

Introduction

On March 11, 1954, the New York State Assembly officially celebrated *Ladies' Day*, “when male legislators gallantly step aside to let the seven members of the fairer sex run the show.” But the author of this *New York Times* piece then noted, “Their moment of glory was short lived. When the section of the calendar involving final votes on bills was reached, the men took over again.”¹ Aside from the patronizing tone, the short article showed that New York’s women, despite having begun serving in the legislature in 1919, were still a rarity thirty-five years later, so much so that political leaders singled them out for special notice. It was also apparent that these women were very much outside the circle of power and thus figuratively invisible.

This faux-celebration of the woman politician was marginally better than the presuffrage days when to be a woman meant literal invisibility with respect to the political system. There was no place for them in formal politics at all. To illustrate, I point to the death of New York City Tammany machine stalwart Murray Hall in January 1901. The death received multiple days of newspaper coverage. Fellow party members were shocked to find Hall was actually a woman.² For over a quarter of a century, Hall had dressed and behaved as a man, including the activities and rituals of partisan politics. Hall had been a member of the Iroquois Political Club and an election district leader. The price Hall paid for that participation was hiding her sex to everyone. Then current State Senator Barney Martin of Lower Manhattan had trouble accepting the deception once it was revealed. “He was at the polls every election day, voted once anyway as they say, and helped get out the vote.”³ Senator Martin concluded by observing, “His place will be a hard one to fill, but he won’t be a her again if I can help it.”⁴

By 1954 women had made a place for themselves in the legislature but significant power still eluded them. They also remained largely absent

from broader discussions of New York politics. Their history and contributions are rarely part of the secondary literature even though eighty-eight women served between 1919 and the 1992 elections. These are the years that bookend this study. The year 1918 was the first time New York's women could both vote and run for legislative office. As a result of that election, two women began their terms in the New York State Assembly in January 1919. At the other end, 1992 was considered a wave election for women in congressional races, and one that many hoped signaled a broad breakthrough for women candidates at all levels going forward. Fourteen women won election to New York's legislature in 1992, the most in any single cycle to date, doubling the previous high of seven, ten years earlier.

It is all the more important that we examine these women legislators given that scholars agree women had their earliest and largest success as candidates at the state level. By 1933, 320 women had served in state legislatures across the nation, with Louisiana the only holdout.⁵ But as late as 1973, Albert Abrams, then secretary of the New York State Senate, considered the arrival of three new female senators the equivalent of "culture shock" for that body.⁶ That was a year after former State Assemblywoman and then Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm became the first black female to seek the presidential nomination. The first goal of this study is to restore these New York women legislators to our political narrative by showing how their actions influenced lawmaking. The second goal is more subtle, for it involves the cultural elements of attitude and behavior. What kind of impact did these women have on the way the legislature conducted its business and how legislators behaved among themselves and appeared to the public?

Realizing these goals requires understanding the political environment of New York State and the position of the legislature within it. Through a series of twenty-two interviews with influential and knowledgeable government figures, two editors—Gerald Benjamin and Robert Nakamura—studied the workings of the New York State Legislature in the mid-twentieth century. In their book, *The Modern New York State Legislature*, they argued that the legislature had professionalized itself and, in doing so, reasserted its authority and influence vis-à-vis the executive. The subtitle of their book—*Redressing the Balance*—highlights the legislature's renewed importance. The book also makes the case that New York, like every state, is the product of a unique set of factors: geography, demography, economics, as well as the accumulated weight of its political party and institutional histories. We can only understand New York's politics by looking at the whole framework. And what is true about the whole is also true about the course of women legislators.

Anne Marie Cammisa and Beth Reingold, two scholars of women state legislators, say “to explain women’s behavior and role in state legislatures more fully, we must do so in the context of variations in state political culture, legislative norms and structures, and the continuing process of legislative professionalization.”⁷ My study documents New York women’s actions as elected officials and integrates those actions into both the history of New York State politics and the story of the emerging woman politician.

This study builds off a first generation of scholars interested in women state legislators. In the 1970s, they examined the concept of the woman legislator writ broadly. Jeane Kirkpatrick’s *Political Woman* from 1974 sketched out the background and characteristics of women currently entering electoral politics.⁸ The typology she laid out reflected women’s unique path to politics as well as the gendered social expectations that impacted their time in politics. While her analysis was aimed at women in state legislatures, her conclusions remained generic. Irene Diamond’s *Sex Roles in the State House* from 1977 also focused on women state legislators. She looked at the impact of sex differences on women’s quest for political office. Diamond acknowledged the impact of local conditions on women’s electoral chances, so, at least intuitively, she understood that state circumstances had a role to play. But, again, her analysis was broadly constructed.⁹ A next generation of scholars began producing state-centered studies of women legislators in the 1990s. Individual works on women from Iowa, Texas, Arizona, and California, respectively, place the subjects squarely within the context of those states’ political histories and unique institutional frameworks. These state-centered studies also consider the social and cultural heritage of the state’s residents.¹⁰ This study of the New York woman legislator is consistent with these efforts in that the history of the women is deeply embedded within the broader New York story.

