divided in their reactions to their candidacy, with some party leaders supportive and others opposed. The pattern among state senators is largely similar.

Table 5
Women and men report similar levels of party support for their candidacies.

	Representatives			
	2008		1981	
	Women %	Men %	Women %	Men %
Party leaders generally supported my candidacy.	68	66	61	72
Party leaders generally opposed my candidacy.	5	7	6	6
Party leaders neither supported nor opposed my candidacy.	14	15	14	11
Party leaders were divided in their reactions to my candidacy; some were supportive, but others were opposed.	14	12	18	11
N =	529	438	429	196

2008 and 1981 CAWP Recruitment Studies.

“Again, think back to the first time you ran for the office you now hold. Which of the following statements best characterizes the reactions of your party’s leaders to your candidacy?”

We also find a gender difference in perceptions of the importance of party support. More women state representatives than their male colleagues rated “having the support of my party” as very important to their decision to run for the legislature (35% compared to 25%). This difference is also evident among state senators (38% compared to 23%). This gender gap in beliefs may reflect the fact that women legislators are more likely than their male colleagues to run because they were recruited by the party. But it may also mean that women are more reluctant than men to run without the party nod. In some states, it may be important for women to attract the notice and support of party leaders. One woman legislator explained that in her state, winning the party’s endorsement means you need to “satisfy the party” by paying “your dues to the party. And you have to be perceived as having worked your way up from a lower level.”

Though it is a less common path to the legislature, reaching the legislature through an appointment may require even greater support from party leaders than the electoral route. Although the overwhelming majority of state legislators reach their offices through election, some legislators, because of a midterm vacancy, are appointed to their seats. Similar proportions of women state representatives and their male colleagues were appointed (6% compared to 5%). There is a slight difference among state senators, however: 5% of women state senators compared with 8% of men state senators were appointed to their seats. This suggests that women may not be seeking and winning appointments to the senate at the same rates as their male colleagues.

Winning support from the parties is key to reaching public office for women as well as men. Given the flagging numbers of women in state legislatures, both major political parties—including women within the parties—could expand their efforts to recruit and support women candidates. This is especially true for the Republican party, given the decline in the number of Republican women. Women leaders, in particular, can play an important role in candidate recruitment.⁹ As one women legislator we interviewed explained, “I think it takes women in the legislative leadership who are doing the recruiting to put a special effort into finding women candidates. And I think when women aren’t in leadership, that is a lot less likely to happen.”

“It is not that men in leadership don’t recruit women. They just don’t recruit as many, and they don’t put the extra effort into recruiting women who are sometimes harder to get to get to run. I think there are fewer women in the legislature because much more often men are in charge.”

Both political parties could also reach out to encourage more women of color to seek office and support their candidacies. Compared to their Democratic female colleagues, women of color in state houses are less likely to reach elective office because they were recruited by a party leader or elected official, and they are less likely to have party support when they run. Women of color were less likely to report that the party supported their candidacy (46% versus 73%) and more likely to have faced party leader opposition (15% versus 4%) or faced neutral or divided party leaders (39% versus 24%). The differential experience with recruitment is likely due in part to the fact that women of color are more likely to be elected from districts where the party is less active in recruitment.¹⁰ Still, these findings suggest an opportunity for further efforts to identify and support women candidates of color.

⁹ In 2009, only 11 Democratic state party chairs and 8 Republican state party chairs are women. In addition, women hold only 15% of state legislative leadership positions. These statistics mean that relatively few women are leading their parties’ candidate recruitment efforts.

¹⁰ Among Democratic state representatives, 55% of women of color compared to 70% of non-Hispanic white women said the party is somewhat or very active in candidate recruitment in their districts.

3. Organizations Help Women Run

Organizations are encouraging women to run for office, but they have not been the most important source of encouragement for women's candidacies. Organizations could be more active in candidate recruitment.

The most influential sources of recruitment are parties and officeholders—not organizations. However, organizations play a larger role in women's decisions to run for the state house and the state senate than in men's—perhaps because women need more encouragement and support to run for office. This is true today as it was in 1981. In 2008, for example, 28% of women state representatives reported that an organization other than their party played a particularly important role in getting them to run the first time for their current office, compared to 19% of men state representatives. In 1981, the gender difference was slightly larger, with 34% of women state representatives but only 16% of their male colleagues reporting that an organization was important. Organizations played a larger role for the candidacies of women state senators as well.

