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EDITOR'S PICK

Number of women in WV Legislature continues to decline

By Erin Beck Register-Herald Reporter
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During West Virginia's legislative session for the last several years, dozens of women would gather at the State Capitol, take seats typically reserved for men, and wait for their turn to speak.

From the panhandles to southern West Virginia, they'd arrive before 8 a.m. to speak at public hearings. They'd add their names to a list and sit in the ornate House chamber, under the gold dome and the crystal chandelier.

Each time, most of them would oppose the abortion bill being discussed.

Lawmakers would then take their seats. For the next several hours, they'd give speeches.

Then they'd go on, anyway, within hours or days, to pass the bill.

The Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University reports that nationwide, the number of women in state legislatures will increase from about 25 percent to at least 27 percent this year. A record 126 women will serve in Congress.

But when the next state Legislature begins making laws this January, if lawmakers seem out of touch with women, West Virginians won't have to wonder why.

Just 19 women – down from 20 women previously – will take seats in the 134-member Legislature. That's about 14 percent in a state where women outnumber men by more than a full percentage point.

"Not a good year for Republican women"

West Virginia's low rate of women lawmakers could be partly explained by the state's conservatism, according to Jean Sinzduk, associate director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University. She said 2018 was "not a good year for Republican women across the country."

In West Virginia, Republican women actually had a much better chance of winning in the general election — about 50 percent of them won, compared to about 30 percent of Democratic women. Carol Miller, who will represent the Third District of West Virginia, is the only new Republican woman in Congress.

But not many Republican women chose to run.

Sinzduk noted that while Democratic women have historically run at higher rates than Republican women, that gap significantly widened in 2018.

In West Virginia, 25 Democratic women ran in the general election, compared to 16 Republican women.

“You need more women to A. be recruited or B. be self-starters, and this year the Democratic women really became self-starters,” she said.

Sinzdak noted that Republican women have difficulty getting through primary elections, when the most conservative members of the party vote.

She also said that many Republican party officials don’t focus on recruiting candidates with diverse experiences due to identity traits like race, religion, sexual orientation or gender.

“It’s not that it doesn’t matter,” she said. “I wouldn’t say they would say that, but it’s really ‘who’s good on the issues and who’s going to vote on the issues and put forward the issues that we care about.’

“For Democrats, it is the whole experience of your life — if you’re a person of color or a woman or whatever your specific identity is influences how people feel about the issues.”

Sinzdak also noted that successful fundraising can be more difficult for women because it may require turning to existing networks.

“They’re not on the golf course with all these major corporate donors,” she said.

Political scientists at the Center on American Women and Politics recommend that political parties help recruit and support female candidates to achieve equal representation.

Belinda Biafore, chairwoman of the West Virginia Democratic Party, said the Democratic Party put more work than prior years into assisting female candidates.

She said the Democratic Party trained female candidates, and the West Virginia Federation of Democratic Women established a political action committee. She also said groups from Washington, D.C., visited for a women's summit.

"They always have more money than we do, but we’ve got more energy," she said. "We’ve got more woman power, more troops in the ground, so in the long run, that's going to pay off."

While Republican Party officials did not respond to requests for comment, GOP women interviewed for this story said they felt enough support from their party, although none were aware of primary campaigns for any newcomer Republican women.

Prior to the election, just two of the 20 women in the West Virginia Legislature were Democrats. In January, there will be eight Democrats and 11 Republicans.

"More traditional" candidates

When Donna Boley, R-Pleasants, took office in 1985, she was the only woman in the Senate. Now she is the president pro tempore, a leadership position given to the longest-serving senator.

Larry Swann, former minority leader in the House of Delegates, was the first to ask her to run. She was later appointed by Gov. Arch Moore.

"I never once thought about running until he called," she said. "Then I was thinking about it and when I had a chance to be appointed, I took advantage of it. It would help if people encouraged the women some and said, 'You know if you want to run, I'll help you.'"

As more women joined her, she became more educated about legislation other lawmakers were considering.

"It wasn't that we were working on just certain women projects or something," she said. "It was just nice being able to confer with the women."

