

Can More Women Run? Reevaluating Women's Election to the State Legislatures

Susan J. Carroll
scarroll@rci.rutgers.edu
Rutgers University

and

Kira Sanbonmatsu
sanbon@rci.rutgers.edu
Rutgers University

Abstract: Do men and women take similar or different paths to public office? In this paper we examine the occupational and educational backgrounds, family situations, and prior political experiences of women state legislators and their male counterparts. We assess the utility of three different possible explanations for changes and continuities observed in the pathways women legislators have followed into office over time: an assimilation model, a convergence model, and a persistent differences model. We present findings from two nationwide surveys of state legislators conducted by the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) in 1981 and 2008 as well as from semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted in 2009 with 22 women legislators from 15 states. Although we find some limited support for each of the three models, the preponderance of evidence is consistent with a model of persistent gender differences over time in pathways into office. Some past studies have suggested that increases in the number of women officeholders will depend on whether or not women attain those credentials associated with men's election to office, but the variation we find in the backgrounds and experiences of women legislators and the persistence of gender differences over time suggest a need to think more broadly and less conventionally about the women who might serve in the future. Our analysis leads us to conclude that more women (of varying occupational backgrounds, education levels, ages, and previous experience) could run.

Paper prepared for presentation at the 2010 Annual Meetings of the American Political Science Association, Washington, D.C., September 2-5. The authors thank Kelly Dittmar and Janna Ferguson for research assistance.

Much has changed for women in politics since 1981. The term “gender gap” came into popular use for the first time following the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan when analysts observed a difference in the voting patterns and political preferences of women and men. On the heels of the gender gap, Reagan made history by nominating the first woman to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court. At that time only 23 women served in Congress, just 4.3% of its members (CAWP 2010). Today the gender gap is widely recognized as an enduring feature of American politics, three of the nine justices on the Supreme Court are women, and 90 women serve in the U.S. House and Senate (16.7% of all members of Congress) (CAWP 2010).

Women still bear more responsibility than men for caregiving within the family. However, women’s status outside the home has changed considerably, and gender roles are much more flexible today than several decades ago. Women now earn a majority of post-secondary degrees. They also earn nearly half of law degrees compared with only about 30% in 1980 (U.S. Census Bureau 2008). In 2009, for the first time in U.S. history, women became a majority of employees (Mulligan 2010).¹ A Pew Research Center study found that 22% of married men in 2007 compared with 4% in 1970 were married to wives whose education and income exceeded their own (Fry and Cohn 2010).

Surely we should expect these changes in the social and political landscape to have implications for how gender is related to officeholding. Scholars have long observed that many women legislators take paths to office that differ from men’s (Kirkpatrick 1974; Diamond 1977; Carroll and Strimling 1983; Burrell 1994; Thomas 1994; Dolan and Ford 1997; Thomas, Herrick, and Braunstein 2002). But over time gains in women’s educational and occupational status and the attenuation of traditional gender roles should have weakened the relationship between gender and officeholding.

While we might expect to see changes in the relationship between gender and officeholding over time, there are different models that may help to explain any changes that have occurred. The first possibility is an assimilation model, where men's pathways constitute the political norm and women's pathways into office come more and more over time to resemble this norm. Because women's lives outside of politics have come in many ways to look more like men's lives over the past two and one-half decades, a similar pattern may be evident in the political sphere with women's routes to office conforming over time to the standard set by men.

Alternatively, it is possible that change has been bidirectional rather than unidirectional; change may have occurred in men's as well as women's pathways into office. After all, the social changes that have occurred in gender roles since the emergence of the modern women's movement have affected both women and men. Although the changes have been less dramatic than for women, men's lives have been altered. Paralleling changes in society more generally, changes in pathways into office may be apparent for men as well as for women with a new norm emerging that reflects the convergence of what were formerly gender-based routes into office. Thus, changes in pathways into office may have followed a convergence model where men's pathways into elective office have come to look more like women's pathways at the same time that women's have come to more closely resemble men's.

While both of these explanatory models seem plausible, a third possibility presents itself: the persistent differences model. Perhaps gender differences in the pathways that women and men take to office have not narrowed over time. Perhaps the gender-related changes we have seen in the larger society have not been sufficient to lead to notable changes in the ways women and men enter office, or perhaps social changes take a longer time frame to manifest themselves in the political arena than in other arenas of society. If so, women may continue to take

distinctive pathways to office when compared with their male colleagues despite significant changes in gender roles.

In this paper we examine the backgrounds of women and men state legislators in 1981 and 2008 to see how well these various models—the assimilation model, the convergence model, and the persistent differences model—help explain the changes that have, or have not, taken place over time in the pathways that women and men follow into office. By focusing on those who have won election to office, we are examining the paths to the legislature that have proven successful for women.

Description of Data

We analyze data from the 2008 and 1981 CAWP Recruitment Studies, conducted by the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University, which surveyed state legislators from all fifty states. The 2008 CAWP Recruitment Study² was designed in large part to replicate the original 1981 CAWP Recruitment Study.³ 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. The 1981 study was funded by the Charles H. Revson Foundation, and the 2008 CAWP Recruitment 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.

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%.⁴ In 2008 women were 23.7% of all state legislators (CAWP 2008).

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.⁵ A total of 789 legislators completed the survey for an overall response rate of 55.4%.⁶ In 1981 women were 12.1% of all state legislators (CAWP 1981).

We also present evidence from in-depth, semi-structured phone interviews conducted with 22 women state legislators, 12 Democrats and 10 Republicans, from 15 states that varied in geography, partisan control, and level of professionalism of the legislature. The interviews, which were approximately 30 to 60 minutes in length and were conducted in the fall of 2009, were intended to supplement and help us understand the survey results. We selected women legislators for interviews based on their biographical information; those interviewed were diverse in their backgrounds and ideologies. Several had been actively involved in recruiting candidates to run for the legislature. We asked the women we interviewed for their general perspectives on women's election to the state legislatures and for their interpretations of some of our key survey findings.

