

CHAPTER 6

Women in California Politics

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"Toughness doesn't have to come in a pinstripe suit."

Dianne Feinstein, U.S. Senator

"My mother had a saying: 'Kamala, you may be the first to do many things, but make sure you're not the last.'"

Kamala Harris, California Attorney General

Women are part of the political landscape in California. California voters have elected women to the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives, the state Assembly and Senate, as well as local and judicial offices throughout the state. In addition, women from various backgrounds have held leadership positions in both the national and state legislatures. Although there are still some political offices that have not been filled by women, the number of these offices decreases every year. This chapter introduces the women in California politics, from the national, state, and local levels of government.

Women in the National Legislature

The general election of 1992 is often called "the Year of the Woman," and during that election Californians elected two women, both Democrats, to represent their state in the U.S. Senate. This was the first time that California had a female U.S. Senator. More importantly, this was the first time that a state had two female Senators serving simultaneously, and both women were elected based on their own qualifications. Although both women won their seats during the 1992 election, Dianne Feinstein's victory was in a special election to fill a vacancy due to Senator Pete Wilson's resignation from the U.S. Senate after he was elected governor of California in 1990. During the interim period from 1990 to 1992, State Senator John Seymour was appointed as U.S. Senator until the next general election was held. Even though Senator Seymour was technically considered the incumbent, Feinstein won the U.S. Senate seat with over 54% of the vote (Federal Election Commission, 1993) and assumed the seat on November 10, 1992, officially making her the state's first female U.S. Senator. In 1994, when the Senate term originally won by Pete Wilson in 1988 ended, Feinstein ran and won a full Senate term. The 1994 election was much closer with Feinstein edging out Michael Huffington 46.7% to 44.8% to win

the seat (Federal Election Commission, 1995). However, Feinstein's re-election victories in 2000, 2006, and 2012 were far more decisive.¹

Barbara Boxer is the other female Senator elected in 1992 although her term legally began on January 5, 1993. Boxer defeated her opponent Bruce Herschensohn, a conservative media commentator, by winning 48% of the vote to his 43% (Federal Election Commission, 1993). She won re-election in 1998, 2004, and 2010 with approximately 10% more votes than her opponents.²

Both women have built impressive political careers starting with getting elected at the local level of California politics. In 1969, Dianne Feinstein was elected to the San Francisco board of supervisors. During her eight years on the board she served as board president for 5 years. As a result of the assassinations of San Francisco Mayor George Moscone and Supervisor Harvey Milk on November 27, 1978, Feinstein was appointed mayor of the city making her the first female mayor of San Francisco. In 1979 she ran for the office of mayor and won, and was re-elected in 1983. In 1990, following her terms as mayor, Feinstein ran unsuccessfully for the office of governor; her opponent was U.S. Senator Pete Wilson. Two years later, Feinstein ran in the special election for the Senate seat previously held by Wilson (Wasniewski, 2006).

Similar to Feinstein, Barbara Boxer started her career as an elected official when she ran for and won a seat on the Marin County board of supervisors in 1976. In 1982, Boxer ran for an open seat in the House of Representatives; she defeated her Republican opponent with 52% of the vote. After five terms in the House, Boxer ran for the U.S. Senate seat she currently holds (Wasniewski, 2006).

Although it appears that women have been successful in getting elected to the U.S. Senate representing California, there was only one other viable female Senate candidate before the two current Senators. In 1950, California voters had their first opportunity to elect a female Senator when Democrat Helen Gahagan Douglas ran against Republican Richard M. Nixon. The 1950 race between Douglas, a singer, actress, member of the House of Representatives, and wife of actor Melvyn Douglas, and Nixon, the future Vice President and President, was considered one of the "dirtiest" in U.S. history. Nixon and his advisors employed fear-based tactics, such as overtly and covertly associating Douglas with Communism, as well as using sexist stereotypes such as questioning her toughness and dismissing her intellect, to campaign against his female opponent. During this race, Nixon referred to Douglas as the "Pink Lady" and Douglas referred to Nixon as "Tricky Dick" a nickname that would follow him throughout the rest of his political life. In the end, Nixon was the victor winning 59% of the vote and Douglas never ran for political office again (Denton, 2009).