Chapters 1 and 2 provide the contextual background for understanding New York women’s political history. Chapter 1 gives a brief overview of New York’s development and the effect that development had on the state’s politics and governance. The focus there is on where and how developments bred the environment that elected women encountered. Women legislators had to negotiate New York–specific elements if they were to succeed, just as their male colleagues had to do. But the women faced an added adjustment that men did not. They had experienced a political apprenticeship that was unique to their gender. Chapter 2 shifts to the history of women’s separate political experiences presuffrage and sketches out the suffrage fight in New York. The history of women’s earlier exclusion from partisan politics would

affect their identity as politicians going forward. New York's women had to reconcile women's separate political history both with the unique aspects of their state and the gendered nature of partisan politics and with the political institutions within which partisan activities occurred. The suffrage campaign gives us a first glimpse into how well women did in understanding the politics of the state and in developing strategies to succeed in the world as it was and not as they wished it to be.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the specific attributes and histories of exemplary women legislators from 1919 through 1980. Presenting all the women's individual stories is neither feasible nor the best way to write the history. Instead, I identified patterns to their service that showed common elements or experiences, or both, at a given time. The chapter names reflect key characteristics of those eras. The title in chapter 3 uses the terms *pioneer* and *placeholder* as shorthand for the first group of women legislators studied. They were pioneers by entering an environment that was truly new for them. They broke new ground that subsequent women built on. They marked and held places for them. It is equally important to notice the points at which the existing pattern changed in a significant way. In the critical years around 1965 and again around 1980, the model of what a woman legislator ought to be shifted. Chapter 4 refers to the woman legislator as an *activist*. The women who ran embraced the idea that activism was challenging and changing old norms. But they divided over the role of the legislature as the best vehicle to effect that change.

Within these chapters, I profile broadly the *archetypal woman legislator* of each era using various parts of the histories of the individual women who were there at that time.¹¹ The chapters thus group the women together as representative of periods I believe warrant that designation. The periodization framework allows me to make sense of the details in a way that I hope captures the essence of these women politicians' experiences. But throughout, I want to be clear that these women were individuals with their own stories. As Nancy Baker Jones and Ruth Winegarten concluded in their own study of Texas women legislators: there is no one typical female legislative type, though that does not mean there was not an archetype that each existed in tension with.¹² Chapter 5 provides several examples of how important it is to not rely solely on composite profiles. This chapter looks more deeply at the legislative careers of a few women from the activist era.

A key assumption about the woman legislator has been that she would bring more attention to issues women cared about. Chapter 6 follows women's efforts to leverage their influence by building unifying organizations

among fellow women legislators. Even as women grappled with how best to maximize the impact of their small numbers in office, they homed in on particular issues. For the first four decades of legislative service, women were most strongly associated with issues of home, family, and community. But in the 1960s, women added a second track: their own societal disadvantage. Some of the expansionist impulse fed off the women's movement's success at getting the public's attention. Some of it reflected an expectation, or maybe a hope, that the timing was right for a nucleus of inspired women officeholders to successfully challenge older, cultural traditions. Chapter 7 looks at how women politicians pursued both a more traditional women's agenda focused on family and community as well as one that focused on women's own position in that community. The chapter takes a deeper look at women's leadership in the 1960s and 1970s on education reform and reproductive rights, specifically the fight for abortion reform.

Chapter 8 uses a microstudy of Westchester County in the lower Hudson Valley to examine what was happening to New York's women politically as the twentieth century ended. In 1992, more women than ever before won seats in the legislature. It was also a banner year for women candidates at the national level. The media dubbed the phenomena "The Year of the Woman" and presumed an outsized influence for gender on electoral outcomes everywhere. I assess the relative weight of that belief against other factors in play in New York that may better explain women's state-level success that year.

In sum, the story of New York's women legislators, a story which has not been told, shows the evolution of the woman politician in New York as the complex interaction of many factors. Gender has been and remains important to how women conceive of themselves as politicians, how they deal with the political environment they enter, and how they make their contributions once there. But while I can sketch out this story, evidentiary matters keep the full details somewhat elusive. Much of what cannot be recovered has to do with the way historical records were previously developed and saved. And those record-keeping decisions had a gendered component. An important impediment to knowing more about these women is that the paper trail is thin, extremely so for the earliest legislators. The default position early on was not to save one's records from the time in office. Nor were there many legislative records, such as legislative bill jackets, for the first years when women served. Jackets were and are collections of supplementary material that are forwarded with passed legislation to the governor to provide background information on the bill. For the earliest women

legislators, we are left mostly with what has been said about the women in the media; the biographical information they submitted on themselves to the annual legislative summary, *The New York Red Book*; lists of the laws they introduced; and a few mentions in other sources. These sources, when woven with limited secondary material that take a broad look at women entering politics immediately after suffrage and women in individual state legislatures in this period, are what allow for an understanding of a first generation of New York's women legislators.

Sometimes, however, the absence of something can be meaningful in and of itself. In *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues that certain voices have been silenced and thus marginalized at key points in the process of creating the historical narrative.¹³ The lack of archival materials on the majority of early- and even many mid-twentieth-century women legislators may say something about how hard it was for women to find their own voice in this political arena. There may also have been a social element at work here that traced back to past cultural assumptions about women's selfless nature preventing them from promoting their own political profiles. The way in which the women's movement of the mid-twentieth century broke those traditional taboos has had a positive impact on women taking more control of their own history.

Thankfully, the maturation of the woman politician as a distinct entity has included the recognition that her own story is important. Going forward, more women in politics have saved their records and donated them to archives and libraries. In the early 1990s, the New York State Legislative Women's Caucus, a bipartisan organization of women legislators, began an oral history project whose goal was to interview all the women who were serving or had served in that body. While the project did not prove sustainable, it did capture the reminiscences of a small group, and those voices have proven invaluable to this project. And I am grateful for the ability to have personally interviewed a small group of retired legislators. Still, as I write this introduction, I admit up front that the chapters to follow represent only the start of documenting the collective history of New York's women legislators rather than its end point.