



Women Legislators facing a double bind

by Kathy Shinkle

"I want to blaze a trail for other women. I know that years from now there will be many other women in politics."

— N.C. Representative Lillian Exum Clement, 1923

"I realize I'm rather a pioneer in this. I feel the women who come after will have an easier time."

— N.C. Senator Rachel G. Gray, 1980

Sixty years after Buncombe County elected the first woman to any southern state legislature, North Carolina women legislators still feel like trailblazers. Lillian Exum Clement, a 26-year old attorney from Asheville, defeated two male opponents for the nomination in 1920, the same year the 19th amendment to the U.S. Constitution gave women the vote. When Greensboro businesswoman Rachel Gray reached the General Assembly in 1977, the "pioneer" legislators were only beginning to grow in numbers, and in power.

Lillian Clement served on seven House committees in her first session, including appropriations and the judiciary, and she chaired the Committee

on Institutions for the Deaf and Dumb. Of the 17 bills she introduced, 16 became law. In 1925, her death cut her career short, but that same year Mecklenburg County sent Julia M. Alexander to the House, followed by Carrie Lee McLean in 1927. Both attorneys, they each served one term; Rep. Alexander died in 1927, and Rep. McLean was defeated in a 1929 bid for the Senate. In 1931, Jackson County elected Gertrude McKee North Carolina's first woman senator. She also served in 1937 and 1943, non-consecutive terms because of a rotation agreement which then gave the county a Senate seat only every six years.

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, most General Assembly sessions included a woman, sometimes two. Not until 1949, however, did two women, both from Mecklenburg, serve together in the House, and not until 1967 did the Senate have more than a single woman. That year, three women served in the upper chamber, prompting the installation of "modesty panels" on all desks. During the 50 years after Lillian Clement broke the barrier, only two women, both in the House, built up any significant seniority. Grace Taylor

Rodenbough from Stokes County served seven terms (1953-66), and Nancy W. Chase represented Wayne County for eight (1963-78).

During Ms. Chase's last terms, the number of women legislators started growing: in 1973, one senator and eight representatives; in 1975, two senators and 13 representatives; in 1977, four senators and 20 representatives; and in 1979, five senators and 17 representatives. In 1979, those 22 women legislators constituted 12.9 percent of the General Assembly, the largest percentage of women in any southern legislature and 14th nationally. While women were 51 percent of the population, they held 10.3 percent of the seats nationwide.

During the last decade, changes in the American society as well as events in North Carolina have contributed to the rapid increase in the number of women legislators. Throughout the country, women have moved outside the home, facing discrimination in the male-dominated business world

and in some cases gaining acceptance. In North Carolina, two factors reinforced this nationwide pattern: the prolonged fight over ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) and the presence of the bi-partisan North Carolina Women's Political Caucus (NCWPC).

In 1973, when ERA first came up for a vote, most of the nine women legislators in the General Assembly favored it and never expected it to fail. "We expected it to pass. We didn't think there would be any hassle," recalls Rep. Patricia S. Hunt (D-Orange). Throughout the 1970s, the amendment remained highly visible and controversial, bringing more and more women into the political process on both sides of the issue and teaching them practical political skills. Coalitions of women's groups emerged, including many not previously active in politics. Some organized specifically around the ERA, such as "Mothers Against ERA" or "North Carolinians United for ERA." Others which had already formed around a broader range of women's issues began to focus extensively on ERA, particularly the NCWPC.

Organized in early 1972, the NCWPC emerged as a potent political force about the same time as many of today's strong women legislators, most of whom share the Caucus' views and look to its members for assistance and support. At the national level, the Caucus has worked to elect women; in North Carolina, this goal has taken second place to the ERA ratification effort.

These three factors — the changing roles of women, the ERA fights, and the Caucus — resulted in women legislators who were mostly highly educated, independent-minded, and from urban areas in the Piedmont, where the Caucus had built its greatest strength. Of the 22 women legislators in 1979, five were from Mecklenburg County, four from Guilford, three from Forsyth, and two from Wake. Only one of the remaining eight came from a rural community. Most had attended college; a third had earned advanced degrees; and two-thirds had held business or professional positions, primarily in education.

