



***Where are the Women?***  
***A Report on the Status of Women in New York's Local Governments***  
**October 2002**

**Introduction**

This survey is the first in a series of biennial surveys planned by the Susan B. Anthony Center for Women's Leadership to track the gender balance of governments in New York's fifty-seven counties and five largest cities, Albany, Buffalo, New York City, Rochester and Syracuse. This survey assesses the numbers of women serving as elected county legislators, city council members, elected chairs or presidents of legislatures or city councils, and mayors or county executives. Future surveys will also examine the rate of growth in women's participation and will attempt to measure how women's participation may change legislative agendas, procedures and political practice.

**Overview**

There are several good reasons New Yorkers might expect to see a healthy number of women serving in their local governments:

- First, 2000 US Census data show that women make up 51.8% of New York's population and 52.7% of residents of voting age, 18 years and older.
- Second, because New York's counties and cities must implement programs central to women's lives, women especially may be drawn to participate at the local level.
- Third, if many women don't run for state or federal offices because districts are large, campaigns expensive and the work is in capitals far from home and family, perhaps women make up the difference by serving in greater proportions in local county and city governments.
- Since women make up 13.6% of the US Congress, with women 21.2% of New York's congressional delegation, and 21.3% of the NYS Legislature, it may be logical to guess that even more women serve at the local level. Certainly male politicians often get experience and name recognition serving in local offices; the greater the number of women in local office, the greater the number prepared to run for state legislature, Congress and state and federal executive offices.
- Finally, because New York State is home of the nation's women's rights movement and many of its most influential past and present women leaders, New York women might be expected to carry on the work of their famous foremothers.

## Findings

In fact, for the fifty-seven counties and five cities combined, only 17.8% of the members of county legislatures and city councils are women. The five city councils include more women (29%) than do the county legislatures. For the county legislatures alone, women are 16.6% of the state's 996 county legislators. Five counties include no women at all; sixteen have one or none; and, 41 (72%) of county legislatures, where the average total number of legislators is fifteen, have three or fewer women. Four women chair their county legislatures and three women chair three of the five city councils. None of the five cities has a woman mayor; only one woman is an elected county executive.

The picture looks somewhat brighter if the five largest counties in New York, Erie, Monroe, Nassau, Suffolk and Westchester, with a total population of 5.36 million, are taken alone. Here women are 23 of 100 county legislators, or, 23%. However, when these five New York counties are compared to the five largest counties in Florida (Broward, Hillsborough, Miami-Dade, Palm Beach and Pinellas, total population 6.8 million), where counties have roles and structures similar to New York counties, the picture is less rosy. In Florida, women are 22 of 43, or 51%, of county legislators (commissioners).

There are many questions to ask about women's under representation in New York's local governments. Are New York-style politics especially unfriendly to women? Wendy Brown, a political scientist who analyzes the role of gender in US politics, notes that "more than any other human activity, politics has historically borne an explicitly masculine identity." (Wendy Brown, *Manhood and Politics*, Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1988.) Does this mean that New York's local politics are more masculine than Florida's? In New York, do we see men as "natural" politicians because they are more likely to be independent, ambitious, self-serving, and aggressive? If more women join New York's local governments, will our beliefs about politicians and our politics change? Will we come to admire and elect women politicians who may be more nurturing, collaborative, and more likely to use power to promote common goals rather than individual careers?

This first survey of women's participation in New York's county and large city governments is the beginning of the Anthony Center's work on these questions. The Center hopes to make New Yorkers aware of the relative absence of women in their local governments and, with that awareness, work with New Yorkers to build solutions.

## **The Role of New York's Local Governments in Women's Lives**

Though federal and state governments make many policy decisions affecting women's lives, county and city governments in New York are responsible for implementing those policies. County and city governments also oversee public safety, public health, environmental and educational programs. The effectiveness, sensitivity and efficiency of these programs may either enhance or hinder women's health, safety and economic well-being

Programs especially relevant to women include: domestic violence prevention, child protective services, enforcement of child support, breast cancer and reproductive health screening and education, city public school systems, community colleges, limits on exposure to second hand tobacco smoke, enhanced child care and welfare reform initiatives.

Women already serving in local governments intuitively echo research in political science which shows that when women serve in numbers large enough to be a “critical mass,” so that they support each other’s experiences, beliefs and values, governments spend more time and resources working to improve the conditions of women’s and children’s lives.

