

North Dakota lags in number of female lawmakers

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<http://www.inforum.com/event/article/id/302154/group/News/>

BISMARCK – For Shirley Meyer, one thing stands out when looking around at state lawmakers.

Nearly all of them are men.

“You look around our chamber and the Senate also – the first thing you’ll notice is the lack of women,” Meyer, D-Dickinson, said. “The next thing you notice is the lack of younger people in there, if you will. But when you look across and see all the gray hairs in there, you really need to ask yourself, ‘Why?’”

Of North Dakota’s 141 legislative members, 21 of them are women. Fifteen serve in the House and six in the Senate, which has one vacant seat to fill after a recent resignation.

The 2011 Legislature reflects the fewest number of women since 1987, when there were 20. There were 22 female lawmakers in North Dakota in 2009.

The numbers show a wide disparity between the 50 percent of women who make up the state’s population and those who serve in its legislative chambers. Women comprise just 14.9 percent of the North Dakota Legislature.

Prior to the November election, North Dakota ranked 43rd in the nation as far as proportion of women in state legislatures, according to the Center for American Women and Politics.

Today’s female lawmakers say they need to get more women involved.

“I just think a woman’s perspective is sorely needed in the North Dakota Legislature,” Meyer said.

So why haven’t women gained more ground in state politics, and why does it matter? Several past and present lawmakers are weighing in on the issue.

But first, a bit of history.

Barriers for women

The 1923 North Dakota legislative session was the first to include women. For nearly 50 years, numbers ranged from zero in 1935 to five in 1971.

Women made big gains in the 1970s, with numbers climbing to 20 in 1979. Since then, numbers have remained between 18 and the record high of 26 in 1999.

Lawmakers have various answers as to why there aren’t more women in these roles.

For one, it’s harder to get women to run for office, said former Rep. Pam Guleson, D-Rutland. Women aren’t always as willing to share the responsibilities of home life and to ask their spouses for assistance, she said.

“I think the other part of it is it’s still a societal thing,” Guleson said. “I think it’s just a harder acceptance level from the public, even though we should have crossed that barrier a long time ago.”

She recalls a 1994 election forum where she was asked how she would run for office with three small children and what her

husband thought about it.

“She had no interest in hearing about that with the men (candidates),” Gulleson said. “The burden gets placed on women candidates to answer that question over and over and over.”

Rep. Kathy Hawken, R-Fargo, said she’s also been asked why her husband lets her be involved in politics. And while Hawken said she has many male colleagues who value her opinion, she doesn’t know if it’s universal.

“There are too many times when I feel like women are tolerated but not appreciated,” she said. “That is definitely true more in the House than it is in the Senate, in my opinion.”

Former Rep. Frank Wald, R-Dickinson, said he’s sure there’s some of the good-old-boy mentality that still exists, but he thinks it’s less pronounced than in years past.

“Certainly I think we have more openness and transparency now than we did when I started (in the late 1970s),” said Wald, who gave a nominating speech for his replacement, Vicky Steiner.

House Majority Leader Al Carlson of Fargo said the Republican Party is open to qualified candidates of both genders. He said he looks at qualifications when picking committee chairmen and pointed to the three chairwomen and four vice chairwomen in the House.

It comes down to commitment, he said.

“You have to find people who are willing to make the time commitment and effort to leave home for four months,” Carlson said.

Sen. Judy Lee, R-West Fargo, said the Legislature’s schedule makes it tough for both women and young people to participate.

While some see the Legislature as an 80-day commitment every two years, there’s more to it than that, with interim meetings, constituent calls and events, she said.

“The time commitment is just huge for somebody who has a job at home and is a parent,” she said. “It’s especially a burden for parents of young children.”

Lee sees women and young people involved at the local level with city and school boards, where they can remain at home instead of traveling to Bismarck.

Why it matters

Several lawmakers, both male and female, said women bring a different perspective to the table. Sen. Dave Nething, R-Jamestown, said it’s been “very helpful” to have women lawmakers who bring up different points than men.

Wald of Dickinson said he particularly noticed the impact of women when he was speaker of the House in 1999 and sat at the front of the chamber.

“In my 30 years that I served in the House, I found that we had some very capable, successful female legislators, and I hope that trend continues,” he said.

At home, women are generally “the peacemakers, if you will,” which carries over into lawmaking, Meyer said.

“We’re much better at building consensus. We kind of always have our end goal and are not so much focused on the game-playing that tends to go on in politics, which I find frustrating,” she said.

Women also relate more on a personal level when it comes to issues for women, families and children, Meyer said.

Hawken said she’d like to see women make up one-third of the Legislature one day.

Although the numbers aren’t strong right now, the women who have dedicated themselves to serving are, Gulleson said.

“We’re so well served when women are elected because they work really, really hard,” she said. “Women have a unique experience, and they need to be at the table of decision-making at every level.”

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