

July 15, 2017

Women Running in 2017

Assessing NJ and VA State Legislative Elections

Kelly Dittmar, Ph.D.

In November 2017, two states – New Jersey and Virginia – will hold state legislative elections. These races provide a first glimpse into trends that could continue in 2018, when the majority of state legislative and congressional seats nationwide will be contested. Much has been written about the surge of interest among women seeking to become more politically engaged. The 2017 races in New Jersey and Virginia provide our first opportunity to see if this heightened engagement is translating into candidacies. Short answer: yes, more women are running, but overwhelmingly on the Democratic side.

In our post-primary analysis, we find evidence that more Democratic women are running in 2017 state legislative races than in recent years, but many of them will have to defeat strong incumbents to win. This is particularly true in Virginia, a state where Republicans hold both legislative chambers. In New Jersey, where Democrats control the state legislature, there are fewer opportunities for Democratic challengers, and thus a less significant increase in the number of women nominees in 2017.

Virginia

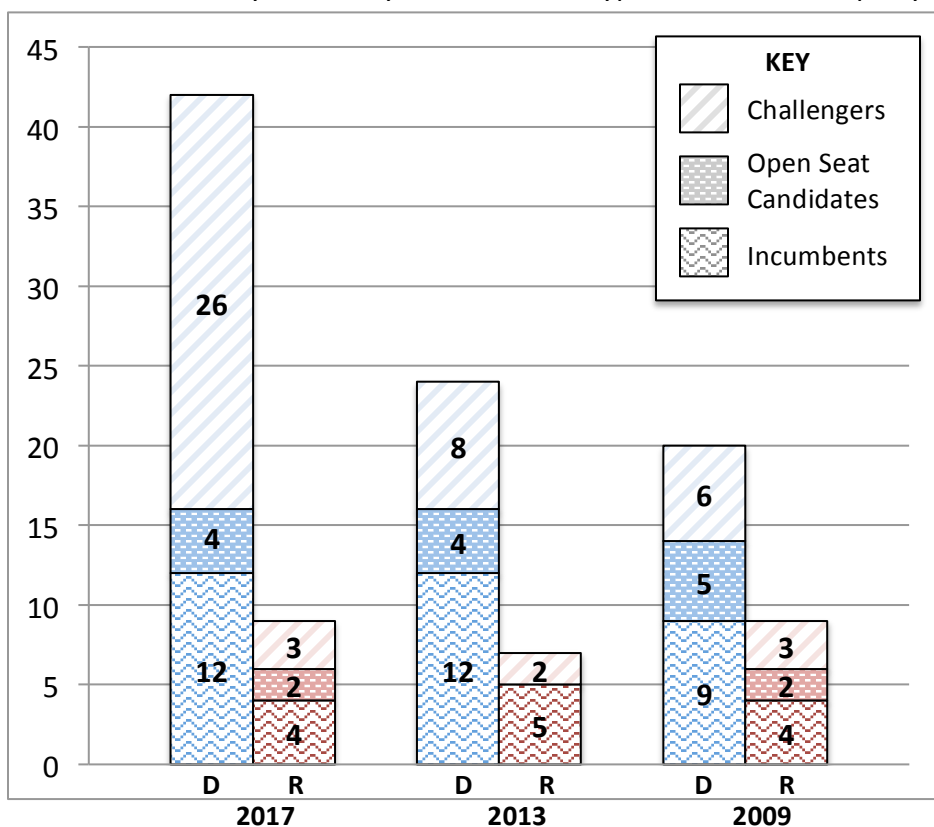
All seats in the Virginia House of Delegates are up for election in November 2017. After the June 13th primary election, 51 women will compete as major party general election candidates. This is a more than 60% increase in the number of women candidates compared with 2013 or 2009, the last two election cycles where only the House of Delegates was up for election.

Importantly, though, the jump in candidacies is concentrated among Democratic women, who hold twice as many nominations in 2017 as they had in 2009. Even more specifically, the increase among Democratic women is concentrated among challengers – candidates who will face off against incumbents in November.

Over 60% of Democratic women candidates are challengers, compared to one-third of Republican candidates.

In 2013, by comparison, one-third of Democratic women and just under one-third of Republican women ran as challengers in the general election for the House of Delegates.

Female Major Party Nominees for the Virginia House of Delegates
By election year, candidate type, and candidate party



Defeating incumbents is hard, but not impossible. One gauge of the toughness of a challenger's race is how the opposing party fared in the most recent election. Among the 26 Democratic women running as House challengers this year, 12 are running against incumbent Republicans who ran unopposed in 2015. The average GOP vote in the remaining 14 districts in 2015 was 63%. Seventeen of the 26 Democratic women challengers ran unopposed in their primary bids suggesting that Democrats did not see those races as easy wins.

