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Ohio legislature, especially on GOP side, is Boys Town: Thomas Suddes

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Two Republican women were state senators in 1923, the first year women served in the General Assembly; today, 86 years later, there's just one, Sen. Karen Gillmor of Tiffin.

In the 1990s, Ohio's House, run by suburban Columbus Republican Jo Ann Davidson, included 14 Republican women; today, there are six.

The biggest reason for the drop-off? Legislative term limits, a 1992 GOP brainstorm that backfired badly on Republicans, plus stick-in-the-mud Republican candidate recruitment.

Result: Of 27 women now in Ohio's legislature, just seven are Republicans. In 1922, the first six women whom voters chose for the General Assembly were all Republicans, including Sen. Maude C. Waitt of Lakewood and Rep. Nettie M. Clapp of Shaker Heights.

If going from six Republican women in the General Assembly in 1923 to seven in 2009 is progress, the sun must set in the morning.

Democrats, meanwhile, have steadily gained through shrewd recruitment: Five female Democrats are senators, including Minority Leader Capri Cafaro of suburban Youngstown; in the House, 15 female Democrats are representatives.

The current stats, according to the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers, mean Ohio ranks 34th among states in female legislators. (Ranked 50th is South Carolina, which has the smallest percentage of women legislators; No. 1 is Colorado; almost 40 percent of its lawmakers are women.) In the 1990s, with as many as five Republican women in Ohio's Senate, Ohio's national rank was 18th.

Academic literature roams all over the map as to whether term limits alone reduce the proportion of women in the 50 state legislatures. But as a practical matter, Ohio General Assembly term limits (basically, no re-election to the Senate or House after eight consecutive years without a four-year break) mean no one builds seniority. No seniority limits policy knowledge and fund-raising leverage. That deficit of data and dollars hands mentoring of future Statehouse colleagues to caucus leaders and lobbyists. And the guys promote their own.

Given perceived Republican weakness among women voters in Ohio, the GOP not only needs to elect more women to the General Assembly. It has to.

Budget quirks

Legislators have lots to say, pro or con, about Gov. Ted Strickland's proposed school-funding reform, but many of the gripes seem to be coming from fellow Democrats in Ohio's House. That's richly ironic. But beyond the big picture billions, the Strickland plan has its bipartisan quirks.

Is it really the state's job to teach children "not only . . . science, reading and math but also . . . how to live and make healthy life decisions?" Isn't it possible that "how to live" or "wellness" courses, decreed in Columbus, could undermine parents or a family's spiritual traditions?

Likewise, the governor's budget "blue book" calls for repealing the Ohio law that lets "designated school

staff . . . administer medication to students." Strickland instead wants "only licensed and qualified health-care professionals to administer medications" to pupils. Is it a complete coincidence that the Service Employees International Union, a Strickland ally, can represent school nurses?

But all the jousting in the world about school funding is pointless if the governor's budget isn't balanced. Almost \$1 of every \$10 Strickland wants to spend from the General Revenue Fund is one-time money. Once it's gone, it's gone. So the governor and his aides are struggling to hold his budget together with ropes of sand. That just postpones a reckoning that can come now, when Strickland can set the terms of the debate - or in 2010, when there's a good chance that his likely GOP challenger, John R. Kasich, just might.

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