Other firsts for women in California politics at the national level were when Nancy Pelosi was selected as the first female House of Representatives Democratic Whip in 2001, the first woman to be chosen by her colleagues to be House Democratic Leader

¹According to the Federal Election Commission, Feinstein received 55.84% versus Tom Campbell's 36.59% in 2000, 59.43% versus 35.02% for Richard "Dick" Mountjoy in 2006, and in 2012 Feinstein won with 62.52 % against Elizabeth Emken's 37.48%.

²Based on Federal Election Commission data, in 1998 Boxer received 53.06% to Matt Fong's 43.01%, 57.71% to Bill Jones' 37.8% in 2004, and 52.18% versus 42.17% for Carly Fiorina in 2010.

in 2002, and the first female Speaker of the House of Representatives in 2007 (CAWP, 2014a). Prior to running for political office, Pelosi worked on political campaigns and held office in the California Democratic Party. In 1987, Pelosi won a special election to fill a vacancy in the House that resulted from the death of another female member of Congress, Sala Burton. To this day, Pelosi continues to represent her San Francisco district in the House and lead her party (Wasniewski, 2006).

Over the years, there have been 36 female members in the House of Representatives representing California, including 30 Democrats and 6 Republicans. The first woman elected to the House from California was Republican Mae Ella Nolan who was elected in 1922 by winning both a special election to replace her deceased husband, and a concurrent regular election. Nolan is one of seven California women who initially gained their seats in the House of Representatives by winning special elections to fill vacancies that were due to the death of their husbands (CAWP, 2014b).

Another important first in Congress occurred when Linda Sánchez was elected in 2002 to represent California's 39th Congressional District in the House of Representatives which meant that she would be serving in the House with her sister Loretta who also represents a district in California and was elected in 1996. This is the first time sisters have served simultaneously. Currently, California boasts of having 18 female representatives, all Democrats, out of the state's 53 seats in the House including Democratic Leader Pelosi (CAWP, 2014b).³

As we can see, California's political women have stood out at the national level. Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer chair important committees in the Senate including the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, the Committee on Environment and Public Works, and the Senate Select Committee on Ethics. Moreover, although Nancy Pelosi no longer holds the position of Speaker of the House of Representatives due to the Republicans holding a majority of the seats in the chamber, she continues to lead her party as the Democratic Leader of the House. All three of these women are widely recognized not only in California, but throughout the United States. However, as we focus on the state level, we note that women do not seem to be as successful in politics at this level in comparison to the success of California women in politics at the national level.

Women and the State Executive

The top executive office at the state level is the position of governor. In California, the office of governor provides a level of name recognition and expertise that some have used to run for the presidency (Ronald Reagan, Jerry Brown, and Pete Wilson) or be chosen for the U.S. Supreme Court (Earl Warren). From the list of 39 California governors one notices that there has never been a female governor for the state. This is not for lack of trying.

Most recently in the gubernatorial election of 2010, Republican Meg Whitman ran against Democrat Jerry Brown for the coveted office of California governor. Although

³As of January 2015, the number of female representatives will increase to 19 with the addition of Republican Mimi Walters.

Whitman lacked formal government credentials, her business experience as the former chief executive officer of eBay provided the name recognition and wealth to fund the campaign that made her a viable candidate. Despite this, Whitman lost the election by obtaining only 40.9% of the vote to Brown's 53.8% (California Secretary of State, 2014).

Whitman was not the first woman to be a major party candidate for the office of governor in the golden state. Prior to the 2010 election, California had two other female gubernatorial candidates supported by the Democratic Party on the ballot: Dianne Feinstein in 1990 and Kathleen Brown in 1994. The race between Dianne Feinstein and Senator Pete Wilson was not expected. The year before the 1990 election, it was anticipated that John Van de Kamp would be the Democratic nominee for governor. Yet, Feinstein won the primary election in June 1990 with over 52% of the vote. Following the primary, with her experienced campaign staff and the hard work needed to reach out and raise the necessary funds, Feinstein was a contender. In the end, however, Wilson won the governor's seat with 49.3% of the vote to Feinstein's 45.8% of the vote (California Secretary of State, 2014), but the experience and network she developed made her ready to run for the Senate seat vacated by Wilson.