Who Is “Eligible” to Run for Office?

Writing in 1994, R. Darcy, Susan Welch, and Janet Clark predicted that women would constitute more than half of nonincumbent women state legislative candidates by the year 2006 (1994: 125). This prediction was based on a model that took into account the structural factors that they identified as the main impediments to women’s election to office: incumbency and the social eligibility pool. Darcy, Welch, and Clark argued that sex discrimination and socialization created a gender imbalance in the occupations that typically precede a political career. The dearth of women in the social eligibility pool resulted from the highly sex-segregated nature of the workforce, especially the small numbers of women in the fields of law and business. They argued:

... a substantial part of the underrepresentation of women in public office in the United States is because of their underrepresentation in this eligible pool: the business and professional occupations [e.g., law] from which most officials are recruited.... [C]hanging the occupational distribution of women would influence their recruitment to public office (Darcy, Welch, and Clark: 108).

Thus, when Darcy, Welch, and Clark predicted that women would come to compose a majority of nonincumbent candidates, they were envisioning an almost automatic relationship between the rise of women in the fields of law and business and the rise of new women candidates for the legislatures. Of course, as we know with the benefit of hindsight, their prediction has not been realized, and women today constitute only about one-quarter of nonincumbent candidates.

Despite the failure of Darcy, Welch and Clark’s prediction, the eligibility pool is still viewed as an important cause of women’s under-representation. Indeed, in their recent work on citizen ambition, Jennifer Lawless and Richard L. Fox (2005) used the eligibility pool approach. In order to identify those citizens who are “potential candidates,” they constructed a sample of individuals working in occupations from which elected officials tend to be drawn—law, business, and education—as well as political activism.

Darcy and his coauthors recognized that at least some women officeholders had reached office as homemakers or with careers in female-dominated professions such as education and social work. But they did not believe that these backgrounds would be the source of future growth in women’s representation. Arguing that “women’s occupations and activities have not provided the same sort of gateway to political office as prestigious male occupations” (1994: 112), Darcy, Welch, and Clark excluded women’s presence in female-dominated professions from the model they used to predict women’s officeholding.

Because of the continued importance of the social eligibility pool to theories about women’s representation, we begin our analysis with an examination of the relationship between occupation and officeholding. We seek to determine if women have assimilated to the routes that men tend to take to office, if women and men have converged to a common pathway, or if gender differences have persisted.

Who Serves?

Occupational Backgrounds

The story of pathways to office in the 1980s was one of gender difference. In 1981, when CAWP conducted its first recruitment study, significant differences in legislators’ occupational

backgrounds were apparent. Women state legislators were much less likely to reach the legislature from careers in traditionally male-dominated occupations such as law and business (Table 1). In 1981 only 6.4% of women state representatives and 5.6% of women state senators were attorneys; their male colleagues were much more likely to practice law (Tables 1 and 2). Women also were also less likely than their male counterparts to come to the legislature from business (Tables 1 and 2). Only 4.6% of women state representatives and no women state senators were business-owners.

[Table 1 and Table 2 about here]

Instead, women were much more likely than their male colleagues to have occupations in female-dominated fields. Fully one-fifth of women state representatives and senators were elementary or secondary school teachers in 1981 compared to much smaller proportions of their male colleagues. Although the numbers were relatively small, women were also more likely than men to have jobs (other than physician and dentist) in the fields of health care and social work (Tables 1 and 2).

Fast forward to 2008, and perhaps surprisingly, these occupational differences largely remain intact. Despite two decades of social and economic change, the predominant pattern evident in occupational pathways to office is still one of gender difference. Women come to the legislature from a variety of occupations, but women and men legislators continue to hail from different fields.

Although women state legislators are more likely to be lawyers in 2008 than they were in 1981, they remain less likely to practice law than their male colleagues (Tables 1 and 2). Similarly, women continue to be less likely than their male colleagues to have backgrounds in business-related fields although more women now come from a business background. Similar

proportions of female and male state representatives and senators identified as self-employed or business owners in 2008, but fewer women than men worked in other business-related occupations (Tables 1 and 2).

Women state legislators today continue to be much more likely than their male counterparts to come from the fields of education and health care. In 2008 almost one of every five women state representatives in both chambers were elementary or secondary school teachers, compared with about one of every ten of their male colleagues. Even more women were nurses or health care workers (other than physician or dentist) in 2008 than in 1981; meanwhile, only tiny numbers of men came to the legislature from these health-related occupations in either year (Tables 1 and 2).

While the predominant pattern in these occupational data is clearly one of continued gender difference, women have assimilated to men's pathways in at least one noteworthy way: there has been a decline over time in the proportion of women legislators who report never having an occupation outside the home. Whereas 16.7% of women state representatives reported that they had never been employed outside the home in 1981 and thus could be characterized as full-time homemakers, only 3.5% of women could be categorized in this way in 2008. This shift in the occupational profile of women legislators parallels the significant increase in women's labor force participation and the decline in the number of full-time homemakers occurring in the larger society since the early 1980s.

On the one hand, the limited evidence of assimilation that we see in our data is surprising given the rise in women's labor force participation, women's educational advances, and the increase in women lawyers. On the other hand, though, perhaps we should not have expected to see dramatic change in legislator backgrounds. After all, the labor market remains quite

segregated, with certain occupations largely populated with women while others are dominated by men. Despite the movement of women into nontraditional fields, occupations remain highly segregated by gender.

The rise in women legislators over time has not been accompanied by a large increase in the share of women legislators who are lawyers. Instead, the occupational backgrounds of many women legislators continue to reflect those areas in which women have traditionally exhibited expertise: education and health. As a result, two important correctives to existing accounts of women's officeholding seem merited. First, it does not appear that the numbers of women in the traditionally male-dominated fields of law and business are as important to explaining the underrepresentation of women in office as previously thought. The numbers of women entering law and business fields has increased substantially over the past two or three decades, and yet women officeholders remain far from parity with men in numbers and still are notably less likely than their male colleagues to have backgrounds in law and business.