In her work on women in state legislatures (Sue Thomas, *How Women Legislate*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) Sue Thomas suggests that “the better the balance between women and men, the more women can cast aside inhibitions related to minority status and support issues central to their lives.” She found women’s influence on issues involving women, children and families was insignificant when they made up less than 15% of a legislature and was only marginally better where their share reached 25-30%.

The dearth of local elected women in New York, with many legislatures having three or fewer ‘token’ women members and no government having a majority of women legislators or council members, means that New York women have not had the opportunity to experience the kind of “critical mass” that could allow them to effectively shape their governments’ work on the issues that are closest to their lives.

### **Dry Pipeline**

Congresswomen Louise Slaughter, Carolyn Mahoney and former congressman and U.S. Senate candidate, Rick Lazio, all got their start by serving in county or city government. The number of women in the local government pipeline may directly affect the popular dream of a “someday” woman president of the United States. Without larger numbers learning both politics and policy, gaining name recognition and enlarging networks of support, New York’s delegations to Albany and Washington may fail to grow appreciably. 962 New York men serve in local governments as legislators, city council members, mayors and county executives; 196 women do. Women are not being prepared in local government in numbers even closely comparable to men’s.

### **Women in New York’s History**

Women’s low levels of participation are especially surprising given New York’s historic role in the women’s rights movement and the many prominent, influential women still who lead it. In 1848, Elizabeth Candy Stanton helped organize the first women’s right’s meeting in Seneca Falls. Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Emily Collins, and other New York women organized the fight for women’s suffrage from New York, where the epicenter was Susan B. Anthony’s home in Rochester, NY. Other leading New York women include Elizabeth Blackwell, Eleanor Roosevelt, Margaret Sanger, Bella Abzug, Gloria Steinem, Geraldine Ferraro and Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton. Clearly few women have used their example to lead in New York’s local governments.

## **Results**

For all fifty-seven counties and five largest cities, elected women members are 17.8%. One woman is a county executive and none is a mayor.

The Syracuse Common Council has the largest percentage of women serving, at 40%. Counties with the largest percentage of women legislators include: Albany, 30.7%; Erie, 29%; Schuyler, 37.5%; and Tompkins, 33.3%. New York City has the largest number of women serving in local government, 13, but with 51 members of the City Council, they make up just 25% of the Council.

While the five largest counties in New York, Erie, Monroe, Nassau, Suffolk and Westchester have a combined average of 23% for the number of women legislators, none has even a third of women legislators. Monroe County has just 5 out of 29 (17.2%) and Nassau, 3 of 19, which at 15% puts it below the 16.6% total for all county legislatures.

The median number of women serving in county legislatures is 3; New York counties have between 9 and 39 total legislative seats, with the average being 17-18 seats. 72%, or 41 counties have 3 or fewer women legislators. Five counties (Cayuga, Franklin, Madison, Steuben and Warren) have no women serving.

### County Legislatures vs. Boards of Supervisors

New York's counties may be governed by either a legislature, where representatives are elected from legislative districts to govern the county, or by a board of supervisors. In a county run by a board of supervisors, town supervisors from towns in the county join together to also legislate countywide government. Each supervisor also works independently to administer his/her town. 17 counties have boards of supervisors instead of county legislatures. Because women serving on boards serve as town executives (supervisors) as well as legislators, and, because women's numbers in executive seats throughout the state (1 of 57 county executives) and nation (5 of 50 governors; no president) are even lower than their numbers in legislative seats, fewer women may be expected to serve on boards of supervisors. In fact, data show that the percent of women serving on boards of supervisors in the 17 counties is 12.7%. Women who serve only as county legislators in the other 40 counties are 18.3% of all who serve only as legislators.

### Leadership

Because women are nearly a third of city councils (and in Syracuse, 40%) their numbers may allow them to elect female leadership; three of the five cities have female chairs of city councils. (Helen Desfosses in Albany, Lois Geiss in Rochester, and Bethaida Gonzalez in Syracuse.) However, in New York City, arguably the most professional of New York's city and county governments, no woman currently holds a leadership position. (Gifford Miller, Speaker; Joel River, Majority Leader; Bill Perkins, Deputy Majority Leader; Leroy Comrie, Majority Whip; James Oddo, Minority Leader of the

Council; and, Martin Golden, Minority Whip.) None of New York's five largest cities has a woman mayor.

