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2004 Elections and Women: An Analysis of Statewide and State Legislative Election Results

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Women serving in state-level offices made few gains in the 2004 elections. The numbers of statewide elected officials and state legislators changed very little as a result of the elections.

The results of the 2004 elections were disappointing for those who would like to see increases in the numbers of women public officials. While some states saw gains, others saw losses in the numbers of women serving in state-level offices. Nationwide the numbers of women serving in state-level offices changed only slightly as a result of the elections.

Governors

Most gubernatorial elections occur in non-presidential, even-numbered election years. In two such years from the past, 1994 and 2002, a record 10 women won major party nominations for governor.¹

In 2004 only 11 states elected new governors, and with so few states electing governors, it is not surprising that the number of women who ran for governor fell far short of the all-time record. However, the number of women general election candidates in 2004 also fell short of the numbers of women (five in 2000 and six in 1996) who have run for governor in other comparable years. In 2004 only three women, all Democrats, emerged from the primaries as general election candidates across the 11 states.²

Heading into the 2004 elections, a record number of nine women served as governors across the country. Six of these women—Janet Napolitano (D) of Arizona, M. Jodi Rell (R) of Connecticut, Linda Lingle (R) of Hawaii, Kathleen Sebelius (D) of Kansas, Kathleen Blanco (D) of Louisiana, and Jennifer Granholm (D) of Michigan—served in states where gubernatorial elections were not held in 2004.

The other three women governors were serving in states that held elections. Judy Martz (R) of Montana did not seek re-election. Olene Walker (R) of Utah failed to win her party's nomination and thus was not a candidate in the general election. Ruth Ann Minner (D) of Delaware ran for re-election.³

Minner was joined by two other women who won their party's nomination for governor in their states—Christine Gregoire (D) of Washington and Claire McCaskill (D) of

Missouri. Minner, an incumbent, was re-elected by a decisive margin. Gregoire, who stepped down as attorney general to run for the open gubernatorial seat, won her gubernatorial bid by the slimmest of margins following a statewide manual recount. McCaskill, a former state legislator and county prosecutor who ran for an open seat, won 48 percent of the votes in losing to her Republican opponent, Matt Blunt.

The results of the 2004 elections mean that eight women (six Democrats, two Republicans) will be serving as governors across the country in 2005, down from the record nine who served in 2004.

Lieutenant Governors

As is the case for gubernatorial elections, most elections for lieutenant governor are held in non-presidential, even-numbered election years, and consequently the record for the largest number of women seeking this office was set in such a year—29 women general election candidates in 1994. In 2004 only seven women, six Democrats and one Republican, were major party nominees for lieutenant governor in the nine states that held elections for this office; this number was greater than the five women who ran in 2000 but fewer than the nine women candidates for lieutenant governor in 1996.

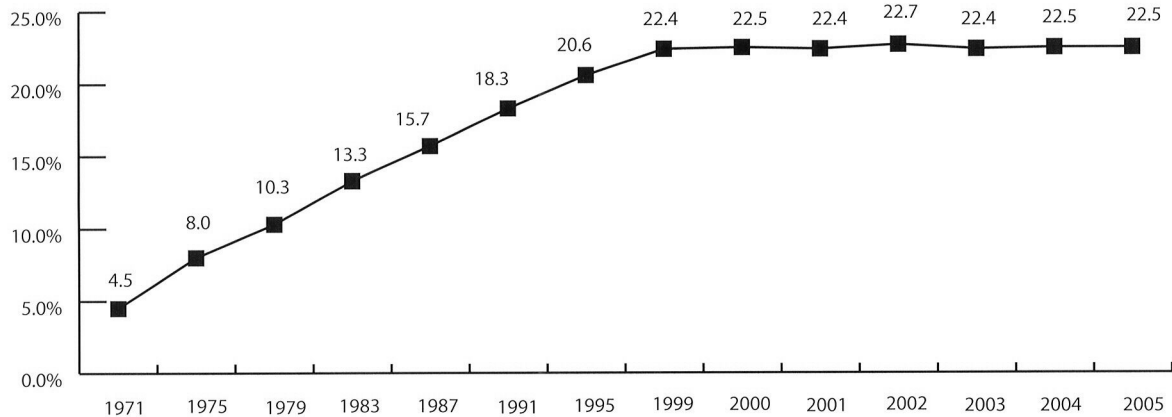
Two incumbent lieutenant governors sought re-election, Beverly Perdue (D) in North Carolina and Kathy Davis (D) in Indiana. Perdue won, but Davis lost to another woman, Republican Becky Skillman. The four other women candidates, who ran as challengers or for open seats in the states of Missouri, North Dakota, Utah and Vermont, all lost.

