

# Research-in-Brief

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## Does Women's Representation in Elected Office Lead to Women-Friendly Policy?

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As of spring 2002, women hold 13 of the 100 seats in the U.S. Senate and 60 of the 435 in the U.S. House. They make up just 22.4 percent of state legislatures and are just 5 of 50 governors across the country. Currently, the Inter-Parliamentary Union ranks the United States 52nd out of 179 countries in the world for its percentage of women in the national legislature (Congress). These numbers place the United States near the bottom of Western industrialized democracies.

In the United States, women's unique experiences and shared concerns may be ignored in the policymaking process due to their underrepresentation in elected office. Having women in office could widen political debate to include a larger group of issues traditionally ignored by male policymakers.

This Research-in-Brief analyzes whether having more women in elected office is, in fact, associated with more women-friendly policy in the United States. It does so by examining whether variations in women's levels of elected representation coincide with trends in women-friendly policy across the 50 states, based on an evaluation of data from IWPR's work on *The Status of Women in the States*.

### Women's Elected Representation Across the States

Women's levels of elected representation vary widely across the 50 states. In some states, women make up almost half of all legislators and fill one or more statewide elected offices: governor, lieutenant governor, or other executive positions. In other states, women make up less than 10 percent of the state legislature and fill virtually no high-level elected executive positions in the state. Most, of course, fall somewhere between these two extremes.

Table 1 illustrates the differences among the states in women's elected representation. In this table, states are ranked for their scores on a composite index of women in elected office. This analysis assesses the proportion and importance of offices held by women at four levels: state representatives, state senators, statewide elected executive officials (besides governors), and governors.<sup>1</sup>

*... women's presence in legislatures and other state-level elected offices is closely associated with better policy for women.*

Not surprisingly, states' scores for women in elected office vary quite a bit. With the least representation for women, Mississippi scored 0.52, with women filling only 13.9 percent of seats in the state house of representatives, 5.8 percent of seats in the state senate, and no statewide elected offices in 1996. In contrast, Washington state earned a score of 2.96 for women in elected office. Women comprised 38.8 percent of the state house of representatives and 40.8 percent of the state senate in Washington, and they held half of all statewide elected positions in the executive branch besides governor (only one state, New Jersey, had a female governor in 1996). Generally, states in the West and Northeast had the highest levels of women's representation in 1996, while states in the Southeast had the lowest.

### Women-Friendly Policy Across the States

Within the United States, states have substantial and growing authority over many policies of concern to

**Table 1. State Ranks and Composite Scores for Women in Elected Office, 1996**

RANK	STATE	SCORE
1	Washington	2.96
2	Kansas	2.90
3	Colorado	2.88
4	Alaska	2.73
5	Hawaii	2.60
6	Delaware	2.50
7	New Jersey	2.35
8	Indiana	2.33
9	Minnesota	2.31
10	Arizona	2.16
11	Vermont	2.13
12	Nevada	2.03
13	Connecticut	1.97
14	Ohio	1.94
15	Michigan	1.92
16	Idaho	1.89
17	Oregon	1.80
18	Maryland	1.78
19	Illinois	1.77
20	Rhode Island	1.63
21	Wyoming	1.59
22	Maine	1.58
23	Montana	1.52
24	Nebraska	1.51
24	New Hampshire	1.51
26	North Dakota	1.47
27	New Mexico	1.44
28	New York	1.43
28	South Dakota	1.43
30	Missouri	1.42
31	California	1.37
32	Wisconsin	1.34
33	Utah	1.32
34	Pennsylvania	1.31
35	Iowa	1.28
36	Massachusetts	1.23
37	Texas	1.21
38	Florida	1.19
39	Tennessee	1.15
40	Oklahoma	1.12
41	Georgia	1.03
42	North Carolina	0.99
43	Arkansas	0.98
44	Virginia	0.88
45	West Virginia	0.82
46	South Carolina	0.77
47	Alabama	0.68
48	Louisiana	0.61
49	Kentucky	0.55
50	Mississippi	0.52

**Source:** IWPR's 1996 analysis for *The Status of Women in the States* project, based on information from the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University and the Council of State Governments.

women and their families, including those concerning violence against women; child support; welfare; employment; legal protection for lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women; and reproductive rights. By creating policies around these and many other issues, states can and have enacted a variety of provisions that protect and strengthen, or deteriorate, women's resources and rights.

