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John Baer: It's time for a woman's touch - in Pa.'s Legislature



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ON THE BIRTHDAY of "the Father of our Country," here's an update on the mothers: Things could be a lot better.

I've long argued that politics needs more women, especially in Pennsylvania's self-protective, bloated, ineffective, scandal-prone, men's-club Legislature.

Cut its size, its cost and add more women and there would be less corruption and more production.

We're among the worst states for women: 46th in the number of female lawmakers, just 14 percent of the Assembly. The national average is 24 percent, according to the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers.

No other Northern state ranks as low. The only states lower? Alabama, Mississippi, Oklahoma and South Carolina - the first state, I'd remind you, to secede from the Union.

And our number could decline. At least three incumbent women - Philly's Kathy Manderino, Chester County's Barb McIlvaine Smith and Lancaster's Katie True - aren't seeking re-election this year.

All this is despite facts common to all but a few states: In Pennsylvania women outnumber men (52 percent to 48 percent); women register to vote at higher rates than men (69 percent to 67 percent), and women vote more than men (62 percent to 59 percent).

The figures are from the U.S. census and pertain to the 2008 elections. The figures and other data represent only marginal progress since I last wrote about this issue, in 2003.

Then, we ranked 47th with a Legislature 13 percent female. Then, we were the only state in which men outnumbered women. But then and now, the numbers suggest a women-are-fer-breed'n'-not-fer-leadin' attitude.

We've never elected a woman governor (20 other states have) or U.S. senator (22 other states have). We've sent only seven women to Congress ever, and three of them succeeded deceased husbands. We now have two: Philly/Montco's Allyson Schwartz and Erie's Kathy Dahlkemper.

Barbara Hafer, elected state auditor general and treasurer and the state's first major-party woman candidate for governor (1990), is running for the Johnstown congressional seat that was held by the late Jack Murtha. I ask her: Why so few women in state politics?

"Politics is tough, and you have to stay around and fight," she says. "Also, a lot of the old excuses hold: Harrisburg's a 'boys' town' and women don't like to travel or be away from home for long stretches."

Rep. McIlvaine Smith, leaving after two state House terms, tells me: "I don't know what it is about us . . . I do know for a lot of the guys it's like being back in college in a frat. They go out drinking together; they go to car races together; they share houses together."

Debbie Walsh, director of the women's center at Rutgers, thinks it's a process: "What you have in Pennsylvania is a pretty entrenched party system that makes it difficult for women to break in . . . New Jersey used to be near the bottom like Pennsylvania, but over the last 10 years, thanks to a concerted push for women to change the culture,

we're up to 15th."

(When I call the Pennsylvania Center for Women, Policies and Public Policy in Pittsburgh, I get a voice message saying that no messages can be received.)

Here are three reasons more women would improve politics:

* Even considering the numerical disparity, women in office almost never are mired in scandal, sexual or otherwise.

There are exceptions: Baltimore Mayor Sheila A. Dixon, forced to resign earlier this month after she was caught stealing gift cards intended for the poor of her city; maybe Pittsburgh state Sen. Jane Orie, reportedly under investigation for alleged improper use of her office to help her sister, Joan Orie Melvin, win a seat on the state Supreme Court. But, come on, a list of scandals involving male politicians around the nation would fill this newspaper.

* Men turn public debate into

testosterone tests and end up accomplishing little. When New Hampshire Rep. Carol Shea-Porter last month said the quickest way to get health care done is to "send the men home," she was right. She argued that almost every woman in Congress has cared for children, mothers, husbands' mothers, and that every one knows more than men about needs and nurturing. Hard to disagree.

* During decades of covering politicians, I've experienced a pattern:

Men tend to talk about their careers and what they want to be. Women tend to talk about specific issues and what they want to do.

So, think about this. Two weeks are left to file for this year's elections. You need \$100 to run for state House or Senate and a petition signed by registered voters (500 signers for Senate, 300 for House).

And, with due respect to birthday-boy George, remember the words of former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher:

"In politics, if you want anything said, ask a man. If you want anything done, ask a woman."


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