

# WOMEN IN THE LEGISLATURE: A Force for the Future

by Betty Mitchell Gray

---

*The year 1993 was a banner one for women in the General Assembly, with a record 31 female lawmakers serving. The increasing clout of women had an impact on everything from making it a crime for a husband to rape his wife to increasing funding for domestic violence centers.*

*Such successes were partly due to the increasing number of women in the General Assembly. In 1992, 51 women sought election to the legislature, and 61 percent were successful. The surge of candidates was part of a trend that saw record numbers of women running for public office nationwide. One traditional obstacle for women—raising money for campaigns—apparently has been overcome. On average, winning female candidates for the North Carolina House and Senate raised more money for 1992 campaigns than did their male counterparts.*

*Still, female lawmakers make up only 18.2 percent of the North Carolina General Assembly and nearly 52 percent of the state's population. This underrepresentation of women may limit the effectiveness of female legislators, although numbers are only one of the factors that influence effectiveness in the legislature.*

*Due to partisan differences, the Women's Legislative Caucus limits its efforts to reach consensus on issues coming before the General Assembly. Thus, its role as a power broker is limited. Women in the legislature also note that they are not a homogenous group. They say there are few issues upon which gender alone would determine how a legislator votes. Finally, female lawmakers say men still control the purse strings, and through the purse strings, the General Assembly.*

**J**ust before the start of the 1993 General Assembly, freshman Sen. Linda Gunter stopped at the security booth in the legislative parking garage to get the key to her office. When she identified herself as a newly elected senator from Wake County, the guard seemed skeptical. "You don't look like a legislator," he told her.

"You have this stereotype of what a senator is," says Gunter, a 43-year-old teacher. "In my generation, women were secretaries, nurses, and teachers."

The story is a familiar one to freshman Rep. Erin Kuczmarski (D-Wake). Kuczmarski was one of several House members chosen to escort Vice President Al Gore to the House floor when he addressed a joint session of the General Assembly during the 1993 session. About an hour later, Kuczmarski was barred by a Secret Service agent from returning to her office. She too was told she didn't look like a legislator.

But the look of the legislature is changing. White males no longer represent a majority of legislators, and the makeup of the General Assembly seems to be moving closer to that of the North Carolina population in terms of race and gender.<sup>1</sup> The 1993 General Assembly was, in fact, the most diverse in the state's history, with a record 31 women serving out of 170 legislators.

Still, women represent a majority of the North Carolina population at nearly 52 percent.<sup>2</sup> At 18.2 percent of the General Assembly, they are far from a majority, but they *are* gaining ground. In 1971, only two women served in the legislature. Does the increasing number of female lawmakers make a difference in terms of the types of bills passed

---

*Betty Mitchell Gray is a legislative reporter for The Virginian-Pilot of Norfolk, Va., and a former reporter for the Washington Daily News. In 1990, the Washington Daily News won the Pulitzer Prize for Meritorious Public Service for a series of articles by Gray on contamination of the towns' drinking water supply.*



Karen Tam

---

"IN MY GENERATION,  
WOMEN WERE SECRETARIES,  
NURSES, AND TEACHERS."

—FIRST TERM SEN. LINDA  
GUNTER (D-WAKE)



Karen Tam

**Rep. Erin Kuczmarski (D-Wake)—barred from her office because she didn't "look like a legislator."**

and dollars appropriated? And what obstacles prevent an even faster increase in the number of female legislators and ascension to the top seats of power?

## A Steady Increase in Numbers

**T**he number of women in the North Carolina General Assembly had been slowly building since the early 1970s. (See Table 1, p. 5.) But the number of female office-seekers may have gotten a boost from the televised confirmation hearing of U.S. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas before the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee in October 1991. The specter of a committee of white males grilling witness Anita Hill on her allegations of sexual harassment by Thomas angered many women and contributed to a record number of female congressional candidates filing for office in 1992.

This phenomenon received heavy press coverage on the news and opinion pages of newspapers across the nation. But another phenomenon got a great deal less media attention—the record number of women who filed as candidates for state legislatures in 1992 and their remarkable success rate.

Of the 2,373 female candidates for state legislatures nationwide in 1992, 1,374, or about 58 percent, won, while another 142 incumbents whose

terms did not expire retained their seats.<sup>3</sup> That brought the total for 1993 to 1,516, a 141 seat gain over 1992 and a fivefold increase in female representation since 1969. (See Table 2, p. 6.) North Carolina ranked 17th nationwide in the number of female candidates running for the legislature, with 51—tied with Florida and Idaho. In North Carolina, 61 percent of these candidates were successful.<sup>4</sup>

But the expanding ranks of women in the General Assembly cannot be attributed to a single television event such as the Clarence Thomas hearings. The roots of female representation run much deeper.

In 1921, the first female legislator, Buncombe County lawyer Lillian Exum Clement, joined the N.C. General Assembly. Clement defeated two men for the nomination in 1920—the same year the 19th amendment to the U.S. Constitution gave women the right to vote.<sup>5</sup> From then through the 1960s, the number of female legislators remained low, with fewer than five women serving at any one time in the two chambers combined. But since the early 1970s, the number of women serving as lawmakers has increased steadily—with the most dramatic increases coming in the late 1970s and early 1990s.<sup>6</sup>

During the 1970s, women lost their bid to get the General Assembly to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, and some

were frustrated by the effort. The amendment, which would have put language in the U.S. Constitution outlawing discrimination on the basis of gender, was defeated three times in committee during the 1970s, and finally died in committee in 1979. A “gentlemen’s agreement” between 12 opponents and a proponent of ERA prevented discussion or a vote on the amendment in the 1981–82 session, and it did not resurface before the June 30, 1982, deadline for ratification.<sup>7</sup>

The failure to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment no doubt disappointed proponents. Whether it encouraged more women to run for the General Assembly is subject to debate, but the number of female legislators did rise over the course of a

decade during which the General Assembly repeatedly considered and rejected the controversial amendment. Nine women served in the General Assembly in 1973, when the ERA suffered its first lopsided defeat. By 1975, when the amendment was narrowly defeated in the House, there were 15 women serving. By 1977, when the legislation actually cleared the House and died in the Senate, the ranks of female legislators had swollen to 23 members, or 14 percent of the 170-member General Assembly.

