

BLACK WOMEN IN STATE LEGISLATURES: THE VIEW FROM OKLAHOMA

JASON F. KIRKSEY
University of New Orleans

DAVID E. WRIGHT III
University of Houston

Over the past 20 years the number of black women elected to public office has increased dramatically. However, beyond the act of holding office comes the ability to directly affect change in public policy. In order to bring about policy change, elected officials have to become an integral part of the policy-making process. This article examines the level of incorporation black women have achieved within the Oklahoma State Legislature. Through interviews conducted with members of the legislature, we attempt to see how well black women have adjusted to the legislative process. The results show that black women appear to have become effective members of the Oklahoma Legislature.

The progress of black women in state legislatures differs greatly from that of white women. While the first white women, Clara Cressingham, Frances S. Klock, and Carrie C. Holly, were elected to the Colorado legislature in 1894 (Anthony and Harper 1902), it was not until 1928 that a black woman served as a state legislator. Mrs. E. Howard (Minnie) Harper was appointed (to succeed her deceased husband) to the state legislature in West Virginia eight years after the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment (Githens and Prestage 1977). At the time, Mrs. Harper's position was the highest elective office held by a black woman. It was not until almost half a century after the first white women were elected to a state legislature that a black woman, Crystal Bird Fauset, in 1938 was elected in the Pennsylvania Assembly. Fourteen years later, in 1952, Cora Brown of Michigan became the first black woman elected state senator (Githens and Prestage 1977). In 1968, Hannah Atkins became the first black woman elected to serve in the Oklahoma legislature.

Jewel Prestage (1977), examined the situation of black women in state legislatures in the early 1970s. Between 1972 and 1974, she found only

35 black women held seats in the legislatures of 23 states. Twenty-seven states elected no black women. Table 1 shows this situation, as well as the subsequent growth in the numbers of elected black women in the legislatures. In 1972 and 1974 black women accounted for less than 1 percent (0.7 and 0.8 percent respectively) of the total number of legislators in those states. However, since that time, the number of black women serving in the legislatures of these 23 states increased dramatically. By 1989, there were 74 black women (2 percent of the total

TABLE 1.

Black Women Legislators in Twenty-Three States, 1972-1989.

STATE	Total Seats, Both Houses, 1989*	Number of Black Women					Black Women Percent 1989
		1972	1974	1980	1985	1989	
Arizona	90	0	0	0	1	2	2.2
California	120	1	0	4	4	4	3.3
Colorado	100	0	1	1	2	2	2.0
Connecticut	187	0	1	1	2	1	0.5
Delaware	62	1	1	0	0	0	0.0
Florida	160	1	2	1	2	2	1.3
Georgia	236	1	2	6	6	7	3.0
Illinois	177	0	1	4	6	9	5.1
Indiana	150	0	1	3	3	3	2.0
Iowa	150	1	0	0	0	0	0.0
Kentucky	138	3	3	2	1	0	0.0
Louisiana	144	1	1	1	2	3	2.1
Maryland	188	3	3	4	6	8	4.3
Massachusetts	200	0	1	2	1	2	1.0
Michigan	148	4	3	4	5	5	3.4
Missouri	197	2	2	4	1	3	1.5
New Jersey	120	1	1	2	2	2	1.7
New York	211	0	1	2	7	9	4.3
Oklahoma	149	1	1	1	1	3	2.0
Pennsylvania	253	1	0	1	3	3	1.2
Tennessee	132	0	1	1	1	2	1.5
Texas	181	1	2	4	3	4	2.2
Washington	147	1	1	1	0	0	0.0
Total	3646	24	29	49	59	74	2

Source: Author's calculations from data in Githens and Prestage (1977), p. 406; Preston, et al., (1982), pp. 96-97; and *Black Elected Officials: A National Roster*, 1985, 1989.

*Total number of legislature in 1989.

membership) and 98 seats (12 percent). Overall, black women increased their representation in state legislatures by 180 percent in the past 20 years. Black women are still absent, however, from the legislatures of almost half (21) of the 50 states.

While much has been written about the lives and experiences of state legislators (see Wahlke, Eulau, Buchanan and Ferguson 1962) and the experiences of white women legislators (see Kirkpatrick 1974; Diamond 1977), very little is known about black women legislators (but see Prestage 1977). Here we examine how black women in one state legislature, Oklahoma, view themselves, as well as how they are perceived by their colleagues.

