

Women in Government

Political Participation of Rural NC Women

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The theme of the 56th United Nations Commission on the Status of Women is “The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges.” Indeed, women all over the world face poverty, hardship, and disenfranchisement, but in rural areas, resources can be scarce and these problems are often amplified. In terms of governance, women are tremendously underrepresented in positions of power, particularly as elected officials. Worldwide, women compose only 17% of all elected officials (Devlin). In the United States, only 17% of federal legislators are women (IPU). The state of North Carolina fares slightly better in comparison, but only about 22% of the North Carolina Legislature consists of women (NCSL). It is important that more women, particularly women from rural areas, run for public office so as to add their perspectives to the decision making process in our local, state, and federal government.

The importance of having women serve in elected positions cannot be understated. Women in elected positions tend to advocate for issues that relate to both men and women, including “equality, education, women's relatively poor economic position, childcare, violence against women and integration of gender into the issues of employment and pay” (Devlin). Evidence also suggests that having women present to help make policy decisions affects the legislative outcomes (Devlin). Having women serve in elected positions to bring the perspectives of women to these decision-making bodies’ shows a more complete form of democracy, one where elected leaders represent their constituents. Women are without a doubt affected by

legislation and thereby deserve to have their perspectives represented in the decision making process.

Rural Realities

North Carolina is a state with tremendous agricultural heritage, and accordingly, a considerable number of North Carolinians live in rural communities. The population of rural women in North Carolina is estimated to be about 1,415,563. The North Carolina General Assembly contains only 28 women legislators out of a 170 seats. Of these, less than 10 come from rural North Carolina (National Conference of State Legislatures). It is clear, then, that while women obviously compose about 50% of the population of North Carolina, the number of women who represent women in the General Assembly is very small. Moreover, the number of women from rural North Carolina is also large, but the number of women who represent them is smaller still. All women deserve an equal voice in the government but having few women representing them in the General Assembly weakens that voice - and rural women in particular deserve better representation by women like themselves. For this reason, rural women should be encouraged to run for the General Assembly and other public office positions and they should be helped along the way.

Case Study: Marian McLawhorn

Marian McLawhorn is the first female representative of the NC House District 9 in the NC General Assembly. She is from Grifton, North Carolina and has served as NC Representative since 1999. Her political career began when she successfully ran as the first female mayor of her small town. Like Elaine Marshall, McLawhorn did not have many political role models, and adds that there were simply few women who could serve in that capacity. McLawhorn notes that

women of her generation rarely got involved in the political process themselves, but they would host teas and other events to “get out the vote.” She credits the Pit County Democratic Party with providing her with tremendous support. McLawhorn also mentions that in her early days of political campaigning, she would be met with resistance from the men in her area- they would resent “bossy” women. She adds that her personal political victories were always greatly supported by women, and that this formed a strong network for her. The women who helped her may not have been able to contribute financially in some cases, but they were paramount to raising awareness and “getting out the vote.”

Case Study: Melanie Wade Goodwin

Melanie Wade Goodwin is from Rockingham, NC and represented House district 66 from 2005 to 2011. She mentions that before she ran for office, she did not have many role models – and when she was elected, she looked to her colleagues for guidance, including Representative Deborah Ross, Representative Jennifer Weiss, Representative Lucy Allen, Representative (later Senator) Margaret Dickson, Speaker Joe Hackney, and Senator (later Lt. Governor and Governor) Bev Perdue. Goodwin mentions that no women were politically active when she was growing up, as they were busy with their jobs and caring for their families. She notes that while some tried, there was a strong “good-old-boy” culture in the community, one that was difficult to overcome for a woman. She adds “We had a couple of mayors who were able to get elected in a couple small towns and stay for a long time, but they were the exception.”

Goodwin mentions facing a lack of respect as an obstacle the first time she ran for office, and notes “no one in the predominantly white male establishment in my community took me seriously even though I’m an attorney and ran my own law practice in town.” She relied on the

help of friends in Montgomery County early in her first election. Goodwin adds “I think the only thing that might have changed how I was received when I first ran was having more competent, capable women serving in public office in other areas of the community.” Goodwin credits her husband, the Democratic Women of Richmond and Montgomery Counties as networks that helped her campaigns, as well as Lillian’s List.

Case Study: Lindy Brown

Lindy Brown comes from the town of Hamlet, NC. She is a social worker who is currently running for the NC House in district 38. Brown’s background is in clinical social work, and was called to run for public office when she noted that the needs of clients with mental disabilities were not being met. She saw funding to care for these clients slowly eliminated and decreased, as well as the downsizing of psychiatric care facilities. The erosion of these benefits helped her to realize that lack of housing, treatment, and early intervention of care are important issues – and these are the issues she brings up as she campaigns. She notes that the communities from which she came “believed in helping the fellow man,” and she sees running for public office as an opportunity to do just that.