Until the 1992 increase, the number of female legislators fluctuated between 23 and 25 members—a large enough voting bloc to assure at least some legislative successes. For example, in the

**Table 1. Number and Percentage of Women in the North Carolina General Assembly, by Chamber, 1971–1993**

	1971	1973	1975	1977	1979	1981
Senate	0	1	2	4	5	3
House	2	8	13	19	17	19
Total Number	2	9	15	23	22	22
Total Percent	1	5	9	14	13	13
	1983	1985	1987	1989	1991	1993
Senate	5	4	4	4	5	7
House	19	16	20	21	20	24
Total Number	24	20	24	25	25	31
Total Percent	14	12	14	15	15	18

Sources: *Article II*, the biennial guide to the legislature published by the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research, 1989–1990 and 1993–1994 editions, p. 236 in both editions.

1987–88 General Assembly, the 24 female legislators unanimously supported a change in the marital rape law to allow prosecution of husbands living separately from their wives, though at that point they lacked the political clout to have the exemption from the rape laws removed completely from state statutes.<sup>8</sup> And in subsequent sessions, female legislators have banded together to pass legislation requiring insurance companies to pay for mammograms—which test for breast cancer—and Pap smears, which can detect cervical cancer.<sup>9</sup>

The increase in female legislators also has had side effects—like the hiring of more female lobbyists. “Noticeably, now with more women elected, lobbying teams encompass many more women,” says Ann Duncan, chairman of the Employment Security Commission and a former Republican Representative from Forsyth County. “I believe they feel the need to retain female lobbyists not only to lobby female legislators more effectively—or to give the message that, ‘We hire females on our team,’ but to more effectively communicate those issues labeled ‘female issues’ to male legislators.”

**Lillian Exum Clement—  
North Carolina's first female legislator.**



**Table 2. Number of Female State Legislators Serving Nationwide and Percent of All Legislators, 1969-1993**

Year	Number of Female State Legislators	Percent of of All State Legislators
1969	301	4.0
1971	344	4.5
1973	424	5.6
1975	604	8.0
1977	688	9.1
1979	770	10.3
1981	908	12.1
1983	991	13.3
1985	1,103	14.8
1987	1,170	15.7
1989	1,270	17.0
1991	1,388	18.3
1992	1,375	18.4
1993	1,516	20.4

Source: Center for the American Woman and Politics, Rutgers University, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, N.J., 08901. Phone: (908) 828-2210.



***U.S. Sen. Sam Ervin helped thwart proponents of the Equal Rights Amendment with an appearance at a 1979 legislative hearing on the issue.***

## A Growing Force in the Legislature

**T**he influence of female legislators climbed to what may have been an all-time high in 1993. "Clearly, there is no job out there that an elected official can do that can't be done by women that are currently serving in the legislature," says House Speaker Dan Blue (D-Wake). "Women have come to full power, at least in the House, and that's as it should be."<sup>10</sup>

Women are forging alliances, promoting their own issues, and playing key roles both in supporting and opposing legislation. Consider these examples:

■ When Gov. James B. Hunt Jr. unveiled his plans for new education standards and school accountability, he turned to two powerful female legislators for help in passing his programs—Rep. Anne Barnes (D-Orange), and Sen. Beverly Perdue (D-Craven), chairs of the House and Senate education committees.<sup>11</sup>

■ Two female Republicans—Reps. Connie Wilson of Mecklenburg County and Cherie Berry of Catawba—led opposition to Hunt's "Smart Start" package of legislation for preschool children. A third female Republican, Sen. Betsy Cochrane (R-Davie) worked quietly in the Senate to rewrite the legislation and meet some of the objections raised by Republicans in the House.<sup>12</sup>

■ Rep. Annie Brown Kennedy (D-Forsyth), chaired the House Courts and Justice Committee, which took on such difficult issues as a bill to prevent the state from executing mentally retarded murder defendants and an overhaul of the insurance system for compensating injured workers.

■ Freshman Rep. Jean Preston (R-Carteret) led the effort in the House to turn back a bill sponsored by Senate President Pro Tempore Basnight (D-Dare) that would have restricted menhaden boats off the Dare County coast.<sup>13</sup> Basnight sought the restriction to protect tourism, but Preston feared it would hurt a menhaden fishing fleet that operates out of Beaufort in her home county.

■ Rep. Ruth Easterling (D-Mecklenburg), the 83-year-old co-chair of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Human Resources, rose time and again in the early morning hours of May 27 to turn back efforts to alter appropriations as the House worked through the night to pass its operations budget bill.

■ And Sen. Elaine Marshall (D-Harnett), a lawyer specializing in domestic cases, helped get a law repealing a marital rape exemption through a reluctant Senate judiciary committee. Until its repeal, the law allowed a man to force sex on his wife without her consent as long as he was living with her at the time the incident occurred. Rep. Bertha Holt (D-Alamance) spearheaded the cam-

paign to repeal the marital rape exemption. But she got a key assist from Marshall in the Senate. Marshall swayed her fellow committee members by inviting victims of spousal rape to testify before the committee.<sup>14</sup>

"The women legislators played a key role in the passage of not only the governor's program but in a variety of issues," says Jim Phillips, Hunt's legislative liaison. "Everywhere you turned, on just about every issue, there were women who wielded power on the issue. You don't think about women legislators as women legislators anymore. They are just good legislators who know their stuff."

### New Players at the Table

**L**t. Gov. Dennis Wicker, a former six-term House member who now presides over the Senate, says female legislators have changed not

only the composition of the legislature, but the issues that come to the table for discussion. "I think we've seen a lot more debate on women's issues and children's issues as a result of more women taking part in the process. The most obvious and glaring example of that is the marital rape bill. I would venture to say that but for the clout of women legislators, that bill would never have been approved. Certainly 10 years ago, it would never have been debated, much less passed into law."

