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No sooner was the ink on the 2004 post-mortem election analysis dry did the pundits of American politics turn their attention to who would vie for the Democratic and Republican presidential nominations in the 2008 race. Among the names mentioned so far are two prominent political women—Hillary Clinton and Condoleezza Rice. In fact, a February 2005 public opinion poll conducted by Siena College and Hearst Newspapers found that 53% of those polled thought Hillary Clinton should run, and 42% of those polled thought Condoleezza Rice should run. Moreover, 62% of those polled agreed that the US is “ready” for a woman president in 2008.



For a nation who has never seen a woman assume its highest office, this is interesting food for thought. In this same poll, 24% of respondents reported they thought a woman president would be a better foreign policy-maker than a man; 11% thought a man president would be better. 18% of those polled thought a woman would be a better commander-in-chief, though 23% thought a man would be better in this role. On domestic issues, however, a full 67% thought a woman president would be better than a man, and only 3% thought the opposite was true. Clearly, those polled thought that electing a woman president would not only be a symbolic change in who represents our nation, but would lead to substantive policy changes as well.

Interestingly, though, we know that Hillary Clinton and Condi Rice come from considerably different sides of the table on a lot of policy debates. Knowing this, how can we believe categorically that electing any woman to an office like the presidency would lead to changes in policy from her male predecessor? How do we expect political change based on gender within the

context of politics that seems increasingly divided by political parties? It is this puzzle that drove me to examine the impact that women have on the policy process at a different level of government, in the 50 US state legislatures.

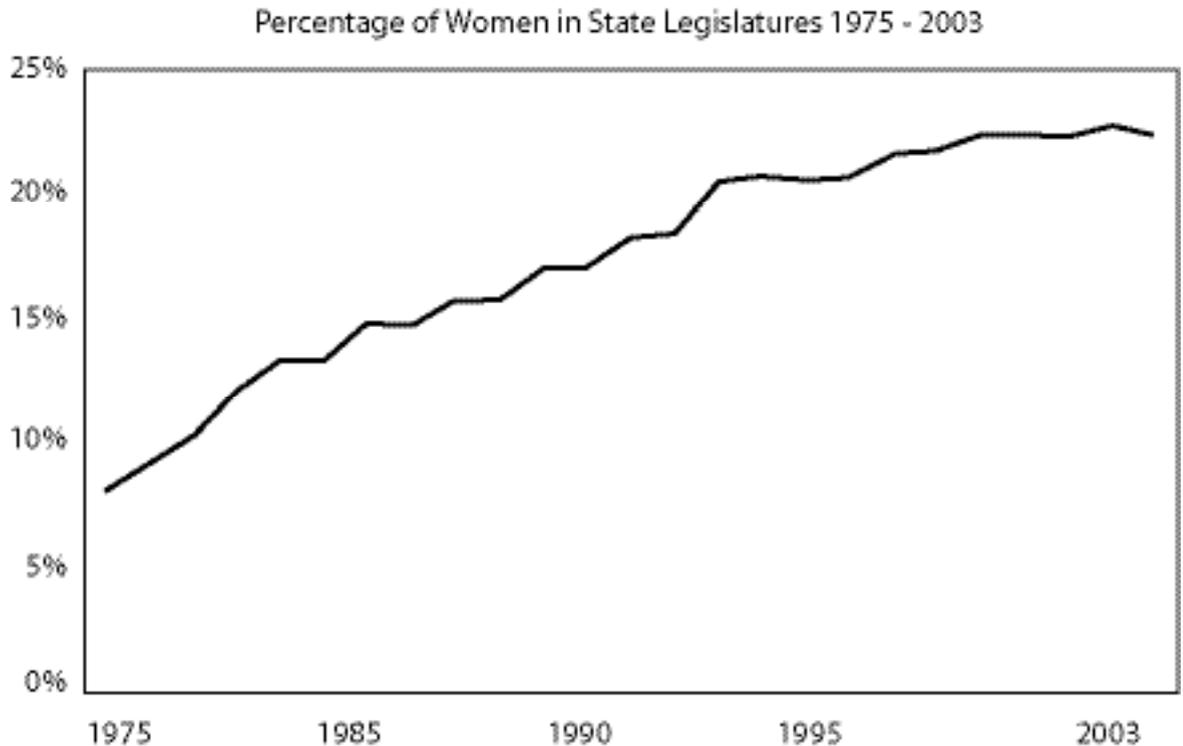
The state legislatures are one of the first places women made inroads in becoming part of the political elite in American politics, making them a great place to understand if women change politics, and how they might do so. Currently, according to the Center for Women in American Politics

(CAWP) at Rutgers University, 22.5% of state legislators in the US are women, up from only 8% in 1975. The proportion of women in the state legislature varies dramatically by state, however. Maryland has the largest percentage of women in the state legislature at 34%; South Carolina has the smallest proportion at just 8.8%. Massachusetts ranks near the middle in the proportion of women in their legislature (20th out of 50 states), but still above the national average, with 24.5% women in the 184th General Court. Across the US, about 63% of the women legislators are Democrats and 37% are Republicans.

