

The Women of the Pennsylvania General Assembly

Explaining Women's Representation in Pennsylvania State Politics

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The Pennsylvania General Assembly is ranked 40th among the 50 state legislatures for its proportion of female legislators. Women constitute 18.6% of the bicameral legislature, including nine of 50 senators and 38 of 203 representatives. Various characteristics of the Pennsylvania General Assembly, including its professionalization, appear to provide numerous challenges to women's entry. As such, the presence of 47 women in the legislature is noteworthy. This exploratory case study examines the experiences of women in the Pennsylvania General Assembly, presenting a qualitative analysis of several interviews with female legislators. The findings indicate that these women were encouraged to run for their current seats primarily by having the support of their families and political parties, by the availability of open seats, and by developing confidence in their qualifications through a politicized upbringing.

Somebody once said that it's not that women see things differently; they see different things. My life experiences as a mother, a daughter, as a sister are different than most men I know . . . So I'm going to have a different life experience that I bring to the table. —Lynn

Women constitute 51.1% of the population in Pennsylvania (U.S. Census Bureau 2015), but only 18.6% of Pennsylvania's state legislature (CAWP 2016a). While the proportion of women in the

Pennsylvania General Assembly has been increasing fairly steadily over time, more—though less steady—progress has been made in the states that border Pennsylvania (CAWP 2016b). In fact, Pennsylvania’s low percentage of female legislators is an anomaly within the Northeast region of the United States, which has historically performed quite well, comparatively, in terms of women’s descriptive representation (Norrander and Wilcox 2005). The only states with lower percentages of women in their legislatures are Tennessee, Kentucky, Utah, West Virginia, Louisiana, Alabama, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Mississippi, and Wyoming (CAWP 2016b; see Appendix B for full state rankings).

Many scholars have found that certain institutional factors are associated with fewer female state legislators. These include the professionalization of the legislature (Norrander and Wilcox 2005), the absence of term limits (Thompson and Moncrief 1993), the recruitment practices of political parties (Carroll 1994; Crowder-Meyer 2013; Elder 2012; Sanbonmatsu 2002), the cost of running a campaign (Norrander and Wilcox 2005), and whether officials are elected to single-member or multimember districts (Hogan 2001; Welch, et al. 1985). As a full-time, highly professionalized legislature that lacks term limits and elects officials to single-member districts (NCSL 2016; Schmedlen 2001), the Pennsylvania General Assembly possesses a number of elements that are known to disadvantage potential female candidates.

The most recent research on women’s representation in legislative politics in the United States has shifted focus to the psychological challenges that potential female candidates face. As early as 1977, Darcy and Schramm found that “candidate sex has little or no effect on election outcomes” (9), and women perform just as well as men when it comes to campaign fund-raising (Jenkins 2007; Schlozman and Uhlener 1986). Such results suggest that there is little difference between male and female candidates; instead, the problem is that women are not emerging as candidates to begin with. Richard Fox and Jennifer Lawless contend, “The gender gap in political ambition results from long-standing patterns of traditional socialization that persist in U.S. culture” (Fox and Lawless 2010b, 8). Such socialization typically reinforces women’s traditional family roles as wives and mothers, teaching them that they belong in the home, rather than in politics. Furthermore, the behavior of political actors and institutions often reflects the circumstances and concerns of men, who are the dominant group in legislative politics. As a result of their internalization of these messages and realities, women’s levels of political ambition are dampened by a “gendered psyche,” characterized by a lack of confidence, aggressiveness, and self-promotion (Fox and Lawless 2010b).