Women and men were tapped to run by different types of organizations. For example, among those state representatives who reported that organizational encouragement was important to their candidacy, 29% of women compared to only 4% of men named a women's organization as playing that important role. Moreover, women's organizations were the most common type of organization mentioned by women. In addition to gender differences, there also were differences by political party. For example, Democratic women state representatives were more likely than Republican women to cite a women's organization, a teachers' organization, or an environmental organization as a source of encouragement; Republican women were more likely than Democratic women to mention a business or professional organization, a community organization, or a school, church, or service organization.

"It would increase the number of women running if there were more outside sources making that suggestion to women, be it through political avenues [or] special interest groups. I think that would increase our numbers."

We also asked women legislators a specific question about whether or not one or more women's organizations actively encouraged them to run the first time for their current office. Among state representatives, women's organizations appear to be slightly less important now than they were in 1981. In 2008, 21% of women state representatives reported that a women's organization actively encouraged them to run, compared to 27% of women in 1981. In contrast, there has been a slight increase in the role of women's organizations for state senators (30% of women state senators in 2008 compared to 26% in 1981). Women's organizations played a greater role in motivating the candidacies of Democratic than Republican women. In 2008, 24% of Democratic women state representatives compared to only 16% of Republican women state representatives said they received encouragement from a women's organization. This party difference was smaller among state senators (32% of Democratic women state senators compared to 29% of Republican women state senators).

Those interested in encouraging more women to run will find that Democratic and Republican women are active in different types of organizations. Table 6 demonstrates that there are both party and gender differences in the types of organizations in which legislators were active before they ran for the legislature. Women of both parties were much

more likely than men of their parties to report involvement in women’s organizations prior to their first candidacy. Among Democrats, women were less likely than men to have been active in a labor organization (17% compared to 26%). Meanwhile, Republican women were slightly less active in a business or professional group than their male partisan colleagues (56% compared to 63%). Republican women were more likely than their male colleagues to have been active in a church-related or other religious group (70% compared to 62%). Meanwhile, among Democratic state representatives, women of color were more likely than non-Hispanic white women to be active in civil rights or race/ethnic organizations (65% versus 23%), church-related or religious groups (57% versus 40%), and business/professional groups (61% versus 47%).

Table 6
Women were active in a wide range of organizations and a majority of women in both parties were active in women’s organizations before running for the legislature.

	Representatives			
	Democrats		Republicans	
	Women %	Men %	Women %	Men %
Business or professional group	49	51	56	63
Service club (e.g., Rotary)	40	35	49	49
Teachers’ organization	21	19	14	13
Labor organization	17	26	6	6
Children or youth organization	50	44	54	45
Women’s organization	53	7	56	6
A church-related or other religious group	43	46	70	62
Civil rights or race/ethnic group	29	26	10	7
N =	361	227	171	208

2008 CAWP Recruitment Study.

“Prior to becoming a candidate for the first time, how active were you in any of the following organizations?”

We also found that Democratic women were more likely than Republican women to belong to most types of women’s organizations (Table 7). It is possible that the party gap in women’s officeholding is partly due to differences in these types of organizational connections. Women’s organizations, many of which are pro-choice, seem to provide an important base of support for Democratic women’s candidacies. Republican women lack a comparable base of support from women’s organizations, in part because of the difficulties that the abortion issue can present for Republican women candidates.

Table 7

Democratic women were more likely than Republican women to belong to most types of women’s organizations before running for elective office.

	Representatives		Senators	
	Democratic Women %	Republican Women %	Democratic Women %	Republican Women %
League of Women Voters	29	16	29	23
Other women’s civic organization	40	43	50	46
A business or professional women’s organization	39	36	40	35
A conservative women’s organization (e.g., Concerned Women for America, Eagle Forum)	1	8	0	10
A feminist group (e.g., NOW, WPC)	34	12	29	12
An organization of women public officials	3	6	3	2
A sorority	23	31	35	33
A women’s PAC (e.g., EMILY’s List, WISH List, Susan B. Anthony List)	22	6	17	5
N =	337 to 352	157 to 162	115 to 121	39 to 41

2008 CAWP Recruitment Study.

“Have you ever been a member of the following organizations? If yes, please indicate whether you were a member before you ran the first time for any elective office or whether you joined later.”

Given the low numbers of women in the state legislatures, organizations should expand their candidate recruitment activities. More efforts are needed to reach Republican women in particular because of the declining number of Republican women in legislatures. Organizations could be especially valuable by helping to forge connections between women candidates and party leaders.