When she was in office with only men, they'd talk during lunch. With women, they'd get to know each other during lunch, dinner, while shopping.

"The guys like to go out and eat together in the evenings or they'll watch maybe basketball games together and football games," she said. "I just think that's just normal. The different genders will get together and talk."

During session, Boley and Sen. Sue Cline, R-Wyoming, share a room at a Charleston hotel.

"I'm on finance and she's on judiciary and she picks up an awful lot of stuff in judiciary and shares with me that I would not otherwise," Boley said.

Boley noted that Cline was appointed to her position, before being elected the next cycle, and that Sen. Patricia Rucker, R-Jefferson, the other woman senator who was not up for re-election, built name recognition by starting a Tea Party group in Jefferson County.

"Most of the time I run, I only raise about \$10,000 or \$15,000, where some races go up to \$300,000 and \$400,000 when the men are running," she said. "It might be that they have friends, you know, that have money, but most of the ones running probably don't have a lot of money."

Boley remembers other women – her former employee, since-deceased Anne McCuskey, and Del. Charlotte Lane – visiting her office when she started out.

"They would help me get my act together," she said.

Lane, a former public service commissioner and a Republican who lost this election, was elected in 1978.

"We have a tendency to work harder because we need to establish ourselves and so that people will take us seriously and listen to us," Lane said, "so I think we have a tendency to work harder and to work across party lines."

Lane, who has served several times in the Legislature, was in the Legislature in 1990, when 29 women were there. That was before redistricting.

Of the 29, 12 were from Kanawha County.

Lane thinks a Democratic surge in more populated areas led to her loss this year. Multiple studies show more populated areas are more likely to support female candidates. But they were also more likely to oppose an anti-abortion amendment to the state constitution on the ballot this year, and to vote Democrat.

"I raised enough money," she said. "I had plenty of help. I just came up short in votes."

Del. Amy Summers, R-Taylor, won her race in the 49th District against Democrat George Abel by about 63 to 37 percent. Summers, who was first elected in 2014, says she probably wouldn't have thought of running had her dad not once been a mayor.

Summers noted that West Virginia's first female U.S. senator, Shelley Moore Capito, a Republican, is the daughter of former Gov. Arch Moore.

Congresswoman-elect Carol Miller is the daughter of an Ohio congressman. West Virginia's youngest lawmaker, Saira Blair, also a Republican, is the daughter of a state senator. Blair did not run this year because she'll be attending graduate school out of state.

Summers, who said she's never experienced sexist behavior or harassment in the Legislature, waited until her three kids were grown to run for office.

"I hate to say it," she said, "but I'm more traditional, and I think a lot of women don't get into it because it's very difficult on your family for the mom to be gone. It's hard. I mean the moms – a lot of times – hold things together."

Class of 2018

Sammi Brown, a 33-year-old Democrat who won in West Virginia's 65th District, said she had knocked on 2,000 doors before local party officials in Jefferson County took her seriously.

She said they had wanted "your prototypical politician," an older white male, to run instead. She told him: "You are welcome to get in a primary."

A former field organizer, Brown said she would get up at 4 a.m. to put in several hours of work before canvassing.

She also received emails, calls and Facebook messages criticizing her appearance, her clothing, and her age. What could you possibly know about the economy, they'd say. She has her MBA.

"I had the holy trifecta here of knocks against you running in West Virginia," she said, noting she is interracial, female and young.

"I'm not sure that I would get the same criticism if I were later in my career, if I were married and if my husband or significant other was with me at every event," she said. "But that's not how I've done things.

"I can't say that I didn't have those traditional pangs, but I am saying that I had to set that aside and let it hurt a little bit and keep forging forward."

At one event, she found a table of Democratic women criticizing her clothes.

"It was one of the most hurtful things that I actually was there to witness," she said, "that, you know, you thought so little of me and it really was hinged on the fact I didn't have traditional politician's clothes, I guess. But that's not something that a man would have to worry about.

"He's not ever going to have a conversation about ... naturally curly hair," she added.

Brown was also a candidate in 2016. This year, she beat Republican Jill Upson by nearly 6 percentage points to represent Jefferson County.

