

THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN ELECTED OFFICE

Bettina Duval*

The United States currently ranks eightieth for women holding positions in national government.¹ California's government ranks fourth in gender parity—ten years ago it was number one in the country.² So why are we falling behind? Many people assume that in the United States, and especially in states such as California, women are regularly elected to office.³ This is simply not true. This willful blindness to gender inequality causes a false perception of gender parity. In reality, there is much work to be done to achieve equality in California and in the United States.

CaliforniaLIST, a political action committee modeled after Emily's List, was founded in 2002.⁴ Its mission is to elect Democratic, pro-choice women in California.⁵ In 2003, there were eleven women in our State Senate, and twenty-five women in our State Assembly.⁶ Cur-

* Founder and President, CaliforniaLIST. Emily Eisen, Intern, CaliforniaLIST.

1. *Women in National Parliaments*, INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION (Dec. 1, 2013), <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/arc/classif011213.htm>.

2. *Women's Representation in California*, REPRESENTATION2020 (2014), <http://www.representation2020.com/uploads/9/2/2/7/9227685/california.pdf>; CAL. RESEARCH BUREAU, CALIFORNIA'S WOMEN STATE LEGISLATORS: HISTORICAL TRENDS (1918 TO DECEMBER 1, 2014) (2014), <http://www.library.ca.gov/crb/14/S-14-023.pdf>.

3. See Kira Sanbonmatsu, *Gender-Related Political Knowledge and the Descriptive Representation of Women*, 25 POL. BEHAV. 367, 371 (2003); Cathleen Decker, *A Once-Rising Blue Tide Now Ebbs*, L.A. TIMES, Aug. 23, 2015, at B2.

4. *Mission & Vision*, CALIFORNIALIST, <http://californialist.org/our-mission/> (last visited Nov. 6, 2015).

5. *Id.*

6. *S. Final History: Showing Actions Taken in this Session on All S. Bills, Constitutional Amendments, Concurrent, Joint Resolutions and S. Resolutions*, 2003-04 Reg. Sess., 2 S. Final History 1435-36 (Cal. 2004) [hereinafter *S. Final History*]; *Assemb. Final History: Assemb. Bills, Constitutional Amendments, Concurrent Resolutions, Joint Resolutions, and H. Resolutions*, 2003-04 Reg. Sess., 1 Assemb. Final History 4-5 (Cal. 2004) [hereinafter *Assemb. Final History*].

rently, we have twelve female State Senators and nineteen Assemblywomen.⁷

Since the founding of CaliforniaLIST, the status of elected women on the federal level has changed for the better in the remaining states. Presently, twenty U.S. Senators are women, and there are eighty-four female representatives in the House.⁸ Still, the political “pipeline” is of great importance. In California, the assumption that we consistently elect women to public office has actually hindered the election of Democratic female candidates. The number of women serving in our California Congressional Delegation has declined by two, and there has been an approximate 20% decrease in female assemblywomen since 2003.⁹ As the number of Democratic women decreases, the number of qualified female candidates declines, overall.¹⁰ The route to Congress is through local and state elected office.¹¹ Each election cycle over the past decade has brought the loss of one Democratic woman and the gain of one Republican woman.¹² To be sure, “14% of California’s cities are completely without female representation.”¹³

It is not only in politics that California’s women are not represented equally. Among directors and the highest paid executives, there is only one woman for every nine men in positions of power.¹⁴ Among California company directors, only 34% are women.¹⁵ By city, San Francisco has the greatest percentage of female directors at merely 17%, while Orange County has the least, at a despicable 8%.¹⁶

When running for office, the actual challenges California women face today are actually far greater than assumed barriers. We often

7. *Senators*, CAL. STATE SENATE, <http://senate.ca.gov/senators> (last visited Oct. 12, 2015); *Members*, CAL. STATE ASSEMB., <http://assembly.ca.gov/assemblymembers> (last visited Oct. 12, 2015).

8. JENNIFER E. MANNING & IDA A. BRUDNICK, CONG. RESEARCH SERV., RL30261, *WOMEN IN CONGRESS, 1917-2015: BIOGRAPHICAL AND COMMITTEE ASSIGNMENT INFORMATION, AND LISTINGS BY STATE AND CONGRESS 1* (2015).

9. *Compare Assemb. Final History*, *supra* note 6, with CAL. STATE ASSEMB., *supra* note 7.

10. See Tom W. Smith & Lance A. Selfa, *When Do Women Vote for Women?*, PUB. PERSP., Sept.-Oct. 1992, at 30, <http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/public-perspective/ppscan/36/36030.pdf>.

11. LEADERSHIP CAL. INST., *WOMEN 2014: AN EXAMINATION OF THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN CALIFORNIA STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT 1* (2014), http://www.leadershipcaliforniainstitute.org/sites/all/files/Women_2014.pdf.

12. See Decker, *supra* note 3.

13. LEADERSHIP CAL. INST., *supra* note 11, at 6.

14. UNIV. OF CAL. DAVIS, UC DAVIS STUDY OF CALIFORNIA WOMEN BUSINESS LEADERS 2 (2013), <http://gsm.ucdavis.edu/sites/main/files/file-attachments/ucdaviswomenstudy2013final.pdf>.

15. *Id.* at 2.

16. *Id.* at 5.

hear female politicians get asked, “How will you balance being a mother with your political responsibilities?”¹⁷ However, the real barriers for hopeful female politicians include meeting fundraising requirements, garnering partisan support, and the fostering of political ambition in early life.¹⁸ These impediments were cited in a recent study of women legislators in Washington D.C.;¹⁹ two out of three women have difficulty raising the money needed to run an effective campaign.²⁰ Almost half of legislators stated that their parties encouraged more men to run for political office than women, and 75% of women stated that they felt discriminated against on account of their gender.²¹ The study also found that young women are less likely than young men to have ever considered running for office.²² Reality is: women are not disregarding political office on account of familial obligation; instead, the chauvinist political machine our country has in place is pushing them out of office.

In addition, rather than nominating themselves, women will wait to be asked to run.²³ Women are less likely to run if they are not recruited.²⁴ This is because women rate themselves as less qualified than men to hold office by a margin of 20%, regardless of their actual qualifications.²⁵ These are the challenges that our organization, CaliforniaLIST, is faced with.

CaliforniaLIST knows and has demonstrated that when women run for office, women win. Female candidates can, without a doubt, compete with their male counterparts if given the proper encouragement and funding. It is not a question of whether women are capable of holding office, but a matter of getting women to run and supporting them when they do so. By encouraging and standing with qualified female candidates, we can achieve gender parity in California’s government.

17. See POLITICAL PARITY, SHIFTING GEARS: HOW WOMEN NAVIGATE THE ROAD TO HIGHER OFFICE 30 (2014), <https://www.politicalparity.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Shifting%20Gears%20Report.pdf>.

18. *Id.* at 11, 23, 25.

19. *Id.* at 23.

20. *Id.* at 9.

21. *Id.* at 28.

22. *Id.* at 7.

23. *Id.* at 25.

24. See *id.* at 31.

25. JENNIFER L. LAWLESS & RICHARD L. FOX, BROOKINGS INST. OF GOVERNANCE STUD., WHY ARE WOMEN STILL NOT RUNNING FOR PUBLIC OFFICE? 11 (2008), http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2008/5/women-lawless-fox/05_women_lawless_fox.pdf.