

# Women in State Government: Still Too Few

By Susan J. Carroll

*In recent years the movement of women into state-level offices has slowed after several decades of gains. Efforts to actively recruit women for elective and appointive positions will be critical in determining what the future holds for women in state government.*

In the history of our nation, women are relative newcomers among state elected and appointed officials. Women first entered state-level offices in the 1920s following passage and ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which granted women suffrage. However, significant growth in the numbers of women in office occurred only after the emergence of the contemporary women's movement during the late-1960s and early-1970s. Since the mid-1970s, as data collected by the Center for American Women and Politics show, women have greatly increased their numbers among elected and appointed officials in state government. Nevertheless, progress has slowed in recent years, and nationwide statistics show little or no growth in the numbers of women serving in state-level offices since the turn of the century.

## Governors

Since the founding of our country, only 37 women (22D, 15R) have served as state governors (Table A), and only one woman has served as governor of a U.S. territory (Puerto Rico). Almost half of the states, 23, have never had a female chief executive. Arizona is the only state to have had four female governors as well as the only state to have had a woman succeed another as governor. New Hampshire has been governed by three different women although one of the governors of New Hampshire, Vesta Roy, served for only seven days following the death of an incumbent. Connecticut, Kansas, Oregon, Texas and Washington each have had two female governors.

The first female governor, Nellie Tayloe Ross of Wyoming, was selected in a special election to succeed her deceased husband in 1925. Fifteen days later a second woman, Miriam "Ma" Ferguson, was inaugurated as governor of Texas, having been elected as a surrogate for her husband, a former governor who had been impeached and consequently was barred constitutionally from running again. Ferguson's campaign slogan was "Two governors for the price of one." The third woman to serve as a governor, Lurleen Wallace of Alabama,

campaigning on the slogan, "Let George do it," and was similarly elected to replace a husband who was prohibited by term limits from seeking an additional term in office.

The first woman elected in her own right (i.e., without following her husband) into the governorship was Ella Grasso, who presided over the state of Connecticut from 1975 to 1980. Twenty-five of the female governors, including Grasso, who have served since the mid-1970s were elected in their own right. The other nine became governor through constitutional succession; only three of these nine were subsequently elected to full terms.

Six women (3D, 3R) serve as governors in 2016, falling short of the record nine women who served simultaneously in 2004 and again in 2007. Four female governors—Mary Fallin (R-Oklahoma), Nikki Haley (R-South Carolina), Maggie Hassan (D-New Hampshire) and Susana Martinez (R-New Mexico)—were re-elected and one woman, Gina Raimondo (D-Rhode Island), was newly elected as governor in 2014. A sixth female governor was added in early 2015 when Secretary of State Kate Brown (D-Oregon) succeeded to the governorship upon the resignation of the incumbent.

Martinez, a Latina, and Haley, an Indian American, are the first two women of color ever to serve as governor of a state.

## Other Statewide Elected and Appointed Officials in the Executive Branch

The states vary greatly in their numbers of statewide elected and appointed officials. For example, New Hampshire and Maine have only one statewide elected official, the governor, while North Dakota, at the other extreme, has 12.

