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Contrasting party dynamics: A three decade analysis of the representation of Democratic versus Republican women state legislators[☆]



Laurel Elder^{*}

Political Science, Hartwick College, Oneonta, NY 13820, USA

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the partisan dynamics characterizing women's representation in state legislatures over time, a dynamic that is obscured when focusing on women as a single group undifferentiated by party. The realignment of the parties ideologically, and over the appropriate role for women in particular, has impacted their respective abilities to recruit, support, and elect women. As the Republican party became more conservative over the past three decades, gains among Republican women legislators stalled, and in some cases reversed. Republican women have faced their biggest obstacles in conservative states dominated by Republicans and made their biggest gains in states trending Democratic, where Republican seats are arguably less valuable. In contrast, the Democratic party's comparatively stronger support for gender equality, as well as its alliance with feminist groups focused on electing more women to office, has made it a more welcoming home for women seeking political careers. The Democratic party has effectively tapped into the growing pool of working women to facilitate a steady increase in Democratic women legislators in all regions of the country. These differing party dynamics have implications for women's descriptive and substantive representation, the prospects for women in higher office, and the image and future viability of the two parties.

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1. Introduction

Women remain underrepresented in state legislatures across the United States at just 24% as of 2014.¹ Moreover, women's representation in state legislatures has only increased by one percentage point since the start of the

21st century (CAWP, 2014). The fact that women's representation remains relatively low and progress has stalled is not only a concern for those who believe descriptive representation is important for the legitimacy of our elected institutions, but it has substantive implications as well. State legislatures produce policies that greatly affect women's lives, as well as all people living in the United States. Research has shown that women legislate differently from men, and that legislatures with more women members produce policies that are more responsive to the interests of women and children (Carroll, 2001a; Dodson, 2001; Thomas & Welch, 2001).

A major reason for women's stalled progress is the contrasting partisan dynamics characterizing women legislators. Over time, the number of Republican women in

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^{*} Tel.: +1 607 431 4887.

E-mail address: elderl@hartwick.edu

¹ The data on women's representation in state legislatures used in this paper are based on data from April 2014.

state legislatures has stagnated, even as the Republican share of legislative seats has increased. In contrast, Democratic women have made steady, impressive gains. In 2014, Democratic women legislators outnumber their Republican counterparts fairly dramatically, 1,136 to 633 (CAWP, 2014). These numbers are all the more significant given that Republicans now hold the majority of state legislative seats nationally (NCSL, 2013).

Most research seeking to understand the continued underrepresentation of women has focused on women's overall levels of representation in state legislatures. This research explores the different dynamics at work behind the representation of Democratic versus Republican women, and in doing so, provides insights into why women remain under-represented in state legislatures that are obscured when focusing on women as a cohesive group undifferentiated by party. The differing party dynamics of women's representation have important implications for women's descriptive and substantive representation, the prospects for women in higher office, and the image and viability of the two parties.

2. Literature review

Ever since women started to enter political office, women's representation in legislatures has varied across states and regions. Researchers use this geographic variation as leverage in understanding the factors that foster and hinder women's representation. A consistent finding is that political ideology matters. States with more conservative and more Republican electorates have fewer women in their legislatures (Arceneaux, 2001; Norrander & Wilcox, 1998, 2005; Sanbonmatsu, 2006). Studies conducted on data from the 1970s and 1980s show that women fared more poorly in states controlled by the Democratic party (Diamond, 1977; Sanbonmatsu, 2002), but studies employing more recent data suggest the negative relationship between Democratic control and women's representation no longer exists (Rule, 1999).

States with highly professional and well paid legislatures have fewer women, suggesting higher salaries attract more competition, which in turn disadvantages women (Arceneaux, 2001; Norrander & Wilcox, 2005). Additionally, women are better represented in states where there are more women in the candidate eligibility pool, typically measured by women's presence in the workforce (Arceneaux, 2001; Darcy, Welch, & Clark, 1994; Norrander & Wilcox, 2005). A large obstacle to women's representation is incumbency, which disadvantages any previously excluded group. Yet studies show that higher turnover rates and term limits do not consistently predict more women (Arceneaux, 2001; Carroll, 2001b; Carroll & Jenkins, 2001, 2005; Moncrief, Niemi, & Powell, 2004).

A smaller set of articles focuses on describing and explaining the growth in women's representation in state legislatures over time, which is the primary focus of this research. Norrander and Wilcox show that the Northeast was the early regional leader in women's representation, but by 2004 the West had caught up followed by the Midwest, with the South trailing behind (1998, 2005). Moreover, women initially made the greatest gains in states with

the most liberal cultures, but progress across the 1980s and 1990s was greatest in less liberal states (Norrander & Wilcox, 1998; Rule, 1999). Norrander and Wilcox (2005) analyze the growth in women's representation in lower and upper houses of state legislatures from 1994 through 2004 and find that an increase in the proportion of seats held by Republicans predicts smaller gains for women.

Paxton, Painter, and Hughes (2009) use latent growth curve models to test different theories about the trajectories of women's state legislative representation from 1982 through 2006. They find that women made their biggest gains during the 1992 'Year of the Woman,' even though there were not more open seats than usual in state legislative elections that year, thus confirming their gender salience hypothesis. They also find that women made the most progress entering state legislatures across the 1980s, less in the 1990s, and the least progress in the 2000s, once the nation's focus switched to terrorism.

These studies seek to explain variation in women's growth rates or levels of representation by focusing on women as a single group. However, women's representation among Democratic and Republican state legislators has followed strikingly different trajectories. Fig. 1 shows women as a percent of Democratic and Republican legislators from 1981 through 2014. Across the 1980s, women's representation within the two parties was roughly equal, although Republican women maintained a slight edge. Starting in the early 1990s, however, the dynamics of women's representation in the two parties begins to diverge, with women making strong inroads among Democratic legislators while Republican women decline as a portion of their party's legislators, as well as in terms of their absolute numbers.² Thus, if the heightened focus on terrorism in the 21st century worked against women's representation, as Paxton et al. (2009) argue, its dampening effects were felt only among Republican women.

Only a handful of studies have taken party into account to help explain women's representation in state legislative office. Sanbonmatsu (2006) argues persuasively that parties matter greatly when it comes to women's representation. Although parties in the United States do not have the power to select their nominees, party leaders engage in recruitment activities that influence who runs. Additionally, in an earlier study, Sanbonmatsu (2002) analyzes pooled state legislative data from 1971 through 1999 and finds that several factors, including women's workforce participation, the professionalism of the legislature, and the partisan composition of the legislature affects women's representation differently by party. She argues that these partisan effects are driven by the fact that Republican and Democratic women emerge from distinct candidate pools, with Republican women more likely to enter elected office from traditional roles as homemaker.

² Fig. 1 shows women's representation as a portion of Democrats and Republicans over time, but the same patterns characterize the actual number of Democratic and Republican women over time. From 1981 through 2014, the number of Democratic women state legislators increased by 623 while the number of Republican women only increased by 235. In 1995, the absolute number of Republican women peaked at 673. As of 2014 there are only 633 Republican women state legislators.

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