Because of the growing number of women serving in the General Assembly, says Sen. Howard Lee (D-Orange), "policy decisions will be more broadly based. From the women's perspective, men don't always have the sensitivity to the unique problems that women face." On such issues as domestic violence and spousal rape, says Lee, "having the presence of women whom we all respect in these policy discussions has enlightened many of us men."

Besides the spousal rape bill, women lawmakers also played key roles in passing legislation that banned demonstrations in obstructing access to abortion clinics,<sup>15</sup> affirmed a woman's right to breastfeed in public,<sup>16</sup> increased appropriations for domestic violence centers,<sup>17</sup> implemented Hunt's early childhood initiatives,<sup>18</sup> and strengthened



**Rep. Connie Wilson (R-Mecklenburg) received media attention for opposing "Smart Start" legislation but also developed expertise on health care issues.**

Karen Tam

the law against child abuse.<sup>19</sup> "Almost all of the things we did will help women and will help children," says Rep. Bertha Holt (D-Alamance).

Holt says the current state of affairs is a far cry from when she arrived in Raleigh for her first term in 1975. Then, says Holt, the General Assembly was still under the control of "good ol' boys," and women had to fight for recognition to speak on the House floor. Today, she says, younger male lawmakers are more open to women's views and more supportive of issues that traditionally have been considered women's issues—like her bill repealing the marital rape exemption.

Easterling says domestic violence, infant mortality, and child care needs have been issues that society and state lawmakers have not wanted to deal with in the past. She says they were pushed to the forefront in the 1993 General Assembly by the record number of women serving.

North Carolina ranks 30th nationally in the number of female legislators, sandwiched between Missouri and Florida, and trails only Maryland and Arkansas among the Southern states.<sup>20</sup> (See Table 3, p. 12.) Washington ranks No. 1, with females constituting 39.5 percent of its legislators. But the fact that North Carolina elected 31 female members in 1993 becomes more impressive when one considers that in 1971, the North Carolina General Assembly had only two female legislators, both serving in the House. By 1993, the Senate had seven women serving and the House 24. (See Table 1, p. 5.)<sup>21</sup>

And more important than sheer numbers, legislative observers say, is the quality—the ability, intelligence, and energy—not only of veteran female legislators but of the influx of first-term women. "Being a woman or a man shouldn't make a difference," says Perdue. "I have never seen a door closed because I was a woman." Power in the legislature is based largely on seniority, Perdue



Karen Tam

***Sen. Elaine Marshall (D-Harnett) helped shepherd spousal rape legislation through the senate.***

says. "I'm able to do what most good legislators can do after eight years."

## Gender Still Makes a Difference

**B**ut observers say gender still makes a difference in the General Assembly, and power, particularly the power of the purse strings, still rests with male legislators. "Basically, the North Carolina General Assembly is, for the most part, under the control of men," says Roslyn Savitt, lobbyist for the N.C. chapters of the National Organization for Women and the National Associa-





"ALMOST ALL THE THINGS WE DID  
WILL HELP WOMEN AND WILL HELP  
CHILDREN."

*REP. BERTHA HOLT, CHAIR,  
WOMEN'S LEGISLATIVE CAUCUS*

were men, with Sen. Helen Marvin (D-Gaston) the top-ranked woman at 17th.<sup>22</sup> Marvin chose not to run in 1992 and is now a member of the University of North Carolina's Board of Governors. Only three other women were ranked in the top half of the Senate: Sen. Betsy Cochrane (R-Davie), 19th; Perdue, 20th; and Sen. Lura Tally (D-Cumberland), 22nd.

In the House, the highest ranking women were Anne Barnes at 13th and Speaker Pro Tempore Marie Colton (D-Buncombe) at 14th. The next highest ranked woman was Stamey at 25th.

Those numbers have not changed dramatically since the first effectiveness rankings were published for the 1977 legislature. That year, Rep. Patricia S. Hunt (D-Orange) was the

highest-ranked woman in the House at 12th. (Hunt peaked at 10th in the 1979 rankings, and ultimately was appointed a District Court judge by then-Gov. Jim Hunt.) Sen. Katherine Sebo (D-Guilford) was the only woman to be ranked in the top half of the Senate for 1977, at 24th of 50.<sup>23</sup>

tion of Social Workers. "That's not to say that there aren't people like Dan Blue who are very strong on women's issues. But the final decision-making still is in the hands of men."

Peggy Stamey, a Wake County Democrat who served 10 years in the House before resigning in July 1993 to accept an N.C. Parole Commission appointment, agrees with that assessment. "Believe me," Stamey says. "Men still control the legislature. Things have improved for women, but not nearly enough."

Since 1977, the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research has published biennial effectiveness rankings for legislators based on ratings by their legislative colleagues, registered lobbyists, and the capital press corps. Women consistently have had trouble breaking into the top 10 percent of either the Senate or the House. In the Center's rankings of the effectiveness of the 1991 General Assembly (the most recent year for which rankings are available), the 16 highest ranking senators

highest-ranked woman in the House at 12th. (Hunt peaked at 10th in the 1979 rankings, and ultimately was appointed a District Court judge by then-Gov. Jim Hunt.) Sen. Katherine Sebo (D-Guilford) was the only woman to be ranked in the top half of the Senate for 1977, at 24th of 50.<sup>23</sup>

## Men Get the Plum Appointments

**A**ppointment to a committee chairmanship is one route to effectiveness, particularly appointment to head one of the four committees that spend and raise money. Men head all of the General Assembly's money committees—the House and Senate appropriations committees, which decide how to spend money, and the finance committees of the two chambers, which decide how revenue is raised. Easterling, Holt, and Rep. Mary McAllister (D-Cumberland) serve as co-chairs of appropriations subcommittees in the House.<sup>24</sup>

"It certainly increases the number of people who come to your door," says McAllister of her appointment as transportation appropriations co-chairman. "Becoming chairman of the group gives you a much broader perspective." In the Senate, all appropriations subcommittees are headed by men.