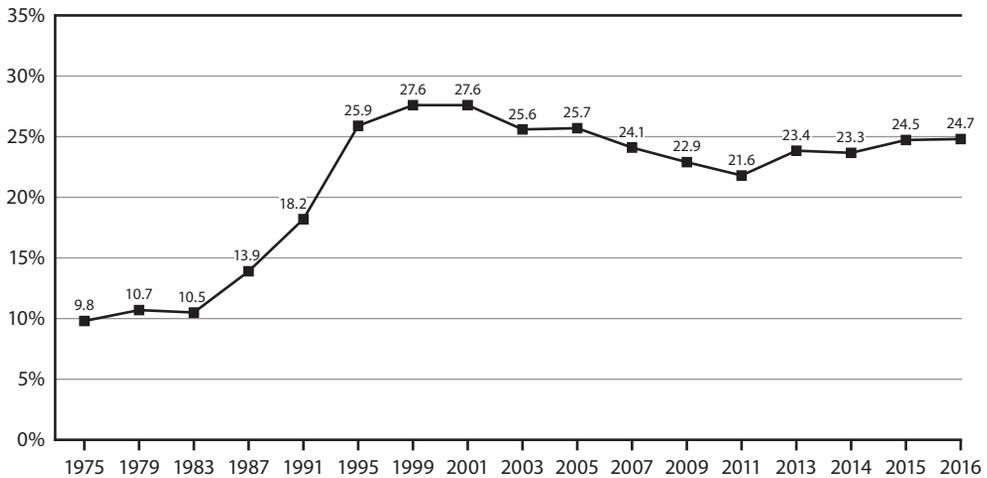
The first woman to hold a major statewide office was Soledad C. Chacon (D-New Mexico) who was secretary of state in New Mexico from 1923–26; Delaware, Kentucky, New York, South Dakota and Texas also had female secretaries of state in the 1920s. The first female treasurer, Grace B. Urbahns (R-Indiana), served during the same time period, from 1926–32.

**Table A: Female Governors Throughout History**

<i>Name (Party-State)</i>	<i>Dates served</i>	<i>Special circumstances</i>
Nellie Tayloe Ross (D-WY)	1925–1927	Won special election to replace deceased husband.
Miriam “Ma” Ferguson (D-TX)	1925–1927, 1933–1935	Inaugurated 15 days after Ross; elected as surrogate for husband who could not succeed himself.
Lurleen Wallace (D-AL)	1967–1968	Elected as surrogate for husband who could not succeed himself.
Ella Grasso (D-CT)	1975–1980	First woman elected governor in her own right; resigned for health reasons.
Dixy Lee Ray (D-WA)	1977–1981	
Vesta Roy (R-NH)	1982–1983	Elected to state senate and chosen as senate president; served as governor for seven days when incumbent died.
Martha Layne Collins (D-KY)	1984–1987	
Madeleine Kunin (D-VT)	1985–1991	First woman to serve three terms as governor.
Kay Orr (R-NE)	1987–1991	First Republican woman governor and first woman to defeat another woman in a gubernatorial race.
Rose Mofford (D-AZ)	1988–1991	Elected as secretary of state, succeeded governor who was impeached and convicted.
Joan Finney (D-KS)	1991–1995	First woman to defeat an incumbent governor.
Ann Richards (D-TX)	1991–1995	
Barbara Roberts (D-OR)	1991–1995	
Christine Todd Whitman (R-NJ)	1994–2001	Resigned to take presidential appointment as commissioner of the Environmental Protection Agency.
Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH)	1997–2003	
Jane Dee Hull (R-AZ)	1997–2003	Elected as secretary of state, succeeded governor who resigned; later elected to a full term.
Nancy Hollister (R-OH)	1998–1999	Elected lieutenant governor; served as governor for 11 days when predecessor took U.S. Senate seat and successor had not yet been sworn in.
Jane Swift (R-MA)	2001–2003	Elected as lieutenant governor, succeeded governor who resigned for an ambassadorial appointment.
Judy Martz (R-MT)	2001–2005	
Olene Walker (R-UT)	2003–2005	Elected as lieutenant governor, succeeded governor who resigned to take a federal appointment.
Ruth Ann Minner (D-DE)	2001–2009	
Jennifer M. Granholm (D-MI)	2003–2011	
Linda Lingle (R-HI)	2003–2011	
Janet Napolitano (D-AZ)	2003–2009	First woman to succeed another woman as governor; resigned to become U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security.
Kathleen Sebelius (D-KS)	2003–2009	Father was governor of Ohio. Resigned to become U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services.
Kathleen Blanco (D-LA)	2004–2008	
M. Jodi Rell (R-CT)	2004–2011	Elected as lieutenant governor, succeeded governor who resigned.
Christine Gregoire (D-WA)	2005–2013	
Sarah Palin (R-AK)	2007–2009	Resigned.
Beverly Perdue (D-NC)	2009–2013	
Jan Brewer (R-AZ)	2009–2015	Elected as secretary of state, succeeded governor who resigned.
Mary Fallin (R-OK)	2011–present	
Nikki Haley (R-SC)	2011–present	First Asian (Indian) American woman to be elected governor.
Susana Martinez (R-NM)	2011–present	First Latina to be elected governor.
Maggie Hassan (D-NH)	2013–present	
Gina Raimondo (D-RI)	2015–present	
Kate Brown (D-OR)	2015–present	Elected as secretary of state, succeeded governor who resigned.