Thus, the elections basically preserved the status quo among women lieutenant governors. Prior to the election, there were 16 women lieutenant governors (seven Democrats, nine Republicans), and in 2005 this number will remain the same with a slight partisan shift (six Democrats, 10 Republicans) produced by Skillman's defeat of Davis in Indiana.

Other Non-Judicial Statewide Elected Officials

In addition to candidates for governor and lieutenant gover-

Figure 1 Proportion of Women Among State Legislators



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

nor, 24 women (11 Democrats, 11 Republicans, two nonpartisans) ran in general elections for other non-judicial statewide elected offices. Of these, 12 won their races. Four women (three Democrats, one Republican) were elected secretary of state, two (both Republicans) won races for treasurer, three (one Democrat, one Republican, one nonpartisan) were elected as chief education official for their states, one (Republican) won a race to become commissioner of labor, and two (both Republicans) were elected as corporation commissioners. The number of women serving in statewide offices other than governor and lieutenant governor actually decreased as a result of the election from 56 pre-election to 55 in 2005. Of the women who will hold statewide offices in 2005 other than governor and lieutenant governor, 23 are Democrats, 29 are Republicans, and three are nonpartisan.

Justices on Courts of Last Resort

Women on state courts of last resort did not fare any better in the 2004 elections than did their non-judicial counterparts who sought statewide office. Although only three sitting justices were defeated in the 42 contested elections for seats on state supreme courts, two of the three were women—Justice Jean Brown of Alabama, who was defeated in a Republican primary, and Justice Janet Stumbo of Kentucky, who lost the general election. While six women incumbents were re-elected, only one female newcomer—Patti Smith of Alabama—was elected to a seat on a court of last resort.⁴ This means a net loss nationally of one woman supreme court justice as a result of the 2004 elections.

According to the National Center for State Courts, 95 women, representing 28.2 percent of all justices, will be serving on courts of last resort in early 2005.

State Legislators: Nationwide Results

The number and proportion of women state legislators serving across the country has stagnated in recent years. The proportion of women among legislators grew consistently and fairly dramatically throughout the 1970s and 1980s, from 4.5 per-

cent in 1971 to 17.0 percent in 1989. The rate of growth slowed in the 1990s, but by the end of the decade, 1999, the proportion of women among legislators had reached 22.4 percent. Since the late 1990s, the numbers and proportions of women legislators nationally have leveled off (see Figure 1).

The 2004 elections did nothing to change this overall picture of stagnation. In fact, 1664 women state legislators will be serving at the beginning of 2005,⁵ the same number as in 1999. This 2005 number represents an increase of five women legislators over the 1659 who served just prior to the 2004 elections. Nevertheless, women will continue to constitute 22.5 percent of all legislators across the country, the same proportion as in 2004.

Women who ran for state senate seats fared less well in the election than did women who ran for house seats. The numbers of women senators actually decreased slightly as a result of the election while the number of women representatives increased. A total of 402 women senators will serve in 2005 compared with 411 in 2004; in contrast, 1262 women will serve in state houses in 2005 compared with 1248 in 2004.

Consistent with the larger pattern of Democratic gains nationally at the state legislative level, the proportion of Democrats among women state legislators increased slightly as a result of the 2005 elections. In 2004, 60.6 percent of legislators were Democrats and 38.6 percent were Republicans. In 2005, 62.6 percent will be Democrats and 36.5 percent will be Republicans.

State Legislators: State by State Results

The effect of the 2004 elections on the representation of women in state legislatures varied across the states. Some states saw increases in the numbers of women who will be serving in the legislature while others saw decreases.

Sixteen states (Arizona, California, Delaware, Idaho, Kansas, Kentucky, Minnesota, North Carolina, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, New York, Oklahoma, Texas and Vermont) will experience increases in the number of women in their legislatures as a result of the 2004 elections. For most of these states, the increases are modest, but for a few

states the gains are larger. The states with the greatest percentage increases in women legislators (more than four percentage points) are Nebraska, Arizona, Delaware, Nevada and Kansas.

