

California's Women State Legislators

Historical Trends (1918 to 2012)

California has long been at the forefront of electing women representatives. Since 1993, California has been represented in the U.S. Senate by Diane Feinstein and Barbara Boxer. Nancy Pelosi became the first female Speaker of the House in 2007. At the State level, Esto Broughton, Grace Dorris, Elizabeth Hughes, and Anna Saylor were elected to the California Assembly in 1918, two years before the majority of women in the United States won the right to vote. This Short Subject examines trends in the number and party affiliation of California women legislators elected to the state Assembly and Senate from 1918 to 2012, as well as the effects of term limits adopted in 1990.

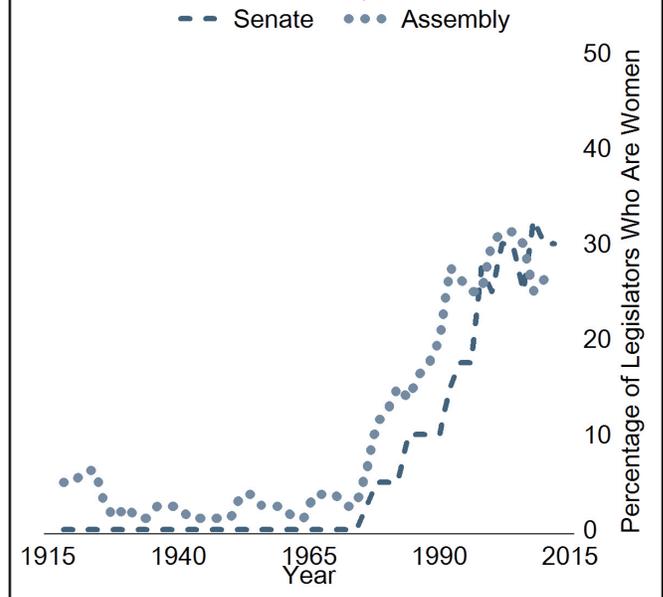
TRENDS IN THE LEGISLATURE

The number of California's elected women Legislators increased soon after women received the vote in 1911, starting with the four members of the Assembly mentioned above, in 1918. Their numbers dropped in the mid-1920s, staying between one and three before recovering to six again in 1976. Women's representation jumped to 9 percent (11 members) in 1978, rising to 17.5 percent (21) by 1990. Their numbers peaked in 2004 at 31 percent (37) and fell back to 26 percent (31) in 2012.

From 1918 until 1975, all the women elected to the Legislature were in the Assembly. As shown in Figure 1, women's seat holding in this chamber rose to 11 percent (9 members) in 1978, and continued rising through the 1980s and 1990s. Women representation peaked in 2002 and 2004 with 31 percent (25) before dropping to 26 percent (21) in 2012.

The first two state Senators, Rose Ann Vuich and Diane Watson, were elected in 1976 and 1978 and served into the 1990s. By the end of the 1980s, there were five female senators. This number continued to increase through the 1990s, and has remained at over 25 percent of the body (10 members) since. The number of women senators peaked in 2008 at 32.5

Figure 1. Percentage of California Legislators Who Are Women, 1918-2012¹

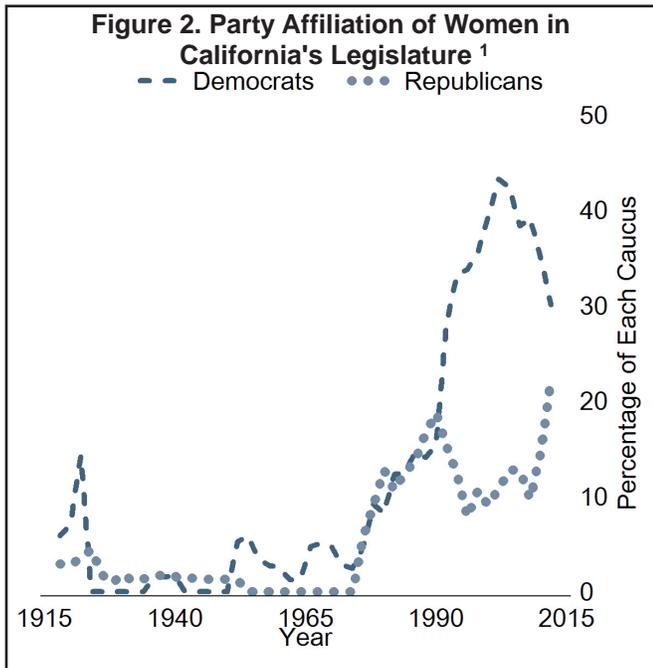


percent (13) and declined to 27.5 percent (11) in 2012.