*Source:* Center for American Women and Politics, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University, February 2016.

**Figure A: Proportion of Women Among Statewide Elective Officials**



Source: Center for American Women and Politics, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University.

Several years passed before a woman became lieutenant governor. Matilda R. Wilson (R-Michigan) served briefly as lieutenant governor of Michigan in 1940 when she was appointed to fill an expiring term. However, the first woman elected as a lieutenant governor was Consuelo N. Bailey (R-Vermont) who served from 1955–56. An additional three decades passed before a woman became attorney general of a state; the first was Arlene Violet (R-Rhode Island) who served from 1985–87.

As evident from Figure A, the proportion of women among statewide elective officials (including governor) has grown substantially since the 1970s. From 1975 to 1983 the increases were small and incremental. Then, between 1983 and 2000, there was a period of significant growth; the number and proportion of women serving statewide almost tripled, reaching a record of 92 women constituting 28.5 percent of all statewide elected officials in 2000. Since 2000, the numbers and proportions have declined. Fewer women, 77, hold statewide offices in 2016 than in 1995 when there were 84 women.

In early 2016, women hold 24.7 percent of the 312 statewide elective positions. In addition to the six women governors, 12 women (4D, 8R) serve as lieutenant governors in the 44 states that elect

lieutenant governors in statewide elections. This is considerably fewer than the record high number of 19 women who served as lieutenant governors in 1995.

Other female statewide elected officials include: 13 secretaries of state (7D, 6R), nine attorneys general (6D, 3R), nine state auditors (5D, 4R), nine chief education officials (3D, 5R, 1 nonpartisan), eight state treasurers (4D, 4R), two corporation commissioners (2R), two public service commissioners (2R), two state comptroller/controllers (1D, 1R), one commissioner of insurance (1D), one commissioner of labor (R), one railroad commissioner (R), one agriculture and commerce commissioner (R), and one public utilities commissioner (R). In addition to the two women of color who serve as governors, the women serving in statewide elective office include two African Americans (the lieutenant governor of Kentucky and the state treasurer of Connecticut); two Latinas (the lieutenant governor of Illinois and the secretary of state of Rhode Island); one Native American (the superintendent of public instruction of Montana); one Asian Pacific Islander (the state controller of California); and one multi-racial individual (the attorney general of California).

Women may be slightly better represented among top appointed officials in state government than among statewide elected officials, although it is not possible to know for certain since the most recent data available are from 2007. According to nationwide data collected by the Center on Women in Government and Civil Society at SUNY-Albany, in 2007, women constituted 32.2 percent of department heads with major policymaking responsibilities (including heads of departments, agencies, offices, boards, commissions and authorities) who were appointed by governors. This proportion represented a substantial increase over 1997 when women constituted just 23.2 percent of department heads. Women were even better represented in 2007 among top appointed advisers in governors' offices, with women holding 41.9 percent of these positions—a slightly higher proportion than the 39.5 percent of these positions they held in 1997. Women of color are still a rarity among appointed officials, with women of color constituting just 6.3 percent of all department heads and top advisers in governors' offices in 2007.