As a second corrective, we suggest revisiting the notion that women have difficulty reaching office from female-dominated occupations and expanding our conception of the eligibility pool for women candidates. Our occupational findings imply that the pool of women who can run for public office may be much larger than we have commonly assumed. After all, the number of women who work in traditionally female-dominated fields, such as education and health care, far exceeds the number of women lawyers. According to data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, women were only 34.4% of lawyers in 2008 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2009). But women were 74.0% of workers employed in education-related occupations—81.2% of elementary and middle school teachers and 56.0% of secondary school teachers (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2009). Although women constituted only 30.5% of physicians and surgeons,

they were 91.7% of registered nurses. Simply considering the fields of education and health care as part of the social eligibility pool would greatly expand the number of potential women candidates.

Education

In addition to occupation, Darcy, Welch, and Clark view education as an important determinant of who is eligible to run for office. Writing in the early 1990s, they argued that women were at a “definite disadvantage in terms of education” (1994: 108). Although women outnumbered men among college students at that time, fewer women than men in the general population had completed college or obtained some post-graduate training. Because “college seems to be nearly a prerequisite for the modern legislator” (1994: 108), Darcy, Welch, and Clark concluded that education was another factor limiting women’s presence in the eligibility pool and thus another critical factor contributing to their underrepresentation among officeholders.

Educational differences between women and men have continued to narrow over the past three decades. In contrast to 1980 when only 13.6% of women 25 and older, compared with 20.9% of men, had graduated from college, women are now almost as likely as men to hold a bachelor’s degree. According to U.S. Census data, in 2009, 29.1% of women and 30.1% of men 25 and older had completed undergraduate school. Moreover, because women are a larger proportion of the American population than men, the sheer number of women holding bachelor’s degrees is greater than the number of men (National Center for Education Statistics 2010).

Change is particularly evident among the younger generation. In April 2010, a U.S. Census Bureau press release predicted “more women than men are expected to occupy professions such as doctors, lawyers and college professors as they represent approximately 58

percent of young adults, age 25 to 29, who hold an advanced degree” (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). In this young age cohort, 9% of women, compared with only 6% of men, had earned advanced degrees (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). Also, as widely reported in the media, women now frequently outnumber men among entering classes of law students.

Although legislators can be found at all educational levels, both women and men in state legislatures tend to be drawn from the better educated strata of society. For example, in 2008, 78.6% of women state representatives and 84.4% of women state senators had graduated from college, and 45.7% of women state representatives and 55.3% of women state senators had earned advanced degrees (i.e., a master’s or a doctorate). Education levels of legislators have increased over time, and legislators of both genders were somewhat more educated in 2008 than in 1981.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that the education gap between women and men in the general population has greatly diminished over time (and even shows signs of reversing itself among the younger generation where women are now more educated than men), education gaps continued to be apparent among state legislators in 2008. These gaps, however, follow a curvilinear pattern, with women more likely than men to have master’s degrees and men more likely than women both to have ended their formal education with high school and to have obtained doctorates, especially J.D.s (Table 3).

[Table 3 about here]

Comparing the educational levels of state legislators in 1981 and 2008, there are some signs of convergence, but the main pattern is one of persistent gender differences. The proportion of men with law degrees decreased just slightly from 1981 to 2008 among state representatives while remaining the same among state senators. In contrast, the proportion of

women with law degrees increased for women legislators in both chambers, offering some evidence of both convergence (for state representatives) and assimilation (for state senators). Nevertheless, gender differences persisted in 2008 with women in both houses of the legislature less likely than men to have been trained as attorneys; in fact, among state senators only half as many women (10.6%) as men (21.3%) had law degrees. Thus, despite some evidence of convergence and assimilation, the dominant pattern over time with regard to law degrees is one of persistent gender differences.

In 1981 women were notably more likely than men to have ended their formal educations upon earning a bachelor's degree and just slightly more likely than men to have master's degrees. By 2008 this pattern had shifted upward with women equally or just slightly more likely than men to have a bachelor's as their highest degree but notably more likely to have earned a master's degree.

Thus, despite some changes over time, gender differences in educational levels persist among legislators. These findings on education reinforce the findings of gender differences in occupational pathways to office. Although most of the women who gain election to state legislatures are very well educated, they are less likely than men to have formal legal training and law degrees. Women have managed to run successfully for legislative office without having the same educational credentials as men. Being well educated seems to help, but a law degree certainly is not a prerequisite.

Family Factors

As women's educational attainment, occupational status, labor force participation, and income have risen, their domestic lives have changed as well. These changes in women's lives

have been accompanied by changes in men's domestic lives. But the changes in men's lives have been smaller, and women remain the primary caregivers within the family.

The persistence of traditional gender roles, especially women's disproportionate responsibility for caregiving, helps explain our findings on the impact of family-related factors on women's political careers. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Blair and Henry 1981; Carroll 1989), we do find that family considerations are often important to the political decisions of men as well as women. We also find some evidence of convergence between women and men as a result of changes that have occurred among men legislators since the early 1980s. Nevertheless, despite the passage of several decades, gender differences persist, and family continues to have different implications for women's and men's candidacies.

While family considerations affect both women and men, they still play a larger role in women's candidacies. Analyzing the results of the 1981 CAWP Recruitment Study, Carroll and Strimling observed that the differences they found between women and men who held public office "suggest that considerations about children's needs and spouse's attitude affect a woman's decision about seeking elective office more often than they affect a man's" (1983: 7). Although much has changed since 1981, we find that the gendered division of labor within the home continues to have powerful implications for women's decisions to seek state legislative office and the timing of women's political careers.

