

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN OKLAHOMA STATE POLITICS

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Women comprise approximately 51 percent of the Oklahoma population today: The 1990 Census documents 1,614,766 women and 1,530,819 men. Nevertheless, women's involvement in the political arena at the state level has been low historically and that trend continues today. Political scientists have differed as to the reasons. Some cite the populist, conservative, traditional cultural environment, while others cite the lack of interest, the advantage of incumbency, difficulty in fund raising, *et cetera* as factors.

The political history of Oklahoma is unique. The state achieved statehood in 1907, and in that year elected a woman, Kate Barnard, to the statewide office of Commissioner of Charities and Corrections. Barnard was one of the first woman in the United States to be elected to a statewide office, eleven years before women had the right to vote in the state. Even before statehood, in 1891, Cora Diehl ran for Registrar of Deeds for Logan County, Oklahoma Territory, and won 53 percent of the vote. Oklahoma was also one of the first states to elect a woman to the U.S. Congress. Alice Mary Robertson of Muskogee was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1921. In 1923, Mabel Bassett was elected Commissioner of Charities and Corrections, an office which she held until 1947. Paradoxically, these women won office in a state that, at the time of statehood, legally barred women from seeking many constitutional offices. The Oklahoma state constitution had a provision which prohibited females from holding certain state executive offices. It was not until State Question 302 passed in 1942 that the ban was removed and women could run for all state executive offices.

With regard to women's suffrage, Oklahoma was the thirty-third state to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, which granted women the right to vote. The state was also one of fifteen states that extended the right to vote to women before the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. State voters amended the state constitution to provide for women's enfranchisement in 1918.

There was a hiatus of eleven years (1930-41) when no women served in the Oklahoma legislature. This is explained by some political scientists as being related to the Great Depression, which also devastated the Republican Party throughout much of the state. Since that time, women have served in both houses of the state legislature, as

lieutenant governor, secretary of state, secretary of public instruction, treasurer, attorney general, secretary of labor, corporation commissioner, insurance commissioner and as supreme court justices.

In 1997, women constitute ten percent of the legislative membership. Out of a total of 149 members, fifteen are women, with nine in the House and six in the Senate. There are no African American women in the House and two in the Senate.

Most committee chairs and positions of true power continue to be held by males, predominantly members from rural districts. Most female legislators are from urban areas. Senator Penny Williams (Tulsa) is a member of the powerful Rules Committee, and Rep. Betty Boyd (Tulsa) is a Rules Committee member in the House. Committee chairs occupied by women in the House are: Laura Boyd (Norman), the Community and Family Responsibilities Committee; and Debbie Blackburn (Oklahoma City), the Subcommittee on Common Education. Blackburn is also vice chair of the Administrative Rules Review Committee and of the Human Services Committee. Williams, Betty Boyd, Laura Boyd and Blackburn are Democrats. Majority Caucus Secretary is Debbie Blackburn and Minority Caucus Secretary is Joan Greenwood (R, Moore).

In the Senate, the female committee chairs are: Maxine Horner (Tulsa), Government Operations and Agency Oversight; Angela Monson (Oklahoma City), Retirement and Employee Benefits Subcommittee and vice chair of the Business and Labor Committee; Trish Weedn (Purcell), General Government; and Penny Williams, chair of the Education Committee and vice chair of the Human Resources Committee. All of these senators are Democrats. Senator Horner is Majority Caucus chair.

There have been female legislators in recent years who have “moved up the ladder” to higher positions, either to appointed or elected positions. The Honorable Vicki Miles-LaGrange was a State Senator from 1989 to 1993, when she resigned to accept an appointment as U.S. Attorney. She was the second woman to hold this position in Oklahoma, being preceded by Betty O. Williams, 1981-1987. Miles-LaGrange served as U.S. Attorney until December 16, 1994, when she was appointed as U.S. District Judge, the first African American and one of the few women nationally to hold that position. She joined Robin Cauthron, the first woman Oklahoma Federal District Judge, appointed in 1991. Stephanie Seymour of Tulsa is Chief Judge of the Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals in Denver. Lieutenant Governor Mary Fallin began her political career as a member of the House of Representatives from 1990 to 1994. She ran for the office of lieutenant governor in 1994 and won.

After twelve years in the House, Hannah D. Atkins was appointed U.S. Delegate to the United Nations by President Carter in 1980, then in 1983 to the position of Assistant Director of the Oklahoma Department of Human Services by then-Governor Henry Bellmon. In 1987, Governor Bellmon appointed Atkins to the dual position of Secretary of State and Cabinet Secretary of Human Resources, making her, at that time, the highest-ranking female executive in the state government.

In the judicial branch, there are two female supreme court justices: The Honorable Alma Wilson (appointed February 9, 1982), and the Honorable Yvonne Kauger (appointed March 22, 1984). Both have been returned to office at each election and

both have served as Chief Justice. Susan Loving was appointed Attorney General on June 21, 1991. Reta M. Strubhar is on the Court of Criminal Appeals, the first woman to sit on that appellate court of last resort, having been appointed in 1993, and elected in 1994.

Claudette Henry served one term as state treasurer, beginning in 1991. The Corporation Commission has had two women as commissioner, Norma Eagleton, who was appointed Corporation Commissioner in 1979 and then elected in 1980 and 1982. Rene Bode was appointed in 1997.

State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Sandy Garrett, was elected to her position in 1994 after being appointed as Cabinet Secretary of Education by Governor Henry Bellmon in July 1988, and then on December 27, 1990, by Governor David Walters. Brenda Reneau was elected to the statewide position of Commissioner of Labor in 1994.

The Governor's Commission on the Status of Women was established by Governor Henry Bellmon during his first term as governor in 1964. Each governor thereafter established either a committee or commission by an executive order and appointed a group of women to serve on it. In 1994, legislation was passed which established a permanent Commission on the Status of Women. The Commission, however, does not have the power to promulgate rules. Senate Bill 694 (1997), which would have given the Commission rule-making power, was defeated. The Commission sponsors the Oklahoma Women's Hall of Fame. Claudia Tarrington of Tulsa was the first chair of the commission, which has approximately thirty members who are appointed by the governor, Senate president pro tempore and speaker of the House.