### Justices on Courts of Last Resort

The first woman to win election to a state court of last resort was Florence E. Allen, who was elected to the Ohio Supreme Court in 1922 and re-elected in 1928. Nevertheless, it was not until 1960 that a second woman, Lorna Lockwood of Arizona, was elected to a state supreme court. Lockwood's colleagues on the Arizona Supreme Court selected her in 1965 to be chief justice, making her the first woman in history to preside over a state court of last resort. She was followed by Susie Sharp of North Carolina who, in 1974, became the first woman to be elected by popular vote to be chief justice of a state court of last resort.

In 2003, Petra Jimenez Maes of New Mexico, who currently serves as an associate justice, became the first Latina chief justice of a state supreme court. Similarly, in 2005 Leah Ward Sears of Georgia became the first African American woman to preside over a state court of last resort.

According to the National Center for State Courts, 126—or 36.7 percent—of the 343 sitting justices on state courts of last resort in early 2016 are women. Of the 53 chief justices of these courts, 22, or 41.5 percent, are women. Women comprise a majority of justices on courts of last resort in nine states—Arkansas, California, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, Ohio, Tennessee, Washington and Wisconsin. Women constitute at least 40

percent of the justices (but less than a majority) on an additional 21 courts of last resort.

### Legislators

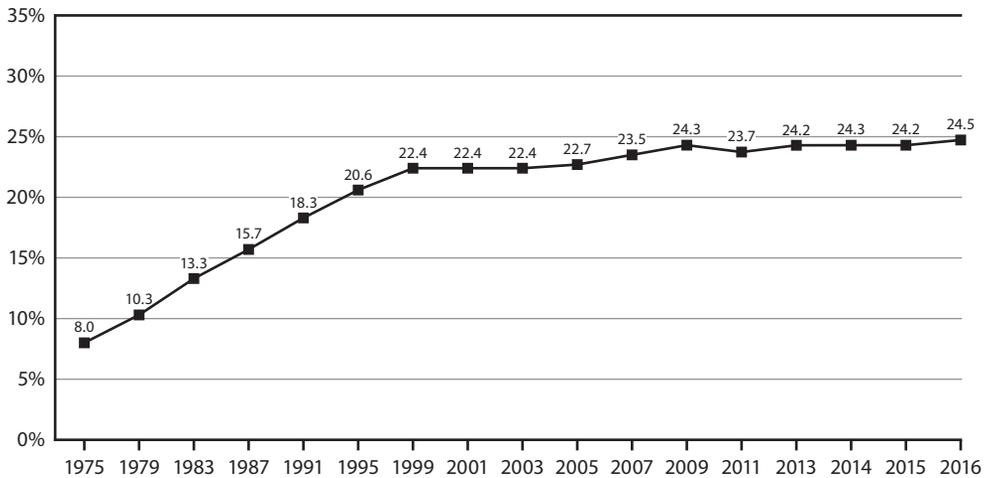
Even before 1920 when women won the right to vote across the country, a few women had been elected to legislatures in states that had granted the franchise to women. By 1971 the proportion of women serving in state legislatures across the country had grown to 4.5 percent, and over the years this proportion has increased more than fivefold. As Figure B illustrates, the proportion of women among legislators grew steadily throughout the 1970s and 1980s. However, the rate of growth slowed in the 1990s, and similar to the pattern for statewide elected officials, the numbers and proportions of women legislators nationwide have leveled off since the late 1990s. The proportion of women legislators has increased only about two percentage points since 1999 (Figure B).

In early 2016 women hold 444, or 22.5 percent, of all state senate seats and 1,364, or 25.2 percent, of all state house seats across the country. The number of women who serve in state legislatures in early 2016—1,808—is just under the record number of 1,809 who served in 2010.

Great variation exists across the states in the proportion of legislators who are women. (See Table B.) Colorado ranks first among the states with 42 percent among its legislators, followed by Vermont (41.1 percent), Arizona (35.6 percent), Washington (34.0 percent) and Minnesota (33.8 percent). With the exception of Minnesota and Illinois, all of the states ranked in the top 10 in the proportion of women in their legislatures are located in the west or northeast. However, despite this geographic concentration, no easy explanation exists for why these states have risen to the top, and scholars who have statistically examined the variation among the states in the representation of women in their legislatures have found no simple patterns.