THE OKLAHOMA LEGISLATURE

Oklahoma has a bicameral legislature with a Senate of 48 members and a House of 101. The legislature meets annually in regular session for a period of four months, from February to May. All members of the legislature come from single-member districts which several studies indicate promote the representation of blacks. Oklahoma's black voting-age population is 6 percent (Joint Center for Political Studies 1989). Currently, five blacks serve in the Oklahoma legislature accounting for 3.3 percent of its membership, approximately half the proportion of seats we expect from their population proportions. Two black women serve in the Senate and one in the House; both black men are in the House. Women hold 8.7 percent of the legislative seats.

Eleven members of the Oklahoma State Legislature were interviewed in their offices in May 1991. Each interview consisted of structured questions and lasted from half an hour to an hour. All of the black legislators (three women and two men) were interviewed along with four white women and two white men.

LEGISLATIVE EFFECTIVENESS

When asked about the legislative effectiveness of black women, we received mixed responses. Legislative effectiveness is typically measured in one of three ways: 1) "positional" (holding a formal leadership

position); (2) "reputational" (identification as such by other legislators); and (3) "decision-making" (by an ability to pass legislation) (Weissert 1991). Here all three methods are combined.

A number of respondents remarked that black women are hard working, enthusiastic, and energetic about their legislation. But one black woman pointed out black women get pigeonholed by their race. "There is a lot of 'press inflation' when it comes to black women; often times the black women in the legislature are perceived as being racial when they are not." She went on to say the press focuses on many issues involving black women not worthy of coverage while ignoring a number of important ones. She further felt there are constraints on black women's legislative effectiveness. Black women are expected to deal with only certain types of issues. "If you are a square peg, you only fit in a square hole."

RESPECT

The legislators were asked if they believed black women had a tougher time gaining respect among their peers than other members of the legislature. A black male legislator mentioned he has great respect for black women in the legislature because of what they accomplish. A white male legislator felt all legislators are respected regardless of race or sex. None of the white women legislators interviewed felt black women had a tougher time gaining respect than other legislators, including themselves.

The black women, however, did feel they have a tougher time getting the respect of other legislators. One black woman legislator said, "Black women are faced with a slight double disadvantage [being black and a woman] when it comes to getting respect in the legislature." Another of the black women remarked, "Yes, black women have a tougher time gaining respect than other legislators." The other black woman believed that while black women may not have a tougher time getting respect than other legislators, "it takes too long for us to be recognized. It takes too long for others to realize that we can do a great job and that we have the ability to be good legislators."

ADAPTATION TO THE LEGISLATURE

The earlier legislators adapt to legislative life, the greater their chances for success in these elected bodies. One black woman legislator mentioned that black women come into the legislature and adjust to it very quickly. A white woman legislator gave an example of how fast a freshmen black woman legislator introduced a controversial bill. But a black male legislator reversed the question of adjustment stating, "The legislature had to become creative as a result of the Civil Rights Movement and learn how to adjust to blacks." He felt black women had no problem coming into the legislature and were often better prepared than whites [women and men]. "Black women come to the legislature on a mission and they are married to it." None of the white male legislators felt black women had any problems adjusting to the legislature.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

When asked if black women accomplished as much as whites the general feeling among the legislators was they do. One white woman legislator replied, "In Oklahoma black women, and men, may accomplish more than whites because of their savvy. They work as a coalition and stick together." A black woman legislator said, "As individuals, blacks accomplish more than individual whites in the legislature." However, one black woman felt they do not accomplish as much as whites, especially in key leadership positions: "There are structural constraints which limit black women and men in the legislature." When asked to elaborate further on these constraints, she explained:

The fact that there are no women in the leadership nor has a black woman ever held a key leadership position as presiding officer, majority or minority leader, or even a whip seems to be unusual. It doesn't appear to be racism, instead there is the perception or, better, an attitude within the legislature that these aren't positions where women and particularly black women ought to be.