These women legislators operate in an increasingly partisan universe. According to the National Council of State Legislatures, 11 of the 50 state legislatures have one house controlled by the Republicans and one house controlled by the Democrats. Even where one party does control both houses of the legislature, many of the parties are neck and neck in the number of seats they hold, and therefore the majority's hold on legislative control can be tenuous. For example, in the Colorado

FIGURE 1:

Data from the Center for American Women in Politics, Rutgers University



state legislature, Democrats are in the majority in both houses, but only by a slight margin. They hold 35 of 65 seats in the house, and 18 of 35 seats in the senate. There remain some states, Massachusetts among them, where one party dominates legislative proceedings. However, it is important to consider that women legislators are elected to an environment where many factors may constrain their actions.

At first, women elected to the legislature faced an uphill climb in becoming integrated into the legislative process. For instance, one early researcher studying women in state politics found women legislators in one state had to fight just to have a women's restroom built near the chamber. During the breaks in this chamber, women had to run to a different part of the building to use the restroom, and therefore they missed deals with lobbyists and their colleagues that could be made in the halls of the legislature during these breaks. The men in the legislature had a restroom just outside the door, and so they didn't encounter this problem.

As women moved past these early obstacles, they began to make their mark on the legislative process. Most notably, observers of women's activities in the state legislatures noted women pursued a different issue agenda in the legislative process. Primarily, women focused on "women's issues," or a set of issues that followed from the ways women were socialized in American society. At an early age, women were taught to be caregivers and nurturers. This continued into adulthood, where women became mothers and wives, whose primary job was to care for the family in the private world of the

home. Thus, women legislators pursued bills related to these roles - bills about education, healthcare, welfare, children and families. Additionally, women paid attention to women's rights legislation in the chamber - bills that related to women's own place in society.

Women's attention to these areas of legislation was noted, but the fruits of their labor, or the outcomes of these pieces of legislation, were less clear, the point from which I began my own research. Within the 99 chambers of the 50 state legislatures (each state has a house and senate except for Nebraska, which has a unicameral chamber) I catalogued three pieces of information. First, I used a survey from Project Vote Smart, a nonprofit organization that collects information about candidates for elections, to determine what women and men candidates for the state legislature thought about various issues, such as abortion, affirmative action, the economy, education, healthcare, and welfare. Second, I collected all of the bills sponsored by women and men legislators in four states - Arkansas, Colorado, Washington, and Wisconsin - and recorded the type of issue each bill addressed. Third, through the Representation in America's Legislatures Project, I collected roll call votes on legislation in 97 of the 99 state chambers, so that I could tell how each male and female legislator voted on each piece of legislation in the chamber. Using these three pieces of information, I could



track women legislators' opinions and actions from the election to the passing of a bill, to see if women did create and pass a different agenda from men in the legislative process, or more simply, whether electing women to the legislature made a difference in the kinds of policies the legislature created.

In the candidate survey, I found women legislators expressed different opinions about policies in the election process. For instance, women candidates were more likely to support the legality of abortion and increasing state funds for child care for low-income families. However, once I accounted for the women candidates' party identification, I found Democratic women held policy opinions closer to Democratic men than to Republican women, and Republican women agreed more with Republican men than with Democratic women in their policy positions. Women legislators are different from men in their opinions about issues, but partisan differences still separate Democratic and Republican women.

On bill sponsorship, both women and men legislators introduced bills that related to women's issues. A woman legislator in Colorado introduced a bill that prohibited discrimination in wages for persons working in comparable jobs, and a woman legislator in Washington introduced legislation mandating contraceptive coverage by insurance plans. However, a male legislator in Arkansas introduced legislation prohibiting

group insurance plans from diminishing benefits for a woman during pregnancy, and a male legislator in Wisconsin introduced legislation giving a tax credit to businesses that equip their facilities to allow the pumping and storage of breast milk. Women legislators in opposite parties tended to introduce legislation in different areas pertaining to women's issues. For instance, Democratic women focused on expanding women's rights under the law (such as the wage discrimination example above), while Republican women focused on crimes against women, such as domestic abuse and sentencing for sex offenders. Republican and Democratic women sometimes stood on opposite sides of women's issues, for instance, in abortion and marriage/divorce laws. Both introduced bills aimed to redefine these rights as they related to women, but these bills did dramatically opposing things.

For roll call votes on these issues, women legislators simply voted with their respective parties in most circumstances. Some women's issues bills, particularly those dealing with non-controversial women's health issues, such as money to fund breast cancer research, passed overwhelmingly when introduced in any chamber. More often than not, though, women followed party lines in voting rather than unity in the chamber around their gender. Therefore, much of the legislation benefiting women that was passed in these legislative sessions was due to partisan agreement on an issue, and so women's issues had a decidedly partisan stance. Exceptions existed, but they were rare - one in the many bills across twenty-two chambers in this portion of the study.

What do these results at the state legislative level say for a potential President Rice or second President Clinton? I believe they are evidence that agendas affecting women can come in substantially different partisan forms. Women may be more interested in women's issues at the outset of their involvement in political life, but within the structure of politics, their efforts regarding women's issues are shaped by the partisan nature of the policy process. This is not to discount the symbolic value a woman president may bring to the office - certainly, it is beneficial for a young woman in the US to see a woman in the ultimate position of power in the government. The findings do signal, however, a need to go beyond a singular understanding of what a woman may do to change politics. She may certainly change things, but in a different way from her partisan counterpart.

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