At the other extreme, Wyoming, with only 13.3 percent, ranks last among the 50 states in the representation of women among its legislators. Accompanying Wyoming in the bottom five states are Oklahoma (14.1 percent), South Carolina (14.1 percent), Alabama (14.3 percent), and Mississippi (14.4 percent). Eight of the 10 states with the lowest proportions of women are southern or border states. Only one southern state, Florida, with 25.0 percent women, and one border state, Missouri, with 24.9 percent women are above the national average of 24.5 percent. As these rankings make

**Figure B: Proportion of Women Among State Legislators**



Source: Center for American Women and Politics, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University.

clear, the south as a region lags behind the rest of the country in the representation of women within its legislatures.

Nationwide, Republicans outnumber Democrats among all state legislators regardless of gender. However, a very different pattern is evident among women legislators where Democrats outnumber Republicans. Among female state senators nationwide, 59.9 percent are Democrats; among female state representatives, 60 percent are Democrats.

About one-fifth of female state legislators, 22 percent, are women of color. Of the 102 senators and 296 representatives serving in legislatures in early 2015, all but 33 are Democrats. African American women hold 68 seats in state senates and 191 seats in state houses across 41 states. Latinas are concentrated in 26 states; they hold 20 senate and 68 house seats. Asian American women count among their numbers 12 senators and 26 representatives in 13 states while Native American women hold two senate and 11 house seats in six states.

**The Future**

Although women have made substantial progress over time in increasing their presence in state government, the leveling off among state legisla-

tors and slight decline among statewide elective officials since the turn of the century are troubling developments. At a minimum, these developments provide evidence that increases over time are not inevitable.

The lack of growth in numbers has implications for women’s representation not only among state legislators and nongubernatorial statewide officeholders, but also among governors and members of Congress. Probably the most striking positive development for women in state government in recent years has been the increase in women governors. Of the 37 women governors across the entire history of our country, 23 have served all or part of their terms during the first few years of the 21st century. Of the six sitting governors, three held statewide elective office before running for governor—one as lieutenant governor, another as secretary of state and a third as state treasurer. In addition, four of the current women governors served in their state legislatures, where two were majority leaders and one was majority whip.

Similarly, many of the women who have run for Congress gained experience and visibility in state government before seeking federal office. Of the 84 female members of the U.S. House in the 114th