For the 1994 gubernatorial race, once again Pete Wilson's opponent was a woman. Kathleen Brown, the daughter of former governor Edmund "Pat" Brown and sister of current governor Jerry Brown, was the Democratic nominee to challenge Pete Wilson. Besides being part of the political "Brown" family, she was also elected in the 1970s to the Board of Education for the Los Angeles Unified School District, and appointed in 1987 to the Los Angeles Board of Public Works. Furthermore, in 1991 Brown was elected as State Treasurer for California (Earnshaw, 1994).

Even though Wilson was the incumbent and incumbents are expected to have an advantage at the polls, he was not a popular governor. With Brown's impressive political credentials, the outcome should have benefitted the challenger. However, Brown had her own problems including her inability to define herself and her key issues, and running out of money the weekend before the election (Scott, 1994). As a result, despite Wilson's unpopularity he was able to win re-election with 55.2% of the vote to Brown's 40.6% (California Secretary of State, 2014).

Although three women sought the position of California governor, none of them were successful leaving California as one of the 24 states which have never been governed by a woman. Early speculation is that current Attorney General, Kamala Harris, will seek the governor's office in 2018 when Governor Jerry Brown will be term-limited from seeking another term. However, 2018 is a long way off in the future and who knows what will happen during that time.

Besides the position of governor, the executive branch of California government also includes seven other elected positions: the Lieutenant Governor, Attorney General, Secretary of State, Controller, Treasurer, Superintendent of Public Instruction, and the Insurance Commissioner. In addition, there is a Board of Equalization consisting of four members who are directly elected by the voters. All of these positions have been filled by a woman at some time, except the office of Insurance Commissioner. In fact, the positions of Treasurer and Secretary of State have been filled by women more than once since the 1960s. There have been three female state Treasurers: Republican Ivy Baker Priest (1967–1974), Democrat Elizabeth Whitney who was appointed to fill a

vacancy due to the death of Jesse Unruh (1987–1989), and Democrat Kathleen Brown (1991–1995). As for the Secretary of State, two women have been elected to this position: Democrat March Fong Eu who was the first Asian American woman to be elected to a statewide executive office in the United States (1975–1993) and Democrat Debra Bowen who has held the office since 2007 (CAWP, 2014b).

In addition to these offices, a woman, Democrat Mona Pasquil, was appointed to the office of Lieutenant Governor in an interim capacity (2009–2010) when John Garamendi left the office before his term was finished after he was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. Pasquil was the first Asian American and first female Lieutenant Governor for the state. Moreover, Democrat Kamala Harris was the first woman, first African American, and first South Asian to be elected to the office of California Attorney General in 2011. Two other Democrats, Kathleen Connell and Delaine Easton, were the first and only women to get elected to the offices of State Controller and Superintendent of Public Instruction,⁴ respectively. Both women served from 1995 to 2003 (CAWP, 2014b).⁵

Women and the State Legislature

Although 34% of the current California members of the U.S. House of Representatives are women, the percentage of women in the state legislature is considerably lower. In fact, the female presence in the California state legislature has decreased since its high point in 2005–2006 and even at that point, it peaked at 30.8% (see Figure 6.1). Currently, there are 12 women in the 40-seat state Senate and 20 women in the 80-seat state Assembly resulting in 26.7% of the state legislators being women. This ranks California as 17th in the country as far as the percentage of female state legislators, well behind states such as Colorado and Vermont where women make up approximately 40% of their state legislators (CAWP, 2014c).

