



Do “Clean Election” Laws Increase Women in State Legislatures?

by Laura Renz

ISSUE

Proponents of taxpayer-funded political campaigns, often called “clean elections” by their proponents, cite the ability of an increased number of diverse, non-traditional candidates able to run for and be elected to office as a sign of the program’s success.

Women legislators are frequently touted as examples; advocates write that “the prevailing system that allows unlimited campaign contributions and expenditures is inaccessible and unaffordable for many women, who... have fewer connections to donor networks.”¹

According to these advocates, replacing voluntary private contributions to candidates with taxpayer funds will erase or at least diminish the supposed problem of reduced fundraising opportunities for female candidates.

If this claim is accurate, we would expect to see a rising percentage of female legislators in Arizona and Maine, the only two states that have offered taxpayer funds to all

qualifying legislative candidates in recent election cycles. This research examines legislator gender in Arizona and Maine in an effort to determine whether taxpayer-funded political campaigns have in fact increased the number of women able to successfully run for election.

ANALYSIS

There has been a national trend of more women running for all offices, in every state, for many years. The National Conference of State Legislatures stated in a recent report that “since 1969, the number of women serving in legislatures has increased substantially from several hundred to 1,667- or 22.6 percent of the 7,382 seats,” and that this is true for both the Republican and Democratic parties.² The most recent numbers indicate that the number of women in office has continued to rise slightly, with 23.7 percent of legislative seats in the 50 states being held by women in 2008.³

² Legislator Demographics,” published by the National Conference on State Legislatures, *available at* http://www.ncsl.org/programs/legismgt/about/demographic_overview.htm

³ Women in State Legislatures 2008,” published by the National Conference on State Legislatures, *available at* <http://www.ncsl.org/programs/wln/WomenInOffice2008.htm>

¹ “Women Speak Out in Support of Clean Elections,” published by Northeast Action, *available at* <http://www.neaction.org/women.legislators.leaders.pdf>



In 1991, 33% of Maine’s legislature was comprised of women; by 2007 it was 31%

The progress women have made in winning elections and obtaining leadership positions in state governments is a well-documented nationwide trend.⁴ Maine and Arizona in particular have historically been national leaders in regards to electing women to the state legislature. According to the Center for American Women in Politics, Arizona has ranked among the top ten states in terms of highest percentage of women legislators for 18 of the past 20 years; Maine has been among the top ten states for 11 of the past 20 years.⁵

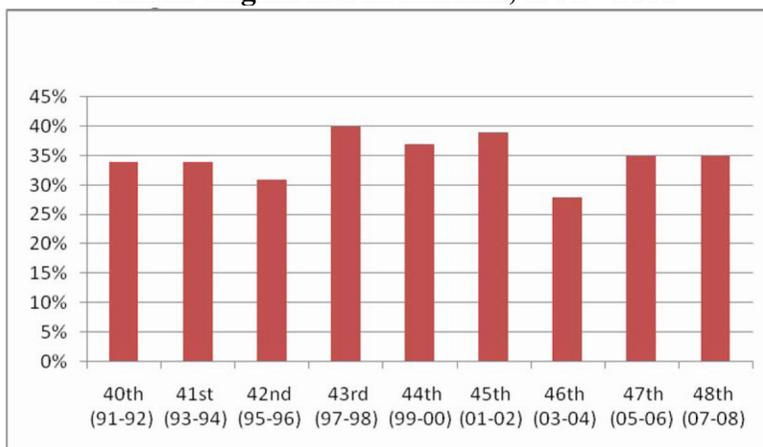
The data from both Maine and Arizona both show little change in the number of women serving in the legislature since their adoption

of taxpayer-funded political campaigns.

In Arizona, the highest percentage of women legislators was 40% in the 1997-98 session; the lowest in the period studied was actually seen after the clean elections program was started, when the percentage of legislative seats held by women decreased to 28% in the 2003-04 session.

In 1991, 34% of Arizona lawmakers were women; in 2007 women made up 35% of the legislature.⁶ Women averaged 35% of all Arizona legislators between 1991 and 2000 under the previous system of voluntary, private contributions, while the taxpayer-funded system since has averaged 34%.⁷

Female Legislators in Arizona, 1991 - 2008⁶



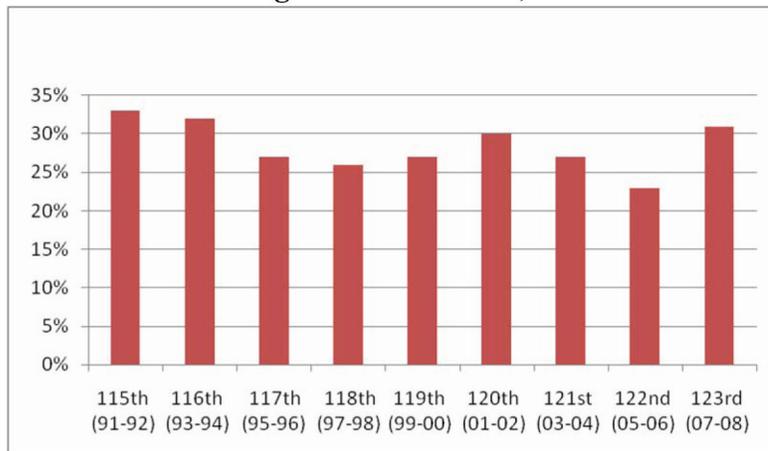
This data was obtained with from the Arizona Capital Times feature “Everyone Who Ever Served in The Arizona Legislature.” 12 October 2007.

4 Women in State Legislatures: 2006,” published by the National Conference on State Legislatures, available at <http://www.ncsl.org/programs/wln/WomenInOffice2006.htm>

5 Center for American Women in Politics, available at <http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/Facts/StbySt/AZ.html> and <http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/Facts/StbySt/ME.html>.

6 See id

7 See id

Female Legislators in Maine, 1991 - 2008⁸

“Maine House of Representatives: Women in the State Legislature,”
available at <http://janus.state.me.us/house/history/women.htm>

Maine reflects a similar pattern. In 1991, 33% of their legislature was comprised of women; by 2007 it was 31%.⁸ Before adoption of taxpayer-funded political campaigns in 2000, an average of 29% of Maine’s legislators were women, dropping only slightly to 28% after adoption.⁹ In Maine, the highest percentage of women serving in the legislature, 33% in the 1991-92 session, occurred before they began providing taxpayer dollars to candidates for state legislature. The lowest percentage of women for the period studied, 23% of legislators, occurred in the 2005-06 session.

⁸ See id

⁹ See id

CONCLUSION

The average number of female legislators in Arizona and Maine declined slightly in both states after they began providing taxpayer dollars to legislative candidates. Both states also saw the highest number of women in the legislature before their “clean elections” programs inception, and the lowest number of women after.

Based on this research, the claim that taxpayer-funded political campaigns increase the number of women elected to office is false. If women do in fact face challenges and barriers to fundraising that their male counterparts do not, the evidence clearly demonstrates that taxpayer-funded political campaigns should not be considered as a possible remedy to this problem.

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