We asked legislators to rate the importance of various factors in influencing the decision to run the first time for their current office.⁷ In both time periods, women in both state senates and houses were less likely than their male colleagues to respond that "approval of my spouse or partner" was "very important," although overwhelming majorities of legislators of both genders said spousal support was very important to their decision (Table 4). One important change

between 1981 and 2008 is that male legislators in both chambers are more likely now than in the past to identify spousal approval as very important.

[Table 4 about here]

While this finding that more men than women rate spousal support as very important to their decisions to run seems surprising at first glance, it becomes far less surprising when one considers the marital status of legislators. Women in both chambers were much less likely than their male counterparts to be married in 1981 or 2008 (Table 5), and the gender difference in marital status largely accounts for the gender difference in evaluations of the importance of spousal support. Because women were less likely than men to be married, notably larger proportions of women than men indicated that spousal support was “not applicable” in their decisions to run for office.⁸

[Table 5 about here]

We also asked about the importance of spousal support to officeholding, and here gender differences are more apparent and in the expected direction. Among both state representatives and state senators who were currently married or living as married, women in both 1981 and 2008 were more likely than men to say that their spouse or partner was “very supportive” of their officeholding (Table 6). Few legislators of either gender reported that their spouses were indifferent or resistant to their holding office, but men were more likely than women to acknowledge that their spouses were only “somewhat” supportive.

[Table 6 about here]

Levels of spousal support were very similar for women in both time periods, but some change in the direction of convergence with women is evident among men. Men—especially among state representatives—were notably more likely to report a “very” supportive spouse in

2008 than in 1981 (although still less likely to do so than women) and less likely to report that their spouses were indifferent or somewhat resistant to their officeholding (Table 6). These findings suggest that family considerations play a greater role in men’s career decisions today than in previous decades and that over time men are coming to look more like women in terms of the importance they attach to their spouse’s approval of their officeholding activities.

Parenting, another important aspect of legislators’ family lives, has typically presented a more complex set of calculations for women in politics than for men as documented by a sizable body of research (e.g., Lee 1977; Carroll 1989; Carroll and Strimling 1983). Gender differences are strikingly apparent in the extent to which considerations around children enter into the political decision-making calculus of legislators, and these gender differences have been remarkably persistent over time. We asked legislators about the importance to their decision to run of: “My children being old enough for me to feel comfortable not being home as much.” In both 1981 and 2008, a majority of women state legislators in both chambers—and a much larger proportion of women than men—rated this factor as “very important” to their decision to run the first time for their current office (Table 7).

[Table 7 about here]

Consistent with this evidence about the role that considerations about children played in legislators’ decisions to seek office, women representatives and senators were less likely than their male colleagues in both 1981 and 2008 to have young children (Table 8). In both years, almost no women, but a few men, had children under the age of six, and the vast majority of women, and a smaller majority of men, had no children under the age of 18. Interestingly, while the proportions of both women and men with children under the age of six were similar in 1981 and 2008, the proportions of state representatives with children under the age of 18 declined

noticeably for both women and men over the past quarter century. For example, while one of every three women state representatives serving in 1981 had a child under 18, only about one of every seven women serving in 2008 had a child that young (Table 8).

[Table 8 about here]

The decline in the proportion of legislators with children under the age of 18 is likely a reflection of the “graying” of state legislatures that has taken place during recent decades. The National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) has found an increase in the age of legislators in recent years. The average age for a legislator today is 56, with almost three-fourths of legislators (71.5%) age 50 or older (NCSL N.d.). This “graying” of legislators reported by NCSL is also evident in the CAWP studies. The mean age of women representatives in 2008 was 57, up from a mean age of 48 in 1981, and the mean age of women senators similarly increased from 50 in 1981 to 59 in 2008. The mean ages for the women’s male colleagues (57 for both representatives and senators in 2008) were similar to those for women. As Table 9 makes clear, there were relatively few women or men under the age of 40 serving in either chamber in 2008, and fewer in 2008 than in 1981. The vast majority of women legislators and their male counterparts serving in 2008 were 50 or older.

[Table 9 about here]

Although legislators of both genders are now less likely to have young children than in 1981, reflecting the higher age of legislators in 2008, the gender differences apparent in 1981 were still evident in 2008. In both time periods women legislators were less likely than their male colleagues to have young children at home. This pattern suggests both that women still are more likely than men to wait until their children are older to run for office and that family responsibilities remain a greater impediment for women than for men.

Experience

In 1981, women arrived in the state legislatures with more experience than men on a host of dimensions. Women legislators were more likely to have had campaign and staff experience. For example, 82.3% of women representatives compared with 74.5% of their male colleagues had worked on a political campaign before seeking office themselves. Among senators, 83.3% of women compared with 71.6% had worked on one or more campaigns. Similar differences were evident for staff experience. In 1981, 23.4% of women state representatives compared with 15.9% of their male colleagues had worked on the staff of a public official before seeking office themselves. Among state senators, 24.2% of the women but only 12.1% of the men had experience working on the staff of an officeholder.

These gender differences persist today. In 2008, women state representatives were more likely than their male counterparts to have worked both on the campaign of a candidate (73.6% compared to 60.3%), and on the staff of an elected public official (21.8% compared to 17.1%). The experiences of state senators in 2008 largely mirror those of state representatives, except that women and men had more similar levels of staff experience.

We also find that women legislators are somewhat more likely than men to have been active in their political parties although we do not have comparable data for 1981. Women and men state representatives had similar levels of experience at the level of the local party; about 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 (12.4% of women compared to 7.1% of men) to have served as members or chairs of their party's state or national committees and slightly more likely (33.4% of women compared to 29.3% of men) to have attended a party convention.

Women state senators were about equally likely as men state senators (11.1% compared to 11.4%) to have served as chairs of state or national committees, but they were more likely than their male colleagues to have been members or chairs of their local party committees before running for the legislature (43.3% compared to 36.8%) and to have attended a party convention (41.5% compared to 36.0%).