Of course, defining women-friendly policy can be controversial. Nonetheless, some sources provide useful guidelines about what women-friendly policies might entail at the state level. For example, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which was unanimously adopted by representatives of 189 countries (including the United States) at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, outlines critical issues of concern to women and remaining obstacles to women's advancement, including the need for policies that help prevent violence against women; promote women's economic equality; alleviate poverty among women; improve their physical, mental, and reproductive health and well-being; and enhance their political power.

Based on the Platform for Action, IWPR created a Women's Resources and Rights Checklist of state policies that can be used to advance women's status in these areas in the United States. These rights and resources fall under several categories: protection from violence, access to income support (through welfare and child support collection), women-friendly employment protections, legislation protecting sexual minorities, and reproductive rights. The Checklist is designed to provide a measure of states' commitment to policies intended to help women achieve economic, political, and social well-being. Table 2 provides a list of the policies included in the Women's Resources and Rights Checklist. It also assesses the number of states with each policy or, where appropriate, the average value for all states on a policy indicator.

To evaluate states' commitment to women-friendly policy, the number of policies each state had from the Women's Resources and Rights Checklist in 2000 was totaled.<sup>2</sup> Table 3 provides rankings and total scores for each of the states on the Women's Resources and Rights Checklist.

Like the scores for women in elected office, states' scores on the Women's Resources and Rights Checklist vary widely. Out of a total possible score

**Table 2. Indicators of Women-Friendly Policy: Women’s Resources and Rights Checklist, 2000**

**Total Number of States  
with Policy (of 50) or  
U.S. Average**

**Violence Against Women**

Number of states in which domestic violence is a separate criminal offense: .....	30
Number of states with laws requiring domestic violence training of new police recruits: .....	32
Domestic violence and sexual assault spending per person: .....	\$1.34
Number of states in which a first stalking offense is considered a felony: .....	10
Number of states with laws requiring sexual assault training for police and prosecutors: .....	10

**Child Support**

Percent of single-mother households receiving child support or alimony: .....	34%
Percent of child support cases with orders for collection in which support was collected: .....	39%

**Welfare Policies**

Number of states that extend TANF benefits to children born or conceived while a mother is on welfare: .....	27
Number of states that allow receipt of TANF benefits up to or beyond the 60-month federal time limit: .....	30
Number of states that allow welfare recipients at least 24 months before requiring participation in work activities: .....	23
Number of states that provide transitional child care under TANF for more than 12 months: .....	33
Number of state TANF plans that been certified or submitted for certification under the Family Violence Option or made other provisions for victims of domestic violence: .....	40
In determining welfare eligibility, number of states that disregard the equivalent of at least 50 percent of earnings from a full-time, minimum wage job: .....	25
Average monthly TANF benefit, 1997-98: .....	\$358

**Employment/Unemployment Benefits**

Number of states with minimum wage higher than the federal level as of January 2000: .....	10
Number of states that have mandatory temporary disability insurance: .....	5
Number of states that provide Unemployment Insurance benefits to:	
Low-wage workers .....	12
Workers seeking part-time job .....	9
Workers who leave their jobs for certain circumstances (“good cause quits”) .....	23
As of July 2000, number of states with proposed policies allowing workers to use Unemployment Insurance for paid family leave: .....	0 Enacted; 12 Proposed
Number of states that implemented adjustments to achieve pay equity in state civil services: .....	20

**Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity**

Number of states that have civil rights legislation prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and/or gender identity: .....	19
Number of states that have a Hate Crimes law covering sexual orientation: .....	24
Number of states that have avoided adopting a ban on same-sex marriage: .....	20

**Reproductive Rights**

Number of states that allow access to abortion services:	
Without mandatory parental consent or notification .....	9
Without a waiting period .....	33
Number of states that provide public funding for abortions under any or most circumstances if a woman is eligible: .....	15
Number of states that require health insurers to provide comprehensive coverage for contraceptives: .....	11
Number of states that require health insurers to provide coverage of infertility treatments: .....	10
Number of states that allow the non-biological parent in a gay/lesbian couple to adopt his/her partner’s child: .....	21
Number of states that require schools to provide sex education: .....	18

**Institutional Resources**

Number of states that have a Commission for Women: .....	39
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For sources and more information on the indicators used here, see IWPR’s 2000 report on *The Status of Women in the States*.  
Compiled by the Institute for Women’s Policy Research.