4. More Women Can Run

The pool of women candidates is larger than is commonly believed.

Conventional wisdom suggests that there are common pathways into politics that candidates tend to follow. Consequently, those interested in recruiting women candidates tend to look for women candidates in the same places where they look for men candidates. However, our findings suggest the conventional wisdom may be erroneous; women and men may follow different pathways into politics. We find several notable gender differences in how women and men reach the legislature. These gender differences in prior political experience, occupational background, and family factors indicate that the pool of women potential candidates is much larger than is commonly believed.

Our findings suggest that women need not have a longstanding plan for a political career nor follow a set of carefully calculated steps in order to reach the legislature. Many women and men successfully reach the legislature without prior elective or appointive officeholding experience.¹¹ Just under half of women state representatives (44%) and over one-third of their male colleagues (37%) had no elective or appointive experience before serving in their state houses.

Thus, holding a lower level office is not a prerequisite to serving in the legislature; a seat in the lower house of the legislature is often the first elected position for both women and men. Indeed, state representative was the very first elective office sought for 61% of women state representatives and 51% of their male colleagues. Those who recruit candidates should combat the widespread impression that women must begin their political careers at the local level and make clear that women can run for the legislature as their very first bid for elective office.

The women legislators we interviewed emphasized that the path to the legislature is not clearly defined. Many emphasized the importance of experience in the community without delineating a particular type of experience. For example, one woman legislator explained that in her state legislature, which she called a “citizen’s legislature,” “it is not career politicians...just small business people, retired farmers and teachers. In this state your qualifications are just to be well-known and respected in your town.” Another woman legislator argued that “a well-rounded life experience” is what a legislator needs.

“The fact of the matter is women are still predominantly the person expected, and in most cases doing, the mothering and parenting and juggling of the home front. That weighs heavily.”

One woman legislator explained that in her experience of recruiting candidates, the ability to win outweighed a particular qualification: “Quite frankly, when we are recruiting, the first thing we look for is someone who can win the race.” Another woman argued that in recruiting candidates, leaders of her citizen legislature “look for people who are going to be likeable by the public, who are going to work hard, who have some background in their community.”

In our study, we find that among those who had held office prior to serving in the legislature, there are gender differences in where women and men got their start. Women state representatives who arrived at the legislature with some prior elective or appointive experience most commonly started on a local or county board or commission. This was true in both 2008 and 1981. In 2008, 38% of the women state representatives who had prior experience served on

¹¹ The exact question wording was: “Prior to serving in your current office, had you ever held an elective or appointive position—including boards and commissions—at any level of government? (Do not include political party positions.)”

a local or county board or commission (other than school board) as their very first public office, as did 34% of women in 1981. Because many legislators begin on a local board or commission, state laws that require gender balance on boards and commissions are likely to have important effects on women's state legislative officeholding.¹²

There has been some change over time, with school board having become a more common starting place for women, and state boards or commissions less common. In 2008, 26% of women with pre-legislative officeholding experience served on a local or county school board as their very first office compared to 15% in 1981. Meanwhile, in 2008, only 10% of women with experience got their start on a state board or commission, whereas in 1981, 21% of women did so.

Women state representatives were more likely than their male colleagues to start on a school board (26% compared to 16%) or a local or county board or commission (38% compared to 32%). Only 16% of women served on a local council as their first office compared to 27% of men. There are also some notable differences in the officeholding patterns of Democratic and Republican women. Democratic women state representatives were more likely to get their start on a local council than Republican women. And while the two groups of women were equally likely to start out on a local or county board (other than school board), Republican women were more likely than Democratic women to report a local or county school board as their very first office.

"If you see somebody who is a strong education advocate [ask them], 'have you thought about transferring that passion to the school board and shaping policy for children?' Or, 'have you thought about going to the legislature?' So you sometimes have to help people get a vision for moving beyond where they are."

Women state senators were more likely than women state representatives to have held an appointed or elected office prior to winning their current office (72% of women state senators compared to 56% of women state representatives). But women state senators and men state senators were about equally likely to have held a prior office (72% of women state senators compared to 70% of men state senators).

Where did women state senators get their start in electoral politics? Among those state senators who sought an elective office before running for the senate, 32% of women compared to 48% of men first ran for a state house seat. School board was the second most commonly sought first elective office among women senators (22% of women compared to 10% of men). Meanwhile, 18% of women state senators compared to 22% of their male colleagues who ran for a prior office sought a local council position, and 8% of both women and men ran for a county commissioner position.

