



Creating Women's Caucuses in State Legislatures

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All 50 U.S. state legislatures include women, but only half have women's legislative caucuses. Female representatives at the state and federal level share issue priorities and a sense of obligation to represent women. Caucuses offer them opportunities to reach policy consensus and design strategies to sustain and increase representation for women.

Partisan differences and pressures to hew party lines can make it difficult for women legislators to work together – especially in states with highly polarized parties. Nevertheless, caucus-builders can make headway by stressing the nonpartisan purposes of women's caucuses, and the provision of meeting space and staffers who can help with scheduling can facilitate caucus formation and functioning.

The Activities of Women's Legislative Caucuses

Women's caucuses pursue diverse strategies. Following the controversial 2016 sentencing of Stanford University student athlete Brock Turner for sexual assault against an unconscious woman, the political action committee of the California Women's Legislative Caucus raised money to recall Superior Court Judge Aaron Persky. Similarly, in 2014, the agenda of the Hawaii Women's State Legislative Caucus included a bill to restore funds for domestic violence services. In addition, Hawaii caucus members met with a police chief in Honolulu to confront him about one of his sergeants who had been videotaped assaulting his girlfriend – and later the caucus submitted 12 bills relating to domestic violence, including some proposing new standards for police departments.

At the less active end of the spectrum, the Wyoming Women's Legislative Caucus chose to submit as its lone legislative initiative in 2015 a bill specifying that "all future legislation in Wyoming be drafted using gender neutrality." Although not as confrontational as the actions taken in Hawaii or California, this legislation drew attention to gender and united women who usually do not collaborate on legislation. Still other women's caucuses, like those in Colorado and Illinois, engage in archival preservation and leadership development, suggesting still more ways in which women legislators can work together.

However, organized action is not always preferred. According to the National Conference on State Legislatures, as of 2016 there are 25 states with no women's legislative caucus at all.

Challenges to Caucus Formation

Creating a bipartisan women's caucus is fraught with challenges. Women must navigate party polarization and institutional rules, overcoming disagreements about the role gender should play in representation.

- Outside the legislature, women often spend time on their duties as wives, mothers, and household managers – which can limit their ability to organize. Most legislators complain about jam-packed legislative sessions, especially for non-professional bodies that meet infrequently. Building more time into legislative schedules would not only help female legislators to create caucuses but would also afford all officeholders more informal time to work out solutions to policy problems.
- Staff support is often very limited. Dedicated staff support can also help get a caucus off the ground and promote continuity for caucuses with turnover, especially in states with term limits.
- Strict lobbying laws and limits on how legislators can raise and spend money have also restricted legislators' ability to meet socially, form groups, and build relationships of that sort that could further enable innovation. Ethics can be encouraged by thoughtful regulations, but such rules should not preclude possibilities for caucus formation.

Why Caucuses Matter – and How They Can be Launched

Women's caucuses inside institutions that are traditionally dominated by men provide a safe space for marginalized legislators to support each other and develop initiatives apart from those determined by committees and parties. By participating in bipartisan caucuses, members develop relationships and skills that assist them in accomplishing all their legislative goals. Caucuses allow legislators to express shared identities, develop expertise, and become better advocates for key constituencies. Finally, caucuses provide leadership opportunities and are correlated with an increase in women's advancement to formal leadership positions. If women's ability to form such groups is restricted, they may be limited as effective legislators.

My research shows that women who want to launch caucuses need to fit efforts to specific state environments. Savvy entrepreneurs start by building trust across party lines. In successful caucus-building efforts from 2006 to 2010, organizers argued that women legislators needed these groups to build mutual support and/or to make it easier for female representatives to advance legislation. In many states Republican women had to be convinced to participate while male legislators had to be reassured that caucuses were not a threat.

Successful caucus entrepreneurs marshalled the available resources and offered frames designed to attract participants and forestall opposition. In Colorado, for example, Representative Karen Middleton sought to take advantage of the large number of women representatives. With her eye on the long game, she and her co-organizers prioritized bipartisan participation and decided not to pursue policies that would put some potential participants in a difficult political position. As a result, they built a socially networked caucus – in the hope that relationships built across the aisle would one day facilitate shared policy efforts.

The bottom line is that more than gender determines whether and how women state legislators organize caucuses. Caucus builders must navigate partisan differences and institutional circumstances. Legislatures can help with flexible scheduling, staff support, and ethics rules that allow space for legitimate caucus activities. When caucuses do form, both female legislators and the institution as a whole can reap benefits.

Read more in Anna Mitchell Mahoney and Chris Clark, "Fertile Ground: When and Where Do Women's Legislative Caucuses Emerge?" *Northeastern Political Science Association*, 2014.