

Making their Mark



Women Still Gravitate to Health Care, Education But their Numbers in Government Have Leveled

Sen. Hillary Clinton's candidacy for president is bringing new attention to women in government this year. Women are making strides in state governments, focusing particularly on the issues of health care and education, but the number of female legislators has stagnated in the last decade.

By Mikel Chavers



Focusing on education, North Carolina Lt. Gov. Beverly Perdue visits the Information Technology High School in Robeson County, N.C.

The spark started with a small group of women state legislators. They were interested in preventing cervical cancer and increasing screening for it.

But what that spark ignited was something much bigger—something that the women spread to state legislatures around the country.

Because of that interest, the Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit Women in Government began hosting conferences on preventing cervical cancer and exploring its link to human papillomavirus—known as HPV. In spring 2003, a task force met on the issue, dedicated to tackling it head on in state government.

Then in January 2004, the effort officially took off with the organization's Challenge to Eliminate Cervical Cancer Campaign. By the end of the year, women introduced or helped pass legislation on the issue in 15 states.

Most women didn't even know what HPV was, said Kathryn Guccione, associate director of public policy and public relations for Women in Government.

So in August 2004, the nonprofit established a policy resource center with a Web site, background information and access to sample pieces of legislation—all in the name of helping women in state government advance the cause of ending cervical cancer.

And the spark ignited a movement.

Today, all 50 states have introduced legislation or resolutions aimed at cervical cancer prevention, funding for screening, statewide task forces or study commissions, Guccione said.

Issues Come Naturally

In fact, women state legislators naturally gravitate to health care and education issues, according to Women in Government. The nonprofit organization reaches an audience of roughly 1,700 women state legislators, and polls a smaller group of members yearly on top issues, according to Guccione. Health care and education are always big issues, she said.

"Women as natural caregivers and as mothers, in terms of caring for their families, are interested in health care," Guccione said. "Women are the primary caregivers—they're making the majority of the health care decisions in their households."

Women naturally were interested in the cervical cancer campaign because it's a women's health issue, said Sen. Connie Lawson of Indiana.

Back in 2002, Lawson attended her first meeting on the cervical cancer effort. The HPV vaccine wasn't even in existence at the time.

"We were concerned about the medical advice that doctors were giving," Lawson said of those days. "We were concerned about whether or not doctors were telling women that there was a new HPV test available."

Lawson formed a task force in Indiana on the issue without legislation in 2003. Then in January 2007, she filed legislation that would require girls entering the sixth grade to be vaccinated for HPV.

Although the attacks on the bill and

vaccine requirement seemed to come from every direction, Lawson pushed Senate Bill 327 out of Indiana's Senate with the support of every female senator behind it.

The final version of the bill eventually passed without the vaccine requirement. It does require all public schools in the state to send home a pamphlet to parents prepared by the state health department, using the latest scientific information about cervical cancer and HPV, Lawson said.

Rep. Karen Morgan of Utah followed a similar path. First, Morgan sponsored a cervical cancer and HPV awareness resolution in 2004. Then in 2007, she tried to get \$1 million from the state to fund a public awareness campaign and also to aid in vaccinations for underinsured women. Although she didn't succeed in getting money from the state, her dream was funded by a private donor.

The \$1 million private donation includes funds for HPV and cervical cancer awareness efforts as well as for vaccines for underinsured women.

"It's been a great success," Morgan said.

Sen. Julie Denton of Kentucky received an award from the American Advocates for Health in January for her work on health issues. The award recognized a diabetes bill, which passed nearly three years ago, mandating all public and private schools to have someone on site who can administer special shots to prevent children with diabetes from going into diabetic shock.

For the bill's success, Denton received the Legacy in Public Health Award from the Lexington, Ky.-based not-for-profit association formed to recognize health care contributions and achievements associated with chronic disease.

"I think women—and I think states have proven this—make most of the health care decisions in their families," Denton said. "It's a natural extension with public policy."

In fact, all the women in Kentucky's general assembly received the Health Achievement Award from the American Advocates for Health for their work in diabetes policymaking.

Education is also a natural public policy area for women. Of the eight female governors this year, five have major education priorities and initiatives.

Women are Making their Mark Across the Country

Making History

North Carolina Lt. Gov. Beverly Perdue



If Beverly Perdue wins the North Carolina governor's race, she'll be the state's first female governor.

Perdue, currently the lieutenant governor, took a unique road to politics. She taught school for three years and, when her husband was serving in the military in Vietnam, she got into aging issues and caring for seniors. From there, she began a lifelong passion for gerontology.

When she moved to New Bern, N.C., in the 1970s, she ran a national program at a local hospital dealing with seniors' health care issues. Then she had an epiphany.

"Well why don't I run for office instead of sitting here complaining about it," she said of the moment of realization back

then. "Nobody thought a woman could win then," she said. And when she did, "it was a big deal."

Prior to her election as lieutenant governor, Perdue served in the North Carolina House of Representatives for two terms and the North Carolina Senate for five terms.

But politics to her has never been about being in the minority—it's about hard work.

Today Perdue still focuses hard work on aging issues as well as other health care, education, environment and military issues.