Women are also more likely than their male colleagues to have attended a campaign training program or workshop. In 1981, 57.8% of women state representatives compared with 43.4% of their male colleagues had attended at least one training. By 2008 larger proportions of both women and men reported having participated in a campaign training program, but gender differences were as apparent as they were in 1981. In 2008, 75.0% of women state representatives had attended at least one campaign training compared to 59.6% of their male colleagues. Like their female colleagues in the state house, women state senators were also more likely to have attended a campaign training workshop than were male state senators in both 2008 and 1981.

The greater experience levels among women compared with men raise the question of whether women need so much experience to reach the legislature. It may be that women acquire more experience in order to bolster their confidence and feel sufficiently qualified while men more often feel qualified without a great deal of experience. Some of the women legislators we interviewed suggested this might indeed be the case. One woman legislator thought that women may have more experience because women want “to feel solid about their credentials before they put themselves out there.” Another legislator suggested it was “an act of self protection”--that having more experience helped women feel more secure. But it may not just be that women are not as confident about their qualifications as men; the flip side is that men may be overconfident.

Several of the legislators we interviewed expressed the view that men often do not feel they need much experience to run. As one legislator suggested, “I think sometimes women are more honest about their abilities--and maybe a little more realistic and practical.”

An alternative explanation for the finding that women have more political experience is that there may be a double standard in which more is expected of women candidates. Women may need more experience than men in order to be viewed as equally qualified. As one legislator explained, “when women come on the scene, they have to prove themselves whereas men are given the presumption of competence until they disprove it.” Another woman legislator, observing that a woman “is going to have to have more qualifications and work harder,” went on to explain that party leaders “won’t even look at a woman unless she’s got some experience, but they will look at a man without the same qualifications if he is a warm body and he can work hard and raise money.” These sentiments were echoed by another woman legislator who suggested, “because we are women, a minority,... we have to appear a little smarter and have a little more experience to better our male opponents. Unfortunately sad but true—the reality of it.” Although we are not able to distinguish between explanations and say with confidence why it is that women acquire more experience than men, the pattern of women being more qualified is clearly evident. And it is a persistent pattern across more than two decades.

Implications for Recruitment

Our analysis of survey data in this paper has provided limited evidence for the assimilation and convergence models as explanations for patterns we observe over time in the pathways to office taken by women and men. Perhaps the strongest evidence for an assimilation model is the fact that few women legislators today report that they are full-time homemakers. In

this respect women officials have come over time to resemble their male colleagues. Women also are more likely today than they were in 1981 to work in law or business, the two most common occupations for male legislators, providing some additional evidence for an assimilation model.

We also find some evidence consistent with a convergence model of women's and men's pathways to office. The proportion of women legislators with law degrees has increased since 1981, offering some evidence of convergence in the case of state representatives, where the proportion of men who are attorneys has declined somewhat. In addition, we find evidence that family considerations play a greater role in men's political career decisions today than they did a quarter century ago with men coming to look more like women in terms of the importance they attach to their spouse's approval of their political involvement. This finding also is more consistent with a convergence model.

However, despite these findings suggesting that some modest assimilation and convergence have occurred, the majority of evidence in this chapter is consistent with a model of persistent gender differences in pathways into office. The differences in the backgrounds of women and men serving in legislatures in 2008 were stunningly similar to the differences that were apparent in 1981. Despite widespread societal changes over the past quarter century, our findings for 1981 and 2008 are remarkably consistent. What is most striking and in many ways surprising is how little evidence of change we found.

Unlike their male colleagues, many women legislators in 2008 continued to come from occupations in the female-dominated fields of health care and education. Similarly, women in 2008 were less likely than their male counterparts to have only high school educations or doctorates, especially law degrees, just as they were in 1981. They were more likely than men to

be concentrated in the middle of the educational range: more likely to have bachelor's degrees in 1981 and more likely to have master's degrees in 2008. Relative to men, women in both years were more likely to report that their spouses were very supportive of their officeholding, less likely to have young children, and much more likely to report that having older children was very important to their decisions to seek office. Finally, women in 2008 as in 1981 were more likely than men to have political experience before seeking office themselves, including working on campaigns, serving as staff to an elected official, and attending campaign training. In all these respects the pattern we find is one of persistent gender differences in the pathways to public office.⁹

Moreover, despite some recurrent patterns in women legislators' pathways into office (the tendency to have occupations in traditionally female-dominated occupations, to be college-educated or have master's degrees, to have supportive spouses and grown children, to have acquired considerable political experience before running), their backgrounds also reveal remarkable variability. As the tables in this paper show, women come to the legislature from a variety of occupations and educational levels. While most are older and do not have children at home, some women legislators are younger and some do have young children. Although women are more likely than men to have political experience before running for office, some women do run successfully without campaign experience and party involvement. Just as women do not follow the same pathways into office as men do, so too is it impossible to identify a single dominant pathway that women take into office. There is no "women's pathway" to office. Rather, there are a variety of pathways women follow.

Our in-depth interviews reinforce this conclusion. We asked the legislators we interviewed, "What kinds of qualifications and experience, if any, do you think women need to

have before they run for the legislature?” Their answers are very revealing. Some legislators seemed initially to be stumped by this question because they did not perceive that there were particular qualifications or experiences that women needed to have.

Remarkably few pointed to education or occupation as a qualification, and when they did, they generally were not referring to advanced degrees. The legislator who most strongly emphasized education and occupation said the following:

I certainly think that education--a college education--...is very important these days.... We have female colleagues who have come to the table as attorneys....[T]hat adds value ... in terms of how people perceive them.

