

REMEMBER THE LADIES

Written by Kristin Gjelaj

In a letter dated March 31, 1776, Abigail Adams urged her husband, John Adams, and the other members of the Continental Congress not to forget about the nation's women when fighting for America's independence. In 2020, the 100th anniversary of women's suffrage in the United States, Stacy Garrity and other Pennsylvanian women are still echoing those iconic words: Remember the Ladies.

Iraq War veteran Stacy Garrity pulled off a monumental feat in Pennsylvania this election cycle— she was elected state treasurer and, except for appellate judges, became only the ninth woman ever in Pennsylvania to hold statewide office.

Garrity's success does not reflect reality for many females who have campaigned for executive or legislative positions in Pennsylvania. Women may have made progress when it comes to political representation in the United States over the years, but an examination into the state-by-state numbers shows those gains haven't happened equally among states – especially in Pennsylvania.

For example, in comparison, 70 men have served as Pennsylvania treasurer since the office was created in 1704 – twelve men since it became an elected position in 1953. Women? Before Garrity, there were just four, and one of those was appointed.

When it comes to electing a female governor, or a United States senator, Pennsylvania fares even worse. No woman has yet held either office.

Former U.S. Rep. Allyson Schwartz, one of only 11 women to serve in Congress from Pennsylvania since 1941, when Veronica Grace Boland went to Washington, ran for both jobs – U.S. Senate and governor – during her political career. She was unsuccessful both times.

The state has had several stretches when it had no women members of Congress. The longest was from 1964 to 1993, and the most recent was 2016 to 2018.

“Pennsylvania is still very much a boys' club,” said Schwartz. “They were always afraid I would be too independent. When I kept winning, the delegation was not happy. I was breaking up the club.”

Some states that historically have leaned conservative – like Texas, Louisiana, Kentucky and Oklahoma – have all held female governors. Alabama and Kansas have female governors right now. In fact, across the U.S., there are nine women governors. Pennsylvania is one of 20 states that has never elected a woman to its highest office.

As for the U.S. Senate, Pennsylvania is one of 30 states never to have elected a woman to the post.

Even at the state legislative level, Pennsylvania fares poorly.

The Pennsylvania General Assembly is made up of 253 members – 203 in the state House of Representatives and 50 in the state Senate. Fifty-five women, about 27 percent of the body, comprise the House. The Senate makeup: 13 women, which is 26 percent.

Dana Brown, executive director for the Pennsylvania Center for Women and Politics at Chatham University, in Pittsburgh, has spent a decade studying literature that relates to women and politics.

“Proportion is most important,” said Brown. “We would like to see a more reflective legislature of our population. We are still far from that.”

Women account for 51 percent of Pennsylvania’s general population.

Pennsylvanian women would need to hold 129 spots in the legislature to align with populational parity in the state.

Ten years ago, when Brown began at Chatham, women accounted for just 18 percent of the legislative seats in Pennsylvania and ranked 39 out of the 50 states. Since then, Pennsylvania has ascended eight spots to 31.

But the progress is still frustrating for many women.

Schwartz was elected to Congress in 2004, following more than a decade in the state Senate.

In Washington, when she would look around, Schwartz said, it never escaped her mind that she was the only woman in the delegation. She said she carried the voices of women on her back, wearing the honor with great pride. She said she wanted to prove that women could hold their own in a male-dominated space.

But others worked directly against her, she said.

“Pennsylvania powerbrokers” – how Schwartz refers to the men who controlled state politics – kept redistricting her congressional district to push her out of office, she said, in hopes different demographics would favor a male candidate.

“It never worked,” said Schwartz.

Schwartz said that she always prioritized “showing up,” regardless of the male attitudes in her delegation. She helped to draft legislation on health care, specifically authoring key provisions

of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act that included increasing access to primary care, recognizing of pre-existing conditions and allowing young adults to remain on their parents' health coverage until age 26.

Yet, her efforts commemorated by President Barack Obama, she said, were not enough to give power brokers and reporters across the state confidence in her run for governor.

"They never cared to look at my congressional resume," said Schwartz. "They seriously asked me if I knew how to run anything. With men, it's presumed they can do everything. It was exhausting to be dismissed."