Since 1918, there have been a total of 139 women elected to the California Legislature. Of these, 136 got their start in the Assembly. Most of these (103) remained there for their entire legislative career. There have been 33 women who started in the Assembly then moved to the Senate, starting with Marian Bergeson, elected to the Assembly three times beginning in 1978, then elected to the Senate three times as well, beginning in 1984. Three others served only in the Senate. To date, no women have started in the Senate and later moved to the Assembly. Interestingly, both Nell Soto and Betty Karnette started in the Assembly, moved to the Senate, then returned to the Assembly.

PARTY AFFILIATION OF LEGISLATORS

Since 1918, of the 139 women elected in California, 97 were elected as Democrats, 43 as Republicans, one as an Independent and one from the Green Party.² Partisan affiliation of California's elected women Assembly members and Senators has gone through



several significant shifts since the first women were elected in 1918. From 1918 through 1950, most women Legislators were Republican. From 1954 through 1974 all of California's elected women Legislators were Democrats. From 1976 to 1990, there was a mix, with Democrats most often a majority, but this shifted again in the early 1990s, as Republican numbers stayed mostly static while Democrats increased. From 1994 through 2012 at least 70 percent of California's women Legislators were elected as Democrats. As shown in Figure 2, after 1990, the percentage of women Democrats more than doubled as a percentage of their caucus before falling more recently. Republican women have maintained their numbers as their caucus has declined as a whole.

EFFECTS OF TERM LIMITS

Term limits enacted in California in 1990 originally limited members to three two-year Assembly terms and two four-year Senate terms beginning with the 1992 elections. Their effect on how California elects women appears to differ across the two chambers. In the Assembly, the number of elected women jumped in the 1992 election, which could indicate a rise in open seats resulting indirectly in more women winning office. The effect of term limits in the Senate is more clear. In 1998, the first election featuring former Assembly members termed out of that chamber, the number of elected women Senators rose from 7 to 11, a 57 percent increase. All 11 were former Assembly members, and the group included five women who were termed out of the Assembly in 1996 or 1998.

Through the 2012 election, California has lost nearly 60 women legislators to term limits. In the next two elections, California will lose 22 more, 15 in the Assembly and 7 in the Senate.

METHODOLOGY

There were two main challenges in determining the number of elected women legislators in California. The first was that the official election results published by the California Secretary of State do not identify candidate sex or gender, so an alternate method had to be used. We checked through the Statement of the Vote for candidate names and compiled a list of female candidates, which we verified by biographical information, and compared to the list provided by the California Legislative Women's Caucus.

The second challenge is that there exists the possibility that a woman campaigned for a legislative office, was elected, and served in the Legislature as a man without being detected. This is highly unlikely, but possible, as is illustrated by accounts of Charlie Parkhurst, the first woman to vote in California.³ She did so in 1868, voting as a man 43 years before women won the vote in California. California law does not require candidates to identify by sex or gender.

ENDNOTES

1. California Secretary of State (1918-2013). *Statement of the Vote*. Data used for both figures can be found at www.library.ca.gov/crb/14/s-14-004.xlsx. Senators are elected every four years, their election data was smoothed by including them in the next bi-annual election cycle in addition to their actual election.
2. The numbers add up to more than 139 because of three women legislators who were elected under different party banners in different elections. Esto Broughton (Assembly) changed from Democrat to Republican for the 1924 election. Jean Morehead (Assembly) changed from Republican to Democrat for the 1982 election. Lucy Killea (Senate) changed from Democrat to Independent for the 1992 election.
3. Beal, Richard (1991). *Highway 17: The Road to Santa Cruz*.

This Short Subject was prepared at the request of Assemblywoman Bonnie Lowenthal, on behalf of the California Legislative Women's Caucus.

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