"I've morphed over into energy and environment issues," she said. She was also involved in the fight to save her state's military bases during the military base realignment and has maintained an involvement in military issues.

In-Tune

Kentucky Sen. Julie Denton



Kentucky Sen. Julie Denton nearly had her third child at the Capitol.

Denton's water broke when she was in the Kentucky Senate. She was two weeks into the session and her third child was two and a half weeks early.

"I got into the car and drove straight to the hospital," she said. And she barely made it. The trip from the Capitol in Frankfort to the hospital in Louisville usually takes about an hour.

These days, Denton is very in-tune with health care and education issues—she's won an award for legislation on emergency diabetes treatment for children in school.

"For me, I think it's real natural because for the last 20 years, I've been a mom," she said. While at the Capitol, she tries to make the best of her time so she can get back to her children—now ages 4, 10, 18 and 20.

"I'm not piddling around," she said. "I'm going to go home and cook dinner and do laundry and help with homework and get the clothes laid out for the next day."

Gathering Support

Indiana Sen. Connie Lawson



When Indiana Sen. Connie Lawson filed a bill in 2007 that sought to mandate the HPV vaccine for all girls entering sixth grade, she had no idea she'd find herself in the middle of a heated debate.

The 12-year legislator simply wanted to eliminate cervical cancer in her state.

With her passion, she was able to push the bill—Senate Bill 327—through Indiana's Senate with the support of every female state senator.

In the end, the bill was changed to require public schools to give out educational pamphlets on HPV and cervical cancer to parents, but did not require the vaccination.

"In the end we were successful," Lawson said.

And although Lawson is one of only 28 women state legislators in Indiana, she doesn't feel like a minority. "There's a minority of people who are interested in certain issues," she said. "Women have a better understanding and empathy for families and what families need to go through in order to get along in the world."

Answering the call

Utah Rep. Karen Morgan



Before Rep. Karen Morgan served five terms in Utah's House, she was recruited to run for a seat in the state's House by a state senator and a state representative.

She answered that call and is now the chair of the board of directors of the national Washington, D.C.-based educational and policy organization Women in Government.

In 2007, Morgan answered another call, this time to eliminate cervical cancer. She went back to her state and tried to get \$1 million in state funding for a cervical cancer and HPV educational awareness campaign as well as to fund HPV vaccines for underinsured women.

The state did not fund her bill, but a private donor provided the \$1 million for the educational campaign and the vaccines. The public awareness campaign began last August.

Women in State Government by the Numbers

- 1975** Ella Grasso of Connecticut was the first woman elected governor of any state in her own right in 1975.
- 49** To date, women have been elected to statewide executive offices in 49 states. In Maine, the only statewide elected executive is the governor and a woman has never held the position.
- 37.8%** The highest percentage of women state legislators in the country is the 37.8 percent in Vermont. The top five states with the highest percentage of women state legislators this year (in order) are: Vermont, New Hampshire, Washington, Colorado and Minnesota.
- 10** There are 10 female lieutenant governors this year.
- 8.8%** The lowest percentage of women state legislators in the country is the 8.8 percent in South Carolina. The states with the lowest percentage of women state legislators this year (in order) are: South Carolina, Oklahoma, Alabama, Kentucky and West Virginia.
- 8** There are eight female governors this year.
- 2 to 1** Democrat women serving in state legislatures in 2008 outnumber their Republican counterparts by more than 2 to 1.

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

In Arizona, one of Gov. Janet Napolitano's main priorities is education. Among her education achievements, Napolitano has secured raises in teacher pay and also created a new grade level by offering voluntary full-day kindergarten across the state, according to the Arizona governor's office.

In her State of the State speech earlier this year, Napolitano announced her intention to raise the high school dropout age from 16 to 18 years old. She also wants to give students—starting with this year's eighth graders—who agree to stay out of trouble and maintain a B average throughout high school free tuition at any of the state's universities or community colleges, according to the speech.

In Delaware, Gov. Ruth Ann Minner

wants to expand one of her biggest education priorities by growing the state's Student Excellence Equals Degree—or SEED—scholarship program, which offers free college tuition to students maintaining at least a 2.5 grade point average and who stay out of trouble.

Minner calls it one of the most important accomplishments of her career in public service, according to the SEED program's Web site.

But beyond those top issues of health care and education, women state legislators are taking an interest in newer issues as well. Every year Women in Government surveys its members, and this year energy efficiency and environmentalism seems to be floating to the surface, Guccione said.

With new interest in topics like energy efficiency, sustainability and environmentalism, "we're going to see a shift in some of the trends," Guccione said.

Women by the Numbers

And as far as trends, the number of women getting involved in state government speaks volumes. Though the percentage of women state legislators certainly hasn't decreased over the years—it hasn't really been increasing lately either. (Please see related graph.)

There are more women in state government than ever before, but since the late 1990s, the number of women state legislators has virtually stagnated—fluctuating only in miniscule increments of less than 1 percent, according to the Center for American Women in Politics at Rutgers University in New Jersey.

"This feels like we've been stuck since 1999," said Debbie Walsh, executive director of the center.