In its effectiveness rankings surveys, the Center also asks respondents to rate which of the General Assembly's committees were most powerful. Of the 12 committees designated most powerful in the 1991 session by respondents, only one was chaired by a woman. Barnes headed the House Education Committee, rated the House's fifth most powerful committee.<sup>25</sup>

In the Senate, Democrats ignored women in selecting officers for the 1993 session, choosing Sen. Marc Basnight (D-Dare) as president pro tempore of the Senate and Sen. Ralph Hunt, an

African-American from Durham County, as majority whip. Cochrane, the Senate's sole female officer, was chosen Republican minority whip. Basnight says the fact that women hold fewer leadership positions in the Senate has more to do with seniority than gender. "You look first for competence and not for [gender]," Basnight says. "There has to be some experience in the office."

The seven women serving in the Senate, while promising, "haven't been there any period of time," says Basnight. "There's no seniority there. In the Senate, you have to *compete* for committee assignments and chairmanships. To be able to do the job takes experience and time."

Adds Sen. Leslie Winner, a freshman Democrat from Mecklenburg, "In the Senate, no freshmen—male or female—were selected to chair standing committees, and all Democrats who were not freshmen—male and female—were selected."

## Women's Issues? Yes and No

**A**re there really such things as women's issues? I put the question to 16 Democratic and Republican lawmakers. Of the dozen who responded, the consensus was "not really."

Issues that were once considered important only to women—such as child care—have become more relevant to male politicians in recent years. Even issues like abortion, domestic violence, and problems associated with displaced homemakers—once depicted solely as "women's issues"—now also are being cast as human rights and public health issues.

Still, there's something paradoxical about the responses of female lawmakers to this question. They say there are no women's issues, and then they go on to name some. Most women could think of only one or two, but string them together and you get a list of women's concerns, with few differences between the two parties.

That list includes domestic violence, pay equity, abortion, mandatory insurance coverage for mammograms and pap smears, breast feeding in public, and child care and other child

advocacy issues.

Several of the female lawmakers said they are the ones who promote and best understand these issues. In that limited sense, they *are* women's issues. Still, they say issues that affect women generally affect everyone. "These are people's issues," says Rep. Joni Bowie (R-Guilford).

Rep. Bertha Holt (D-Alamance) says elimination of the spousal defense in rape prosecutions during the 1993 session of the General Assembly was the closest she could come to identifying a woman's issue. As for domestic violence, she says, "I think it's a family issue. I think it's a public health issue. The chief reason for women going to the emergency room is that they have been beaten."

"Women have been painted into a box," says Rep. Connie Wilson (R-Mecklenburg). "Women's issues encompass the whole scheme of what we deal with in Raleigh. All the issues are intertwined. I see all the issues as women's issues."

—Betty Mitchell Gray

**Table 3. Percentage of Women in State Legislatures and Ranking Among the 50 States**

State	Percent of Female Legislators	Ranking Among the 50 States
Alabama	5.7%	49
Alaska	21.7	21
Arizona	35.6	2
Arkansas	9.6	46
California	23.3	18
Colorado	34.0	3
Connecticut	25.1	13
Delaware	14.5	38
Florida	17.5	31
Georgia	17.4	32
Hawaii	23.7	16
Idaho	30.5	7
Illinois	23.2	19
Indiana	19.3	27*
Iowa	14.7	37
Kansas	29.5	8
Kentucky	4.3	50
Louisiana	6.9	48
Maine	31.2	6
Maryland	23.4	17
Massachusetts	23.0	20
Michigan	19.6	26
Minnesota	27.4	9
Mississippi	10.9	44
Missouri	19.3	29
Montana	19.3	27*

State	Percent of Female Legislators	Ranking Among the 50 States
Nebraska	20.4	23
Nevada	27.0	11
New Hampshire	33.5	5
New Jersey	12.5	41
New Mexico	19.6	25
New York	16.1	35
<b>North Carolina</b>	<b>18.2</b>	<b>30</b>
North Dakota	16.3	34
Ohio	21.2	22
Oklahoma	9.4	47
Oregon	26.7	12
Pennsylvania	9.9	45
Rhode Island	24.7	14
South Carolina	12.9	40
South Dakota	20.0	24
Tennessee	12.1	42
Texas	16.0	36
Utah	13.5	39
Vermont	33.9	4
Virginia	11.4	43
Washington	39.5	1
West Virginia	16.4	33
Wisconsin	27.3	10
Wyoming	24.4	15
<b>National Avg.</b>	<b>20.4%</b>	

\* Denotes a tie that affects ranking. States in which ties are due to rounding rather than to exact percentages are ranked according to exact percentages.

Source: Center for the American Woman and Politics, Rutgers University.

Winner later was selected chair of a select committee on bonds and instructional technology.

Sen. Lura Tally (D-Cumberland), a 20-year veteran with six Senate terms and five House terms to her credit, says the Senate has been slower in advancing women into positions of leadership. "The Senate has been much slower in taking on women," she says, "but the Senate has traditionally been more conservative."

Holt, however, says there is clear room for improvement in the House as well. "The election of Dan Blue (as House speaker) was very, very good for women," says Holt. "But still there has not ever been a female in the legislature who's been very close to the decision-making in the legislature. It will probably be a long time before there is."

What would it take to push more women into positions of leadership in the General Assembly? More numbers would probably help, although the state of Alaska is showing that women don't have to have dominant numbers to dominate. There, with 13 females among 60 legislators, women hold the offices of House speaker, majority leader, minority leader, and Senate Finance co-chairman.<sup>26</sup>

## A Call for Equity

**T**he proportion of women serving in the N.C. General Assembly—at 18.2 percent—exceeds the average for the South, where females make up 12 percent of the typical legislative body.<sup>27</sup> Still, some say more women should be serving. "Thirty-one women is just not enough out of 170 legislators," says Anne Mackie, director of the Women's Agenda Program for N.C. Equity, a Raleigh non-profit advocating for women's issues. "We need equity."

Perdue adds, "Women represent 52 percent of the population in the state. We certainly are not 52 percent of the elected population in the state."