Schwartz lost overwhelmingly in the Democratic primary to Tom Wolf, who is now midway through his second term as governor. Wolf's roots in business were enough to convince Pennsylvania voters to entrust him with the state's highest office.

Reasons Men Dominate

Former U.S. Rep. Kathy Dahlkemper and Schwartz served in Congress together for two years, from 2009 until 2011. They were the only two female representatives from Pennsylvania.

Dahlkemper, now the Erie County executive, calls Pennsylvania a "divided state with both an East Coast feel and a Midwestern values system."

She said strong party systems have attributed to Pennsylvania's "battleground" reputation and have fueled polarization across the state. No party overwhelmingly dominates the state, but both parties' competition for dominance has discouraged women from creating their own political pipelines.

"When you have strong political party systems, the way in which you do in Pennsylvania, both Republican and Democrat parties are strong, meaning that they have paid staff, paid leaders, headquarters in almost every county and they most importantly exercise considerable amount of authority over nominations through endorsements," said Brown.

Historically, both parties have been more willing to endorse and financially support male candidates, she said.

In addition, she said, the fact that Pennsylvania is a "professional legislature" has affected opportunities for women. Because the legislature meets year-round, is composed of full-time staff, allocates money for district offices and maintains salaries that allows members to serve without the need for a second income, men have long sought the positions.

"Men of both parties weren't really reaching out to women," said Dahlkemper. "When they were looking for women to run for a specific position, they would think only about the men because it has been the traditional way.

“It’s only been in the last decade or so,” she continued, “that they have been intentional about it and reaching out to women candidates. Usually, a woman had to be a self-starter instead of waiting to be asked.”

However, this narrative can easily be flipped, according to Brown, the Chatham professor.

“If you change party leadership and cultural attitudes, it is possible that the party could act as a recruiter for women in politics,” said Brown.

It is notable that during their annual reorganization caucuses following the Nov. 3 election, state Senate Republicans chose a woman to be their majority leader and state House Democrats chose a woman to be their floor leader.

Another issue affecting women seeking office, Brown said, is the few number of open legislative seats.

“Pennsylvania’s high incumbency rate acts as a deterrence for any newcomer,” said Brown. “Especially for women and women of color.”

There have been some success stories on that front.

State Rep. Summer Lee defeated her own party’s incumbent Democrat, Paul Costa, in the 2018 primary election by getting over 67% of the vote. Her victory made her the first Black woman to represent southwestern Pennsylvania in the state legislature.

In 2011, Patty Kim became the first Asian-American to serve in the Pennsylvania House. After serving on Harrisburg City Council, she decided to challenge 20-year incumbent Ron Buxton for the House seat. Buxton decided to retire instead of run.

“Being first and not seeing many people look like me, I feel like a pioneer” said Kim. “I have the pressure to stay clean and positive. I do stand out, but I have to make use of that.”

She said there is another dimension that keeps women away from running for office: raising children.

“I just love being a mom,” said Kim. “If I lived three hours out of the state capital, I don’t know if I could do this. I live four minutes away and I want that convenience.”

Dahlkemper said women often do not to deal with scrutiny and judgment that come from being a woman in a leadership role.

“I think it’s more the negative nature of our politics that hold women back,” she said.

Dahlkemper discussed a wellness check she did on her daughter and grandchildren during the COVID-19 lockdown order issued by the state earlier this year. Her daughter had traveled to the family cottage—away from her Philadelphia home. Dahlkemper went there to take her daughter and her children groceries and make sure they were OK.

One of her former opponents had a field day, she said, criticizing her for leaving Erie.

“He basically said I should resign because I went out of the county to go check on my family,” said Dahlkemper. “Those are the kind of things that make women say, ‘Gosh, I have issues in my own family. Is this worth putting myself out there and getting criticized for doing what you usually do as a mother.’”

Inspirations to Run

Men are even more likely to create their own political pipeline, because they are willing to run without thinking of imminent risks. According to the Harvard Business Review, men will apply for a job even if they only meet 60% of the qualifications, but women apply only if they meet 100% of them.

“Women don’t voluntarily run towards chaos,” said Kim. “Running for office as a woman is like jumping off a cliff and just hoping your parachute opens.”