**Table B: Women in State Legislatures 2016**

State	Senate			House			Legislature (both houses)	
	Democrats	Republicans	% Women	Democrats	Republicans	% Women	% Women	State rank (a)
Alabama	3	0	11.4 (b)	11	5	15.2	14.3	46
Alaska	1	4	25.0	2	10	30.0	28.3	15
Arizona	6	7	43.3	11	8	31.7	35.6	3
Arkansas	3	4	20.0	6	14	20.0	20.0	36
California	8	4	30.0	11	8	25.0	25.8	20
Colorado	8	4	34.2	20	10	46.2	42.0	1
Connecticut	8	1	25.0	25	19	29.1	28.3	15
Delaware	5	1	28.6	7	2	22.0	24.2	27
Florida	6	6	30.0	13	15	23.3	25.0	23
Georgia	8	2	17.9	28	18	25.6	23.7	29
Hawaii	8	0	32.0	10	4	27.5	28.9	13
Idaho	4	6	28.6	7	12	27.1	27.6	17
Illinois	12	4	27.1	32	10	35.6	32.8	7
Indiana	3	6	18.0	12	10	22.0	20.7	34
Iowa	6	1	14.0	21	6	27.6	22.7	30
Kansas	4	9	32.5	10	17	21.6	24.2	27
Kentucky	2	2	10.5	10	8	18.0	15.9	43
Louisiana	3	2	12.8	9	8	16.2	15.3	44
Maine	5	3	22.9	30	16	30.5	29.0	12
Maryland	10	2	25.5	36	11	33.3	31.4	8
Massachusetts	12	0	30.0	29	9	23.8	25.0	23
Michigan	1	3	10.5	17	9	23.6	20.3	35
Minnesota	15	8	34.3	27	18	33.6	33.8	5
Mississippi	4	5	17.3	11	5	13.1	14.4	45
Missouri	5	1	17.6	19	24	26.4	24.9	26
Montana	12	6	36.0	21	8	29.0	31.3	9
Nebraska (c)	...Nonpartisan...		22.4	.....Unicameral.....			22.4	31
Nevada	3	2	23.8	9	7	38.1	33.3	6
New Hampshire	4	4	33.3	69	45	28.5	28.8	14
New Jersey	8	3	27.5	18	7	31.3	30.0	11
New Mexico	4	3	16.7	13	10	32.9	26.8	19
New York	7	5	19.0	37	5	28.7 (d)	25.8	20
North Carolina	7	5	24.0	14	12	21.3	22.4	31
North Dakota	4	4	17.0	11	8	20.2	19.1	38
Ohio	4	3	21.2	13	13	26.3	25.0	23
Oklahoma	3	3	12.5	5	10	14.9	14.1	48
Oregon	6	2	26.7	16	4	33.3	31.1	10
Pennsylvania	4	5	18.0	14	23	18.2	18.2	40
Rhode Island	9	1	26.3	18	3	28.0	27.4	18
South Carolina	1	1	4.4	12	10	17.7	14.1	48
South Dakota	1	6	20.0	4	11	21.4	21.0	33
Tennessee	2	4	18.2	7	9	16.2	16.7	41
Texas	2	5	22.6	16	13	19.3	19.9	37
Utah	3	3	20.1	7	3	13.3	15.4	43
Vermont	7	2	30.0	44	15	43.3 (e)	41.1	2
Virginia	7	1	20.0	14	4	18.0	18.6	39
Washington	10	8	36.7	19	13	32.7	34.0	4
West Virginia	0	2	5.9	6	12	18.0	14.9	47
Wisconsin	7	4	33.3	14	9	23.2	25.8	20
Wyoming	1	0	3.3	3	8	18.3	13.3	50

Source: Center for American Women and Politics, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University. Figures are as of February 2016.

Key:

(a) States share the same rank if their proportions of women legislators are exactly equal or round off to be equal (AK, CT, FL, MO; IL, OR; MA, OH, WI).

(b) Includes one Independent.

(c) Nebraska has a unicameral legislature with nonpartisan elections.

(d) New York percentage includes Working Family Party (WFP).

(e) Vermont percentage includes three Independents and three Progressives.

Congress, 45 served in their state houses, 20 in their state senates and three in statewide elective offices. Of the 20 female U.S. senators, seven served in their state houses, five in their state senates and four in statewide elective offices.

Activists who are interested in increasing the number of women serving in office often refer to a political pipeline through which potential women candidates for higher office come forward from among the pool of women who have gained