If low levels of women's descriptive representation are primarily a result of individual women's lack of confidence in their own abilities to run for and serve in legislative politics, then it is critical for researchers to take a close look at particular women's decision-making calculi, to understand which concerns and considerations are most salient for women in a specific political environment. Because of the great variation in the cultures of states and in the institutional structure of the state legislatures, it is worth studying women's representation in Pennsylvania independently. Moreover, given the importance of psychological factors for cultivating or dampening women's political ambition, an analysis of Pennsylvania's political institutions is not sufficient to understand the problem of women's descriptive representation in its full complexity. A qualitative analysis of open-ended interviews with female legislators is particularly suited to the job, in order to tease out the explicit and implicit considerations, concerns, and motivations such women had when running and while serving in legislative office. By focusing on the intricacies of the individual and identifying patterns within the larger group, we may be able to reach a better understanding of Pennsylvania's poor record for women's representation and what might need to change in order to solve it.

This exploratory case study of the women in the Pennsylvania General Assembly aims to shed greater light on the motivations, opportunities, obstacles, and rewards of being a woman in Pennsylvania politics by appealing to the experts: the women who have successfully run for and been elected to the state's legislature despite the odds. I briefly examine demographic information for both male and female legislators and a few unique features of Pennsylvania's legislature and political context, followed by a qualitative analysis of interviews with several women legislators in Pennsylvania. The findings indicate that supportive families, mentors, and political parties, as well as the availability of open seats helped the women of the Pennsylvania General Assembly to develop the confidence they needed to run for legislative office, despite the particular challenges posed by Pennsylvania's political context.

Women's Representation in Pennsylvania

As of 2016, Pennsylvania is ranked 40th among the 50 states for its share of female state legislators, currently at 18.6%, including nine of 50 senators (18%) and 38 of 203 representatives (18.7%) (CAWP 2016a). The percentage of women in the Pennsylvania General Assembly has increased fairly steadily over time (see Figure 1).

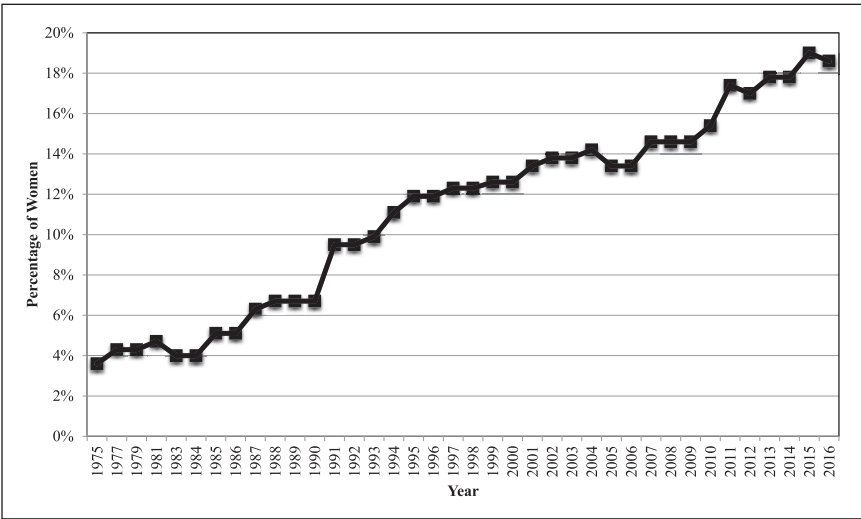


Figure 1. Percentage of Women in the Pennsylvania General Assembly, 1975–2016. (Center for American Women and Politics, “State Fact Sheet—Pennsylvania.” Available at http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/state_fact_sheets/pa.)

When one looks at the Pennsylvania General Assembly in isolation, it appears that the descriptive representation of women in the legislature is a success story, with fairly steady growth over time. However, a comparison of Pennsylvania with its border states reveals that Pennsylvania’s progress actually trails behind the progress of those states—with the exception of West Virginia, which has previously seen higher percentages of women in its legislature despite its recent decline (see Figure 2). Pennsylvania’s border states have consistently ranked above Pennsylvania for the percentage of women in their state legislatures, with sharper increases over time, even in combination with larger decreases in the proportion of women in their legislatures.

