

Gender and Election to the State Legislatures: Then and Now

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Abstract: Much has changed for women in American society and politics over the past several decades. The social, economic, and political roles of women and men have been transformed. Today, a record number of women hold elective office. Yet, we do not know if the factors that shape candidacy for women and men have remained the same over this time period. We compare the background characteristics and experiences of women and men state legislators in 2008 with state legislators in 1981 using studies conducted by the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP). The investigation of the paths that women and men take to office is a pressing research agenda in light of the plateau in women's state legislative officeholding that has occurred in recent years.

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Gender and Election to the State Legislatures: Then and Now

Much has changed for women in American society and politics over the past several decades. The social, economic, and political roles of women and men have been transformed in dramatic ways. In 1981, the first woman was nominated to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court. The term “the gender gap” came into use for the first time following the 1980 presidential election. Relatively few women held elective office. Only 23 women served in Congress in 1981, making up 4.3% of members (CAWP 2009a).

In contrast, a record number of women hold elective office today. A total of 90 women serve in Congress, making up 16.7% of members. The gender gap in voting behavior is now widely recognized as a feature of American politics. Women earn a majority of post-secondary degrees, and while women earned only about 30% of law degrees in 1980, today they earn nearly half (U.S. Census Bureau 2008). Women still bear more responsibility than men for care-giving within the family, but there is much more flexibility in gender roles than there was several decades ago.

Such changes suggest that gender may have become less relevant to elective officeholding over time. There is debate among scholars about the extent to which gender affects candidacy and elections today. Several studies have demonstrated that women candidates fare as well as men with voters when they are running in similar circumstances (e.g., Darcy, Welch, and Clark 1994; Seltzer, Newman, and Leighton 1997). At least at the congressional level, women general election candidates are able to raise as much, or more, money than their male counterparts (Burrell 1994; Burrell 2003). And incumbency, while as powerful as ever,

clearly is not the sole or even dominant explanation for women's continued underrepresentation, as research on women's representation in state legislatures in term-limited states has clearly demonstrated (e.g., Carroll and Jenkins 2001). Nevertheless, women have not come close to achieving parity among public officials at any level of office, and at state legislative, statewide, and federal levels their representation remains below 25%, suggesting that gender is still relevant to electoral candidacies and outcomes.

Researchers have begun to examine anew questions regarding the recruitment of women for public office, which was one of the first topics explored by scholars of women and politics beginning in the 1970s. Initial explanations for the underrepresentation of women in public office tended to focus on gender role socialization, situational and structural factors, and overt gender discrimination (e.g., Lee 1977; King 1977; Stoper 1977; Welch 1978; Flammang 1997). Recent scholarship has revisited these questions in order to understand the persistence of women's underrepresentation in public office (Fox and Lawless 2004; Lawless and Fox 2005; Lawless and Fox 2008; Moncrief, Squire, and Jewell 2001; Squire and Moncrief 2004; Niven 2006; Sanbonmatsu 2006).

Despite societal change and positive research findings that suggest the political playing field for women, while certainly not level, is much closer to level than in the 1970s and 1980s, a troubling and puzzling pattern has emerged in women's representation among state legislators. From the early 1970s through the late 1990s, the numbers and proportions of women serving in state legislatures increased fivefold, from 4.5% of legislators in 1971 to 22.4% in 1999. However, since the late 1990s, the rate of progress has slowed, with the numbers and proportions of women in legislatures increasing only slightly over the past decade. In 2009, women

constitute 24.3% of state legislators, an increase of only 1.9 percentage points over the 1999 figure (Center for American Women and Politics 2009a).

In order to understand whether and how gender is related to officeholding, we need to know if the factors that shape candidacy for women and men have remained the same over time. In this paper, we compare state legislators in 2008 with state legislators in 1981, using surveys conducted by the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) about the factors that affect state legislators' entry into office. Because the 2008 CAWP Recruitment Study largely replicates the 1981 CAWP study, together the two surveys provide a unique research opportunity to study changes in the relationship between gender and candidacy over the past quarter century. No other study contains such detailed information on the backgrounds and recruitment of state legislators.