The 61 percent success rate of women candidates for the legislature in 1992 shows women *can* be elected to the legislature in North Carolina *if* they run. But with 51 candidates for

170 seats, only so much headway can be made. More women are running for the legislature than ever before, but observers say barriers remain.

Women who enter politics are "fighting the traditional role of wife and mother," says Penny Craver, development director for the N.C. Institute for Political Leadership in Wilmington, which teaches participants how to wage successful political campaigns. The institute has graduated 238 would-be politicians since it opened in 1988. Of these, 87, or 36.5 percent, are women.

Four institute alumnae are now serving in the General Assembly: Sens. Gunter and Marshall and Reps. Frances Cummings (D-Robeson) and Wilson. But Craver says in politics, women have to walk a fine line between being perceived as too

***Rep. Marie Colton (D-Buncombe)—  
Speaker Pro Tempore and among the  
most effective legislators.***



Karen Tam



Karen Tam

**Sen. Leslie D. Winner (D-Mecklenberg) scrutinizes a bill in committee.**

outspoken or too timid, while men win points for being outspoken and decisive.

Others point to a lack of self-confidence among women, family pressures, difficulty in raising money for campaigns, long absences from home, and comparatively low legislative salaries as reasons more women don't seek election to the General Assembly. "Heaven knows, balancing family and the General Assembly is not that easy," says Marshall.

Adds Berry, "If you can't stand the heat, stay in the kitchen, because it's not that easy."

One problem that has surfaced in other states—sexual harassment of female legislators, apparently is not an overt problem in North Carolina.<sup>28</sup> "To my knowledge, we have not had a problem with that," says Legislative Services Officer George Hall. "I'm not aware of any complaint."

Sex role harassment, however, may be another story. Rep. Joanne Bowie (R-Guilford), a public relations executive with adult children, says when she first arrived in Raleigh in 1989, she was told by an older, male colleague, "You need to go home and take care of your babies."

Those women who *do* take the plunge and run for legislative office are finding that many roads lead to Raleigh. Many, like Easterling, McAllister, and Bowie served in local government before seeking office. Easterling, Charlotte's only female city council member when she decided to run for the

legislature in 1976, was blithe about her decision to seek higher office. "I never thought about being in politics," says Easterling. "I just sort of fell into it. I realized that so much of what we do depended on money and permission from Raleigh. So, I decided I'd rather come down here and give permission."

Bowie decided to run after more than a decade of service in local government. She did so, she says, "mainly because there were not enough women in the General Assembly."

Others, like Stamey, the Wake County Democrat, and Wilson, the Mecklenburg County Republican, have worked their way up the political ladder through party organizations. Kuczmarski and Cummings demonstrate yet another route to Raleigh. They gained lobbying experience with professional associations before running for the legislature—Cummings with the North Carolina Association of Educators and Kuczmarski with the North Carolina Chiropractic Association.

Cochrane believes female candidates have at least one advantage over their male counterparts. Where a male candidate might be dismissed as just another politician, female candidates generally are perceived as issue-oriented and sincere, Cochrane says. "The public perceives women less negatively, and they are not smeared with that brush that says politicians are bad."

—continues on page 16

## Fundraising Less an Obstacle

One barrier—fundraising—is apparently less an obstacle for female candidates than it once was. Female candidates say they are becoming more comfortable asking for money, and, as the number of female candidates has grown in recent years, various partisan and non-partisan political action committees (PACs) have organized to help these candidates.

In 1992, winning female House candidates raised more than males—an average of \$17,975 compared to \$17,375 for winning male candidates. The difference was wider in the Senate, where successful female candidates raised \$35,177 on average, compared to \$30,379 for winning men.<sup>29</sup> In the Senate, three of the top 10 money-raisers were women, while an unsuccessful female candi-

---

***“The public perceives women less negatively, and they are not smeared with that brush that says politicians are bad.”***

—SEN. BETSY COCHRANE (R-DAVIE)

---

date had the 10th highest fund-raising total in the House.<sup>30</sup>

“I had no trouble raising money or getting support,” says Rep. Berry. Berry says women have become more active in politics and promot-

---

### *Press Corps, continued*

see just because I’m a white male.”

The UNC Center for Public Television maintained the largest *broadcast* presence at the General Assembly and the most diverse staff. “In the beginning, I sort of felt outnumbered,” says Maria Lundberg, a four-term legislative veteran. “But sometimes I think that being one of the few women that are down there really is an advantage in talking with the legislators.”

Lundberg says the three women who covered the General Assembly during the nightly broadcast of *Stateline: Legislative Reports* helped give the telecast “as many different viewpoints as possible. The feeling has been very strong that all parts of society are represented—to try to have as much diversity as possible.”

Still, there was more criticism of the press corps’ composition than of its coverage of female legislators. “Women legislators are treated, by and large, fairly by the press,” says Sheehan. “Their problems are more with their colleagues.”

Rep. Erin Kuczmarski (D-Wake) says her first-year efforts drew little media attention, but she did not question journalists’ judgment. “Reporters go to the person who is making the news,” Kuczmarski says. “They probably have

not been as interested in me because I am a freshman and still learning. They get their stories from the leadership—like [Speaker] Dan Blue and [Senate President Pro Tempore] Marc Basnight.”

Bruce Siceloff, *The News & Observer’s* state government editor, says even though its legislative reporters all are white males, the newspaper employs a large number of female reporters and is taking steps to hire more people of color. “In hiring or in a promotion—in a staffing decision—diversity should be considered,” Siceloff says. “It’s an important consideration that I weigh in making these decisions.” Siceloff says the newspaper occasionally assigns women to cover the General Assembly when issues are being debated in an area normally covered by a female reporter.

Siceloff agrees that having a woman or an African American reporter assigned to the General Assembly on a regular basis “would broaden our sensitivity to things and make us better.” On the other hand, he says, “I’m not aware of any stories that have been missed” by having all white males cover the legislature.

Sheehan says there were a few occasions, particularly in coverage of political campaigns, when she would write stories about issues ignored by her male colleagues. One such article

ing women's issues, and that translates into more dollars for candidates. "They're out there, and they're active now," she says.