"We had to be sort of independent to get here in a man's world," says Rep. Bertha Holt (D-Alamance), a 64-year old attorney who was the only woman in her class at the University of North Carolina Law School. When a woman reached the General Assembly, explains former State Caucus President Danya Yon, it is often the final step in a long career of community service. For men, says Yon, it's often an early step to a political career.

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Photo by Steve Murray, Raleigh News and Observer

Getting Elected — Only the First Step

After getting elected, freshman legislators — men and women — begin the slow process of building trust and respect and learning how to maneuver through legislative channels. Experienced colleagues can help speed the process, but, as in business, women have not often found mentors. Not long removed from the smoke-filled, club-like “sessions” in Raleigh’s Sir Walter Hotel, male legislators have been slow to accept women as their peers.

“It was, ‘Oh you pretty thing, how nice to have you here,’” recalls Sen. Carolyn Mathis (D-Mecklenburg), who entered the House in 1973. As late as 1977, Secretary of State Thad Eure placed the four women senators in their own ghetto on the back row. Sen. Mathis, then a Republican, had women on one side and Republicans on the other. “He was completely sincere,” she says. “He wanted me, as the one Republican woman, to feel secure.”

The arrival of more women and growing seniority among them has resulted in changing attitudes among the men — and women. “We (used to) sit still,” says Rep. Patricia S. Hunt (D-Orange). “We would not talk. Now we are much more willing to speak up even if we know we are not going to win.” Becoming more assertive, according to many women legislators, means that they are now listened to and sought out for advice in areas where they have expertise.

Women in politics consistently name Patricia Hunt, a four-term representative, as the most influential woman legislator. Her status and effectiveness, apparent in her assignments and her ability to get legislation passed, stem from hard

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Sen. Carolyn Mathis

work, political skills, strong ties to the House leadership, the trust of her peers, and seniority. (In the last two sessions, a four-term legislator in either chamber was senior to at least two-thirds of the other members.) In 1979 this combination helped Hunt gain the chairmanship of the powerful Judiciary III Committee.

One measure of the growing power of women legislators is committee assignments. In 1973, Rep. Chase headed the Health Committee, and two women were vice chairmen of other committees. By 1979, women led two Senate committees and eight in the House and were vice chairmen of eight in the Senate and 16 in the House. In addition, segregated seating of women had ended, and more subtle signs of acceptance became evident, such as men saying “person” instead of “he”

Rep. Patricia Hunt on the floor of the General Assembly.



Photo by Jackson Hill, Raleigh News and Observer



Meeting of the Public School Finance Subcommittee of the Legislative Research Commission (LRC). Rep. Lura Tally (D-Cumberland) (sitting at table), one of the two women on the LRC, has responsibility for this subcommittee.

when referring to all people.

But as skillful and respected as women are becoming in the legislature, none has yet reached a position of real power. No woman has been elected lieutenant governor or speaker of the House. None has been appointed to the Advisory Budget Commission or to chair an appropriations committee or sub-committee, and none has been appointed forthright to the "super sub," the joint appropriations committee making final budget decisions.* Moreover, some women legislators still feel that despite the closing of the Sir Walter Hotel to legislative dealings, important decisions are made in private and merely ratified in committees and on the floor.

"Hardball" Politics

During the 1970s, women legislators often depended on idealism. Many of them saw issues like ERA in strong moral and ethical terms, trusting in the intrinsic "rightness" of their positions to prevail once the facts were presented. This translated into a belief that doing their homework and attending meetings would automatically spell legislative success. "I was very naive. I thought if I did lots of reading and research the facts would fall into place," recalls Sen. Mathis. "I found that wouldn't work. I just had a lot to learn about politics."