We expect to find that gender differences in the factors that affect women's and men's entry into public office have diminished since 1981. Gains in women's officeholding and changes in women's status in society suggest that gender should matter less to shaping the factors that affect entry into office in 2008 compared to 1981. Thus, we expect that women's and men's paths to the legislature have converged to some extent. However, the recent plateau in women's officeholding and the continued underrepresentation of women in elective office lead us to hypothesize that we will still observe gender differences in how women and men reach the legislature.

The 1981 and 2008 CAWP Recruitment Studies

Data for each CAWP study were gathered through a survey instrument sent to legislators in all fifty states consisting primarily of questions concerning the decision to seek office,

previous political experience, and personal background.¹ The 2008 CAWP Recruitment Study, funded in large part by the Barbara Lee Family Foundation with matching funds from the Susie Tompkins Buell Foundation, Wendy McKenzie, and other donors, was designed in large part to replicate the original, 1981 CAWP Recruitment Study.

The 1981 sample included 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.² A total of 789 legislators completed the survey for an overall response rate of 55.4%.³ The survey was conducted by mail.

Our 2008 sampling strategy was modeled on the 1981 study.⁴ We included 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

¹ See the Appendix for details.

² 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. At the time of this study, women constituted 12.1% of state legislators (CAWP 1981).

³ 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%.

⁴ Samples were based on lists of legislators and women legislators serving in January 2008 provided by the National Conference of State Legislatures and the Center for American Women and Politics.

36.5%.⁵ The survey was conducted primarily by mail and web, with a small number of completions by phone.

Analysis

In the following sections, we summarize the results of our initial comparison of the 1981 and 2008 studies. We limit the analysis to state representatives because a seat in the lower chamber is more likely to be the first state legislative office held by state legislators. We consider a host of factors that affect the path to the legislature including the role of family, political experience, parties, and organizations. To preview, we find some evidence of convergence between women's and men's paths to the state legislatures. However, also consistent with our expectations, we find that gender continues to shape entry into the legislature in important ways.

Family Factors

Family continues to have different implications for the political careers of women and men. Analyzing the results of the 1981 CAWP Recruitment Study, Carroll and Strimling observed, "These differences between women and men who hold 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 implications for the decision to seek state legislative office as well as the timing of women's political careers. Family considerations affect both women and men, but they seem to

⁵ 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%.

play a larger role in women’s candidacies. At the same time, we find some evidence of convergence due to changes among men.

We asked legislators to rate the importance of various factors in influencing the decision to run the first time for their current office. Response options were “very important,” “somewhat important,” “not important,” or “not applicable.” In both time periods, women were less likely than men 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 1). This gender difference is largely due to the fact that women were notably less likely than their male colleagues to be married as evident in the larger proportions of women than men who checked “not applicable.” In fact, only 72.1% of women in 1981 and 67.9% in 2008 were currently married, compared with 84.0% of men in 1981 and 87.0% in 2008 (Table 2).⁶

[Insert Tables 1 and 2 here]

When we turn to the importance of spousal support to officeholding, gender differences are more apparent and in the direction one might expect. Among legislators 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 3). 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. Levels of spousal support were very similar for women in both time periods, but this was not true for men. Men were notably more likely to report a “very”

⁶ In 2008 we added the option “living as married,” with an additional 3.0% of women and 1.4% of men checking this option.

supportive spouse in 2008 than in 1981, suggesting that family plays a greater role in men's career decisions today than in previous decades.

[Insert Table 3]

Parenting, another important aspect of legislators' family lives, has typically presented a more complex set of calculations for women in politics than for men. Our survey asked legislators about the importance to the 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—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 4). Men were more likely than women to opt for the "somewhat important" or "not important" options.

In addition, women representatives were less likely than their male colleagues in both 1981 and 2008 to have young children (Table 5). In both years, few men, but almost no women, 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. 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. Although legislators of both genders are now less likely to have young children than in 1981, the gender differences apparent in 1981 were still evident in 2008. 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.