One white woman legislator interviewed felt the accomplishments of black women depend on the individual and how much they wished to accomplish. A white woman legislator observed, "Black women accom-

plish so much because they are very devoted and have deep feelings for their issues." A black woman legislator said, "Blacks accomplish more than whites because we are more persistent." Another black woman remarked, "Black women accomplish more than whites because we have broader and larger agendas." One black male legislator agreed that black women accomplished more than whites in the legislatures because they had bigger agendas. Another black woman mentioned black legislators are under more pressure than whites to get things done. She said, "I receive about 30 calls per day from people needing help. My constituency is much broader than just the district I represent. My constituents, as well as blacks in general, need more and expect more from their representatives." With the exception of holding key leadership positions, black women are perceived as being able to accomplish much in the legislature as a result of their "sticking together", as well as their ability to carry broad legislative agendas.

LEGISLATIVE LEADERSHIP ROLES

In state legislatures the most powerful and influential individuals are those in leadership positions; the presiding officer, majority and minority leaders, as well as committee chairs. For black women to be most effective in state legislatures they must become part of the leadership. We find women, and especially black women, to be quite rare among American legislative leaders. In 1988, only 10.7 percent of the total number of American state legislators holding committee chairmanships were women (Zeiger and Jeffe 1988). In 1989, of the 280 leadership positions in legislatures around the country, only 14 (5 percent) were occupied by women (Council of State Governments 1989). Table 2 identifies the states where women served in the leadership in 1989. Only two women served as speakers of state houses, Jane Dee Hull of Arizona and Vera Katz of Oregon, with just one woman holding the highest ranking position in state senates, Mary McClure of South Dakota. Among black women, only one was part of the upper echelon of state legislative leadership, Speaker Pro Tempore Lois DeBerry of Tennessee. When power and influence is measured in terms of holding key leadership positions, we generally find that women, and black women in particular, are not very powerful or influential within state

legislatures.

Within the Oklahoma State Legislature we find a similar situation. No women are among the top leadership. However, 5 of the 42 Senate and House committees are chaired by women and two of these by black women. Of the five blacks in the legislature, three chair committees. One black woman chairs the Senate Judiciary Committee and another heads up the Senate Government Operations and Agency Oversight Committee. At first glance, it appears black women in the Oklahoma legislature have the opportunity to be quite powerful and influential.

Committee chairs in Oklahoma are in some ways an extension of the leadership rather than sources of independent power. They are appointed

TABLE 2.

Women in Leadership Positions, 1989*

WOMEN IN STATE LEGISLATIVE LEADERSHIP POSITIONS, 1989	
Arizona	Speaker Jane Dee Hull (R)
Colorado	House Minority Leader Ruther Wright (D)
Delaware	Senate Minority Leader Myrna L. Bair (R)
Hawaii	Senate Minority Leader Mary George (R)
Maine	Senate Majority Leader Nancy Randall Clark (D) House Minority Leader Mary Clark Webster (R)
Maryland	House Minority Leader Ellen R. Sauerbrey (R)
Minnesota	House Majority Leader Ann Wynia (D)
New Hampshire	House Minority Leader Mary Chambers (D)
Oregon	Speaker Vera Katz (D)
South Dakota	Senate President Mary McClure (R)
Tennessee	Speaker Pro Tem Lois DeBerry (D)
Vermont	House Majority Leader Sarah M. Gear (R)
Washington	Senate Majority Leader Jeannette Hayner (R)

Source: *State Legislative Leadership, Committees and Staff 1989-90*, Council of State Governments, 1989.

* Hold position as presiding officer, majority leader or minority leader. Women may hold other assistant leader positions not noted above.

and serve more or less at the pleasure of the leadership. Thus, instead of concluding that black women (and men) are powerful individuals in the legislature, they may be fulfilling the needs of the leadership when they hold committee chairs.

AMBITION: BLACK WOMEN AND BLACK MEN

The legislators were asked if black women are more politically ambitious than black men. One black woman legislator replied, "Yes, somewhat. Probably most women are more politically ambitious than men. Women have to be. Women push their agendas more than men and they don't give up." She then gave an example of a bill authored by one of the black women legislators that was initially killed and later passed in the form of an amendment to another bill. Then she pointed out, "Women don't stop fighting." A white woman legislator remarked, "It appears black women are more motivated than black men." Another black woman responded, "Black women are more politically ambitious than black men, but it is more age related than gender. Younger black women work harder than younger black men."