But women have joined the world of "hardball"

**In 1979, after women complained bitterly about their exclusion from the "super sub," Rep. Hunt was added to the committee. But the Senate refused to name an additional member which upset the numerical balance. House Appropriations Chairman Edward S. Holmes "theoretically" removed himself, explains Rep. Hunt, allowing her to stay. "So we did have a voice," says Hunt. Yet her position remained so unclear that even other women legislators still believe no woman has served on the "super sub."*

politics, where success depends on working with people holding different convictions, dealing and trading on practical as well as philosophical grounds. Within this world, a woman faces a double bind that a man does not. On the one hand, she has to overcome the stereotype of the female legislator only interested in women's issues. On the other, refusing this special identification tends to minimize the unique power that might come with it.

While the number of legislators is not sufficient to guarantee passage of a bill, their growing numbers have created a potentially effective voting bloc. Standing together, women legislators could contribute significantly to the passage or defeat of

Rankings of Women Legislators

For the last two terms, the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research has surveyed legislators, lobbyists and the media for a rating of legislators' effectiveness. In 1977, Rep. Hunt ranked 12th among the 120 House members, the only woman in the top quarter. Six were in the second, six in the third, and six in the fourth. In the 50-member Senate, no woman was in the top quarter. Sen. Katherine H. Sebo (D-Guilford) was 24th, two women were in the third group, and one in the fourth.

In 1979, rankings generally rose for those with experience. In the top quarter of the House were Reps. Hunt (10th) and Margaret Tennille (D-Forsyth) (25th). Seven women were in the second group, two in the third, and six in the fourth. Sen. Mathis (18th), in the second quarter, topped the Senate women. Two were in the third group, and two in the fourth.

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Sen. Rachel Gray



Actor Alan Alda, the featured celebrity at a pro-ERA reception in Raleigh, January 21, 1979. Former Raleigh Mayor Isabella Cannon is at right.

proposed legislation. Their bloc of votes, if unified, could be a powerful trading chip in the “hardball” world of legislative politics. But it hasn’t worked that way yet. “Women have been very hesitant to trade votes; they don’t understand how,” says Miriam Dorsey, executive director of the N.C. Council on the Status of Women. “A lot of women are still afraid to use the power they have.”

At the same time, overcoming the image of being interested only in women’s issues has been difficult. “ERA is just one of my priorities,” says Sen. Rachel Gray (D-Guilford), the sole woman on the Senate Banking Committee, “but I’m sure they (men legislators) perceive it as the only one.” The fact that women often sponsor bills concerning abortion, sexual abuse, displaced homemakers, sex discrimination, and daycare — usually identified as “women issues” rather than “people issues” — reinforces the stereotype. Among women themselves, moreover, these are topics often “fought over most bitterly,” says Rep. Hunt. Some legislators have given the impression of focusing on issues associated with women because they are so aggressive, explains Rep. Margaret Tennille (D-Forsyth). “But you name it and they’ve been involved — in education, juvenile justice, human resources, and mental health.”

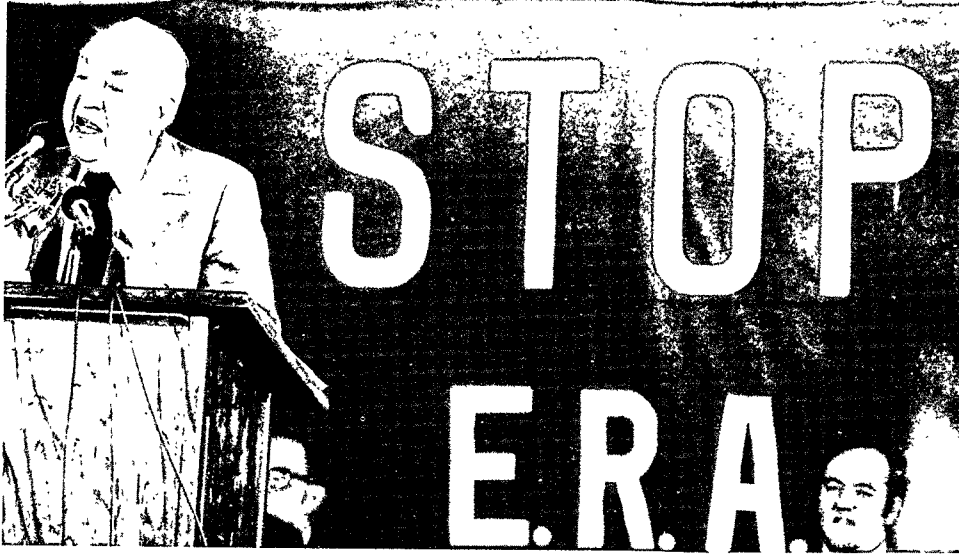
An informal women’s caucus met frequently during the 1973 and 1975 General Assembly sessions, but more for camaraderie than for political strategy, according to many of the participants. In 1977, the group disbanded. “We didn’t want to be recognized as a caucus — men didn’t have a caucus,” says four-term Rep. Jo Graham Foster (D-Mecklenburg). “We just wanted to be members of the General Assembly.” In 1979, the pro-ERA women — those against the amendment were