Rep. Connie Wilson, a Charlotte banker, says her business background has helped her raise money. "I'm used to working with people and their money," she says. "A lot of politicians—not just women—are afraid to ask, but I'm not afraid to ask."

In recent years, statewide political organizations such as the Pine Needles Network, N.C. NOW (National Organization for Women), the Women's Political Caucus, and Women Elect have become more active in contributing to female candidates. The Pine Needles Network, for example, was founded in 1990 with the specific goal of helping elect women to the state legislature. "Our

sole function is to raise money and give money away," says Jan Parker, the network's 1992 treasurer and now a Hunt administration official.

While many women's PACs contribute on a non-partisan basis, the Pine Needles Network contributes only to Democratic female candidates who are waging tight races in the general election, Parker says. In 1992, the PAC contributed \$10,500 to 21 female candidates for state legislature.

Senate Minority Whip Cochrane says she knows of no such group that exists strictly to promote female Republican candidates. The Federation of Republican Women's Clubs contributes to female candidates, she says, but its mission is broader than electing women to office. "The Republicans have looked for a strong candidate with the best potential to win," says Cochrane. "If she

concerned a derogatory remark Democratic U.S. Senate candidate Bo Thomas made about women in front of a reporter for *The Independent Weekly* newspaper during the 1990 Democratic primary campaign. Aside from *The Independent Weekly*'s Barry Yeoman, Sheehan says she was the only reporter who thought the incident worth reporting.<sup>2</sup>

If female reporters bring an additional perspective to state government reporting, why don't more women get the assignment? Denton says it may be that women who prove proficient at covering state government—like Sheehan and Elizabeth Leland, an award-winning reporter for *The Charlotte Observer*—quickly move up the ladder to larger papers and more glamorous assignments. Ann Peters, one of two women who covered the 1985 General Assembly for the now-defunct United Press International Raleigh bureau, got promoted from reporter to state editor to foreign desk editor to foreign correspondent in the news agency's Jerusalem Bureau in a dizzying three-year span.

It usually doesn't happen *that* fast. Sheehan joined *The News & Observer*'s Orange County Bureau when she left her post with the Freedom newspaper chain. "At the time, I thought it was the only thing to do," says Sheehan of her

legislative reporting experience. "But once I left, I discovered that the world was larger than just the halls of the legislature."

And some legislative observers say gender makes less difference than it used to in the coverage of what were once viewed solely as women's issues. "Most [reporters] have children and most have wives working outside the home who are involved in their own careers," says Rachel Perry, Governor Jim Hunt's communications director. "They are involved in day care for their children and other family issues more so than 10 years ago." Still, the consensus seems to be that more females in the capital press corps would broaden legislative coverage and result in more articles about issues important to women.

—Betty Mitchell Gray

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The seven women and their employers are: Betty Gray, *The Virginian-Pilot*; Erika Alderson, *The Insider*; Susan Samples, WECT-TV; and Jane Madden, Beth Hardee, Amy Green, and Maria Lundberg, UNC Center for Public Television.

<sup>2</sup> Barry Yeoman, "Bo Knows . . . How to Take on Big Business and Jesse Helms, But Does He Know How to Keep His Foot Out of His Mouth?," *The Independent Weekly*, Durham, N.C., April 26, 1990, p. 7.



***Rep. Theresa Esposito (R-Forsyth) lends an ear in committee to Rep. Larry Justus (R-Henderson).***

happened to be a woman, more power to her." Cochrane says Republican women have gotten financial support from women's groups and other advocacy groups operating at the local level, although not as much as Democrats.

### **Diversity Versus Effectiveness**

**I**ncreased ability to raise money likely will increase the number of female legislators. That, in turn, would likely increase their clout in the General Assembly. But numbers aren't the only factor that determines effectiveness. Some observers say the Women's Legislative Caucus has not been as successful as it could have been in promoting women's issues and advancing women legislators into positions of leadership.

That's in part because of the diversity of the group. In contrast to the 25-member Democratic Black Legislative Caucus, the women's caucus is about one-third Republican. Blacks have been successful in pushing members into positions of leadership and in accomplishing legislative goals because they all belong to the same party and have been able to agree on a common agenda.<sup>31</sup>

Consensus is much more difficult to achieve with a bipartisan coalition. "We, as a women's

group, have more power in numbers, but the women's caucus is divided," says Holt, who is serving her second term as caucus chairman. Holt says the group typically selects one or two issues to back. One example was a successful effort to win increased funding for domestic violence centers. Another was funding for a displaced homemaker program.<sup>32</sup> There was also the marital rape bill, which was co-sponsored by all 31 female legislators.

Still, the caucus has to choose its battles carefully because there are many issues upon which women in the legislature divide their support along partisan lines. An example is whether to increase appropriations for the state abortion fund for poor women, which Democrats generally favor and Republicans oppose. "That we can pull together on even one or two issues has helped," Holt says.

Easterling says, "You can't lump all women together. The coalitions change within women's groups just like they do with men's groups."

### **Support from the Executive Branch**

**P**art of the success of female legislators can be traced to the fact that Gov. Hunt's 1993 legislative agenda included issues that have been de-



***"You can't lump all women together. The coalitions change within women's groups just like they do with men's groups."***

—REP. RUTH EASTERLING  
(D-MECKLENBURG)

scribed as "women's issues"—those that are of particular concern to women. For example, Hunt identified early childhood intervention as a major objective of his administration. This issue also was important to many female legislators, although support was not universal. Rep. Connie Wilson (R-Mecklenburg) stirred the Christian right to oppose the package and was accused by her House colleagues of spreading misinformation.

Wilson views her role differently. "The bill was being ramrodded through the legislature," says Wilson. "I felt the responsibility to inform

the people of North Carolina as to what was in the bill and what was not in the bill." Wilson says questions raised by her, Rep. Cherie Berry (R-Catawba), and others, resulted in more than 200 lines of changes in the legislation establishing a nonprofit corporation to develop 12 pilot day care programs for young children. "Every issue that we brought up was addressed," Wilson says. Blue later appointed one male Smart Start opponent, Rep. Robin Hayes (R-Cabarrus), to the corporation's governing board.