In addition to coming from different types of prior officeholding experiences, female and male state legislators come from somewhat different occupations (Table 8). To some extent, gender differences in occupational background have narrowed over the past quarter century. For example, a slightly larger percentage of women state representatives today are lawyers (9%) compared to 1981 (6%); 11% of women state senators now are lawyers compared to 6% in 1981. But women are much more likely than men to come from health and education fields, whereas men are more likely

¹² Some states require gender balance on appointive state and local boards and commissions. For example, in 2009 Iowa adopted a gender-balance law that affects appointments to local boards; it already had a law mandating gender balance on state boards. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, other states with gender balance laws include Connecticut, Illinois, Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Rhode Island, and Utah.

to come from business and law. This is the case today as it was in 1981. These occupational differences suggest a recruitment strategy that targets not only the male-dominated occupations, such as business and law, from which male officeholders have traditionally been drawn, but also certain female-dominated occupations that provide women with substantive expertise and networks that they can utilize in the political arena. Women’s status in the legal profession has improved since the early 1980s, but it remains the case that many more women work as nurses and teachers than as lawyers.

Table 8
 Women are more likely than men to come from education and health occupations and less likely to come from business and law.

	Representatives			
	2008		1981	
	Women %	Men %	Women %	Men %
Elementary or secondary school teacher	18	11	20	6
Nurse or other health worker (excludes physician)	8	1	4	0
Lawyer	9	14	6	15
Self-employed/ small business owner/ business owner	7	9	5	15
Farmer	3	6	2	11
Not employed outside the home	4	0	17	0
N =	509	424	436	188

2008 and 1981 CAWP Recruitment Studies.
 “Aside from holding public office, what is or was your primary occupation?”

Those interested in electing more women might also consider recruiting women who are motivated by public policy issues. In both 2008 and 1981, women state legislators were more likely than their male colleagues to rate “my concern about one or two particular public policy issues” as very important in their decisions to run for the legislature. This is one of the few gender differences that increased over time, with notably larger proportions of women citing concern about public policy in 2008 than in 1981. For example, 44% of women state representatives rated this factor as very important in 2008 compared to 32% of women in 1981. In contrast, the proportion of men rating this factor as very important was only slightly larger in 2008 than in 1981 (32% compared to 29%). Women state senators were also more likely than their male colleagues to rate public policy as more important in both years.

Moreover, when asked about the “single most important reason” that they decided to seek their current office, the most common response among women state representatives, but not men, was “my concern about one or more specific public policy issues.” Considerably more women state representatives than men gave this public policy response

“I think there is no specific formula or recipe for a successful legislator in terms of experience.”

(36% compared to 27%) (Table 2, page 9). Greater proportions of both women and men state senators gave the public policy response, with public policy the single most important reason that both women and men gave for seeking their current office; however, women state senators were more likely to cite public policy than their male colleagues (46% compared to 36%).

Concern over public policy issues provides a motivational boost toward candidacy for more women than men who ultimately find their way into the legislature, and this seems more true today than in 1981. As one woman legislator we interviewed explained, “I still think that men are more likely to see political office as a career at a young age, whereas women are more likely to end up there because they get involved in an issue and that turns out to be the way to influence the issue.”

A final, important difference in the backgrounds of women and men legislators concerns family considerations. Women’s roles in society have changed dramatically since 1981. But we find that the gendered division of labor within the home continues to have implications for the decision to seek office as well as the timing of women’s political careers. Although family considerations affect both women and men, they continue to play a larger role in women’s candidacies. For example, the factor “my children being old enough” was rated as very important in the decision to run for the legislature by larger proportions of women state representatives than their male colleagues in both 2008 (57% compared to 42%) and 1981 (57% compared to 38%).

Marital status and parental status constitute striking and persistent gender differences among state legislators. For example, women state representatives, like women in the general population, are much less likely than their male counterparts to be married or living as married (71% compared to 88%), and they are more likely than their male colleagues to be divorced, separated, or widowed (25% compared to 6%). In addition, women state representatives are much less likely than men to be parents of young children (Table 9). In 2008, for example, 3% of women had a child under six compared to 8% of men; similarly, in 1981, 4% of women compared to 12% of men had a child under the age of six.

Table 9
Women are less likely than men to have young children.

