

POLITICS

Nearly 100 years after suffrage, New Jersey women underrepresented in public office

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For a brief time in history, New Jersey was the only place in America where women could vote.

Between 1776, when the state constitution permitted “all free inhabitants, of this State, of full age, who are worth fifty pounds” to vote, and 1807, when the state restricted voting to white male citizens, largely land-owning and unmarried women could make their voices heard.

They were then silenced for 113 years.

The passage of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1920, a milestone that will be celebrated on Sunday as Women’s Equality Day, enfranchised women — all women — once more. Permanently.

2018 elections: After Trump victory, more women running for office in New Jersey

Equal pay: Equal pay for women, sick time for all workers on the way to becoming law in NJ

Women's March: North Jersey women demonstrate, reflect in New York City

More than 8 million women across the country voted in elections that year. By 1964, women were outvoting men. They cast nearly 10 million more votes than men in the 2016 presidential election.

Part of the gap is due to women’s slight population size advantage over men, said Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University. But researchers also speculate that women feel more of a connection to government.

“They sort of feel government in their lives more directly — whether it’s because they may at some point in their lifetime need government programs like Social Security, family leave or

unemployment insurance,” Walsh said. “Maybe they feel more of a need to participate by voting.”

When it comes to participating by serving, women in New Jersey fall on the opposite side of a gap. They hold about 31 percent of the seats in the state Legislature, 29 percent of freeholder seats, 25 percent of council seats and 14 percent of mayoral positions nearly 100 years after winning back the right to vote.

Only one woman, Rep. Bonnie Watson Coleman, a Democrat in the 12th Congressional District, represents New Jersey in Congress.

“There’s still work to be done all the way around,” Walsh said.

New Jersey has the nation’s 13th-highest proportion of women in the state Legislature but is one of the toughest states for women seeking public office, Walsh said.

To get on a ballot and secure a favored position on it, women must break through a unique political party system, particularly at the county level, that is tightly controlled by white men.

“These party leaders pick people who look like them, people they know, people they’re comfortable with,” Walsh said. “These decisions are often made not in a particularly transparent way. That’s made it harder for new people in general to break in, and women are still, in 2018, relatively new people in the mix.”

About 15 years ago, a perfect storm of indictments of sitting legislators and growing public awareness of women’s underrepresentation put cracks in the system.

Party bosses, likely feeling pressure to send a message of change, filled most of the openings with women, Walsh said. In 2005, after years of ranking in the bottom 10 in the nation for its low number of women state lawmakers, New Jersey began climbing up.

Training has helped, too.

Ready to Run, a national campaign training program for women operated by the Center for American Women and Politics, taught more than 4,000 women in New Jersey over the past 20 years to run for office, seek appointed positions and manage campaigns, Walsh said. Other programs, such as Emerge New Jersey, a chapter of a national organization that trains Democratic women in how to run for office, have also made a difference.

“Women across the state now feel empowered to run and put their names forward,” Walsh said. “They’re talking about it; they’re approaching party leaders. That puts pressure on party

leaders to be more responsive.”

Women still face challenges that are unique to them: Familial duties often delay and shorten their political careers; they often have to work harder to fill their war chests and are judged more by gender stereotypes.

But they have also made some exceptional strides.

New Jersey’s women representatives are among the most diverse in the country, with women of color comprising 60 percent of women in the state Senate and 48 percent of women in the Assembly. Women of color represent 24 percent of women state legislators nationwide.

Watson Coleman is the first African-American and first woman of color to represent New Jersey in Congress. Current Lt. Gov. Sheila Oliver is the first African-American and woman of color to serve in her position.

“Government doesn’t always mirror the demographics of a state,” Walsh said. “In New Jersey’s case, we are not just seeing the numbers of women growing, we’re also seeing diversity among these women, and that’s important.”

The progress is impressive, she said. But it’s not quite enough. True political parity requires 50 percent representation, and New Jersey, as well as the rest of the country, has much room for improvement.

On Saturday, the Alice Paul Institute in Mount Laurel marked Women’s Equality Day with a pop-up dinner. Guests were to bring their own tables, chairs and cutlery and, in honor of suffragettes, wear white.

The institute educates the public about the life and work of Alice Paul, a women’s rights activist who helped lead the campaign for the 19th Amendment. She spent the rest of her life fighting for the Equal Rights Amendment, a proposed amendment to the U.S. Constitution she co-wrote that would guarantee equal rights for all Americans regardless of sex and end legal distinctions between men and women.

In 1982, the amendment fell three states short of the 38 needed to ratify it.

Today, Paul’s childhood home in Mount Laurel, Paulsdale, hosts leadership development programs for young people. The nonprofit continues to advocate for the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment.

Lucienne Beard, executive director of the institute, said the congressional acts and bills that chipped away at inequality over the years can easily be overturned unless they are enshrined in the Constitution.

“People say, 'Women are so much better off in this country'... and that's true. We are better off than many other countries, but we're not as good as some of them," Beard said. "At the heart of it, what makes us American, what binds us together as a nation, is our body of laws. And women are not equally represented."

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