Female legislators say Blue's willingness to appoint women to head important House committees, such as Transportation, Environment, and Courts and Justice, also has been important. "The total environment is better," says Easterling. "We have a new administration in the state and a new administration in the country."

Cochrane, however, says that while Hunt's legislative agenda may have benefited women in the General Assembly, Republicans have the longer track record for placing women in positions of leadership. Cochrane served as House Minority Leader in the 1985 and 1987 sessions before moving to the Senate in 1989, where she is now minority whip. "Republicans elected me as minority leader and gave me the opportunity at leadership,

***Women's suffrage advocates rally for a woman's right to vote in this 1920 photo.***



and that was the first time a woman had been in a leadership position in the history of the General Assembly," she says.

Cochrane says former Republican Gov. Jim Martin also was supportive of women, appointing three female cabinet members and a number of division heads and finishing out his term with a female chief of staff. "The Republicans are seldom pictured as being supportive of women, and that is not a fair assessment," she says.

## Role Models Past and Present

**T**he fact that *both* parties are electing female legislators and that women are being named to lofty executive branch positions means more role models for a new generation seeking public office and careers in public service. Indeed, women may find that the public sector represents a quicker path to power than does the private sector, where the proverbial glass ceiling is said to block their rise through the corporate ranks.<sup>33</sup>

Representative Lillian Exum Clement, the state's first female legislator, clearly understood that she was paving the way for future generations. "I want to blaze a trail for other women," Exum is reported to have said in 1923, two years after taking office.<sup>34</sup> "I know that years from now there will be many other women in politics."

Marshall expresses a similar sentiment 60 years later. "To just show the women that grew up in Harnett County that you do not need to be landed gentry to make a difference and you do not need to be male to make a difference—if my service up here can just do a little bit of that, it will be well worth my time, and I will be well pleased," she says.

Adds Cochrane, "Women have obstacles to overcome in their own thinking. I didn't see myself as a legislator. As women find out they can get elected—that the network of support is out there—they will be more encouraged to seek elective office."

Many of the current class of female legislators are finding that despite the difficult hours, time away from family, and lack of free time, they are enjoying life in politics. And among these women, the state's voters may see a future governor or member of the Council of State.

"Women who run for office are not going to be satisfied with sideline activity," says Kuczmarski, a chiropractor whose interest in politics stems from her tenure as president of the state's chiropractic trade group. "They were ac-

tive anyway. That's how they got here. I think every woman will tell you that by being down here, we're helping women because we can't be ignored," she says.

Cummings characterizes the female electorate as a sleeping giant that needs to wake up. "Women don't realize that we are 50 percent of the electorate, and we can win," she says. "Women don't recognize the power that we have." ■

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> For an analysis of the demographics of the legislature, see Kim Kebschull Otten and Tom Mather, "Legislative Campaign Costs, PAC Donations Continue to Rise," *North Carolina Insight*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (August 1993), pp. 85–88. See also Kim Kebschull Otten, *Article II: A Guide to the 1993–1994 N.C. Legislature*, North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research, Raleigh, N.C., May 1993, p. 236.

<sup>2</sup> For more on the demographics of North Carolina, see Ken Otterbourg and Mike McLaughlin, "North Carolina's Demographic Destiny: The Policy Implications of the 1990 Census" *North Carolina Insight*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (August 1993), pp. 2–49.

<sup>3</sup> Center for the American Woman and Politics, National Information Bank on Women in Public Office, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, N.J., 08901. Phone: (908) 828-2210. Research conducted by Lucy Baruch.

<sup>4</sup> New Hampshire, with 239 female candidates for its 424-seat legislature, ranked first in total number of candidates. About 59 percent of those candidates won seats. In Florida, 28 of 51 female candidates won seats in the 160-seat General Assembly, and in Idaho, 32 of 51 female candidates won office in the 105-seat legislature, according to the Center for the American Woman and Politics at Rutgers University.

<sup>5</sup> Clement's feat is recounted in Kathy Shinkle, "Women Legislators, Facing a Double Bind," *N.C. Insight*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (Fall 1980), pp. 10–15. Clement served on seven House committees during her first session and chaired the Committee on Institutions for the Deaf and Dumb.

<sup>6</sup> John L. Cheney, *North Carolina Government, 1585–1779: A Narrative and Statistical History*, N.C. Department of Secretary of State, Raleigh, N.C., 1981, pp. 544–553. Totals from 1979 to present are taken from *Article II: A Guide to the 1993–1994 N.C. Legislature*, the biennial guide to the legislature published by the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research.

<sup>7</sup> Marney Rich, "What Happened to the Amendment in N.C.," *The News & Observer*, Raleigh, N.C., August 23, 1981, p. 8-III. This chronology outlines the General Assembly's deliberations on the Equal Rights Amendment, and on the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which gave women the right to vote. It accompanies an article by Rich titled, "A Battle Recalled: Winning the Vote (Rich, p. 1-III)." As was the case with the equal rights amendment, North Carolina was among the last states to consider ratifying the 19th Amendment. Despite having no representation in the General Assembly, women on both sides of the issue were quick to join the fray. The Southern Women's Rejection League argued that, "Men's vote is sufficient to express the will of the people. Among other things, it is not the right order of affairs to expect men to take orders or direction from women officials. Therefore, if women are given further suffrage, they might hold the office of judge, senator, or by political accident—president of the United States." The North Carolina Equal Suffrage Association countered that, "Women are the equals of men in mentality," and urged women

to "raise fewer dahlias and a lot more hell." Opponents won the battle for North Carolina but lost the war when Tennessee ratified the amendment on August 18, 1920. The N.C. legislature ratified the amendment as a symbolic gesture in 1971.

