

California's Women State Legislators

Historical Trends (1918 to December 1, 2014)

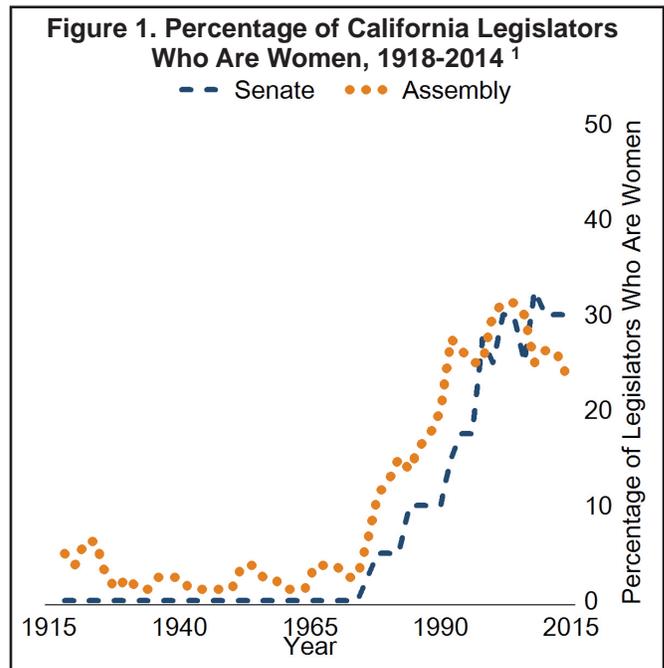
California has long been at the forefront of electing women representatives. Since 1993, California has been represented in the U.S. Senate by Diane Feinstein and Barbara Boxer. Nancy Pelosi became the first female Speaker of the House in 2007. At the state level, Esto Broughton, Grace Dorris, Elizabeth 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 updates to 2014 trends in the number and party affiliation of California women legislators elected to the State Assembly and Senate from 1918 forward, as well as the effects of term limits on women's representation.

TRENDS IN THE LEGISLATURE

The number of California's elected women legislators in the Assembly and Senate increased soon after women received the vote in 1911, starting in 1918 with the four members mentioned above. Their numbers dropped in the mid-1920s, staying between one and three before recovering to six total members in 1976. Women's representation in both houses jumped to 9 percent (11 members) in 1978, and was 17.5 percent (21) by 1990. Their share peaked in 2004 at 31 percent (37) and now stands at 25 percent (30).

From 1918 until 1975, all of the women elected to the Legislature were in the 80-member Assembly. As shown in Figure 1, the share of seats held by women in the lower chamber rose to 11 percent (9 members) in 1978 and continued rising through the 1980s and 1990s. Women's representation peaked in 2002 and 2004 with 31 percent (25) before dropping to 24 percent (19) in 2014.

The first two state senators, Rose Ann Vuich and Diane Watson, were elected in 1976 and 1978 respectively. By the end of the 1980s, there were five women senators. This number continued to increase through the 1990s and has remained at over 10 members, 25 percent, since 1998. The number of women senators

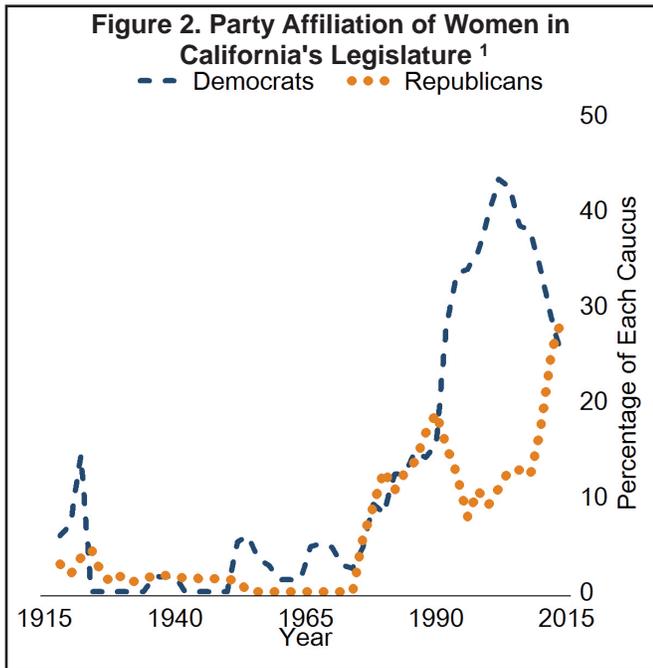


peaked in 2008 at 13 members, 32.5 percent, and declined to 11 members, 27.5 percent, in 2014.

Since 1918, a total of 147 women have been elected to the California Legislature. Of these, 142 were first elected to the Assembly. Most (107) remained in the Assembly for their entire legislative careers. Thirty five women first served in the Assembly then moved to the Senate. The first was Marian Bergeson, who was elected to the Assembly three times beginning in 1978, then elected to the Senate three times, beginning in 1984. Five others served only in the Senate. To date, no woman has started in the Senate and later moved to the Assembly. However, both Betty Karnette and Nell Soto started in the Assembly in the 1990s, moved to the Senate, then returned to the Assembly.

PARTY AFFILIATION OF LEGISLATORS

Of California's 147 women legislators, 101 were elected as Democrats, 47 as Republicans, one as an Independent, and one from the Green Party.² The partisan affiliation of California's Assembly and Senate



women has gone through several shifts since the first women were elected. From 1918 through 1950, most women legislators were Republican. From 1954 through 1974, all of California's women legislators were Democrats. From 1976 to 1990, there was a mix, with Democrats most often a majority. This shifted again in the early 1990s as the number of Republican women lawmakers stayed mostly static while the number of Democrats increased dramatically. From 1994 through 2012, at least 70 percent of California's women legislators were elected as Democrats. As shown in Figure 2, after 1990, women Democrats more than doubled their share of the caucus. The Republican women's share of their caucus fell after 1990—but rebounded after 2008.

EFFECTS OF TERM LIMITS

Term limits, approved by California voters in 1990, limited members to three two-year Assembly terms and two four-year Senate terms, beginning with the 1990 elections. The law, amended by voters in 2012 to allow lawmakers a maximum of 12 years in either house, appears to differ in the Assembly and the Senate in its effect on how California elects women lawmakers. 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 seven to 11, a 57 percent increase. All 11 were

former Assembly members. The 11 senators included five women who were termed out of the Assembly in 1996 or 1998.

Through the 2014 election, California has lost more than 70 women legislators to term limits. In the 2016 election, California will lose eight more—five in the Assembly and three in the Senate.

METHODOLOGY

There are two main challenges in determining the number of elected women legislators in California. The official election results published by the California Secretary of State do not identify a candidate's gender. That requires examining each election's *Statement of the Vote*, compiling a list of female candidates, verifying by biographical information—and comparing it to the list provided by the California Legislative Women's Caucus.

The second challenge is the possibility that a woman campaigned as a man for a legislative office, was elected, and served in the Legislature without being detected. While this is highly unlikely, it is possible: "Charlie" Parkhurst, the first woman to vote in California, cast a ballot in 1868, 43 years before California women secured the vote.³ California law does not require candidates to identify their gender.

ENDNOTES

1. California Secretary of State (1918-2014). *Statement of the Vote and California Election 2014: Semi-Official Election Results*. Data used for both figures can be found at www.library.ca.gov/crb/14/s-14-023.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 147 because of three women legislators who were elected under different party banners in different elections.
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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