

Facing the gender gap

Amidst successes, women's gains in state legislatures have slowed

BY TIM ANDERSON

Among the top election stories in the Midwest in 2002 were the gubernatorial victories of two women, the first time that has ever happened in the region. But for those who study women in American politics closely, another trend was being viewed as similarly significant.

After decades of near-constant yearly gains in the percentage of women in state legislatures, the rate dropped slightly between 2002 and 2003 (from 22.7 percent to 22.3 percent). Over the last 10 years, the percentage has increased by just more than 1 percent, compared to a 6 percent rise between 1983 and 1993.

"It's fair to say that we are right now in a period of stagnation," said Deborah Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University. This trend is troubling to those pushing to close the gap in gender representation. In addition, as Walsh points out, the fact that there are more U.S. women governors today than ever before isn't a one-year phenomenon. Instead, it is a reflection of "30 years of grass-roots efforts."

"The governors didn't come from out of nowhere; they worked their way up the political system," she said. That often included time in state legislatures, so the leveling off of female representation is an important concern for people wanting more women in all elective offices.

Walsh cites various factors causing this current period of stagnation. The first is the proliferation of term limit laws, which some thought would actually increase the number of women in office by opening up more legislative seats to people previously shut out of the political process. However, Walsh says, term limits have forced out many women state legislators. In Michigan, for example, in the year term limits first kicked in, the state lost 52 percent of the female state lawmakers.

The open seats are not always filled by women. Walsh says studies have shown that men and women make their decisions to run for political office in different ways. Analysis by political scientist Gary Moncrief found that men are more likely to decide to run for political office on their own, while more encouragement and outreach efforts are needed to persuade women.

Furthermore, Walsh believes both political parties simply are not making enough of a concerted effort to recruit potential female candidates. Women win at essentially the same rate as men, but they just don't run as often.

The openness of political parties is a critical dynamic in determining the ability of women to get their names on the ballot and win. For example, this factor, along with varying cultural conditions, goes a long way in explaining state differences in the percentage of women lawmakers.

Recruitment, though, does not have to be relegated to the Democratic and Republican parties. Statistics indicate that female repre-

sentation in American government does not have to be a partisan issue, as women have been making up a greater percentage of both parties' state legislative caucuses over the past few decades.

Two efforts in the Midwest underscore how the recruitment of women candidates can extend beyond parties. In response to the huge impact that term limits was having in the Wolverine State, the Michigan Women's Campaign Fund and Michigan Women's Political Caucus teamed up to search for candidates. They hired a former state legislator to help with the recruitment efforts.

Meanwhile, a bipartisan group called Iowa Women in Public Policy is working to increase female representation in elective office, says Kira Sanbonmatsu, a visiting professor at the Center for American Women in Politics.

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While the number of female state legislators has not risen lately, long-term trends tell a much different story. Since 1969, the percentage has increased from 4 percent to 22.4 percent. Walsh contends this change has had an important influence on public policy.

"Diversity in the legislature brings with it a different set of life experiences and priorities," she says. "It's not that men don't want to address things that have traditionally been considered women's issues or problems, but sometimes it takes a woman to bring them to the forefront."

— Tim Anderson is publications manager for the Midwestern Office of The Council of State Governments. This article originally appeared in *Stateline Midwest*, a publication of CSG Midwest.