[Insert Tables 4 and 5]

Other Factors in the Decision to Seek Office

Of course, family is not the only consideration that shapes the decision to seek elective office. Table 6 presents the percentage of legislators who rated various factors as “very important” in the decision to run for the office they now hold. The data in this table suggest that some gender differences in the factors affecting entry to office have narrowed. There is more similarity between women and men due to changes in women’s work roles and gains in women’s officeholding. But other gender differences persist, indicating continued obstacles facing women as well as gender differences in the motivation for seeking office.

[Insert Table 6]

For purposes of comparison, we include in this table the family factors that we discussed in the previous section. As this table shows, both spousal approval and age of children were among the three factors rated as very important by the largest proportion of women representatives in both 1981 and 2001. Clearly, family-related considerations remain paramount for women in deciding to seek office.

The factor that was ranked “very important” in both 1981 and 2008 by even larger proportions of women than the two family-related factors was a perceptual one: “The realization that I was just as capable of holding office as most officeholders.” This factor has become somewhat less important over time, with only 64.0% of women reporting that it was very important in 2008, compared to 80.3% of women in 1981. However, in both years, women were more likely than their male colleagues to view their assessment of their own capabilities as an important factor.

“Having an occupation that would allow me sufficient time and flexibility to hold office” was less likely to be rated very important by women than men in 1981 (Table 6). This gender

difference all but disappeared by 2008, with more women joining their male colleagues in citing this factor. These findings most likely reflect the changing occupational profile of women state legislators.⁷ In 1981, 17.7% of women representatives did not work outside the home; this figure declined to only 5.4% of women in 2008. As women have entered the workforce in increasing numbers, occupational flexibility—one of the most important factors affecting men’s decisions to seek office—has apparently become as important to women’s decisions as it is to men’s. This is a clear area of convergence in women’s and men’s political careers.

In contrast to the pattern for occupational flexibility, women continued in 2008 to be more likely than men to rate “My concern about one or two particular public policy issues” as a “very important” factor in their decision to run for the legislature (Table 6). This is one of the few gender differences that increased over time, with notably larger proportions of women citing concern about public policy in 2008 than in 1981. In contrast, the proportion of men rating this factor as very important was only slightly larger in 2008 than in 1981. These findings suggest a motivational difference between women and men. Concern over public policy issues seems to provide a motivational boost toward candidacy for proportionately more of the women than men who ultimately find their way into the legislature, and this seems more true today than a quarter of a century ago.

Interestingly, as costs of campaigning for state houses have increased over time in many states, money became an important consideration for larger proportions of both women and men between 1981 and 2008 (Table 6). Although the difference is not large, in both 1981 and 2008 women were more likely than men to regard “Having sufficient financial resources to conduct a viable campaign” as very important to their decisions to run for the state house. Despite empirical evidence that women candidates can and often do raise as much money as men,

⁷ See also Dolan and Ford (1997) on occupational changes among women state legislators.

women continue to express more concern than men over their ability to raise sufficient funds. Indeed, one of the largest gender differences we observe is in response to a question we asked in 2008 only about whether women or men have a more difficult time raising funds (Carroll and Sanbonmatsu 2009). More than half of women state representatives but fewer than one-tenth of their male colleagues believe “It is harder for female candidates to raise money than male candidates,” while fewer than half of women and almost nine-tenths of men believe “It is equally hard for both” male and female candidates to raise money. Almost no respondents believed that raising money was harder for male candidates.

On the other hand, it appears that women worried less in 2008 than they did in 1981 about having sufficient political experience, perhaps because women now feel less societal pressure than they once did to prove that they are qualified to hold office. In 1981, women representatives were more likely than men to rate the factor “Making sure I had sufficient prior political experience” as very important to their decision to run. In contrast, by 2008 the proportion citing political experience as very important to their decision had dropped to about the same level as for men in both 1981 and 2008. As with the factor of occupational flexibility, the pattern here seems to be one of convergence, with women’s responses over time coming more to resemble men’s.