The case of the Pennsylvania General Assembly is particularly interesting because it is the largest full-time state legislature, and it is highly professionalized (NCSL 2016). Highly professionalized legislatures require 80% or more of a full-time job and offer salaries that legislators can live on without relying on an alternative source of income. These legislatures usually have larger districts, longer sessions, and more staff than less professionalized volunteer or part-time legislatures (NCSL 2016).

Women can be discouraged from pursuing positions in full-time legislatures because of their disproportionate responsibilities as homemakers and primary caregivers for their families (Mariani 2008; Norrander and Wilcox 2005). Fox and Lawless (2014) found that the women in their study of

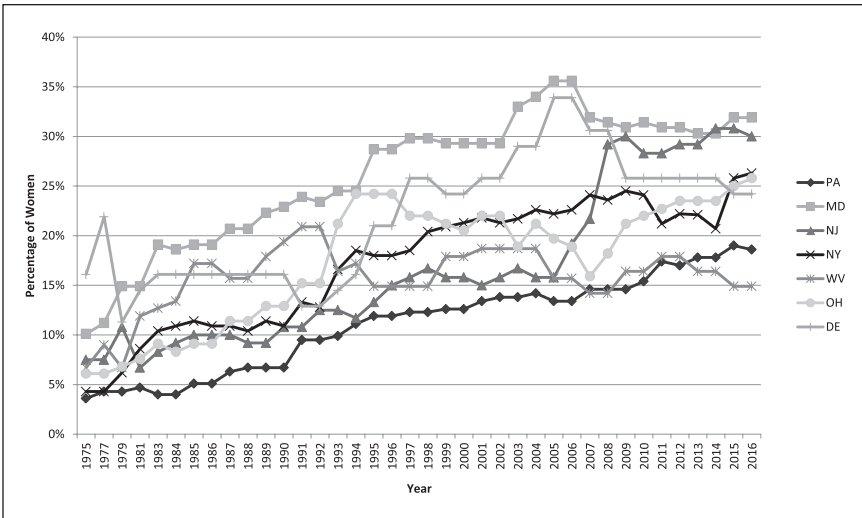


Figure 2. Percentage of Female State Legislators in Pennsylvania and Border States, 1975–2016. (Center for American Women and Politics, “Women in State Legislatures 2016.” Available at <http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/state-by-state/>.)

potential candidates who had spouses or partners were six times more likely to be responsible for most household tasks than similarly situated men and 10 times more likely to be the primary caregivers for their children (400). As a result, when women do serve in full-time—and even part-time—legislatures, they are more likely than their male counterparts to be unmarried and/or childless (Mariani 2008). Female legislators also tend to be older than their male counterparts because many women wait until their children are older to run for office (Mariani 2008; Werner 1968). A consequence of this shortened political lifespan is that women have less time to move up the political pipeline to run for higher levels of office.

A quick look at demographic differences among the men and women in the Pennsylvania General Assembly suggests that, for women, caregiving responsibilities associated with having a family and full-time legislative responsibilities may be less compatible than such responsibilities are for men. Table 1 highlights some of these differences.

While a majority of women in the Pennsylvania General Assembly were married (62.2%) in 2014, even more of the men in the legislature were married (81.7%). The average age among the women in the legislature was 57, and the average age when they were first elected was 49. In contrast, the average age among the men was 52, and the average age when they were first elected was 41 (*Project Vote Smart* 2014). As such, the men have, on average, five to eight

Joan was not the only woman who faced criticism; Dianne received similar questions from women: “Why are you not staying home with your children?” In no interview did any of the women question the notion that women should be responsible for the bulk of childcare; they merely discussed the challenges associated with juggling their family and legislative responsibilities. Even when Carrie pointed out that the men in the legislature do not experience the same degree of guilt while being away from their children, she characterized them as “wonderful” fathers and husbands.

