

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Study after study finds that when women seek and serve in political office – elected or appointed – they are as successful as their male counterparts. Yet, women remain severely underrepresented in North Carolina political offices. Although women make up over 54% of the registered voters in the state, women hold

- Less than 25 percent of all appointed and elected offices
- Under 20 percent of the elected positions with “taxing and spending” authority
- Approximately 18 percent of the positions on “Power Boards” – those with policy-making authority
- Slightly over 10 percent of leadership positions (e.g., mayor and board chair) in appointed and elected offices

In the last two decades, women have achieved many “firsts” in North Carolina politics. Elizabeth Dole was elected to the United States Senate in 2002, and Beverly Perdue was elected governor in 2008. Despite the fact that women have been elected to high profile public offices in North Carolina, the total number of women serving in appointed and elected offices has changed little over the last twenty years.

The situation is particularly acute in rural areas of North Carolina where women are not only greatly underrepresented in county and municipal offices, but many areas of North Carolina, there is no history of women ever serving in offices. There are 44 counties, for example, that have no women serving on the board of county commissions, and all are in areas of the state considered by the U.S. Census Bureau to be rural.

The main reason so few women are in appointed or elected office is not overt discrimination or structural deficiencies in the processes used to appoint or elect candidates to office, but the fact that so few women seek these offices. In an increasing frequency, **when women run, women win**. In the 2014 elections, for example, 25 percent of the candidates across North Carolina on the ballot were women, but 63 percent of these candidates won their races.

These findings point to the need for new solutions to the problems of underrepresentation. For the last few decades, the efforts to increase the number of women serving in political office has relied on a few underfunded nonprofit organizations that recruit or train women to run for office, political parties whose primary mission ignores gender equity, and some token efforts by government to establish commissions or study groups to examine the problem.

The solutions need to be more comprehensive and sustained across North Carolina. Educational institutions, including high schools, colleges, and universities, must take more proactive steps to reverse the trend of young women losing interest in politics as they move

from their teens to their 20s. Organizations whose missions are about preparing women leaders must join forces and resources to make larger and more sustained efforts at getting more women into the political pipeline. Finally, there needs to be much more awareness, not just about the problem of underrepresentation, but also about the research findings regarding the differences women – Democrat or Republican – make in governing, when they serve.