invited but did not participate — met informally several times to discuss ERA and other issues.

This reluctance to focus on a “women’s” strategy was unexpected by some. “I was used to seeing women stick together in Congress and in other states,” says Rep. Ruth Easterling (D-Mecklenburg), a past national president of the Business and Professional Women’s Club, who began her first term in 1977. “I was surprised they didn’t want to get together here.” In North Carolina, they have tended to work in the way Rep. Ruth Cook (D-Wake) describes: “Women legislators in the main represent their constituents. That’s their first responsibility . . . stronger than any responsi-

Women in Leadership Roles in N. C. General Assembly

	1973	1975	1977	1979
SENATE				
Chairmen	0	0	0	2
Vice-chairmen	0	2	2	8
HOUSE				
Chairmen	1	2	4	8
Vice-chairmen	2	10	21	16



Former U.S. Senator Sam Ervin speaking against the ERA, January 22, 1977.

bility to each other.”

The Post-ERA General Assembly

Next year, the General Assembly will most likely vote on ERA for the last time.* Ratification would symbolize the prominence and prestige women legislators have achieved over the past 10 years. Even if it fails again, though, the gains women have made in the legislature are not likely to erode. Most women incumbents who return next year will be in their third, fourth, and fifth terms. That seniority, coupled with the good reputations their accomplishments have earned them, should result in important committee assignments and leadership roles, including more influential roles in the appropriations committees. In the House, women

**The ratification deadline for the ERA has been extended to 1982. If a definitive action is taken in 1981, the issue cannot be revived in the 1982 session.*

Increase in Number of Women in N. C. General Assembly

SENATE		HOUSE		SENATE		HOUSE	
1953	0	1	1967	3	1		
1955	0	2	1969	2	1		
1957	0	1	1971	0	2		
1959	0	3	1973	1	8		
1961	0	5	1975	2	13		
1963	0	5	1977	4	20		
1965	1	5	1979	5	17		

legislators are optimistic that the new speaker, expected to be Liston Ramsey, will use the same criteria — ability, interests, and seniority — for women as for men in making appointments.

Twenty-two women will come to Raleigh for the 1981 session, 19 representatives and three senators (only three of the five senators ran for re-election), a slight decrease from the 1979 total. But looking ahead ten, four, or even two years, more and more women from all political persuasions will probably be elected to the General Assembly for several reasons. With ERA settled, the NCWPC will be able to focus on its goal of recruiting and grooming women candidates. Many of these potential legislators already hold local elective or appointive office, while others continue to develop their political skills in campaigns and party work. Even in Charlotte, where nearly half of the 400 members of the Caucus live, women's issues alone are not enough to win an election, so women are helping each other increase their credentials and visibility in civic and business affairs. And there is no reason to believe that women in the anti-ERA movement will drop out of politics, either. Finally, redistricting based on the 1980 census should bring additional seats to urban areas where women are more likely to run and win.

Once in the General Assembly, new women members should have an easier time finding mentors among those now serving, thus shortening the learning process. Past mistakes will probably not be repeated as women increase their political prowess and their ability and willingness to exercise their power. Thus the women legislators will continue to build upon the steps taken and the gains made by the pioneer women representatives and senators of the last 60 years. □