Others who mentioned education treated it as a baseline qualification and then went on to emphasize personal qualities as being equally or more important. One legislator observed, “I think anyone needs to have an education.... Other than that I think honesty, integrity, willingness to serve are all you need.” And another made clear that while education was important, the educational bar was low. She explained, “I think you need to be educated enough.... like at the newspaper level, like at the sixth grade level... [Y]ou need to be educated but not [necessarily] well educated. And I think you have to like people.”

The legislators did not perceive that political experience per se was an important prerequisite although one legislator from a state where parties play a particularly strong role in the recruitment process explained, “I don’t think there is a clearly defined path of how you get there. But to satisfy the party—in other words, to get endorsed—which is a very, very powerful thing... you have to pay your dues to the party.” While she was the only legislator who mentioned party involvement as critical, several of the legislators did emphasize community

involvement and civic activism as important assets for women who want to run for the legislature. One legislator explained, “I think the main qualification is just to be engaged in city affairs and have a commitment to improving your community and maybe a bit of a track record in working with people in organizations.” She went on to explain that this activism was more important than any “technical or professional qualifications.” Another legislator agreed, “...a well rounded candidate is one who exposes themselves to a variety of interest groups and issues and concerns.... So I think it behooves female candidates to kind of get out and about in their community and have a wide network of folks from a diverse set of groups.” A third legislator explained that what women need in order to be a candidate is “ideally a base in the electorate where you are going to run, based on work you’ve done in the community, whether it is PTA or civic leadership, neighborhood involvement, an important voice on an issue, or service.” Yet another legislator explained how women’s civic activism can lead to a run for the legislature:

...[women] need to be involved in their community, whether PTA president or community association president or on the board of a community organization or non-profit. Get the exposure with issues that they will be confronting with the legislature.... It should be that they are so involved in these issues in their community that when they decide to run, it is like, yes, that is the next logical step.

The women legislators who responded to our survey manifested a strong level of civic activism before running for office the first time, indicating that their involvement in their communities may well have helped pave the way for their candidacies, just as our in-depth interviews with legislators suggested. Among women state representatives, for example, the proportions reporting in 2008 that they had been active or very active in various types of

organizations was: 54.2% for women's organizations, 51.7% for children's or youth organizations, 51.6% for church-related or other religious groups, 51.6% for business or professional groups, and 42.9% for service clubs such as Rotary.

Beyond civic activism and community involvement, the women legislators we interviewed tended to emphasize personal qualities—not occupation, education, or experience—as the major prerequisites for running for the legislature. One woman legislator who “didn’t have any political background, just my nursing background” before running and who initially got involved in legislative activities through a nursing organization suggested, “I think anybody who really wants to [run] can, but it helps to have good organizing skills, good computer skills, ... a profession, a claim to fame if you will, and a reason to get involved.” Another legislator who was involved in recruiting candidates for the citizen legislature in her state explained, “We 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... there is no one thing you need other than some interest in doing it and some willingness to work hard to get elected.” When asked what qualifications and experience women need to run for the legislature, one of the legislators we interviewed answered bluntly and simply, “None.” However, she then went on to elaborate, “It is a willingness, and once you have that willingness and desire, then it is a commitment to give it everything you’ve got.” She felt this level of commitment was especially important for women, “Because it is a lot harder to raise money; it is a lot harder to convince voters that you are just as good if not better than your male counterparts.”

The persistence of gender differences over time and the fact that there seem to be few, if any, prerequisite qualifications or experiences a woman needs to have before running for the state legislature leads us to conclude that many more women could run. Desire to run for office

and commitment to working hard may be more important than years of political experience. Women candidates need not come from traditionally male candidate pools or occupations. Female-dominated occupations such as education, health care, and social work offer rich potential recruiting grounds for those interested in increasing the number of women in office. And while more young women officeholders might be desirable, women whose children are older might be more open to the idea of seeking a legislative seat. Our analysis of who serves clearly suggests a need to think more broadly and less conventionally about the women who might serve in the future.

Table 1. Occupational Backgrounds of State Representatives

	1981		2008	
	Women %	Men %	Women %	Men %
Elementary or secondary school teacher	20.2	6.4	17.5	10.9
College professor	2.5	3.2	3.5	2.4
Educational administration	na	na	2.4	1.7
Other education	na	na	2.2	0.5
Nurse or other health worker (excludes physician)	4.1	0	8.3	0.7
Physician or dentist	0	1.6	0.4	1.9
Other health/care	na	na	2.2	0.5
Social worker	1.6	0.5	2.2	1.2
Lawyer	6.4	15.4	9.1	13.9
Self-employed/ small business owner/ business owner	4.6	14.9	7.3	8.7
Other business	na	na	7.1	13.4
Real estate or insurance sales worker	3.7	10.6	3.0	3.5
Farmer	1.6	11.2	2.6	5.7
Editor or reporter	1.2	0	2.0	0.9
Non-profit	na	na	4.7	0.9
All other occupations	37.4	36.2	22.2	33.0
Homemaker/ not employed outside the home	16.7	0	3.5	0.2
<i>N</i> =	<i>436</i>	<i>188</i>	<i>509</i>	<i>424</i>

Source: 1981 and 2008 CAWP Recruitment Studies.

Table 2. Occupational Backgrounds of State Senators

	1981		2008	
	Women %	Men %	Women %	Men %
Elementary or secondary school teacher	20.8	9.1	20.0	7.2
College professor	2.8	3.0	3.6	2.7
Educational administration	na	na	0.6	6.3
Other education	na	na	0.6	0
Nurse or other health worker (excludes physician)	4.2	0	7.9	0.9
Physician or dentist	1.4	7.6	1.8	3.6
Other health/care	na	na	2.4	0.9
Social worker	1.4	0	3.0	0
Lawyer	5.6	19.7	10.9	17.1
Self-employed/ small business owner/ business owner	0	9.1	7.3	9.0
Other business	na	na	6.7	11.7
Real estate or insurance sales worker	4.2	3.0	1.8	7.2
Farmer	1.4	7.6	1.2	8.1
Editor or reporter	4.2	1.5	3.0	0.9
Non-profit	na	na	6.1	0
All other occupations	30.6	39.4	18.2	24.3
Homemaker/ not employed outside the home	23.6	0	4.9	0
<i>N</i> =	72	66	165	111

Source: 1981 and 2008 CAWP Recruitment Studies.