When the legislators were asked, "Would you like to run for a higher office?" two of the three black women said they would or at least they would consider the possibility. The other said she would not like to because she felt raising money would be too difficult. Neither of the two black men held any ambitions of running for higher office. One black male legislator mentioned the opportunity for him to advance was available, but he was not interested. Other studies also show higher levels of political ambition among black women when compared to black men, something not found among whites (Frazier 1939; Safa 1971; Pierce, Avery and Carey 1977; Darcy and Hadley 1988; Clark, Hadley and Darcy 1989).

Prestage (1977) interviewed 32 black women legislators about their plans for re-election. Almost one third of the women were unsure or had no plans to return to the legislature. Although some of these women aspired to higher office, a significant number of them planned to leave the legislature. One possible explanation for the early departure of black women is their perception that they must work harder than other members of the legislature to get things accomplished.

The likelihood of black women advancing in the legislature depends on when the leadership begins to trust in their ability to exercise power and influence. Trust among legislative colleagues is earned through having similar social backgrounds or similar legislative experiences (Burton and Darcy 1985), neither of which black women in the legislature share with the white men who control it. Since the backgrounds of black women usually differ from those of whites (particularly white men), the only way for black women legislators to earn the trust of the white men is by sharing similar legislative experiences. Given the recent arrival of black women in the legislature, it will take some time before they will be able to gain power and influence.

BLACK WOMEN AND WHITE WOMEN

The legislators were asked if they noticed any differences between working with black women as opposed to white women in the legislature. Most of the legislators interviewed felt the black and white women in the legislature were different.

One white woman legislator felt black women do a good job. When asked in what ways, she explained:

Black women are dedicated, hard working 'go-getters'. They are very interested and involved in what is going on in the legislature, and black women are also very good debaters. Black women must be tough due to their extreme minority status in the legislature. Black women command respect through hard work, as well as by speaking their minds.

Another white woman legislator added, "Black women are more liberal and social issue oriented." A black male legislator said, "Black women are opposite of white women. Black women carry the same agenda as black men, family issues, health issues, etc. Black women are better rounded on issues."

Among the black women, one felt they were different from white women because their agendas are larger than white women's. She also acknowledged that black women have to justify their issues in the legislature. She said, "When black women work with the leadership [in comparison to white women] they must convince the leaders how

important their agenda is. Black women make the leadership become sensitive to their issues." Another black woman legislator also believed black women were different from white women, she remarked, "Black women don't have a luxury of choice on their issues. It depends on the area being represented. The legislature is the bread and butter for black women and black men." She then identified one of the white woman legislators who concentrates on the fine arts and literature legislation and noted, "Black women are unable to do this." She was also interested in arts and literature but could not make the time for it because of the type of agenda she needed to carry to satisfy the interest of her constituents.

Black women see themselves as working harder than white women in the legislature because black women are forced to deal with a wider range of issues. Black women also feel they must do more than white women to prove the worthiness of their legislation to the leadership. However, one white male legislator disagreed with that perception, stating, "There are no differences between black women and white women in the legislature because almost all women, black or white, work hard and are dedicated individuals. They all know their 'stuff'."

CONFLICTING IMAGES OF BLACK WOMEN: SELF AND COLLEAGUE PERCEPTIONS

One black woman legislator commented, "Black women are not given the same opportunities to hold leadership positions as other legislators. This is a definite area that is behind schedule. Black women are making gains holding leadership positions, but they still are not given enough opportunities to make these gains." Another black woman legislator echoed these feelings by saying there are so few black women in leadership positions "because there aren't as many opportunities as there ought to be for black women." A white woman remarked, "Black women are not given the same opportunities to hold leadership positions, not because they were black women, but simply because they were women."

On the other hand, a number of other legislators believed black women are given the same opportunities to hold leadership positions. A white male legislator said, "Yes, black women are given the same opportunities to hold leadership positions as other legislators." He then identified the two black women who chair committees. A black male legislator and a black woman legislator mentioned black women have just recently been

given the opportunity to hold leadership positions in Oklahoma. Several of the legislators black and white when asked, "Why so few black women hold leadership positions?", replied, "because there are only a few black women in the legislature."

RESULTS OF CONFLICTING PERCEPTIONS

The results of the interviews conducted with members of the Oklahoma legislature show there are clearly different (and often conflicting) perceptions of the legislative experiences of black women. The analysis attempted to identify how black women are perceived across a range of issues to determine how well black women have become integrated into the Oklahoma legislature.