Brown said she ran because she was disgusted by the divisiveness around local issues. She listed the Rockwool plant, which emits air pollutants near an elementary school, and a Confederate plaque, erected in 1986 near the courthouse entrance in Charles Town.

She saw that "so much about what makes a community good was getting lost in this really ugly split."

Brown noted she was never a "matriarchal type of candidate."

"It was always a very direct, in your face, I'm here to fight for people type of rhetoric," she said, "and you're going to get pushback about that. Of course you are because people are like, 'Oh, I don't know if I like the word fight. I don't know if I like the fact that you're so abrasive,' and it's not abrasive. It's honest. It's real, and, you know, at first it caught people off guard but ultimately, I think it's what won folks over is that you knew exactly what you were getting with me at all times, and we didn't have to agree.

"They were disenfranchised," she said. "They didn't believe in their government anymore, and they're looking around, and they're saying, 'I see the glossy pictures, I get the 10 pieces of mail, but I still have to choose between my medical bill and if I'm going to get groceries this month so what the hell are you doing for me?'

"And there's really something to just breaking down the mold. It hurts a little bit as a candidate. I'm not going to lie to you. It did. It hurt a lot, but at the end of the day, I don't regret being my most authentic self in this space and I think it ultimately paid off."

DL Hamilton of Charleston reached out to her about joining a group of West Virginia Democratic women running for office, Mountain Mommas. They used Facebook to promote their campaigns and relied on each other for support.

"I said to her, 'Yeah, I think we're going to need each other,'" she said. "It's rough and tumble out there, and I know we're going to have questions. I'm not sure what the resources available to us will be and if we do this together, it'll feel less daunting just because of like having your own tribe."

"A Woman's Say"

During a candidate forum this fall, the Greater Greenbrier Chamber of Commerce decided that, in the interest of time, not every candidate would answer every question.

During the question on Amendment 1, an anti-abortion amendment to the West Virginia Constitution, Cindy Lavender-Bowe, the only woman, happened to be the candidate skipped over.

Lavender-Bowe, a Democratic candidate newly elected to represent most of Greenbrier and portions of Monroe and Summers counties, interrupted to say she was speaking as the only candidate on the panel who had given birth, and as possibly the only one who'd been sexually assaulted.

She said some Republicans tried to shout her down, telling her to follow the rules. Then, a group of Democrats started trying to shout them down.

Earlier this year, West Virginia lawmakers voted for a ballot measure on an anti-abortion amendment to the West Virginia Constitution. Amendment 1, which voters approved Election Day by about 52 percent to 48 percent, could be used to ban abortion if *Roe v. Wade* is overturned, according to supporters of the amendment.

In an interview, Lavender-Bowe said she thinks opposition to Amendment 1 in her area helped her win. Precincts that opposed Amendment 1 were more likely to support her.

Lavender-Bowe, who said she wants to improve access to birth control and focus on support for poor women, noted the amendment contained no exceptions for rape, incest, or life of the mother.

"That to me is just mind-boggling that a woman wouldn't have a say in that," she said. "I think it's a decision that should be between a woman, her doctor and God."

Lavender-Bowe came in second in her four-candidate race, narrowly beating Republican Denny Canterbury.

She said she had looked around and realized she was going to have to sit her 15-year-old son down and tell him the same truth her parents told her.

You're probably going to have to leave here.

"It's still the same thing 30 years later and that didn't really have anything to do with party, because the Democrats were in control for a really long time," she said. "That to me was just the people who've been in charge have not been working for the people of West Virginia.

"They clearly have been working for other interests, whether it's, you know, their own personal interests, or corporate interests or whatever it is, but they've not put children first, and they've not put the working people first and that's why I wanted to run."

During the campaign, a reporter had asked her about running as a woman in West Virginia.

"I'm the mom of a teenager," she told him. "I'm used to wrangling knuckleheads."

Of the eight Democratic women who won, Lavender-Bowe said she was one of seven Mountain Mommas who were successful.

While the group didn't help with fundraising, she said the support was "priceless."

The Greenbrier County Democratic Women's Club paid for a get-out-the-vote coordinator and rented an office. And her background is in nonprofit work, so she was practiced in asking for money.