It seems that there are different understandings of motherhood and fatherhood at play. A male legislator can be away from his children for three full days a week and maintain his reputation as a “wonderful” father; a female legislator, however, is scolded for doing the same. “What about your little children? You need to be their mom” implies that a woman is not being a mom while she is working in the public sphere. Men are not similarly stripped of their fatherhood while traversing the private and public spheres. Such characterization reinforces strict gender roles, with men working in politics and women staying home and raising children.

Multiple women discussed the importance of their families’ support, which has made their demanding schedules and responsibilities more manageable. Carrie, in particular, expressed gratitude for her father and godmother because they have to “pick up the slack” and get her kids to school while she is away in Harrisburg. Conflicts between familial and legislative responsibilities did not ultimately deter the women in the Pennsylvania General Assembly from running for office, but they frequently deter other women from considering a political career, especially if they live farther away, are unable to rely on their families to take on their household and childcare responsibilities, or cannot afford daycare. Such stressors may be particularly strong deterrents for women of color and/or women from lower socioeconomic classes. These challenges can become even more discouraging in combination with other factors, such as the unavailability of an open seat to run for.

Running for Open Seats

Incumbents are reelected to their offices more often than not (Welch, et al. 1985), so it makes sense for any candidate to wait to run for office until a seat becomes vacated. Although Carrie was actually one of the few women who ran and won against an incumbent, during her interview, she addressed the risk of running at the “wrong time” against a “really beloved person,” explaining that the chances of winning would be very slim.

A couple of interview participants explained that working in the Pennsylvania General Assembly is an attractive job for men because it pays well. Terry explained that men see the legislature as a great opportunity to make money and move up the ladder in business or politics, but women are deterred by the “dirtiness of it.” Lynn agreed that men are often attracted by the legislature’s high salary and excellent benefits, and she added that political parties are extremely important in Pennsylvania, especially in terms of standing a chance against an incumbent: “Here in Pennsylvania, we don’t have a lot of turnover—more than we used to, but we don’t have a whole lot, and so the party helps you get one of those slots. If the party is not helping women, women are not going to be there . . . So the incumbent is going to win, and the incumbent happens to be a male in most places.”

Most women that I spoke with did not consider running for office at all until a seat had already opened up and someone had suggested that they run for it. Joan had not been considering a candidacy until her predecessor asked if she would be interested in running for his seat: “He called and said, ‘are you ready to go?’ And I thought he was taking me to lunch. And he said, ‘I’m not running . . . I want you to know. Are you interested?’ And I thought about [it for] two minutes and said, ‘absolutely, I’m interested and would love to.’”

Liz had never considered running for office, even though she had always been very active in local politics. Additionally, she had never thought about how few women serve in public office until she overheard a conversation among co-workers about the issue. Since then, it has become very important to her. Still, she did not run until a seat opened up in the Pennsylvania General Assembly and someone asked her to run for it.

The professionalization of the Pennsylvania General Assembly draws in more competition from men who are attracted by the high salary, and the absence of term limits results in incumbents staying in office for longer, producing fewer open seats for political outsiders. As of 2014, only eight of the 45 women (17.8 %) had won their seats by running against an incumbent, while 82.2% had run for seats that were vacated by retiring incumbents, incumbents running for higher offices, or, in the case of one woman, by the death of her husband, who was the incumbent. In contrast, 21.2% of men had run against incumbents, and 78.8% had run for open seats (*The Pennsylvania General Assembly* 2015). Women are somewhat less likely than men to challenge an incumbent, perhaps because of a lack of confidence in their qualifications (Fox and Lawless 2010a, 2010b, 2012, 2013), even though there is no significant difference in the performance of female and male candidates (Darcy and Schramm 1977; Jenkins 2007; Schlozman and Uhlener 1986).