Brown notes that her role models included Shirley Chisem and Barbara Jordan, and that her mother and grandmother were strong community leaders and entrepreneurs when she was a child. Her father started her interest in politics, and she once worked on Governor Hunt’s campaign. She states that one of her best memories was meeting Coretta Scott King. The network she has had available to her includes her church community, her family, the Zeta Phi Beta sorority, NC Black Women Empowerment Network, the Social Workers Association, and

the Social Service Commission. She adds that an obstacle she faced in her political work and campaigning is access to funding.

Case Study: Elaine Marshall

Elaine Marshall is the first female secretary of state elected to office in North Carolina, as well as the first woman to be elected to statewide office. She grew up in a rural Maryland, and currently lives in a rural area of North Carolina. Marshall emphasizes that her background in a farming community led to her active involvement in the 4H club, which a youth organization run by the US Department of Agriculture. She mentions that there were few opportunities to become political active, and no women in her life were politically active. Marshall listed several reasons for this, including simply not realizing that running for public office could be a possibility. She adds that her parents were not politically active themselves, and it took some self-searching to decide to run for public office. When she first ran for public office and when she first began serving in her first elected position in the NC Senate, she describes her difficulties in finding role models and mentors, as there were few women serving who could play those roles. She notes that her rural community was a fantastic place to grow up, but that there were few opportunities to voice her concerns and get involved in the political process. Marshall also notes, however, that coming from a rural community allowed her to understand rural issues firsthand, knowledge that has helped her both campaign in and serve the state of North Carolina. She states, “When you can talk about those things, from experience, and have the validity, the credibility to talk about those, you automatically open up doors.”

Introducing Lillian’s List

Lillian's List started in 1997 in Chapel Hill, NC, and was closely modeled after Emily's List, a national organization whose goal is to recruit, train, and support Pro-Choice Democratic women to run for federal office. Two former employees of Emily's List decided that a NC-based organization was necessary, and set about recruiting candidates for the first time in 1998. The most prominent way Lillian's List supports candidates is by contributing funds to the political campaigns of selected candidates early in the campaign. This is because early support from contributions tends to provide momentum to candidates, and they are then able to raise more over the period of their campaign – frequently winning the election as a result. Lillian's List raises funds with state wide fundraising events. Once a year, they hold a large statewide event, which brings in the largest sum for the year. In addition, Lillian's List employees travel across the state and do local events in major urban hubs, including in Greensboro, Durham, Chapel Hill, Ashville, and Charlotte. Major donors to Lillian's List are called Trailblazers, and they may contribute \$1000-\$4000 a year. Sponsors may sponsor events for \$250, which allows members to donate smaller sums at a fundraising function. Both Trailblazers and event sponsors select 1-2 featured candidates a year to support directly, based on which candidates need the most help. These candidates tend to be new candidates or candidates facing tough incumbent races. In total, these sponsors directly fund 8-15 candidates a year by contributing funds directly to their campaigns, independent of Lillian's List. The job of Lillian's List, then, is to vet the candidates, analyze districts, and make a strategic decision of whom to support. Lillian's List established their network of funders at the start simply by reaching out to anyone that may be able to contribute funds. Now, they have an online outreach system to solicit funds as well as to recruit potential candidates for office. Lillian's List has been tremendously successfully – in 2010,

Lillian's List contributed about \$80,000 to candidates, and Lillian's List members also gave another \$40,000 directly to Lillian's List vetted candidates.

Lillian's List helps rural women in particular because women from rural backgrounds tend to lack the network and the connections to run for political office. While the majority of the candidates that receive funding from Lillian's List do come from urban areas due to their higher populations, the funding that rural candidates receive from Lillian's List provides tremendous momentum. There are currently at least four women serving in the NC House and Senate who received the support of Lillian's List.

Lillian's List is a key network to several women in NC, including the ones profiled here. McLawhorn mentions that Lillian's List supported her early when she first ran for the State House in 1998, and was the only candidate they endorsed to win the election. She adds that she is grateful in particular to the early support Lillian's List provided, because it is very difficult for women to raise funds. Goodwin notes that with the help of Lillian's List, "I was able to raise the money I needed in my two subsequent elections. The training and seed money has been invaluable. I was elected three times to the State House as a result of their help," and adds further, "As a result of my experiences, I will always encourage women to consider running and serving in elective and appointive positions and help them understand how women have the power to change the world when they are part of policymaking process."

Conclusion

Political scientists have observed that female parliamentary representation around the world has increased steadily in the last 15 years, but the percentage of women serving in these positions remains low (Stockemer). While more women represent the women of their countries,

their numbers remain disproportionately low, diminishing their influence overall. It is important, though, to note that this increase in women's representation in elected office is a promising trend and can be expected to continue to rise as more young women have role models, women in government who do important work they can aspire to do some day. Just as McLawhorn, Goodwin, Brown and Marshall serve as role models for young women in North Carolina, the sight of many more women representing men and women from the offices of the government will be seen around the world.

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