Black women had little or no problem adapting to the legislative process. Part of this trend must certainly be attributed to history as one of the legislators pointed out; however, much of it is clearly the result of the level of confidence the black women have in their ability to be effective legislators. The black women were often described as coming into the legislature better prepared than any other group.

Black women are able to accomplish a great deal once inside the legislature. They were often described by their peers as dedicated and hard working, which undoubtedly was a major factor in their success. Also the broad nature of the agendas carried by black women is another explanation for the perception that they accomplish just as much if not more than other groups in the legislature. The constituencies represented by black women require more attention than those typically represented by whites, which in turn pressures them to get things accomplished.

As committee chairs, several black women in Oklahoma's legislature were included as part of the leadership team. However, the black women legislators identified structural constraints on their ability to exercise power and influence and viewed themselves as being unable to achieve their full legislative potential. This is in sharp contrast to how they were viewed by their legislative colleagues.

The problem of perceptions may indicate insensitivity to the situation of black women. By being black and a woman, black women had to overcome barriers their colleagues did not encounter. On the other hand, black women perceived some of the problems they faced as being unique

to them when clearly they were not. Thus, we see a perceptual difference between how black women viewed their legislative experience in Oklahoma's legislature and how their colleagues perceived them. The analysis indicates the appearance of a symptomatic problem of miscommunication and a lack of interaction between black women and their legislative colleagues.

An underlying question regarding the growing presence of black women in state legislatures concerns their ability to be effective. The "newness" of black women in Oklahoma's legislature, their small numbers and the wide ranging agenda demanding their attention limits what they can accomplish. On the other hand, the black women legislators are realistic; they recognize there are still barriers to overcome.

REFERENCES

- Anthony, Susan B., and Ida Husted Harper, eds. 1902. *The History of Woman Suffrage*, Vol. IV. Rochester: Susan B. Anthony.
- Burton, Doris-Jean, and Robert Darcy. 1985. Careers of Men and Women in the Profession: The 1970-1975 Cohort. *Western Political Quarterly* 38: 132-147.
- Clark, Janet, Charles D. Hadley and R. Darcy. 1989. Political Ambition Among Men and Women State Party Leaders: Testing the Countersocialization Perspective. *American Politics Quarterly* 17: 194-207.
- Darcy, R., and Charles D. Hadley. 1988. Black Women in Politics: The Puzzle of Success. *Social Science Quarterly* 69: 629-645.
- Diamond, I. 1977. *Sex Roles in the State House*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Frazier, E. Franklin. 1939. *The Negro Family in the United States*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Githens, Marianne and Jewel L. Prestage, eds. 1977. *A Portrait of Marginality: The Political Behavior of the American Women*. New York: David McKay.
- Githens, Marianne. 1977. Spectators, Agitators, or Lawmakers: Women in State Legislatures. In *A Portrait of Marginality*, edited by Marianne and Jewel Prestage, 196-209. New York: David McKay.
- Joint Center for Political Studies. 1970-1989. *Black Elected Officials: A National Roster*. Washington, D.C.: Joint Center for Political Studies Press.
- Kirkpatrick, J. 1974. *Political Woman*. New York: Basic Books.
- Pierce, John C., William P. Avery and Addison Carey, Jr. 1977. Sex Differences in Black Political Beliefs and Behavior. In *A Portrait of Marginality* edited by Marianne Githens and Jewel Prestage, 66-75. New York: David McKay..
- Prestage, Jewel L. 1977. Black Women State Legislators: A Profile. In *A Portrait of Marginality* edited by Marianne Githens and Jewel Prestage, 401-417. New York: David McKay.

- Preston, Michael B., Lenneal, J. Henderson, Sr. and Paul Puryear, eds. 1986. *The New Black Politics: The Search for Political Power*. New York: Longman.
- Safa, Helen I. 1971. The Matrifocal Family in the Black Ghetto: Sign of Pathology or Pattern of Survival. In *Health and the Family*, edited by Charles O. Crawford, 35-59. New York: Macmillan.
- Wahlke, John, Heinz Eulau, William Buchanan, and Leroy C. Ferguson. 1962. *The Legislative System: Explorations in Legislative Behavior*. New York: Wiley.
- Weissert, Carol S. 1991. Determinants and Outcomes of State Legislative Effectiveness. *Social Science Quarterly* 72: 797-606.
- Zeiger, Richard and Sherry Bebitch Jeffe. 1989. Women in Politics. *California Journal*: 7-11.