Developing Confidence and Political Ambition

In their interviews, Lynn and Terry expressed frustration about women's lack of confidence and ambition:

You kind of want to believe that your State Rep and your State Senator and your Congressman and your United States Senator are all smarter than you are . . . You want to believe the Governor is smarter than you are. You want to believe that the President's smarter than you are. Guess what, they are not. You know, so women need to have confidence in their own ability to handle these jobs. They can handle it. They can handle it. They can do it. So women need to be encouraged to step up as opposed to being drafted. —Lynn

It's an attitude, I think, that women have that they are lesser, and they are not. They are not. In fact, I would suggest that, you know, any woman who's been a wife, a mother, a homemaker, a business person, is every bit as qualified as any man who runs, but I'm not sure they perceive it that way. —Terry

The trope of the “ambitious office seeker” (Aldrich 2011) assumes a typically male orientation toward candidate emergence, given men's relatively independent and autonomous decision-making context, unconstrained by caregiving roles and expectations. As a result of traditional gender socialization, women often do not consider the possibility of running for office until they are explicitly recruited (Carroll and Sanbonmatsu 2013; Fox and Lawless 2010a, 2010b). The gender gap in political ambition is important to acknowledge; but to conclude that women simply do not have enough of it is to obscure the realities of women's lives and gendered expectations.

Susan Carroll and Kira Sanbonmatsu (2013) have challenged Fox and Lawless's assumption that women emerge as candidates through the same pipeline and decision-making process as men, arguing, instead, that women tend to make a “relationally embedded decision,” influenced more by their relationships with other people than by their individual ambition.

While virtually all women I spoke with needed to be recruited to run, they all ultimately believed that they were qualified for their positions, setting themselves apart from other women who did not decide to run. Many gained this confidence as a result of a “politicized upbringing,” which is characterized by frequent discussions of politics at home, running for office as a student, community involvement, and parental encouragement (Fox and Lawless 2005, 2014).

Carrie originally wanted to be a psychologist, but, around age 15, she took a sociology class and an American government class, which heavily influenced her decision to pursue a political career. Annice explained that she had been very active in her community from a young age, and although she had never aspired to run for office, her leadership in her community helped her to build a network that became very useful when a seat opened up and multiple people asked her to run for it.

When asked who their political role models were, seven survey respondents named women, including Hillary Clinton, Eleanor Roosevelt, Madeleine Albright, former state senator Jeanette Reibman, City Councilmember Betty Eiceman, and Margaret Thatcher. A few also listed their own mothers, who had worked and been politically active while raising children. When it came to mentors, however, 10, or 66.7% of respondents noted that their most significant mentor had been male, and 11, or 73.3% responded that these mentors were “very important” to their political career. These results suggest that many women in the Pennsylvania General Assembly were able to imagine themselves as leaders as a result of growing up and seeing various politically active female role models, and they were perhaps better able to integrate themselves into a masculine political environment with the help of key male mentors.

Discussion and Conclusion

There is a need to have women and minorities in public office, as we represent a portion of society that did not always have the ability to even vote. —Carrie

While the female legislators that I interviewed had a variety of motivations for running for office, as well as different paths that led them to politics, a few patterns emerged from their experiences. Most women were discouraged by many of the same factors that frequently prevent most women from considering a candidacy or running for office, such as conflicts between legislative and familial responsibilities. They were able to overcome such challenges as a result of their own unique circumstances and experiences. While time spent away from their families often evoked feelings of guilt, living close to Harrisburg, having a supportive family, and/or waiting to run for office until their children grew older helped to alleviate many of their concerns, allowing the women of the Pennsylvania General Assembly to run for office when an opportunity presented itself.

Most interview respondents explained that “timing” is key in politics, and it is important to be prepared to take opportunities if and when they come along. This philosophy led many women to run for open seats after an incumbent had stepped down and someone had suggested that they run. Unfortunately, seats do not open up often because the Pennsylvania General Assembly, a highly professionalized legislature, offers attractive benefits that often lead male incumbents to desire longer tenures in office. Additionally, the absence of term limits in Pennsylvania allows incumbents to stay as long as they and their constituents would like. If a woman hopes to run for any seat in Pennsylvania, whether it is an open seat or whether it is occupied by an incumbent, it is almost always necessary that she has her party’s support.