<sup>8</sup> The influence of female legislators on this change in the marital rape law is recounted in Jack Betts, "In the Legislature, White Male Democrats Become a Minority," *North Carolina Insight*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (June 1991), p. 68. Until this change in the law, marriage was a complete defense against a rape charge unless the couple had a written separation agreement or was living apart under judicial decree. The 1987 change in the law dropped this requirement for legal documentation and allowed prosecution if the couple were separated. The law providing an exemption from prosecution for spousal rape was repealed outright in the 1993 session of the General Assembly (Chapter 274 of the 1993 Session Laws, H.B. 214.)

<sup>9</sup> Chapter 490 of the 1991 Session Laws (H.B. 347), now codified as G.S. 58-51-57.

<sup>10</sup> Of 52 chairmen or co-chairmen of standing committees or subcommittees for the 1993 session, Blue appointed 11 women, or 21 percent. Of 31 potential appointments in the Senate, President Pro Tempore Marc Basnight (D-Dare), appointed four women, a 13 percent appointment rate. Women represent 20 percent of the House membership, and 14 percent of the Senate membership, so the number of committee chair and co-chair appointments by Blue and Basnight is in line with the overall number of females serving in the two chambers.

<sup>11</sup> Hunt's Education Standards and Accountability Commission was authorized by S.B. 878 (Chapter 117 of the 1993 Session Laws), now codified as G.S. 115C-105.1—105.10.

<sup>12</sup> Hunt's child-care initiatives were enacted by the General Assembly as special provisions in the budget bill (S.B. 27: Chapter 321, sec. 254 of the 1993 Session Laws) and in H.B. 720 (Chapter 432 of the 1993 Session Laws).

<sup>13</sup> S.B. 991 of the 1993 Session.

<sup>14</sup> Chapter 274 of the 1993 Session Laws (H.B. 214).

<sup>15</sup> Chapter 412 of the 1993 Session Laws (S.B. 873).

<sup>16</sup> Chapter 301 of the 1993 Session Laws (S.B. 1143).

<sup>17</sup> Chapter 561, Sec. 6 of the 1993 Session Laws (S.B. 26).

<sup>18</sup> See note 9 above.

<sup>19</sup> Chapter 324 of the 1993 Session Laws (H.B. 625).

<sup>20</sup> Office for the American Woman and Politics, Rutgers University, 1993.

<sup>21</sup> Kim Keschull Otten, *Article II: A Guide to the 1993–1994 N.C. Legislature*, N.C. Center for Public Policy Research, Raleigh, N.C., May 1993, p. 236.

<sup>22</sup> The Center's legislative effectiveness rankings for the 1991 General Assembly are published in Kim Keschull Otten, *Article II: A Guide to the 1993–1994 N.C. Legislature*, North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research, Raleigh, N.C., May 1993, pp. 212–230.

<sup>23</sup> Fred R. Harwell Jr., *Article II: A Guide to the [1977–78] N.C. Legislature*, N.C. Center for Public Policy Research, Raleigh, N.C., 1978, pp. 189–194.

<sup>24</sup> Easterling is co-chair of the Appropriations Subcommittee on Human Resources, Holt is co-chair of the Appropriations Subcommittee on Justice and Public Safety, and McAllister is co-chairman of the Appropriations Subcommittee on Transportation.

<sup>25</sup> 1991 committee rankings are published in Otten, note 22 above at p. 231. For 1991 standing committees and committee membership, see Kim Keschull, *Article II: A Guide to the 1991–92 N.C. Legislature*, N.C. Center for Public Policy Research, Raleigh, N.C., May 1991, pp. 200–210.

<sup>26</sup> Gary Boulard, "Women at the Wheel," *State Legislatures*, National Conference of State Legislatures, Denver, CO, August 1993, p. 31.

<sup>27</sup> Gary Boulard, "The South's Growing Pains," *State Legis-*

*latures*, National Conference of State Legislators, August 1993, p. 12.

<sup>28</sup> Female legislators have alleged sexual harassment in Colorado, Georgia, Minnesota, New York, and Washington, according to a survey by Maryland's Department of Legislative Reference. For more on this topic, see Dianna Gordon, "It's Not About Sex—It's About Power," *State Legislatures*, National Conference of State Legislatures, July 1993, pp. 51–57.

<sup>29</sup> Kim Keschull Otten and Tom Mather, *The Cost of Running for the North Carolina Legislature—An Analysis of Legislative Campaign Finances During the 1992 Elections in North Carolina*, North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research, Raleigh, N.C., September 1993, pp. 8–9.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid* at pp. 14–15. The three top female money raisers in the Senate, their rank, and amount raised were: Sen. Linda Gunter (D-Wake), 5th, \$59,758; Sen. Leslie Winner (D-Mecklenburg), 6th, \$59,640; and Sen. Mary Seymour (D-Guilford), 10th, \$42,304. Unsuccessful House candidate Wilma Sherrill (R-Buncombe) was the 10th leading money-raiser in that chamber (\$41,750).

<sup>31</sup> For more on this topic, see Milton C. Jordan, "Black Legislators: From Political Novelty to Political Force," *North Carolina Insight*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (December 1989), pp. 40–58.

<sup>32</sup> Chapter 561, Sec. 6, of the 1993 Session Laws (S.B. 26).

<sup>33</sup> For more on the advancement of women in state government, see Angela M. Bullard and Deil S. Wright, "Circumventing the Glass Ceiling: Women Executives in American State Governments," *Public Administration Review*, American Society for Public Administration, Washington, D.C., Vol. 53, No. 3 (May/June 1993), pp. 189–202.

<sup>34</sup> See note 5 above.

*How can you tell who's who  
in the legislature?*

**By reading the 1993–94 edition of . . .**

---

## ARTICLE II

---

### A Guide to the N.C. Legislature

---

Complete with past legislative effectiveness rankings compiled by the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research. Also, information on each legislator's occupation, education, committee assignments, and voting record, as well as trend data since 1975. A bargain at \$22.70—and that includes tax, postage, and handling. Or, order it as a set with the Center's newest research report, *The Cost of Running for the N.C. Legislature*, for \$26 (a savings of \$6.18).

*So give us a call at (919) 832-2839, and  
order a copy of our who's who—Article II*