

Wide gender gap exists in Pennsylvania politics

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The Pennsylvania state
Capitol building dome in
Harrisburg.

Women account for more than half of the U.S. population and more than half of the applicants to medical schools and enrollees in American colleges.

Yet women account for about 17 percent of Pennsylvania's state lawmakers. When the General Assembly is sworn in Tuesday, 42 of the 253 members will be women.

That number will mark a record for women in the Legislature, and a slight increase from the 2009-10 session, when there were 37 women.

But Pennsylvania consistently ranks in the bottom 10 states for the number of female state lawmakers.

Pennsylvania ranked 46th for the legislative session that just ended, according to the Rutgers University Center for American Women and Politics. Nationwide rankings for 2011 are not available.

Pennsylvania's 21-member congressional delegation has only one female member: U.S. Rep. Allyson Schwartz, D-Philadelphia. U.S. Rep. Kathy Dahlkemper, an Erie Democrat, was defeated on Nov. 2.

The Keystone State has never elected a woman governor or U.S. senator.

No one seems able to give an easy answer as to why such a wide gender gap exists in Pennsylvania politics.

Female lawmakers say they didn't experience gender discrimination while campaigning or in office.

Some political insiders blame difficulties in fundraising, while others say child care issues keep women from running. The lack of women in office can be a deterrent to other women who want to get involved, others say.

Women are not necessarily "political entrepreneurs," said Dana Brown, executive director of Chatham University's Pennsylvania Center for Women, Politics and Public Policy.

Instead, women need to be recruited by political leaders or encouraged to run by members of the community, she said.

Women "are most likely to state a public policy reason that instigated putting their name on the ballot while their male colleagues overwhelmingly will cite their long-standing ambitions politically," Brown said.

Women tend to see the Legislature as partisan and “armor-clad,” said state Rep. Mauree Gingrich, R-Cleona, who is heading into her fifth term.

So while women are more inclined to use a team approach to make change happen, “That’s not the way most people see government working right now,” she said.

Gingrich said women typically don’t have the same type of fundraising network that men do. While a man might secure a check for several thousand dollars from a donor, many women gain momentum with small donations in intimate settings, such as having coffee at a friend’s house.

She also sees less inclination to adhere to a party agenda among female lawmakers, which grates Pennsylvania’s party leaders.

Pennsylvania is playing catch-up from its culturally conservative past, said G. Terry Madonna, a political analyst and pollster at Franklin & Marshall College.

Relatively few women participate in many areas of local government, the typical training ground for politicians.

States such as Colorado, which was ranked first in the nation with 38 percent of lawmakers being women, have a weaker party system and populations that are more migratory and less constrained by social and cultural norms, Madonna said.

“I don’t think it’s some sit-down conspiracy by men to keep women out,” Madonna said. “The cultural, economic and social considerations have really, over the years, had a dampening effect on women.”

It’s not as if women are absent from the political scene at the national level.

Hillary Rodham Clinton came close to capturing the Democratic presidential nomination in 2008. Sarah Palin is widely regarded as a top contender for the Republican presidential nomination in 2012, if she chooses to pursue it.

Still, women also can face catch-22 situations, such as how to be “tough, firm and assertive without coming across as ... overbearing or controlling,” said Molly Wertheimer, a communications and women’s studies professor at Penn State Worthington Scranton.

But for some, family and child care issues still reign.

Travel time to and from sessions in Harrisburg is a significant commitment for lawmakers who live outside the midstate, said state Sen. Pat Vance, R-Cumberland County.

Women still are often the primary caregiver, Vance said, so adding several hours of commuting to Harrisburg on top of regular duties can be difficult for some.

If states had more women in leadership positions, it could generate more curiosity by other prospective female candidates, said state Rep. Sheryl Delozier, R-Lower Allen Township.

"We all need to do our part: When we see a good candidate, man or woman, we need to encourage it," said Delozier, who was re-elected last month. "There are still those stereotypes. There are still those people who think women should be home and taking care of the kids."

Delozier, who was first elected in 2008, said she didn't feel she was given or denied anything because of her gender.

Caroline Allen, a Girl Scout leader in Lower Paxton Township, said that it would be helpful if more women held elected offices to inspire girls.

"That we can't show them adequate numbers is a little bit frustrating," Allen said. "I think that as students, the people they run into most as role models would be teachers and/or administrators — that's really where their life experience is."

Allen, who leads a troop of five high school seniors from Central Dauphin High School, said state lawmakers could do a better job of reaching out to younger women to get them thinking about becoming one.

She said that could help make the connection between the leadership positions girls might hold in school, such as class council posts or National Honor Society officers, and elected positions in the political arena.

One woman, state Rep.-elect Tarah Toohil, pulled off one of the biggest upsets on Election Day when she knocked off House Majority Leader Todd Eachus, the second-highest-ranking member of the chamber.

A Republican from Hazleton, Toohil said that she ran because "it seemed that politics was just all the backroom deals ... a 'good ol' boys' club."

Toohil, 31, said her gender wasn't brought up during her campaign.

By the numbers

2011-12

House: 32 women

Senate: 10 women

Total: 42 women (17%)

2001-02

House: 28 women

Senate: 6 women

Total: 34 women (13%)