Meanwhile, in both time periods, the factors “Making contacts that would enhance my business or professional (not political) career” and “My perception that this office was an important stepping-stone toward higher office” weighed far less heavily than other concerns in both women’s and men’s decisions to seek public office (Table 6). Moreover, no notable gender differences are apparent in these factors.

Parties, Organizations, and Experience

It is likely that women candidates who ran for and were successfully elected to state legislative office made it through the process in part because of the large amount of encouragement they received. This was true in 1981 and continues to be the case today.

Gender differences in the interaction that representatives have with the parties appear to have narrowed. A sizeable majority of state representatives of both genders reported that they received support from party leaders (Table 7), and about half reported that party leaders encouraged them to run. In 1981 women were somewhat less likely than men to report that party leaders supported their candidacy when they first ran for the state house, while women and men in 2008 reported more similar experiences. In both time periods, women and men experienced similar levels of party encouragement to run the first time for their current office (Table 8).⁸ In fact, in 2008, just slightly larger proportions of women than men were asked to run for their state house seats by party leaders.

[Insert Tables 7 and 8]

Because we do not find that women experienced a significantly higher degree of party recruitment, we cannot confirm the expectations of some scholars that political parties are a solution to the problem of women's underrepresentation. We simply do not find that women benefit from a disproportionate amount of party encouragement. Neither can we say with any certainty that parties pose no problems for women who run for the legislature since we look only at successful candidates. Rather, what we can conclude is that the women who succeed in winning election to the state house have been encouraged and supported by party leaders in substantial numbers and at levels similar to those of their male colleagues.

⁸ The exact question wording about encouragement to run is: "Did leaders from your party actively seek you out and encourage you to run for this office?"

Consistent with the finding of other research that women legislators are less likely to be self-starters and more likely to need encouragement to run not only from parties but also from other sources (Moncrief, Squire, and Jewell 2001; Squire and Moncrief 2004), we find evidence that organizations were important sources of support for the candidacies of many women. About one of every three women state representatives in both 1981 and 2008, compared with fewer than one of every five of their male counterparts, reported that an organization “played a particularly important role in getting you to run the first time for the office you now hold” (Table 9).

Although the gender difference was somewhat smaller in 2008 than it was in 1981, this finding suggests that organizations can play a significant role in the recruitment of women candidates. Similarly, in both 1981 and 2008, women were more likely than their male colleagues to have attended a candidate training or workshop (Table 9). While the proportions attending candidate trainings increased for both women and men over the past quarter century, three of every four women serving in state houses in 2008 had attended such a training. Although campaign workshops are often intended to help candidates increase their knowledge base and develop skills, in many cases they may also boost self-confidence and provide encouragement to run.

[Insert Table 9]

Conclusion

To some extent, the path that women and men take to elective office has converged. Women serving in state legislatures today are as likely as men to see occupational flexibility as an important prerequisite for seeking office, and they are no more likely than men to worry about whether they have sufficient political experience. While their assessment of their capabilities to hold office still ranks as a top consideration for large majorities of women, gender differences

have lessened over time. Moreover, women who win election to state house seats are just as likely as their male counterparts to have received support for their candidacies from party leaders.

While the paths to office for women and men have converged in some respects, other gender differences are apparent today just as they were a quarter century ago. Family considerations continue to play a pivotal role in the political decisions of women and a more important role in women's decisions than in men's. Few political women seek office unless their spouses (or partners) are fully supportive, and most women still wait until their children are grown. Financial considerations still loom larger in women's decisions, and women's candidacies appear more often than men's to be motivated at least in part by concern over public policy issues. Perhaps most important, encouragement and organizational support seem to be more critical to women's candidacies than to men's.