In fact, from 1999 to 2006 women state legislators made up 22 percent of all state legislators in the country, according to the center. That number barely changed during those years—increasing and decreasing by only tenths of a percent, the center reports.

Only last year did the percentage of women legislators in the country increase to more than 22 percent, growing to just 23.5 percent. This year, the percentage of women state legislators is virtually holding steady, according to the center.

Walsh offers several reasons for the stagnation in the percentage of female state legislators. First, term limits have hurt women, she said.

For example, when term limits kicked in during the 1990s in Michigan, the state lost more than half the women in office, according to Walsh.

Since 1993, state senators are limited to two terms of four years each, and state representatives are limited to three terms of two years each.

"If you look at states with term limits, we've lost women in those states. Women benefited in the past from incumbency," she said.

"There's not a bench of women coming in."

—Mikel Chavers is associate editor of State News magazine.

Behind the Numbers: Number of Women State Legislators Leveling

Back in the 1980s, the percentage of women state legislators in the country would increase by one or two points every election cycle. But a stagnation of growth started in 1999.

That's according to Debbie Walsh, executive director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University in New Jersey.

There are various forces at work here. With term limits, lack of recruitment efforts for women and just the challenges of a tough job with often little pay, the percentage of female state legislators will continue to stagnate, Walsh said.

"All of those things combined make for not a rosy future," Walsh said.

In states like Michigan that have instituted term limits, women are not being replaced by other women, Walsh said. Women benefit from incumbency, she said. According to research from the center, women incumbents win about 95 percent of the time—"you could count on incumbents winning," Walsh said.

More than that, though, there's a problem of simple recruitment.

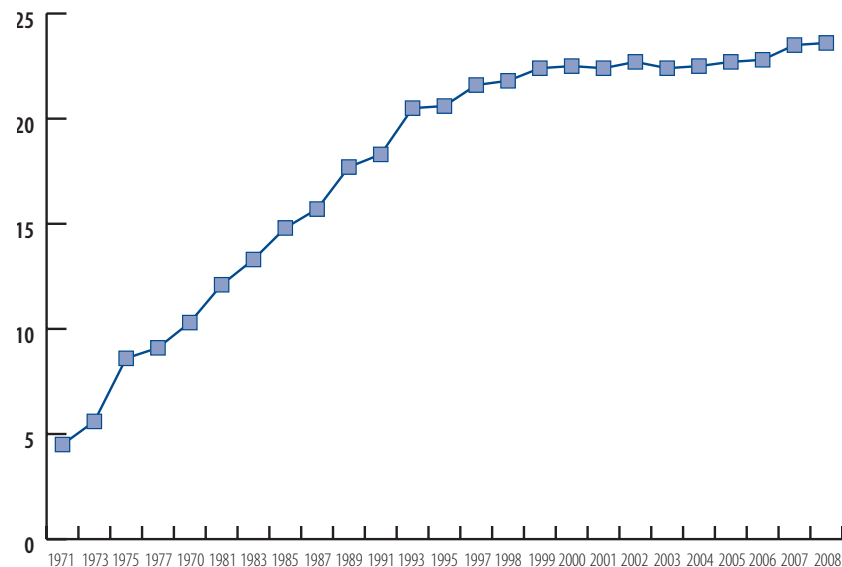
Walsh sums it up like this: "Women are much more likely than their male colleagues to need to be asked to be in office."

According to the Center for American Women and Politics, women are less likely than men to see themselves as qualified and less likely to be asked by their parties to run for office.

Some states are trying to address that problem. New Jersey, for example, began a program called Ready to Run, a one-day bipartisan training program designed to recruit women state legislators and help them get into office.

In 2004, with its low percentage of female legislators, New Jersey ranked among the lowest in the nation for the number of female legislators. But the 10-year-old program seemed to involve more and more women in state govern-

Percent of Women in State Legislatures, 1971–2008



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

ment over time. In 2005, New Jersey was 43rd in the nation for the percentage of women legislators—today the work has paid off and it's 15th in the nation.

Walsh attributes that improvement to the recruitment efforts of Ready to Run, where 70 percent of the graduates of the program have won office, she said.

"Women kind of need that push," she said.

The recruitment program—held at the center—is now branching out to other states, including Iowa and Oklahoma.

For of the majority of state legislative seats, however, the job—and pay—is not often full-time, Walsh said. And women are more likely to be the full-time caregiver at home, making it a challenge to serve in state legislatures. Women tend to wait until their families are older, Walsh said, and that adds to the leveling off of women in state government.

And even at a time when Sen. Hillary Clinton is a viable Democratic candidate for president, although inspiring for many women, Walsh believes the media's treatment of her may be discouraging to a lot of women.

Citing the media's treatment of Clinton as an example, Walsh does not believe America is in a period of "post-gender, post-race politics," and "there really is this sort of resistance to it," she said.

But even in the current political climate, women can be seen as a welcome change, Walsh said. In New Jersey, four recent indictments of state legislators resulted in four open seats. All four were filled by women in the last cycle, she said.

"When there's corruption in government, it's interesting, women look like change," Walsh said.

—Mikel Chavers is associate editor of *State News magazine*.