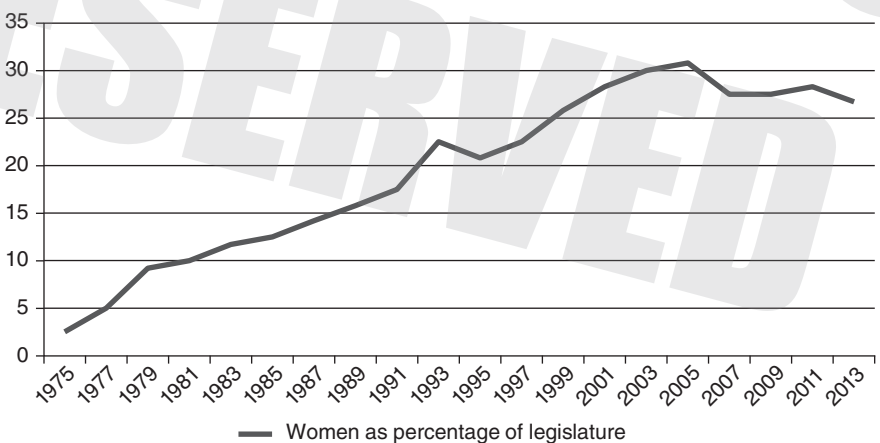


Figure 6.1 Women as Percentage of California State Legislature

⁴Candidates for Superintendent of Public Instruction run as nonpartisans.

⁵In November 2014 Californians elected Democrat Betty Yee to be the next State Controller.

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Women were able to get elected to the California Assembly earlier than they were able to get elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. As mentioned before, the first woman to represent California in the House was elected in 1922; however, in 1918 four women were successful in their efforts to become California Assembly members. Of those four women, three were Republicans (Grace S. Dorris, Elizabeth Hughes, and Anna L. Saylor) and one was a Democrat (Esto B. Broughton). It is interesting to note that women in California gained the right to vote and run for political office in 1911, 9 years before the ratification of the 19th amendment which granted women the right to vote in the United States. California was the sixth state to allow women the right to vote (Cooney, 2014).

As for the state Senate, the first woman to get elected to the chamber was Democrat Rose Ann Vuich in 1976. Even though this is 58 years after the year that the first women were elected to the state Assembly, it is 16 years earlier than the year that women representing California were successful in getting elected to the U.S. Senate. Two years later in 1978, the second woman and first African American woman, Democrat Diane Watson, was elected to the state Senate (California Legislative Women's Caucus, 2014). The number of female state Senators remained at two until 1984 when the number doubled and has continued to gradually increase over time.

Although over the years the percentage of women in the state Assembly has been greater than the percentage of women in the state Senate, in recent times this has shifted. As noted in Figure 6.2, since 2009 women make up a larger percentage of the state Senators in comparison to the percentage of female Assembly members. Another trend that has changed over the years is the gap between the number of female Democrats and female Republicans in the state legislature. Throughout the 1980s and up to the mid-1990s, the difference between the number of female Democrats and Republicans in the state Senate never exceeded two. In fact, in many of those years there were an equal number of female Democrats and female Republicans in the chamber. For the Assembly, the difference never exceeded three during the 1980s and up to the early 1990s. However, in the late 1990s for the state Senate and early 1990s for the Assembly,