Among county legislatures/board of supervisors 4 of the 57 have a woman chair elected by the legislative body. The chair may appoint members to committees and set the legislative agenda. The four chairs are Mary Pat Hancock (Genesee County), Judith Jacobs (Nassau County), Marcia Tuohey (Orleans County) and Lois Bronz (Westchester County).

Only one county, Rensselaer, has a woman county executive. She is Kathleen Jimino.

## **Comparisons**

The Anthony Center's goal for its first survey of women elected to serve in New York's local governments is to establish a baseline for this time and this place. But certainly the data raise a host of compelling questions: When did women first win election to county and city governments? What is the rate of change? How does New York compare with local governments in other states and countries? While these questions are work for future years' reports, some interesting comparisons can be made.

For example, Florida and Maryland, like New York, give counties responsibility for implementing many public safety, health and social service programs. Counties have legislatures (sometimes called councils or commissions) and members are elected from local districts. When New York's five largest counties (Erie, Monroe, Nassau, Suffolk and Westchester, pop. 5.36 million) are compared to the five largest counties in Florida (Broward, Hillsborough, Miami-Dade, Palm Beach and Pinellas, pop. 6.8 million) and Maryland (Anne Arundel, Baltimore County, Howard, Montgomery, and Prince George, pop. 3.1 million), the comparisons are provocative. New York is behind Maryland by a percentage point – New York, 23%/Maryland 24%, but behind Florida by 28%. Florida's five largest counties have 22 women out of 43 county commissioners, for a share of 51%. Clearly the wide gap between Florida and New York needs closer study.

While looking abroad for comparisons may be less relevant since countries have vastly different governments, politics, cultures and values, the contrasts do point up nation's different levels of awareness about the need for and value of women's election to local governments.

For example, a comparative analysis of women's election to local governments in thirteen Asian and Pacific nations prepared for the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific Summit of Women Mayors and Councillors, describes surprising support for women's participation in India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan. Each of these countries uses a quota system to reserve a percentage of local seats for women candidates. In these countries women's participation ranges from 24 – 33% of total local seats.

In Pakistan, for example, *The Christian Science Monitor* ("For Pakistan's Women, Election Quotas a Start," [csmonitor.com](http://csmonitor.com), 5/31/01) reported on reforms instituted by Gen. Pervez Musharraf to set a side

33% of seats in local governments for women. An activist, Baela Jamil, states in the article, “These elections are addressing the strategic gender needs for women. There is now new space for women, which gives them legal and political entitlement for the first time.”

The article continues: “Women such as 20-something college graduate Hameeda Waheeduddin got her first opportunity to enter politics this year when she became president of her union council in the town of Mandi Bahauddin in central Punjab, the country’s largest province. Responsibilities of the country’s approximately 7,000 union councils include running schools and local health services – and, in the future, imposing taxes. . . . For women aspiring to improve their social status, (Waheeduddin) advises women to take charge of their lives and to go ‘for political office as the first step.’”

While in the US, our accepted politics and principles would certainly lead us to avoid quota systems to increase women’s participation as candidates and elected officials, we might still be shocked to see more women serving in Pakistan’s local governments, where women won the right to vote in 1970 and can still be victims of “honor killings”, than in New York State, where women have voted since 1920 and where Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton began the drive for women’s suffrage one hundred and fifty four years ago.

## **Conclusion**

Why do women in New York State hold fewer than 20% of total legislative and council seats in county and city governments? Political experts sometimes assume that women find it more difficult to serve in state and federal offices because their roles as wives and mothers keep them close to home. If women aren’t serving even close to home, what keeps women from running for and winning local political offices?

Perhaps political scientists like Wendy Brown or Georgia Duerst- Lahti, who argue that American politics have gender and the gender is masculine, are correct to observe, “masculinity permeates power and politics.” (Georgia Duerst-Lahti and Rita Mae Kelly, Eds., *Gender Power, Leadership and Governance*, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1995.)

If the hurdles to women’s greater political involvement have less to do with practical considerations like raising money, arranging child care and traveling far from home, they may have more to do with the characteristics and behaviors we expect to see in our political leaders, whether they’re our presidents, mayors or county legislators.

As a result, women’s influence on the work of New York’s local governments may be severely restricted. As Sue Thomas, argues, “The higher the proportion of women in office, the more likely it will be that the ethic of the legislative chamber itself will shift toward higher introduction rates of bills dealing with women, children and the family.” Where women’s numbers in county legislatures and cities across the state are at token levels, these governments do not embrace the values, beliefs and life experiences of more than half of its people.