Most participants were recruited to run for office, and they often found their party’s support to be very important. Women’s organizations, on the other hand, did not prove to be very helpful. A politicized upbringing and the efforts of mentors allowed the women of the Pennsylvania General Assembly to gain experiences and skills that made them confident enough to consider a candidacy. Additionally, while most of the women are not interested in running for higher offices, many suggested that they would be open to taking another opportunity if the timing was right.

In addition to learning about the motivations, opportunities, obstacles, and rewards of being a woman in Pennsylvania state politics, these findings may offer additional insight into the future of women in Pennsylvania politics and, perhaps, women in politics more broadly. Joan suggested that women will eventually reach parity with men in Pennsylvania politics if we are patient. Based on the progress of women’s inclusion in the Pennsylvania General Assembly thus far, it is certainly possible that women will continue to be elected at a slow, but steady rate. This may happen as more male incumbents retire or leave office for other reasons. Lynn, however, believes that women need to be more active in pursuing political careers:

I think studies have shown that women need to be asked to run, but, remember, the men don’t need to be asked to run . . . We’re never going to reach parity in Pennsylvania unless women step up, you know, and say, “I want to run.” Because if women are waiting to be asked, the election is going to be dead, done, and gone without them getting it. And then you have an incumbent who’s going to be reelected.

To remedy this, women are going to need to be empowered by their families and by their parties, recognizing women’s relational decision-making

context. Inclusion and support of women by the political parties are going to be especially important since Pennsylvania's individualistic political culture necessitates party support in order to succeed politically (Elazar 1984).

Most importantly, a qualitative analysis of interviews with women legislators in Pennsylvania suggests that their experiences are exceptional; they have come up against many of the same psychological challenges as many other potential female candidates in Pennsylvania, but they were able to imagine themselves as candidates and run for office because of the convergence of certain fortunate circumstances. The women of the Pennsylvania General Assembly benefited from the support of various actors, including their families, mentors, and parties, as well as from the availability of open seats and timely suggestions to run, circumstances that do not apply to all women. Further qualitative research, including interviews with women who ran and lost in Pennsylvania or women who considered running, but ultimately decided not to run, could provide important comparisons to the interview findings reported here, helping to further narrow down those considerations that most prevent women from running for office in Pennsylvania.

APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. At what point did you know you wanted to run for elective office (in general)?
2. Did you have any political mentors or role models who inspired you to run for office? If so, what kind of support, advice, encouragement, or inspiration did they give you when you were making the decision to run for office?
3. How has being a woman mattered, if at all, to your experiences with politics?
4. Do you think your experiences have been different from those of similarly qualified men? If yes, how?
5. If you were to advise a young woman about running for your current office, what sort of steps or strategies would you advise her to take to prepare herself as a credible candidate?
6. What do you see yourself doing after you leave your current office?
7. Given that there are so few women in elective office in Pennsylvania, as well as within the United States as a whole, what do you think has made you so successful?
8. Why do you think there are so few women in elective office in the United States and in the Pennsylvania General Assembly, in particular?

Supplemental Survey Questions

(The survey was administered in *SurveyMonkey*. Additional close-ended questions were asked, but not reported in this note.)