The persistence of these gender differences are surprising in light of the time that has elapsed between the two CAWP surveys. These differences indicate that gender continues to pose obstacles to women's candidacies today. In the absence of intensified recruitment efforts, gender parity in officeholding is likely to remain an unattainable goal for the foreseeable future. The level of women's officeholding, more so than men's, depends on the strength of recruitment mechanisms. Our findings corroborate other recent studies about the lack of recruitment of women for public office (Sanbonmatsu 2006; Lawless and Fox 2008). Nevertheless, our findings of gender differences are particularly worrisome because they occur among women and men who have successfully run for and been elected to office. Insufficient recruitment from all sources, including political actors and organizations, is a likely explanation for the stagnation that we have seen in women's state legislative officeholding over the last decade.

Appendix

Survey Methodology

Data collection for the 1981 CAWP Recruitment Study took place between May and July 1981. Respondents received 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.

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.

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Table 1. Approval of Spouse/ Partner as a Factor in the Decision to Run

	1981		2008	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Very important	65.9%	69.4%	62.5%	74.9%
Somewhat important	11.1%	14.5%	13.3%	12.6%
Not important	2.8%	1.6%	4.7%	3.0%
Not applicable	20.2%	14.5%	19.5%	9.6%
<i>N</i> =	425	193	528	438

Table 2. Marital Status

	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	8.24%	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> =	432	200	527	437

Table 3. Spousal Support among State Legislators

	1981		2008	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Very Supportive	82.7%	58.2%	83.2%	74.2%
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> =	307	165	376	387

Table 4. Age of Children as a Factor in the Decision to Run

	1981		2008	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Very important	57.3%	37.7%	56.7%	41.9%
Somewhat important	15.7%	23.6%	11.4%	23.1%
Not important	4.9%	8.9%	6.5%	9.8%
Not applicable	22.1%	29.8%	25.5%	25.2%
<i>N</i> =	426	191	526	437

Table 5. Parental Status

	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> =	429	193	531	438

Table 6. Comparison of Factors Regarded as “Very Important” in the Decision to Run

	1981		2008	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Realization that I was just as capable	80.3%	66.2%	64.0%	54.4%
Approval of my spouse or partner	65.9%	69.4%	62.5%	74.9%
My children being old enough	57.3%	37.7%	56.7%	41.9%
Occupation with flexibility	43.5%	59.6%	56.4%	58.5%
My concern about public policy issues	32.4%	28.5%	44.0%	32.4%
Financial resources for campaign	26.5%	21.0%	38.7%	34.3%
Sufficient prior political experience	23.8%	17.1%	13.7%	16.0%
Stepping-stone toward higher office	4.0%	5.1%	1.5%	3.9%
Contacts to enhance my career	3.3%	2.5%	5.7%	5.0%

N ranges from 191 to 528. Cell entries represent percentage of respondents identifying the factor as “very important.” Columns can sum to more than 100% because state legislators rated the importance of each factor.

Table 7. Party Leader Reactions to First Candidacy for the Legislature

	1981		2008	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Generally they supported my candidacy.	61.1%	71.9%	67.9%	65.5%
Generally they opposed my candidacy.	6.3%	5.6%	4.9%	6.9%
They neither supported nor opposed my candidacy.	14.2%	11.2%	13.6%	15.3%
There were divided in their reaction to my candidacy; some were supportive but others were opposed.	18.4%	11.2%	13.6%	12.3%
<i>N</i> =	429	196	529	438

Table 8. Party Leader Encouragement of Candidacy

	1981		2008	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Yes	46.5%	47.7%	54.9%	49.9%
<i>N</i> =	428	197	530	439

Table 9. Organizations and Experience

	1981		2008	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
An Organization Played an Important Role in Deciding to Run				
Yes	33.9%	16.3%	28.4%	19.1%
<i>N=</i>	<i>434</i>	<i>196</i>	<i>528</i>	<i>439</i>
Attended Candidate Training Program or Workshop				
Yes	57.8%	43.4%	75.0%	59.6%
<i>N=</i>	<i>436</i>	<i>196</i>	<i>528</i>	<i>438</i>