	Representatives			
	2008		1981	
	Women %	Men %	Women %	Men %
Child Under 6	3	8	4	12
Child Under 18	14	22	33	40
N =	531	438	429	193

2008 and 1981 CAWP Recruitment Studies.

The interviews we conducted with women state legislators echo these findings from the surveys. Family factors were often cited as an explanation for why more women do not seek public office. One woman legislator explained, “I think women and men weigh considerations about children and spouses differently. And I also think it is much harder for

women....If you are the primary parent, and most women are the primary parent, it is a harder decision to make and you need a lot of support." She also noted that a male legislator may have a spouse who can help care for the children full-time, but that "a wife seldom has a stay-at-home wife." Because of the time demands of running for the legislature, candidacy may pose a more difficult choice for a woman who needs to "replace herself" in terms of her domestic responsibilities when she is not at home.

Other women legislators we interviewed spoke of the challenges women with young children face with voters—as well as with their colleagues. Cultural questions remain about the acceptability of women combining politics with a young family. For example, one woman legislator we interviewed, who is a parent, was asked by a voter, "Can you handle all [of] this?"—a question probably much more frequently asked of female than male candidates. Another legislator observed: "You would never find a woman with children on her campaign sign. Unfortunately, the assumption would be that she is too busy, [that] she would not be able to meet the demands professionally." Another issue is travel to the legislature. One legislator explained that "there is still a stigma for a woman to leave on Monday and come back and be with her family on Friday."

"We [women] are not really ones to just throw ourselves at something if we don't think we can be successful at it... [But] anyone can do this, if you are willing to do the job, [and] put the time in."

Because of these gender differences in family situation, those interested in recruiting more women to office should focus their efforts on older, as well as younger, women. Some younger women may be ready to run because they do not yet have pressing family responsibilities. And some women will be able to balance their roles as legislators with young children at home. However, older women are the most likely to run because their children are grown and their family responsibilities have diminished. Indeed, we find that women legislators first ran for their current office at an average age of 50.

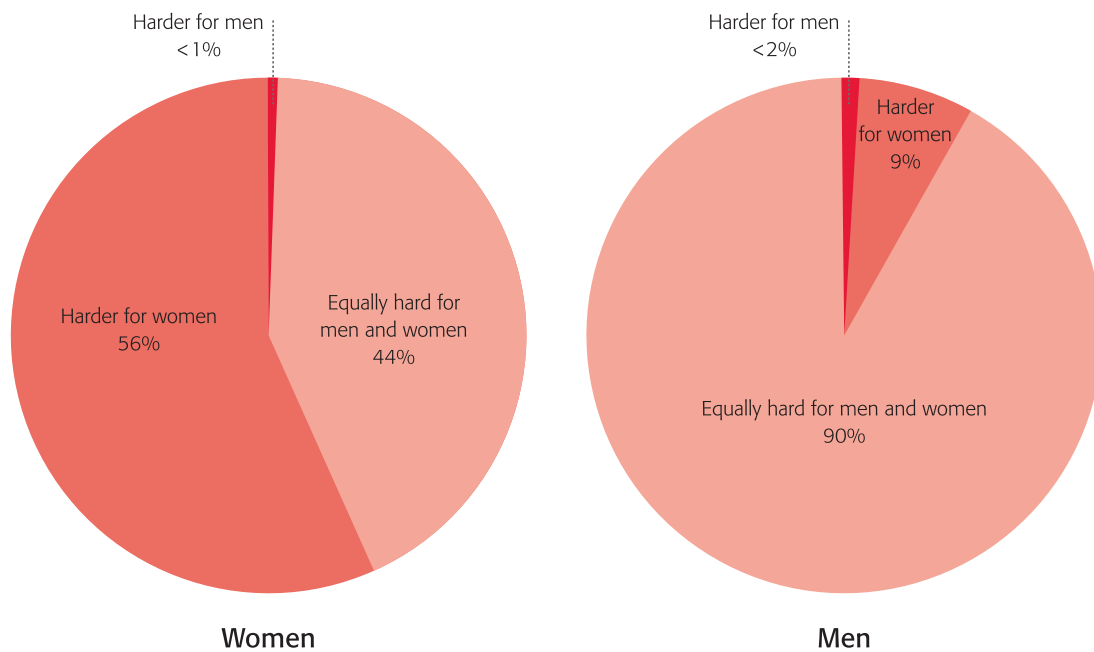
5. Resources are Important

More funding and training can help women win.