1. What would you say is your major personal asset or strength as a public official?
2. What would you say is your major weakness or challenge as a public official?
3. Prior to running for office, who would you say was your political role model? Be as specific as possible in your answer.
4. How important have mentors been to your political career?
 - I did not have a mentor.
 - Not at all important
 - Somewhat important
 - Very important
5. Was/Is your most significant mentor male or female?
 - I did not have a mentor.
 - Male
 - Female

APPENDIX B

Table B.1. Comparison of Study Participants to All Women in the Pennsylvania General Assembly, 2014								
	Women of the PA General Assembly		All Study Participants		Survey Participants		Interview Participants	
Democrats	46.7%	(21)	50.0%	(8)	53.3%	(8)	28.6%	(2)
Republicans	53.3%	(24)	50.0%	(8)	46.7%	(7)	71.4%	(5)
Senate	17.8%	(8)	12.5%	(2)	13.3%	(2)	0.0%	(0)
House	82.2%	(37)	87.5%	(14)	86.7%	(13)	100.0%	(7)
White	80.0%	(36)	87.5%	(14)	86.7%	(13)	100.0%	(7)
Black	17.8%	(8)	6.3%	(1)	6.7%	(1)	0.0%	(0)
Asian	2.2%	(1)	6.3%	(1)	6.7%	(1)	0.0%	(0)
Married	62.2%	(28)	75.0%	(12)	73.3%	(11)	71.4%	(5)
Not Married	37.7%	(17)	25.0%	(4)	26.7%	(4)	28.6%	(2)
Have Children	84.4%	(38)	93.8%	(15)	93.3%	(14)	100.0%	(7)
Don't Have Children	15.6%	(7)	6.3%	(1)	6.7%	(1)	0.0%	(0)
Ran against Incumbent	17.8%	(8)	18.8%	(3)	20.0%	(3)	42.9%	(3)
Ran for Open Seat	82.2%	(37)	81.3%	(13)	80.0%	(12)	57.1%	(4)
Average Age	57.4		58.6		58.1		57.3	
Years in Current Office	8.9		9.1		8.9		10	
Percentage of Women in Assembly	100.0%	(45)	35.6%	(16)	33.3%	(15)	15.6%	(7)

Note: Data in this table were compiled from an online search of the official website for the Pennsylvania General Assembly, official party caucus and campaign websites for each legislator, and *Project Vote Smart*.

Table B.2. Descriptive Representation of Women in the State Legislatures, 2016

State	Rank	% Women	State	Rank	% Women
Colorado	1	42.0%	Missouri	26	24.9%
Vermont	2	41.1%	Georgia	27	24.6%
Arizona	3	35.6%	Delaware*	28	24.2%
Washington	4	34.0%	Kansas*	28	24.2%
Minnesota	5	33.3%	North Carolina	30	22.9%
Illinois	6	32.8%	Iowa	31	22.7%
Maryland	7	31.9%	Nebraska	32	22.4%
Nevada	8	31.7%	South Dakota	33	21.0%
Montana	9	31.3%	Michigan	34	20.9%
Oregon	10	31.1%	Indiana	35	20.7%
Alaska*	11	30.0%	Arkansas	36	20.0%
New Jersey*	11	30.0%	Texas	37	19.9%
Maine	13	29.6%	Virginia	38	19.3%
Hawaii	14	28.9%	North Dakota	39	19.1%
New Hampshire	15	28.8%	Pennsylvania	40	18.6%
Connecticut	16	28.3%	Tennessee	41	16.7%
Idaho	17	27.6%	Kentucky	42	15.9%
Rhode Island	18	27.4%	Utah	43	15.4%
New Mexico	19	26.8%	West Virginia	44	14.9%
New York	20	26.3%	Louisiana	45	14.6%
California*	21	25.8%	Alabama	46	14.3%
Ohio*	21	25.8%	Oklahoma*	47	14.1%
Wisconsin*	21	25.8%	South Carolina*	47	14.1%
Florida*	24	25.0%	Mississippi	49	13.8%
Massachusetts*	24	25.0%	Wyoming	50	13.3%

Source: Center for American Women and Politics, "Women in State Legislatures 2016," available at <http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/state-by-state>.

*States share the same rank if their proportions of women legislators are exactly equal or round off to be equal (AK, NJ; CA, OH, WI; FL, MA; DE, KS; OK, SC).

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