Table 3. State Legislators' Educational Attainment

	Representatives			
	1981		2008	
	Women %	Men %	Women %	Men %
High School	8.9	16.5	4.3	6.0
Some College	28.9	23.0	17.1	15.7
College Graduate	37.1	29.0	32.4	35.4
Masters Degree	15.5	11.5	31.6	21.2
Ph.D./Ed.D./M.D.	2.1	2.5	4.5	7.2
J.D.	6.8	17.0	9.6	14.5
Advanced degree (not specified)	0.7	0.5	0.4	0
<i>N</i> =	<i>439</i>	<i>200</i>	<i>509</i>	<i>401</i>
	Senators			
	1981		2008	
	Women %	Men %	Women %	Men %
High School	5.6	17.9	1.9	4.6
Some College	25.0	11.9	13.7	10.2
College Graduate	38.9	26.9	29.2	34.3
Masters Degree	20.8	16.4	39.1	22.2
Ph.D./Ed.D./M.D.	2.8	6.0	5.6	7.4
J.D.	6.9	20.9	10.6	21.3
Advanced degree (not specified)	0	0	0	0
<i>N</i> =	<i>72</i>	<i>67</i>	<i>161</i>	<i>108</i>

Source: 1981 and 2008 CAWP Recruitment Studies.

Table 4. Spouse/Partner Approval as a Factor in the Decision to Run

Representatives						
	1981			2008		
	Women %	Men %	Tau-c	Women %	Men %	Tau-c
Approval of my spouse or partner	65.9	69.4	-.04	62.5	74.9	-.14**
<i>N</i> =	425	193		528	438	
Senators						
	1981			2008		
	Women %	Men %	Tau-c	Women %	Men %	Tau-c
Approval of my spouse or partner	69.4	69.1	-.02	62.4	73.9	-.13*
<i>N</i> =	72	68		170	115	

* p<.05, ** p<.01

Source: 1981 and 2008 CAWP Recruitment Studies.

Note: Percentage saying factor was “very important.”

Table 5. Marital Status of State Legislators

	Representatives			
	1981		2008	
	Women %	Men %	Women %	Men %
Married	72.1	84.0	67.9	87.0
Divorced or Separated	11.0	4.0	12.9	4.6
Widowed	8.2	3.0	11.6	1.4
Single, Never Married	8.7	9.0	4.6	5.7
Living as Married	na	na	3.0	1.4
<i>N</i> =	<i>432</i>	<i>200</i>	<i>527</i>	<i>437</i>
	Senators			
	1981		2008	
	Women %	Men %	Women %	Men %
Married	68.1	89.4	68.1	82.1
Divorced or Separated	13.9	7.6	15.4	7.7
Widowed	15.3	0	8.3	3.4
Single, Never Married	2.8	3.0	6.5	3.4
Living as Married	na	na	1.8	3.4
<i>N</i> =	<i>72</i>	<i>66</i>	<i>169</i>	<i>117</i>

Source: 1981 and 2008 CAWP Recruitment Studies.

Table 6. Spousal Support among State Legislators

Representatives						
	1981			2008		
	Women %	Men %	Tau-c	Women %	Men %	Tau-c
Very Supportive	82.7	58.2	.23**	83.2	74.2	.09**
Somewhat Supportive	14.3	27.9		12.8	22.0	
Indifferent	1.0	5.5		2.4	1.8	
Somewhat Resistant	2.0	8.5		1.6	2.1	
<i>N</i> =	<i>307</i>	<i>165</i>		<i>376</i>	<i>387</i>	
Senators						
	1981			2008		
	Women %	Men %	Tau-c	Women %	Men %	Tau-c
Very Supportive	87.8	62.7	.25**	88.1	69.7	.18**
Somewhat Supportive	8.2	23.7		6.8	21.2	
Indifferent	2.0	5.1		1.7	4.0	
Somewhat Resistant	2.0	8.5		3.4	5.1	
<i>N</i> =	<i>49</i>	<i>59</i>		<i>118</i>	<i>99</i>	

* p<.05, ** p<.01

Source: 1981 and 2008 CAWP Recruitment Studies.

Question wording: "If currently married or living as married, would you say that your spouse/partner is [very supportive of/somewhat supportive of/indifferent toward/somewhat resistant toward] your holding public office"

Table 7. Age of Children as a Factor in the Decision to Run

	Representatives					
	1981			2008		
	Women %	Men %	Tau-c	Women %	Men %	Tau-c
Age of children	57.3	37.7	.16**	56.7	41.9	.10**
<i>N</i> =	426	191		526	437	
	Senators					
	1981			2008		
	Women %	Men %	Tau-c	Women %	Men %	Tau-c
Age of children	69.4	35.8	.31**	50.9	34.8	.07
<i>N</i> =	72	67		171	115	

* p<.05, ** p<.01

Source: 1981 and 2008 CAWP Recruitment Studies.

Note: Percentage saying factor was “very important.”

Table 8. Parental Status of State Legislators

Representatives				
	1981		2008	
	Women %	Men %	Women %	Men %
Child Under 6	3.7	11.9	3.0	8.2
Child Under 18	33.3	39.9	14.5	22.4
<i>N</i> =	<i>429</i>	<i>193</i>	<i>531</i>	<i>438</i>
Senators				
	1981		2008	
	Women %	Men %	Women %	Men %
Child Under 6	2.9	9.1	1.2	2.5
Child Under 18	21.4	54.5	13.4	22.9
<i>N</i> =	<i>70</i>	<i>66</i>	<i>172</i>	<i>118</i>

Source: 1981 and 2008 CAWP Recruitment Studies.