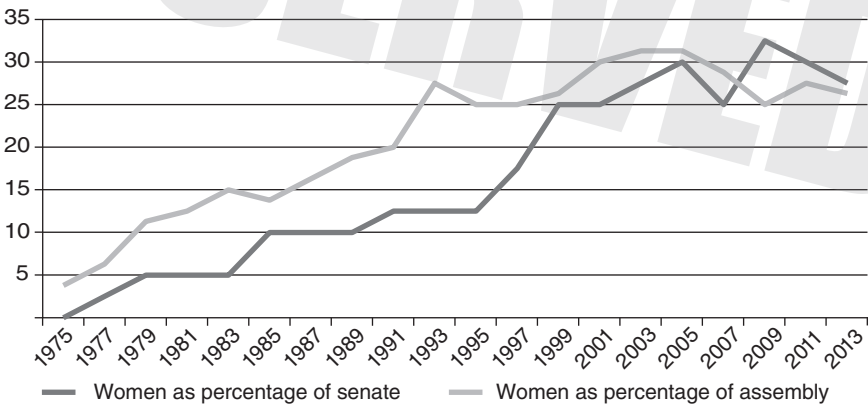


Figure 6.2 Percentage of Women State Senators and Assembly Members

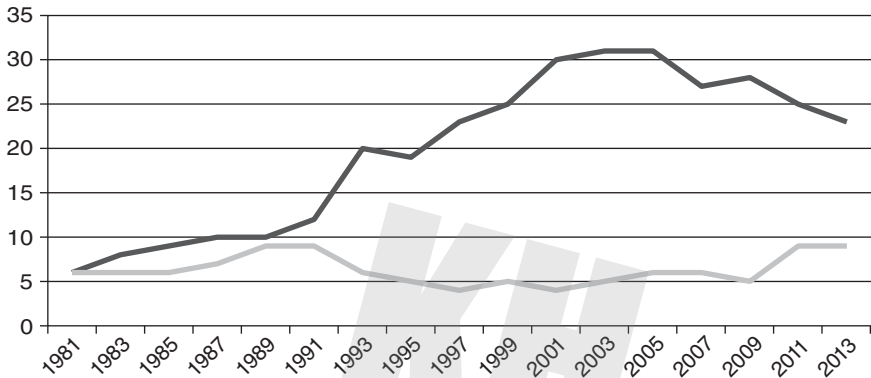


Figure 6.3 Number of Female State Legislators Based on Party Affiliation

the number of Democratic women began to increase substantially and the number of Republican women decreased or stayed at the same low level. As a result, most of the women who hold state legislative seats from the 1990s to the current time are Democrats (see Figure 6.3).

More firsts for women in the California state legislature include Republican Doris Allen becoming the first female Speaker of the Assembly, even though it was only for 3 months in 1995, and Democrat Karen Bass becoming the first woman of color to serve as Speaker of the chamber in 2008 (CAWP, 2014a). Currently, the Speaker of the Assembly, Democrat Toni G. Atkins, is the third female who has held the office; additionally, Atkins is the first lesbian to hold the position of speaker. As for the state Senate, there has never been a female President Pro Tem which is the main leadership position in the chamber.

Because there has never been a female governor in California and the percentage of women in the state legislature peaked at approximately 30% in 2005 but has decreased since that time, partisan and nonpartisan groups have been established to recruit and support female candidates for these state executive and legislative positions. Organizations and programs such as CALIFORNIALIST and Emerge California are recruiting and providing training for Democratic female candidates, while the California Federation of Republican Women encourages Republican women to get involved in the political process. Other nonpartisan organizations such as California Women Lead and Run Women Run have the same goals: to increase the number of female candidates and office holders in California.

Women and the California Judiciary

Although some may consider the judicial branch as being politically neutral, justices in California acquire their judgeships through political means. They are either appointed by the Governor or elected by the voters at a general election. There are three levels of judicial authority in the state: the Supreme Court, Courts of Appeal, and the Trial Courts. The highest court in California, the Supreme Court, is composed of a chief justice and

six associate justices. Out of the 114 Supreme Court justices since 1850, there have been only six female justices (Judicial Council of California, 2014a).

The first female Supreme Court justice was Rose Elizabeth Bird who served from 1977 to 1987. Bird was appointed to the Supreme Court by Governor Jerry Brown even though she had no judicial experience. Besides appointing Bird to the court, she was also appointed as chief justice making her the first woman to hold that position. Throughout her tenure as chief justice she was criticized for her views on crime, especially her opposition to the death penalty.

Because of her decision to overturn several death penalty verdicts as well as her reputation for being “soft on crime,” Bird became the first California Supreme Court chief justice to be removed from office by the voters (Harris & Cohen, 2012).

As of April 2014, four of the seven justices are female including the chief justice, Tani Cantil-Sakauye. However, Justice Joyce L. Kennard who has served on the court since 1989 has announced her retirement; this may shift the female majority to a male majority on the court depending on the appointment of the next associate justice.⁶ Chief Justice Cantil-Sakauye has the distinction of being the first Asian-Filipina American as well as the second female to hold the chief justice position (Judicial Council of California, 2014a).