An even larger number of states—19—will see decreases in the number of women in their legislatures in the aftermath of the elections (Alaska, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Massachusetts, Maine, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Utah, Washington, Wisconsin, West Virginia and Wyoming). Again, for most states, the decreases are small. However, a handful of states experienced more noticeable losses in the number of women legislators. The largest percentage decreases in women legislators (between three and four percentage points) have occurred in Rhode Island, Georgia, Wyoming, Michigan and Maine.

Six states (Alabama, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, New Jersey and Virginia) did not hold legislative elections in 2004. The remaining states (Colorado, Hawaii, Missouri, Montana, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, and Tennessee) held elections, but the number of women serving in their legislatures before and after the elections remained the same.

Implications of the Election Results

From the 1970s through much of the 1990s, the numbers of women serving in state legislatures and statewide offices (below the level of governor) increased incrementally with each subsequent election. And while for many years progress for women lagged at the gubernatorial level, the number of women governors also increased in recent years. Although only 28 women in the entire history of our country have served as governors, half, 14, have served at least part of their terms during the first five years of the 21st century. With this pattern of steady progress, it was easy for those who favor increased representation of women to become complacent. While the increases might have been smaller and slower than they would have liked, nevertheless each successive election represented a step forward toward greater gender parity.

However, as the results of the 2004 elections make perfectly clear, there is no invisible hand at work to insure that more women will seek and be elected to office with each subsequent election. The slight decreases in the number of women governors, supreme court justices, and other statewide elective officeholders illustrate all too well that the numbers of women in office can slide backward as well as move forward. While several different factors may be responsible for the recent leveling off in the numbers of women in statewide elective and state legislative office, a lack of effective recruitment certainly is one of the most important. At the state legislative level, the statistics speak for themselves. In 2004, a total of 2220 women were general election candidates for 5809 seats. Although the number of state legislative seats that are up for election varies from year to year, fewer women ran for the state legislature in 2004 than in any year since 1990!⁶ Clearly, the number of women stepping forward to run for state legislative seats has not been increasing.

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. For example, one recent study of major party candidates in state legislative races found that only 11 percent of women, compared with 37 percent of men, 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.⁷ Another recent study of people in the professions from which political candidates are most likely to emerge (i.e., law, business, education and politics) found that notably fewer women (43 percent) than men (59 percent) had ever considered running for office.⁸

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 actively recruit women for both elected and appointed positions. Legislative leaders, political parties, and advocacy organizations can help by renewing their commitment and augmenting their efforts to identify and offer support to potential women candidates, especially in winnable races with open seats or vulnerable incumbents. Such recruitment efforts may well be critical to insuring that the results of future elections do not mirror the somewhat disappointing results of 2004, but instead push the numbers and proportions of women in state-level office upward in the direction of parity with men.

Endnotes

¹ All statistics in this essay, unless otherwise noted, have been compiled by the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University, and most are available on CAWP's web site at www.cawp.rutgers.edu. My thanks to Gilda Morales, Kathleen Casey, Amy Bain and Linda Phillips for their assistance.

² Three other women, all Republicans, ran in primaries but lost. They were Jennie Lee Sievers and Karen Skelton-Memhardt in Missouri and Fran Schubert in North Carolina.

³ Sila Calderon (Popular Democratic Party) also served as governor of Puerto Rico in 2004; she did not seek re-election.

⁴ Justice at Stake Campaign, “2004 State Supreme Court Election Overview,” <http://www.faircourts.org/files/JASElection2004Summary.pdf>.

⁵ One race in New York involving a woman candidate remains undecided as of early January 2005.

⁶ There were 2375 women candidates for state legislative seats in 1992; 2285 in 1994; 2277 in 1996; 2280 in 1998; 2228 in 2000; and 2348 in 2002.

⁷ Gary Moncrief, Peverill Squire, and Malcolm Jewell, *Who Runs for the Legislature?* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 2001), Table 5.5, 102; see also Susan J. Carroll and Wendy S. Strimling, *Women's Routes to Elective Office: A Comparison With Men's* (New Brunswick, NJ: Center for the American Woman and Politics, 1983).

⁸ Richard L. Fox and Jennifer L. Lawless. 2004. “Entering the Arena? Gender and the Decision to Run for Office.” *American Journal of Political Science* 48(2):264-280.

Bio

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