Fundraising and training support are needed to increase the numbers of women among state legislators. As costs of campaigning for state legislatures have increased over time in many states, money has become an important consideration for larger proportions of both women and men in 2008 as compared to 1981. Although the gender difference is not large, in both 2008 and 1981 women state representatives were more likely than their male colleagues to regard “having sufficient financial resources to conduct a viable campaign” as very important to their decisions to run for the legislatures.

Parties, interest groups, and individuals interested in recruiting women must take the fundraising hurdle into account. Despite empirical evidence—mostly from general election races at the congressional level—that women candidates can and often do raise as much money as men, women continue to express more concern than men over their ability to raise sufficient funds (Figure 3). This issue generated one of the largest gender differences in our study. A majority of women state representatives (56%) compared to a small minority of men (9%) agreed that “It is harder for female candidates to raise money than male candidates.” In contrast, fewer than half the women state representatives (44%), but an overwhelming majority of their male colleagues (90%), expressed the view that “It is equally hard for both [male and female candidates].” Almost no women or men agreed that it is harder for male candidates to raise money than female candidates. Gender differences in the responses of state senators were virtually identical to those among state representatives.

Figure 3
Women and men hold very different opinions about whether it is more difficult for women to raise campaign funds.



*2008 CAWP Recruitment Study.
Data are for representatives.*

“If they cultivate their fundraising skills, women are as good at it as men are.”

In the view of women state representatives, the single most important reason that it is harder for women to raise money is that women do not have the same networks as men. This response was offered by 41% of women state representatives who agreed that women have greater difficulty raising money. The second most important reason was that women are less comfortable asking for money for themselves—a response given by 33% of women state representatives. Fewer women, 16%, pointed to women having to raise money in smaller denominations as the most important reason for gender disparities in fundraising. The reasons provided by women state senators were similar, except that women senators were slightly more likely to identify comfort level as an important reason (38% of women state senators compared to 33% of women state representatives) and slightly less likely to identify networks as important (33% of women state senators compared to 41% of women state representatives).

Many of the women legislators we interviewed confirmed the view of women in the surveys. Some women legislators pointed to differences in both the types of networks that legislators can access and comfort levels in asking for money. Still others argued that women are not as likely as men to support candidates financially and make smaller contributions when they do give. For example, one woman legislator observed “Women ...are giving because they are excited for another woman to be in politics, whereas some men may be understanding they are giving money for a certain reason, for a certain outcome, so they therefore give larger amounts to accomplish that outcome.” According to one woman legislator, the fact that men are less likely than women to think that it is harder for women to fundraise shows that they are “not aware that they are already ahead of women before the game even starts.”

“Guys are used to writing big checks and they have more male associates they can get that kind of money from.”

Among Democratic state representatives, women of color are even more likely than white women to believe that it is more difficult for women than men to fundraise (74% of women of color compared to 60% of non-Hispanic white women). One woman legislator we interviewed identified fundraising challenges for women of color in particular: “I think a lot of it has to do with the areas we represent, the positions that we take. But that is [a] unique [obstacle] to African American women.”

Potential women candidates often feel that they do not have sufficient political experience to run for office. But except for previous officeholding, women have more experience than their male counterparts at the time they run for the legislature. For example, women state legislators are more likely than their male counterparts to have attended a candidate training program or workshop, which is true today as it was in 1981. In 2008, 75% of women state representatives attended at least one training compared to 60% of men; in 1981, 58% of women and 43% of men attended at least one training. Likewise, female state senators were more likely to have attended a training than were male state senators in both 2008 and 1981.

In the words of one woman legislator, trainings may help women “feel that they can do the job and answer the questions.” Another explained that women appreciate the “additional learning experience” offered by a training, arguing that “it helps build their confidence and build a foundation for them.” As one woman legislator explained,

appearance and image issues present “more of a tightrope for women than for men.” Campaign trainings and workshops can help women contend with these and other gender-related obstacles they may face.

Women, both Democrats and Republicans, are somewhat more likely than men to have been active in their political parties. Women and men state representatives had similar levels of experience at the local level; 42% of both women and men served as members or chairs of their local party committees before running for the legislature. But women were somewhat more likely than men (12% compared to 7%) to have served as members or chairs of the party’s state or national committees and slightly more likely (33% compared to 29%) to have attended a party convention.

“Women are more likely to think . . . ‘This is going to be tough. I don’t know how to do this. I’ve never done this before. I am not sure I can do it. So I need all the help I can get.’”