Currently in the six districts of the California Courts of Appeal, women make up 31.9% of the appellate court justices; this percentage has fluctuated slightly over the last 8 years.⁷

As for the Trial Courts, 32.2% of the judges are female; here we find the percentage of female judges has increased gradually over the past 8 years (Judicial Council of California, 2014b). To be appointed or elected as a justice or judge in the state, a person must be a member of the State Bar of California or have served as a judge in California. We can anticipate that as more women complete law school and become lawyers in California, the number of female justices and judges will increase due to the expanded pool of qualified candidates for these positions.

Women and Local Government

At the local level, mayors and city councils are the executive and legislative branches of city governments. It is predicted that women would be more likely to run for these positions and be more successful in their quests for these offices. These predictions are due to the local nature of the campaigns making them less expensive and more likely to be nonpartisan, which are benefits for female candidates who researchers have found lack the support of political parties. Since women are usually the primary caretaker in the home even when they run for and win political office, the proximity of the jobs to home and the likelihood that the jobs are part-time are also advantages of running for local offices. Additionally, there are more local political positions to run for in comparison to state and national level positions (Van Assendelft, 2014). However, even with the

⁶According to early reports, Governor Jerry Brown has announced that he will nominate another woman, Leandra R. Kruger, to replace Kennard.

⁷At the time of writing this chapter, there were 10 vacancies in the state Courts of Appeal.

benefits of seeking local political office, the number of women running for and winning these positions has not grown substantially, and in certain cases, has decreased in the past decade. For example, 14% of the mayors in the 100 largest U.S. cities were female in 2004; 10 years later, the percentage of female mayors in those cities was 13%. We do see a slight increase in the percentage of female mayors in the cities with populations over 30,000; in 2004, 17% of the mayors in these cities were female while in 2014, that percentage is up to 18.4% (CAWP, 2014d).

As we focus on the 10 most populated cities in California, we note that there has never been a female mayor in the most populated city, Los Angeles, even though former City Controller, Wendy Greuel, was a viable candidate for the office in 2013. However, women have been more successful in other California cities. The state capital and sixth most populated city in the state, Sacramento, has been led by three female mayors over the years. Cities such as San Diego, San Jose, Fresno, and Long Beach all have had two female mayors. Three cities, San Francisco, Oakland, and Bakersfield, have at some time elected a female mayor. The only other heavily populated city in the state that has not elected a female mayor is Anaheim.

Looking at the city councils of the same 10 cities we see variation in the percentages of women currently serving on the city councils. Women fill a majority of the city council seats in two of these cities: Anaheim city council is 75% female, and Oakland city council is 62.5% female. Women make up 44.4% of the city council positions in San Diego and Long Beach. In San Francisco, 36.3% of the board of supervisors is female, while 20% of the San Jose city council is female. On the low end we find Sacramento and Bakersfield where 14.2% of the city councilors are female. Lower still is Los Angeles where only one, or 6.6% of the city council members, is female. Finally, Fresno may currently have a female mayor, Ashley Swearengin, however, the city does not have any female members on the city council.⁸

Based on this information, we can see that women have been more successful in some city governments such as in San Diego and Long Beach. In other cities, such as Anaheim, women may not get elected mayor but they have a dominant presence on the city council. Finally, in large, powerful cities like Los Angeles, we may not see many women in city government due to assumptions on the part of potential female candidates that their chances of getting elected are almost nonexistent, or that the campaign will get too personal and dirty. There is also the possibility that voters may view female candidates as unqualified to lead a city the size and strength of Los Angeles and thus will not vote for them. Whatever the reason, the current Los Angeles city government is male-dominated.

Conclusion

As we can see, women in California politics are not as rare as they once were. We have women representing the state at the national level and representing their districts at the state level. Women act as mayors of California cities and judges in the state's court system. Some women are the first to hold their political office, and hopefully they will not

⁸Ashley Swearengin was unsuccessful in her campaign for State Controller in November 2014 which would have required that she step down from the mayor's position.

be the last. Other offices have yet to be held by women. We also see that over the years the number and partisan affiliation of women officeholders have shifted. It is hoped by individuals and organizations, both partisan and nonpartisan, that more women will run for and win political office so that, eventually, women will reach parity with their male counterparts in California politics.

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