Pearl Kim (no relation to Patty Kim) is an Asian-American attorney who ran unsuccessfully for Congress on the Republican ticket during the 2018 midterm elections.

She said her inspiration came from the “Me Too” movement. The district’s incumbent member of Congress resigned amid a sexual harassment scandal, and as a special victims attorney and a survivor of abuse herself, Kim concluded the opening was “the perfect sign” that she should run.

“I almost think being naive helped me,” said Pearl Kim. “It gave me courage to launch a congressional campaign.”

Janet Anderson, a Republican who ran unsuccessfully for state Senate in 2012, decided her signal to run was the retirement of her boss, former state Senator Jane Earle, for whom she worked as an economic development and community adviser.

“I never saw myself center stage,” said Anderson. “I was so apprehensive and nervous, I said ‘no’ three times.”

For many women, however, deciding to run for office follows the narrative of wanting to make a difference within the current system.

Dahlkemper said she decided to run because she was “upset with the trajectory of the country.” Schwartz said the laws of the state were “nostalgic of the ‘50s” and wanted to take her extensive background in women’s rights and health care to Harrisburg.

Garrity, who will be sworn in as the new Pennsylvania treasurer in January, said the state’s Democratic executive branch lacks checks and balances and needs her Republican oversight.

Fundraising issues

How strong is the trend between campaign fundraising and political success? In congressional seats, more than 90 percent of candidates who raise the most win, according to FiveThirtyEight. To go further, from 2000 through 2016, there was only one election cycle when that wasn’t true: 2010.

Guess who historically raises less money in political races?

Women.

“You cannot imagine how difficult it is raising money until you are in it,” said Dahlkemper.

She and others said there are two main variables to fundraising gaps: females are more uncomfortable asking for money, and they are less likely to have corporate connections.

“The way men and women ask for financial help is like day and night,” said Patty Kim. “Men will keep asking and asking to the point where you end up feeling bad to say ‘no’ all the time. The women will sometimes ask other people to ask. We have to learn to pick up the phone and keep asking. It really is a mental block for some women.”

In 2018, according to Cook Political Report, Federal Election Commission filings found that in 67 of the most competitive districts across the United States, women running for Congress raised an average of \$500,000 less than the men, regardless of party.

Males are also more likely to be a part of larger corporations and involved in civic engagement. Female candidates have relied on different or new ways to raise money, getting more in small donations from individual donors and from women and minority groups.

Pearl Kim’s line of work focuses on advocating for children and society’s most vulnerable, not practicing corporate law.

“It’s so much harder for women to raise that kind of capital,” said Pearl Kim. “We lack those corporate connections and it can really handicap someone.”

Schwartz entered politics from the non-profit work realm. She said she loved the fundraising side and thought it was a “great way to engage people.” After each reelection, she immediately began fundraising for the next race.

“Pennsylvania has no limits on campaign gifts, and some networks can get gifts of \$500,000,” she said. “Going up against real money is very discouraging.”

But anomalies do occur. Incumbent state Treasurer Joe Torsella’s campaign spent \$1.8 million on the race against Garrity, who spent just \$217,000, according to campaign finance records.

Garrity’s win marks the first time since 1994 that a Republican beat a Democrat incumbent for a statewide race.

Besides governor, U.S. senator, state treasurer, the other statewide offices are lieutenant governor, attorney general and auditor general.

Just one woman has served as lieutenant governor – Catherine Baker Knoll. She died in office in 2008. She had also served two terms as state treasurer.

Only one woman from a major party has run for governor in a general election – Republican Barbara Hafer, who ran against incumbent Robert P. Casey in 1990. Hafer had served as both auditor general and treasurer. Lynn Yeakel, in 1992, and Kathleen McGinty, in 2016, were Democratic candidates for U.S. Senate, but both lost to incumbent Republicans.

Despite the less-than-stellar record of women serving in prominent offices in Pennsylvania, women interviewed for this story said they were all hopeful for the future.

“It’s all about pulling the next one up,” said Schwartz.

While her election has not garnered anywhere near the attention the presidential race and its aftermath have in Pennsylvania, Garrity’s upset victory is one of those examples of hope for women.

“I hope that people look at me,” Garrity said, “and say, ‘If she can do it, I can do it.’”