



Power spreads out

Congratulations, Nevada! Our state made national news last week when we became the first majority female state legislature in the country. It happened when Clark County Commissioners filled two vacancies in the Assembly with women. Although the state Senate still has a female minority, with nine women and 12 men in office, there are now 23 women and just 19 men in the Assembly, thus producing an overall female majority in the Legislature as a whole.

Why does it matter?

Women tend to see public policy issues differently, as more of a puzzle to be solved than as a game to be won. They are more empathetic and collaborative, viewing consensus-building and compromise as a goal. They are more apt to try persuasion instead of bullying others into doing their will.

Women are usually more interested in issues affecting the average family, especially those involving children. And they're comfortable discussing the public policies packed with emotion that can lead a

witness to tears, such as lack of health care, autistic children who can't get services and issues associated with the sheer poverty derived from trying to raise a family on a minimum wage.

A majority means leaving tokenism behind. Women will be freed from the burden of representing their gender and be known for policy positions rather than being the lone woman on the committee. It has always been vital to have a seat at the table but a majority guarantees the agenda will increasingly reflect a woman's priorities.

It has been a long struggle to arrive at this moment. According to an excellent background paper written by Dana Bennett when she worked for the Legislative Counsel Bureau, women were not allowed to vote or serve in office when Nevada became a state in 1864. The battle over suffrage lasted until 1914, six years before the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified, giving all American women the right to vote. In 1885, some assemblymembers argued that "women were both too

morally fine and mentally frivolous to be responsible voters." There are probably still some Nevada men who feel that way.

Washoe County's women were quick to jump into the political arena once they were allowed into the ring. Jean Dwyer was the first woman to run for the state Legislature in 1916. She came in last in a field of 22 candidates. In 1918, another woman from Washoe County, Sadie Dotson Hurst, was the first woman to be elected to the Legislature. But it wasn't until 1994 that an African American woman was elected to the state Senate when Bernice Martin Mathews ran and won.

Nevada's Legislature is increasingly reflective of the state's population, not only in gender but also in racial and ethnic composition. African-Americans and Hispanics are well represented, especially in leadership spots with African-American/Latino teams set to run the Assembly and the Senate next year—Jason Frierson and Teresa Benitez-Thompson as speaker and Democratic leader and Kelvin Atkinson and

Mo Denis as Senate Democratic leader and president pro tem.

Women no longer will be expected to feel grateful for an opportunity to lead, opportunities men have long taken for granted. Many female legislators paved the way to the majority and as we celebrate this milestone, they should be recognized, especially since many didn't live to see a day that should have come long ago.

Remember the courage and grace shown by Mary Gojack, Nancy Gomes, Jan Evans, Jean Ford, Vivian Freeman, Peggy Pierce, Marcia deBraga, Myrna Williams and Debbie Smith. And celebrate the enduring or ongoing leadership by example from Sue Wagner, Lori Lipman Brown, Chris Giunchigliani, Joan Lambert, Barbara Buckley, Dawn Gibbons, Diana Glomb, Bonnie Parnell, Valerie Wiener and Dina Titus and innumerable others.

It seems like it took forever to get here, but surely Nevada's women can agree we're thrilled to have finally arrived. □

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