**Table 3. State Ranks and Composite Scores for Women’s Rights and Resources Checklist, 2000**

RANK	STATE	SCORE
1	Hawaii	26.99
2	Vermont	23.63
3	Washington	23.48
4	California	23.47
5	Alaska	22.73
6	New Jersey	21.43
7	Connecticut	21.27
8	Massachusetts	20.99
9	New York	20.42
10	Illinois	19.88
11	Rhode Island	19.67
12	New Mexico	19.66
13	Maryland	19.22
14	Iowa	18.74
15	New Hampshire	18.33
16	Minnesota	18.01
17	Oregon	17.75
18	Nevada	17.69
19	Wisconsin	16.21
20	Pennsylvania	15.64
21	West Virginia	15.42
22	Maine	15.23
23	Texas	14.87
24	Wyoming	13.73
25	Missouri	13.64
26	Kentucky	13.63
27	Montana	13.52
28	Ohio	13.18
29	Utah	12.59
30	Colorado	12.57
31	Delaware	11.89
32	Nebraska	11.54
33	Oklahoma	11.36
34	Arkansas	11.25
35	Florida	10.91
36	Georgia	10.61
37	Kansas	10.41
37	Michigan	10.41
39	South Carolina	10.22
40	Louisiana	10.21
41	Arizona	9.95
42	South Dakota	9.90
43	North Carolina	9.44
44	Alabama	8.84
45	Virginia	8.44
46	North Dakota	8.42
47	Indiana	8.05
48	Idaho	7.48
49	Mississippi	6.58
50	Tennessee	6.35

**Source:** IWPR’s 2000 report on *The Status of Women in the States*.

of 39.2, the best state, Hawaii, earned 27.0 points. In contrast, the worst state, Tennessee, earned just 6.4 points. Once again, women in several Northeastern and Western states fare the best, while women in many Southeastern states fare poorly.

### The Relationship Between Women’s Representation and Women-Friendly Policy

How strong is the relationship between states’ scores for women’s representation and women-friendly policy? In a nutshell, very strong. In general, states with higher levels of women’s representation also have more women-friendly policy.

Figure 1 illustrates the strength of this relationship.<sup>3</sup> This figure maps each state according to its scores for women in elected office and for the Women’s Resources and Rights Checklist. As Figure 1 shows, as states scores’ for women’s elected representation increase, in general their scores on the Women’s Resources and Rights Checklist also increase.

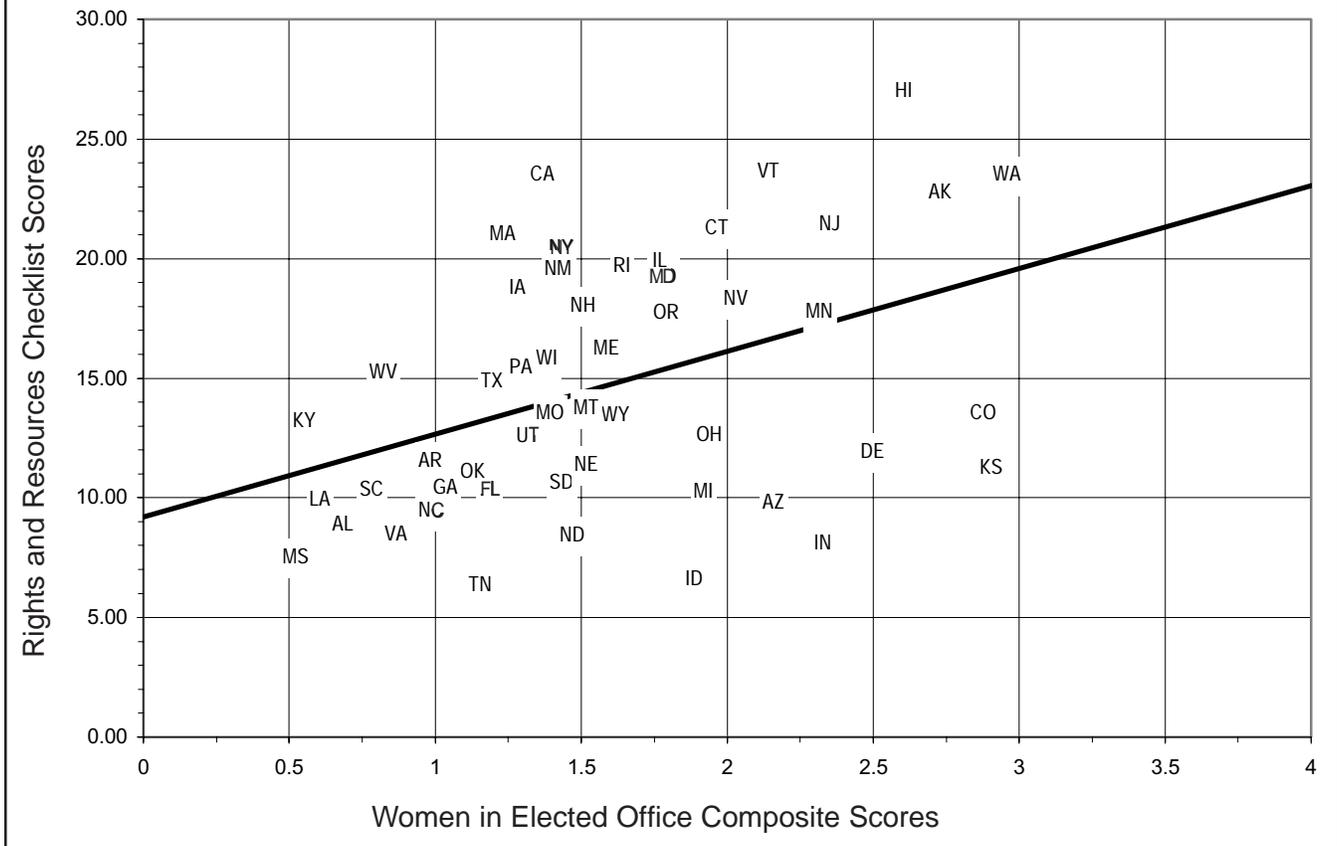
Overall, an increase of one point in a state’s score for women in elected office is associated with an increase of 3.46 points in its score on the Women’s Resources and Rights Checklist. Thus, in a state with equal representation for men and women, the analysis would project an overall score of just over 30 on the Checklist—about 75 percent of the total possible score.