Such differences also exist among state senators. Women state senators were more likely than their male colleagues to have been members or chairs of their local party committees before running for the legislature (43% compared to 37%) and more likely to have attended a party convention (42% compared to 36%). Similar proportions of women and men state senators (11%) served as members or chairs of the party’s state or national committees.

Another area in which women and men differ is that women are more likely to have had campaign and staff experience. In 2008, as in 1981, women state legislators were more likely to have worked on a campaign or on the staff of an elected public official than their male colleagues. For example, in 2008, women state representatives were more likely to have worked on the campaign of a male candidate (67% compared to 56%), more likely to have worked on the campaign of a female candidate (44% compared to 34%), more likely to have worked on the staff of a male elected public official (19% compared to 16%) and more likely to have worked on the staff of a female elected public official (9% compared to 6%). The experiences of state senators largely mirror those of state representatives, except that women state senators were more likely than women state representatives to have worked on the campaign of a female candidate (51% compared to 44%), and that gender differences in staff experience were slightly smaller or reversed.¹³

These gender differences raise the question of whether women need so much experience to reach the legislature successfully. Perhaps women acquire more experience in order to bolster their confidence and feel sufficiently qualified. Our interviews suggest this might well be the case. One woman legislator explained that women may have more experience because they want “to feel solid about their credentials before they put themselves out there.” Similarly, another legislator suggested it was “an act of self protection”—that having more experience helped women feel more secure. Perhaps there is a double standard, with more expected of women candidates; maybe women have to have more experience than men in order for voters and gatekeepers to view them as equally qualified. This may be particularly true for women of color. As one African American woman legislator explained, “Women have to prove themselves doubly, and minority women have to [prove themselves] even more so.” We cannot distinguish between explanations and say with certainty why women acquire more experience than men. Nevertheless the pattern of women being more qualified is clearly evident.

“Women . . . have to prove themselves, whereas men are given the presumption of competence until they disprove it.”

.....

¹³ Among state senators, 22% of women and 24% of men had worked for a male elected public official and 7% of women and 6% of men had worked for a female official.

It does appear that women worry less today than they did in 1981 about having sufficient political experience, perhaps because women now feel less societal pressure than they once did to prove that they are qualified to hold office. In 2008, similar proportions of women and men state representatives rated the factor “making sure I had sufficient prior political experience” as very important to their decision to run for the legislature (14% compared to 16%). In contrast, in 1981, women state representatives were more likely than their male colleagues to rate this factor as very important to their decision to run (24% compared to 17%). On the other hand, women state representatives remain more likely than their male colleagues to rate as very important “the realization that I was just as capable of holding office as most officeholders.” In 2008, 64% of women and 54% of men rated this factor as very important.

Table 10
Women are more confident about running for office today than they were in 1981.

	Representatives			
	2008		1981	
	Women %	Men %	Women %	Men %
Realization that I was just as capable	64	54	80	66
Sufficient prior political experience	14	16	24	17

2008 and 1981 CAWP Recruitment Studies.

N ranges from 199 to 528.

Columns can sum to more than 100% because state legislators rated the importance of each factor.

“Below are various factors that have been suggested to be important in influencing decisions to run for office. Please indicate how important each factor was in affecting your decision to run the first time for the office you now hold.”

Women’s decisions to seek a state senate seat differed from women’s decisions to seek a state representative seat in several ways. Several factors were rated as very important by more women state senators than state representatives. For example, 77% of women state senators compared to 64% of women state representatives rated as very important in their decision to seek their current office “the realization that I was just as capable of holding office as most officeholders.” This finding suggests that it takes more self-confidence to run for a higher level office. Similarly, 50% of women state senators rated as very important “having sufficient financial resources to conduct a viable campaign” compared to only 39% of women state representatives. This finding likely reflects the higher costs of senate races in most states. In addition, 25% of women state senators compared to 14% of women state representatives rated as very important “making sure I had sufficient prior political experience.” This difference is consistent with the fact that the state senate is less often an entry-level position; most who run for the senate have sought and held other offices.

Conclusion

In order to understand how more women can be elected to office, we studied the experiences, backgrounds, and pathways of those women who have reached the legislatures. Our strategy has been to learn from the women who have been successful and to share that knowledge with women interested in running for office and with the activists, organizations, and political leaders concerned with electing more women to office.