There are only 3 Republican women running as House challengers in 2017. Though they all ran unopposed in their primaries, they appear to be running in more competitive general election House races. The average Democratic vote in the 3 districts in 2015 was 53%.

Just 6 women – 12% of all women House candidates – are running in open seat contests for the House of Delegates in 2017, including 4 Democrats and 2 Republicans. On a positive note, women are running in 4 of 7 total open seat contests. Two races in previously Republican districts will pit woman against woman, ensuring a female winner. The remaining races include a Democratic woman candidate seeking a safe Republican seat and another Democratic woman running in a competitive district. Finally, 16 incumbent women delegates will run for re-election in November 2017, including 12 Democrats and 4 Republicans.

Virginia will also elect a new governor and lieutenant governor in 2017. Jill Vogel is the Republican nominee for lieutenant governor. If elected, she would be the first female lieutenant governor of the state and just the third woman to win statewide elective executive office in Virginia.

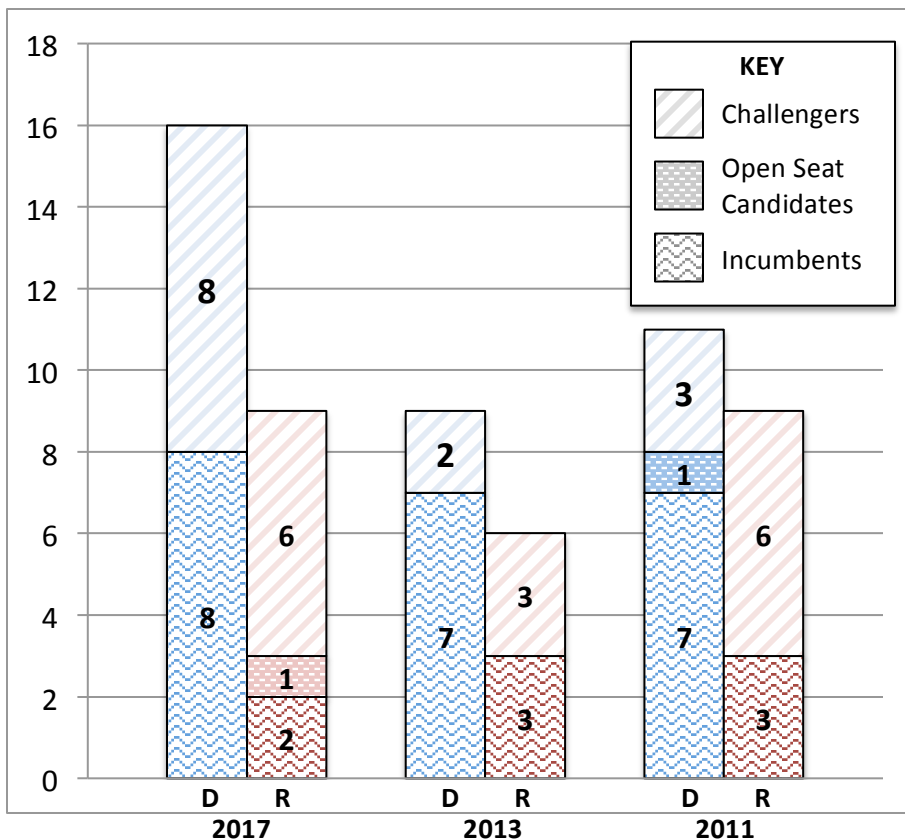
New Jersey

All seats in the New Jersey Assembly and Senate are up for election in November 2017. As a result of the June 6th primary election, 53 women will compete as major party general election candidates for the Assembly and 25 women will run as major party general election candidates for the Senate. Below, we compare this year's numbers with those from the past two directly comparable election cycles – 2013 and 2011 – where all state legislative seats were on the ballot.

New Jersey will also elect a new governor and lieutenant governor in 2017. Kim Guadagno is the Republican nominee for governor. If elected, she would be the second woman governor of the state, and the first woman to serve as both lieutenant governor and governor in New Jersey.

Senate

Female Major Party Nominees for the New Jersey State Senate
By election year, candidate type, and candidate party



The total number of women Senate nominees is significantly greater in 2017 than in 2013, up to 25 from 15 in 2013, though 20 women ran in 2011. While the number of Democratic women nominees nearly doubled from 9 to 16 across these cycles, the number of Republican women nominees increased by one-third.

Both the Democratic and Republican increases are concentrated among challengers. Consistent with past races, there are few women running in open seat contests. In 2017, there are no women nominees in 4 of 5 open seat Senate races; the sole woman candidate running for an open seat is a Republican competing in a Republican-leaning district.

Women running as Senate challengers in 2017 will face tough odds. The average 2013 Democratic vote in the 6 Senate districts with Republican women challengers is 63%, while the average GOP vote in 2013 in the 8 Senate districts with Democratic women challengers is 70%.

Ten (8D, 2R) incumbent women Senators are running for re-election.