Lavender-Bowe is planning to room in Charleston with a Mountain Momma she's never met in person.

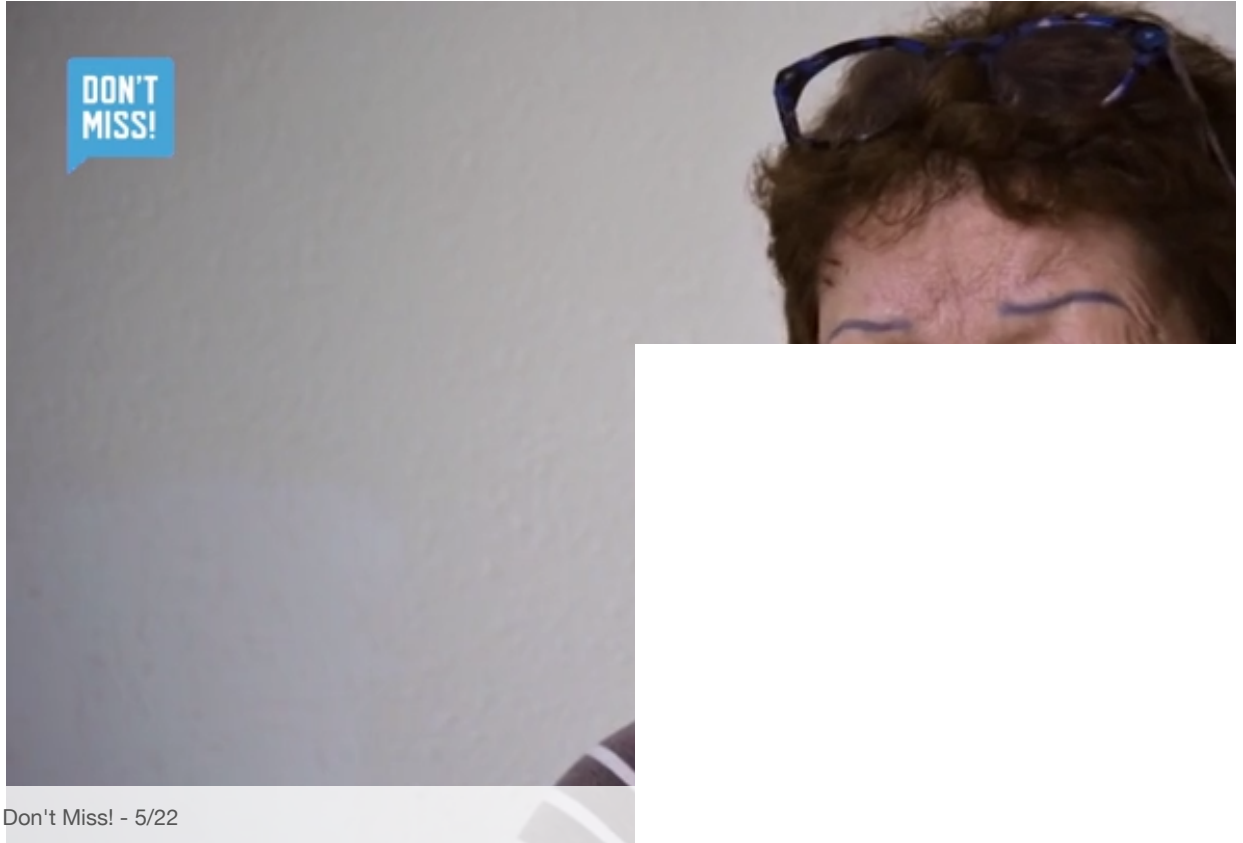
"Her name is Sammi Brown," she said.

Lavender-Bowe said early in the campaign, a friend had asked her greatest weakness.

Noting the other Democrat in her race, Jeff Campbell, was a radio announcer, Lavender-Bowe had said it was her high-pitched voice and her southern West Virginia accent.

"He's like, 'Well, I don't think that at all,' and he made me look at it differently," she said. "He said, 'You have the voice of a West Virginia woman, and that's who you are, and that's what your voice is.'"

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MORE INFORMATION

[These are the 19 women in the WV Legislature.](#)

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