

Nev. has one of highest proportions of female lawmakers

By Michelle Rindels, AP

Nevada is among the states with the greatest proportion of female lawmakers, although women are still underrepresented in the Legislature and in many of the highest elected offices.

Women accounted for one-third of the 63 members in the Legislature last session. That ties the state for fifth place in terms of female representation, according to an analysis by the Associated Press of data collected by the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Colorado leads the pack with 42 percent female legislators, while Vermont, Arizona and Washington come next and Minnesota ties with Nevada's 33 percent. Utah and a handful of Southern states have 15 percent or less female representation, and Wyoming is at the bottom with 13 percent.

Women in Nevada politics point to a variety of reasons the state has a relatively high proportion of female lawmakers. Republican state Sen. Patricia Farley said legislative leaders who recruited her to run in 2014 agreed to work with her schedule as a single mom of two school-age girls, keeping her evenings mostly clear and ensuring meetings ended in time for her to pick up her children from school in the afternoon.

"Running for office isn't necessarily set up for a mom, and much less a single mom," said Farley, who represents a Las Vegas-area district. "There was a lot of effort to help support me running for office."

But she said diversifying the Legislature and bringing more

women and mothers into the process is a worthy goal.

“It makes a difference in the tone and tenor of legislation,” she said. “When we bring our gifts forward, maybe we reduce unintended consequences.”

Erin Bilbray, who founded the Emerge Nevada organization that trains women to run for office, said the relatively high number of women in the Legislature may have to do with working conditions that women might accept more readily than men. Lawmakers meet in regular session for four months every two years, and are paid less than \$9,000 in salary, plus a per diem allowance, for that service.

“There’s a correlation between how little we pay our legislators and how many women are in the Legislature,” Bilbray said.

In local government, women hold some prominent posts. Carolyn Goodman is mayor of Las Vegas, while Hillary Schieve is mayor of Reno.

But a gender gap persists in other offices. Three of the four Nevadans in the U.S. House of Representatives are men, and the state’s only had three women representatives in its history.

The first was seven-term Republican Rep. Barbara Vucanovich, who took office in 1983, while the other two were seven-term Democratic Rep. Shelley Berkley and current 1st Congressional District Rep. Dina Titus, a Democrat.

Nevada is one of 23 states that has never elected a woman as governor. It’s also one of 22 states that has never had a female senator, although Democratic Senate candidate Catherine Cortez Masto could change that.

Bilbray said external and internal obstacles perpetuate the gender gap.

“You have to ask a woman, on average, eight times before they

run for office,” said Bilbray, who ran in Nevada’s 3rd Congressional District in 2014 but lost to Rep. Joe Heck. “They tend to think they’re not qualified.”

Schieve said she tries to plant the idea of public service early, telling young girls she meets that they look like a future mayor.

“I look at it as part of my position to do that,” she said. “To show, ‘Look, if I can do it, anyone can do it.’”

Farley said women still feel they have to compete with men, working 14 hours a day and never taking time off, to be taken seriously in their careers. She said women need to stand up for their family obligations to change the culture in politics.

“What women need to do is say this job of raising my kids is just as important, if not more important,” she said. “More and more people need to believe they can ask for it and get it.”