Assembly

Unlike in Virginia, the 53 women who are candidates for the lower chamber in New Jersey do not reflect a marked increase compared with past years; there were 54 women nominees in 2013 and 49 in 2011, the most recent comparable election cycles.

As in Virginia, however, there is a rise in the number of Democratic women nominees for the Assembly from 2013 to 2017, while the number of Republican women nominees declined this year.

The rise in Democratic Assembly candidates is not concentrated among challengers. In 2013, 31% of Democratic women and 61% of Republican women ran as challengers in the general election for the Assembly. This year, under one-quarter of all Democratic women candidates and half of all Republican women candidates are running against incumbents.

There is a more marked rise in the number of women candidates for open seats; the numbers of Democratic *and* Republican women running for open Assembly seats more than doubled from 2013 to 2017, though they are not record-breaking.¹

Women are running in all eight Assembly districts with open seats in 2017. Three of seven Democratic women running for open Assembly seats are running in districts that voted for Democrats in 2015. Three of 5 Republican women running for open Assembly seats are running in districts that either voted for Republicans or split the vote across parties.

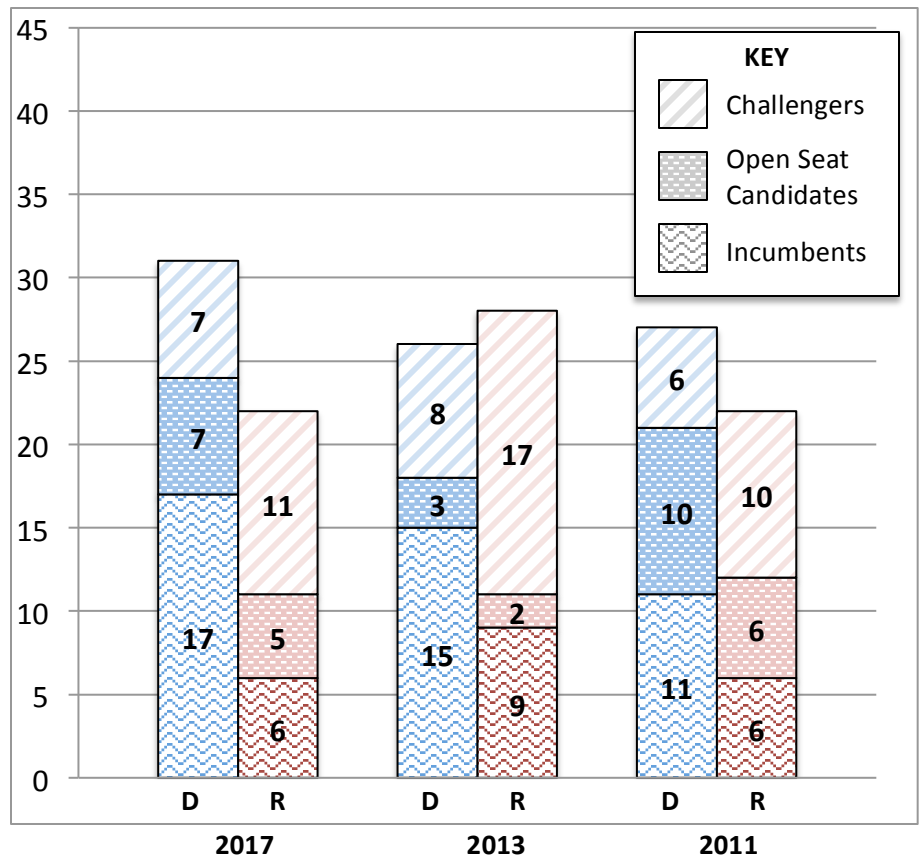
Twenty-three (17D, 6R) incumbent Assemblywomen will run for re-election in November 2017.

Year of the Woman?

Each election year, journalists and commentators ask whether *this* will be the year when women break free from the trend of stagnant legislative growth. While just two states hold legislative elections in 2017, the evidence of and attention to women's electoral engagement post-2016, especially among Democrats, has renewed this curiosity. Our initial data provides some initial insights: yes, there is energy among Democratic women that is reflected in their presence on state legislative ballots. However, the differences in trends among women candidates between parties and across states reflect the very real constraints of political environments in each state and each chamber. Most notably, there are limited political opportunities in each election cycle. These conclusions serve as an important reminder that women's electoral energy must be channeled strategically and across election cycles. It's unlikely that women will bust all trends in any one year, including 2017, but strategically planning for the *decade* of the woman is not a bad idea.

For the latest data on women in the 2017 election, visit CAWP's [Election Watch](#).

Female Major Party Nominees for the New Jersey State Assembly
By election year, candidate type, and candidate party



¹ There were even more women running for open Assembly seats – as Democrats and Republicans – in 2011. Note that candidates for the New Jersey Assembly run in multi-member districts.