### Conclusion

On an aggregate level, women’s presence in legislatures and other state-level elected offices is closely associated with better policy for women. This suggests that having women in elected office may be important to encouraging states to adopt policies relevant to women’s lives. Conversely, women’s resources and rights may influence the number of women elected to public office.

These findings point to a continued need for targeted efforts to increase women’s representation. Women’s organizations, political parties, and women leaders can all play a role in recruiting women to run for office, supporting women’s candidacies, and encouraging both women and men to vote for them.

**Figure 1. The Relationship between Women in Elected Office and Women-Friendly Policy**



These activities could have significant long-term effects on the rights and resources available to women across the country. While having women in elected office cannot guarantee better policy for women, it can help.

By adopting more policies on the Women's Resources and Rights Checklist, states may also encourage more women to run for office. States may increase the sense that the political process addresses issues of concern to women, or they may give women the resources necessary to do so and win.

### Additional Resources & Information

For information on sources for the data used in this report and details on the indicators used in the Women's Resources and Rights Checklist, see IWPR's reports on *The Status of Women in the States*. Starting in 1996, these reports have been released every two years by IWPR. Each series includes a national overview of trends in women's status and between 9 and 14 in-depth reports on women's status in individual states (see IWPR's website at [www.iwpr.org](http://www.iwpr.org) for more details). The first series of these reports, released in 1996, provided the data measuring women's representation in elected office. The third series of these reports, released in 2000, provided data for the Women's Resources and Rights Checklist.

## Endnotes

1. After each state's scores for each category were standardized (by dividing the observed value for each state by the highest value for all states, to create a score ranging from zero to one), they were weighted according to the relative degree of influence and importance of the position. State representatives were given a weight of 1.0; state senators, 1.25; statewide executive elected officials (except governors), 1.5; governors, 1.75. The resulting scores were added to create a total score for each state. Scores on the composite index were then used to rank the states for women's representation in elected office.

The index created by this analysis is a modified version of the composite index of women in elected office used in IWPR's *Status of Women in the States* reports. The data used to create this composite were compiled by IWPR based on information from the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University and the Council of State Governments.

2. In most cases, states were given a "1" for having the appropriate policy and a "0" for lacking it. Where indicators measure a proportion or dollar amount, scores were first standardized by dividing the score into the mean of the scores for all 50 states.
3. Figure 1 illustrates the results of an OLS regression analysis of the relationship between levels of women's representation (as the independent variable) and levels of women-friendly policy in each state (as the dependent variable). To allow for a potential lag between women's representation and women-friendly policymaking, data for women's political representation are from 1996, while data on women-friendly policy are in most cases from 2000. In the results illustrated here, the  $\beta$  coefficient for women in elected office, 3.46, is significant at the  $p < .01$  level (standard error was 1.09). This simple regression has an adjusted  $r^2$  of .16. The correlation coefficient between women in elected office and the Women's Resources and Rights Checklist was .42, with a significance level of  $p < .01$ .

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