Table 9. Age of State Legislators

	Representatives					
	1981			2008		
	Women %	Men %	Tau-c	Women %	Men %	Tau-c
Less than 30 years old	6.1	8.1	.01	0.8	2.5	-.02
Between 30 and 39 years old	15.8	22.3		5.5	6.0	
Between 40 and 49 years old	31.9	19.8		12.8	15.7	
Between 50 and 59 years old	32.1	26.9		37.2	30.2	
60 and older	14.2	22.8		43.8	45.6	
<i>N</i> =	<i>430</i>	<i>197</i>		<i>514</i>	<i>434</i>	
	Senators					
	1981			2008		
	Women %	Men %	Tau-c	Women %	Men %	Tau-c
Less than 30 years old	4.4	0	-.08	1.8	0	-.01
Between 30 and 39 years old	10.1	20.9		1.8	5.2	
Between 40 and 49 years old	29.0	26.9		12.8	16.4	
Between 50 and 59 years old	34.8	35.8		39.6	32.8	
60 and older	21.7	16.4		43.9	45.7	
<i>N</i> =	<i>69</i>	<i>67</i>		<i>164</i>	<i>116</i>	

* p<.05, ** p<.01

Source: 1981 and 2008 CAWP Recruitment Studies.

Sources

- Blair, Diane Kincaid, and Ann R. Henry. 1981. "The Family Factor in State Legislative Turnover." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 6:1(February): 55-68.
- Burrell, Barbara C. 1994. *A Woman's Place is in the House: Campaigning for Congress in the Feminist Era*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Carroll, Susan J. 1989. "The Personal Is Political: The Intersection of Private Lives and Public Roles Among Women and Men in Elective and Appointive Office." *Women & Politics* 9 (1989): 51-67.
- Carroll, Susan J., and Wendy S. Strimling. 1983. *Women's Routes to Elective Office: A Comparison with Men's*. New Brunswick, NJ: Center for the American Woman and Politics.
- Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP). 1981. "Women in State Legislatures 1981." Fact Sheet. New Brunswick, NJ: Center for American Women and Politics.
- Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP). 2008. "Women in State Legislatures 2008." Fact Sheet. New Brunswick, NJ: Center for American Women and Politics.
- Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP). 2010. "Women in the U.S. Congress 2010." Fact Sheet. New Brunswick, NJ: Center for American Women and Politics.
- Darcy, R., Susan Welch, and Janet Clark. 1994. *Women, Elections, and Representation*, 2nd ed. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Diamond, Irene. 1977. *Sex Roles in the State House*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Dolan, Kathleen, and Lynne E. Ford. 1997. "Change and Continuity Among Women State Legislators: Evidence from Three Decades." *Political Research Quarterly* 50 (March): 137-151.
- Fry, Richard, and D'Vera Cohn. 2010. "New Economics of Marriage: The Rise of Wives." PEW Research Center Publications. January 19. <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1466/economics-marriage-rise-of-wives>; accessed February 2, 2010.
- Kirkpatrick, Jeane J. 1974. *Political Woman*. New York: Basic Books.
- Lawless, Jennifer L., and Richard L. Fox. 2005. *It Takes a Candidate: Why Women Don't Run for Office*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Lee, Marcia M. 1977. "Toward Understanding Why Few Women Hold Public Office: Factors Affecting the Participation of Women in Local Politics." In *A Portrait of Marginality*, ed. Marianne Githens and Jewel L. Prestage. New York: David McKay Company, Inc.

- Mulligan, Casey B. 2010. "In a First, Women Surpass Men on U.S. Payrolls." *New York Times*. February 5. <http://economix.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/02/05/in-historical-first-women-outnumber-men-on-us-payrolls/?scp=1-b&sq=women&st=nyt>; accessed February 7, 2010.
- National Center for Education Statistics. 2010. "Table 8: Percentage of persons age 25 and over and 25 to 29, by race/ethnicity, years of school completed, and sex: Selected years, 1910 through 2009." Digest of Education Statistics 2009. U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences. http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d09/tables/dt09_008.asp?referrer=list; accessed August 20, 2010.
- National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL). Not dated. "Legislator Demographics." <http://www.ncsl.org/default.aspx?tabid=14850>; accessed August 20, 2010.
- Thomas, Sue. 1994. *How Women Legislate*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Thomas, Sue, Rebekah Herrick, and Matthew Braunstein. 2002. "Legislative Careers: The Personal and the Political." In *Women Transforming Congress*, ed. Cindy Simon Rosenthal. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press. 397-421.
- U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Department of Labor. 2009. "Table 11: Employed persons by detailed occupation and sex, 2008 annual averages." *Women in the Labor Force: A Databook* (2009 Edition). <http://www.bls.gov/cps/wlftable11.htm>; accessed August 20, 2010.
- U.S. Census Bureau. 2010. "Census Bureau Reports Nearly 6 in 10 Advanced Degree Holders Age 25-29 Are Women." Press Release. April 20, 2010. <http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/education/cb10-55.html>; accessed August 20, 2010.

Notes

¹ *The New York Times* reported that, according to the U.S. Department of Labor, women constituted a majority of nonfarm payroll employees for four months in 2009.

² 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.

³ 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.

⁴ 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%.

⁵ 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.

⁶ 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%.

⁷ Response options were “very important,” “somewhat important,” “not important,” or “not applicable.”

⁸ For example, 20.2% of women state representatives compared with 14.5% of their male colleagues in 1981 and 19.5% of women state representatives compared with 9.6% of their male colleagues in 2008 answered “not applicable” to the question about the importance of spousal or partner support as a factor in the decision to run.

⁹ These gender differences are not a product of differences in electoral circumstances faced by women and men. For example, women and men were equally likely to have faced a primary opponent and to win a seat previously held by their party.