

REGION

# Meet the Women Reshaping New Jersey Politics

To get more women elected to state government, they need to tackle a political-party structure that wields power in selecting and promoting candidates

*By Kate King*

Feb. 5, 2018 8:14 p.m. ET

Colleen Mahr is running for a position that few women hold but is among the most powerful in New Jersey politics—county leader of a political-party organization.

The chairs of the Democratic and Republican parties in each of New Jersey's 21 counties wield significant power, leading organizations that make endorsements in primary elections, provide chosen candidates with fundraising support and award prominent ballot spots.

Seven of the 42 county party organizations in New Jersey are led by women, including four Democrats and three Republicans.

If she wins, Ms. Mahr would bring that count to eight. Ms. Mahr served for five years as first vice chairwoman of the Union County Democratic Committee and became acting chairwoman in January after the chairman resigned.

Ms. Mahr is running against two other candidates, both men, for the permanent chair position in a party convention later this month when the organization, comprised of more than 800 elected committee members, will vote to select a leader.

At a time when women nationwide are signing up in record numbers to run for office, winning leadership roles within political parties is critical to boosting and sustaining female representation in government, Ms. Mahr and other women politicians said.

“Women are capable leaders and should be part of all the decision making, at every step of the way,” Ms. Mahr said.

Diane Allen, a former Republican state senator who retired in January after more than two decades in the New Jersey legislature, said women often have been overlooked by a political-party structure that gives a small group of men disproportionate power in selecting and promoting candidates. She has started a statewide political fund that will support women candidates from both sides of the aisle.

“There is an amazingly strong old boys network,” Ms. Allen said. “I love old white men, I'm married to one. But I don't need all of my laws made by them, and I don't need all of the decisions on who's going to run for public office made by them, either.”

Democrats are hoping women will lead the charge in winning more seats in this year's midterm elections, spurred by outrage about sexual-assault allegations against powerful men in politics, media and Hollywood.

In New Jersey, however, newly inspired candidates are likely to encounter hurdles that have long slowed the ascension of women to public office.

Brigid Harrison, a professor of political science and law at Montclair State University, said a small number of power brokers hold significant power over political resources, nominations and policy. “Those people are all men and they tend to surround themselves with people like them,” she said. “Anywhere you have strong political parties, as we do in New Jersey, you’re typically going to see fewer women in the more powerful positions.”



Rep. Bonnie Watson Coleman, D-N.J., attended a news conference in the Capitol Visitor Center to oppose efforts to defund women’s health care on January 6, 2016. PHOTO: TOM WILLIAMS/CONGRESSIONAL QUARTERLY/ZUMA PRESS

John Currie, who leads the state Democratic Party and is a longtime county chairman from Passaic, said he encourages fellow party leaders to recruit more women, and is pleased to see female candidates emerge this year as strong contenders in several congressional races.

“We might have a lot of catching up to do, but I think that culture is changing,” Mr. Currie said.

Women have made gains in New Jersey elections in recent years. A record 30% of freeholders—elected officials for county government—are women this year, according to the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University. And New Jersey fares better than 34 other states when it comes to female representation in the state legislature, with women holding about 29% of 120 seats.

Women only have incrementally picked up seats in New Jersey, however, with their biggest boosts usually coming after male lawmakers were dragged down by scandal.

The number of women in the state legislature, for example, jumped dramatically between 2004 and 2011, when more than two dozen men resigned midterm or decided not to run for reelection. Eight of the vacancies followed allegations of corruption or other misconduct, according to a 2012 study by the Center for American Women and Politics.

During the same period, only three women won office by defeating sitting lawmakers, according to the study, showing both the power of incumbency and how difficult it is for candidates to succeed without party support.

Bonnie Watson Coleman, who currently is the state’s only Congresswoman, said it is easier for women to get elected compared with when she first ran for office two decades ago, but impediments remain. “The party structure tends to seek out and feel more comfortable with males,” said Ms. Watson Coleman, a Democrat.

Shavonda Sumter, an assemblywoman from Paterson, N.J., said she enlisted well-connected men, known as validators, to make introductions for her when she tried to get on the ticket to run for lieutenant governor in last November’s election. They helped Ms. Sumter, a Democrat, meet with political and union leaders.

“It wasn’t an open invitation, I would not have been in that room if it weren’t for that validator,” Ms. Sumter said. “The rooms where the money was being raised were heavily white, male-

dominated.”



New Jersey Lt. Gov. Sheila Oliver gave a thumbs-up during an inauguration ceremony in Trenton, N.J., on Tuesday, Jan. 16, 2018. Democrat Phil Murphy became the state’s 56th governor, succeeding Republican Chris Christie after he was sworn in at the War Memorial in Trenton on Tuesday PHOTO: SETH WENIG/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Gov. Phil Murphy, a Democrat, chose then-Assemblywoman Sheila Oliver as his running mate in November, and she became the first African-American woman elected to a statewide office in New Jersey.

Other women to have reached the highest levels of New Jersey politics include Christine Todd Whitman, the state’s only female governor, who served from 1994 to 2001. Both parties have nominated women as their candidates in governor’s races, including former Lt. Gov. Kim Guadagno, a Republican, last year.

Ms. Mahr, the longtime mayor of Fanwood, N.J., said she thinks getting involved in politics at the local level is key to increasing the power of women within political parties and getting elected to higher offices.

“Women need to serve in all levels, whether it is mayor, council, Congress or county chairs, to help impact issues that are important to women,” she said.

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