**Table C: Women Statewide Elected Officials 2016**

<i>State</i>	<i>Governor</i>	<i>Lieutenant Governor</i>	<i>Attorney General</i>	<i>Secretary of State</i>	<i>Treasurer</i>
Alabama.....	★	w	★	★	★
Alaska.....	★	★	★		
Arizona.....	★		★	w	★
Arkansas.....	★	★	w	★	★
California.....	★	★	w	★	★
Colorado.....	★	★	w	★	★
Connecticut.....	★	w	★	w	w
Delaware.....	★	★	★		★
Florida.....	★	★	w		★
Georgia.....	★	★	★	★	
Hawaii.....	★	★			
Idaho.....	★	★	★	★	★
Illinois.....	★	w	w	★	★
Indiana.....	★	★	★	w	w
Iowa.....	★	w	★	★	★
Kansas.....	★	★	★	★	★
Kentucky.....	★	w	★	w	w
Louisiana.....	★	★	★	★	★
Maine.....	★				
Maryland.....	★	★	★		
Massachusetts.....	★	w	w	★	w
Michigan.....	★	★	★	w	
Minnesota.....	★	w	w	★	
Mississippi.....	★	★	★	★	w
Missouri.....	★	★	★	★	★
Montana.....	★	w	★	w	
Nebraska.....	★	★	★	★	
Nevada.....	★	★	★	w	★
New Hampshire.....	w				
New Jersey.....	★	w			
New Mexico.....	w	★	★	★	★
New York.....	★	w	★		
North Carolina.....	★	★	★	w	★
North Dakota.....	★	★	★	★	★
Ohio.....	★	w	★	★	★
Oklahoma.....	w	★	★		★
Oregon.....	w		w	w	★
Pennsylvania.....	★	★	w		★
Rhode Island.....	w	★	★	w	★
South Carolina.....	w	★	★	★	★
South Dakota.....	★	★	★	w	★
Tennessee.....	★				
Texas.....	★	★	★		
Utah.....	★	★	★		★
Vermont.....	★	★	★	★	w
Virginia.....	★	★	★		
Washington.....	★	★	★	w	★
West Virginia.....	★		★	w	★
Wisconsin.....	★	w	★	★	★
Wyoming.....	★			★	★

Source: Data for elected officials are current as of February 2016 and have been provided by the Center for American Women and Politics, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University.

Key:  
 ★ — Denotes that this position is filled through a statewide election.  
 w — Denotes that this position is filled through a statewide election and is held by a woman.

experience at lower levels of office. Clearly, the pipeline has worked well in recent years in the case of governors and members of Congress. But what if the pool of women candidates in statewide and state legislative offices continues to stagnate or decline? Then, the number of politically expe-

rienced women with the visibility and contacts necessary to run for governor or a seat in the U.S. House or Senate is unlikely to grow.

While several different factors may be responsible for the recent leveling off in the number of women in elective offices in the states, a lack of

effective recruitment certainly is one of the most important. Statistics on the number of female candidates over time seem clearly to point to a problem with recruitment. For example, 2,528 women were general election candidates for the more than 6,000 seats up for election in state legislatures in 2014, which means more seats were uncontested by a woman than were contested. Moreover, there were 92 fewer female candidates in 2012 than in 2010 and only 70 more women than in 1992. Clearly, then, a major factor contributing to the leveling off in the number of female officeholders is a lack of greater numbers of female candidates.

Research has found that women who run for office are less likely than their male counterparts to be self-starters. Women more often than men seek office only after receiving encouragement from others. In a 2008 nationwide study of state legislators, scholars at the Center for American Women and Politics found that only 26 percent of female state representatives, compared with 43 percent of their male counterparts, said it was entirely their own idea to run for their first elective office. In contrast, 53 percent of female state representatives, compared with 28 percent of men, said they had not thought seriously about running for office until someone else suggested it. Similarly, a study of major party candidates in state legislative races conducted a few years earlier found that only 11 percent of women, compared with 37 percent of men, were self-starters who said that it was entirely their own idea to run for the legislature; in contrast, 37 percent of women, compared with 18 percent of men, reported that they had not seriously thought about running until someone else suggested it. Another recent study of people in the professions from which political candidates are most likely to emerge (i.e., law, business, politics, and education) found that notably fewer women (43 percent) than men (59 percent) had ever considered running for office.

Findings such as these suggest that the future for women in state government will depend, at least in part, upon the strength of efforts to recruit women for both elected and appointed positions. Legislative leaders, public officials, party leaders, and advocacy organizations can help by renewing their commitment and augmenting their efforts to identify and support potential women candidates, especially in winnable races with open seats or vulnerable incumbents. Recruitment efforts may well be key to determining whether the number of women officials continues to stagnate or again begins to move steadily upward as in earlier decades.

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### About the author

**Susan J. Carroll** is Professor of Political Science and Senior Scholar at the Center for American Women and Politics of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University. Her most recent books are *More Women Can Run* (Oxford 2013, with Kira Sanbonmatsu) and *Gender and Elections* (Third Edition, Cambridge 2014, with Richard L. Fox).