Women legislators need to be recruited because they do not usually decide to run on their own. This means that political parties, public officials, and organizations (especially women’s organizations) must expand their efforts to encourage women to run for office. Because the vast majority of women who are elected to office get there with the support of their political parties, concerted efforts are needed to forge stronger connections between potential women candidates and the parties.

Although the number of women serving in the legislatures has increased over the past several decades, women and men continue to take different pathways to politics. These differences in backgrounds and experiences suggest new strategies for recruiting women. Those interested in recruiting more women candidates should:

- Look to women employed in female-dominated occupations such as education and health care as well as traditionally male-dominated occupations such as law and business.
- Convince women who are public policy advocates to pursue those issues as elected officials.
- Recruit women of various ages, but recognize that older women may be more likely than others to be ready to run now because their family responsibilities have lessened.
- Emphasize that local elective experience is not a prerequisite and that the state legislature can be an entry-level office. Service at every level of office is valuable, but women need not think of local office as the only viable first step.
- Help women potential candidates gain the experience and training they feel they need and reassure them that they are capable of running and winning.
- Ensure that women have sufficient financial support. Perceptions about the difficulties of fundraising may deter women from becoming candidates.

Addressing the flagging numbers of women in elective office is critical. Women’s representation is needed to tackle the complex policy questions facing state legislatures—policies that will impact generations to come. Today’s gender imbalance in officeholding has long-term consequences for representation because many of today’s state legislators will be tomorrow’s statewide and federal leaders.

Appendix

Data for the 2008 and 1981 CAWP Recruitment Studies were gathered through survey instruments sent to legislators in all fifty states. The 2008 CAWP Recruitment Study was designed in large part to replicate the original 1981 CAWP Recruitment Study. Many of the questions included on the 1981 survey were repeated on the 2008 survey, and the 2008 sampling strategy was modeled on the 1981 study.

In 2008 we surveyed the population of women state senators (N=423); the population of women state representatives (N=1,314); a random sample of men state senators, stratified by state and sampled in proportion to the number of women from each state in the population of women state senators (N=423); and a random sample of men state representatives (N=1,314), stratified by state and sampled in proportion to the number of women from each state in the population of women state representatives. A total of 1,268 legislators completed the survey for an overall response rate of 36.5%.¹⁴

The 2008 CAWP Recruitment Study was administered by the research firm Abt/SRBI Inc. Data collection began in late January 2008 and continued through early September 2008. Respondents received an initial letter informing them of the study and inviting them to complete the survey online. This letter was also sent electronically to those respondents with publicly available email addresses. Respondents who did not complete the web survey after this initial invitation were sent a paper copy of the survey instrument with a postage-paid, self-addressed return envelope. Non-respondents were subsequently re-contacted with reminder messages and additional copies of the survey instrument. Towards the end of the data collection period, remaining non-respondents received phone call reminder messages as well as invitations to complete the survey by phone. Most respondents (63.2%) completed the paper version of the survey although some respondents completed the web version (27.6%) or phone version (9.1%). Respondents were promised confidentiality.

In 1981 we surveyed the population of women state senators (N=137); the population of women state representatives (N=769); a systematic sample of men state senators, stratified by state and sampled in proportion to the number of women from each state in the population of women state senators (N=136); and a systematic sample of men state representatives (N=382), stratified by state and sampled in proportion to half the number of women from each state in the population of women state representatives.¹⁵ A total of 789 legislators completed the survey for an overall response rate of 55.4%.¹⁶ The survey was conducted by mail.

Data collection for the 1981 CAWP Recruitment Study took place between May and July 1981. Respondents were mailed a paper copy of the survey instrument with a postage-paid, self-addressed return envelope. Two weeks later, all non-respondents received a second copy of the questionnaire. Respondents were promised confidentiality.

¹⁴ The response rate was higher among women than men. The response rates were as follows: women state senators, 40.7%; men state senators, 27.9%; women state representatives, 40.7%; and men state representatives, 33.6%.

¹⁵ The men were sampled in this manner to ensure that we compared women and men who served in similar political and legislative environments. A list of men state legislators was constructed from a directory published by the Council of State Governments. The list of women state legislators was obtained from the Center for American Women and Politics. At the time of this study, women constituted 12.1% of state legislators (CAWP 1981).

¹⁶ The response rate was higher among women than men. The response rates were as follows: women state senators, 53.3%; men state senators, 50.0%; women state representatives, 58.1%; and men state representatives, 52.6%.