

Already Gone: Female Retention in State Legislatures

Jordan Butcher*

Noah Haynes[†]

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Abstract

Recently there has been a great deal of attention dedicated to female candidates and the increasing rate at which females secure elective office. While recent scholars have examined the importance of recruiting more females to office, there is less emphasis on the retention of female legislators. The key to growing female representation in state legislatures rests in both the recruitment and retention of women. We theorize that variation in institutional and personal support influences the rate of female retention in state legislatures. To test this, we examine turnover from all 50 states to better understand the barriers to service and the ways they may be mitigated. We offer this analysis as information to create a better and more supportive environment for our female legislators.

* Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Arkansas State University, jbutcher@astate.edu

[†] Arkansas State University

In January 2021, the Nevada legislature achieved the first female majority in history. When speaking about this particular achievement, Nevada State Senator Maggie Carlton (D) said,

“Women realize that we’ve got to be at the table...We’ve worked very hard for that. We’ve educated folks. We’ve gotten them involved. And they’ve seen what’s at stake, and they want to be part of the conversation. I think that’s fantastic.”¹

Female gains are not exclusive to the Nevada legislature. Legislatures are just now experiencing the first uptick in the percentage of female lawmakers in decades and there is still room to grow before state legislatures mirror the population.

The key to understanding the growth underlying this historic female majority is to understand the careers of female lawmakers. There is a great deal of research on how women get elected to office and how they behave once in office, but there is less information on the circumstances around women leaving office. While it is vitally important to recruit new women to serve in the legislature, it is just as important to persuade those who already serve to stay. Recruitment efforts can only have an outcome similar to what is seen in Nevada if there is a simultaneous push for women to continue serving.

While efforts to recruit new female lawmakers are indeed great, without retention we are stuck in a constant state of recruitment with few long-term gains. This is all the more important in the states that have legislative term limits, as there are additional barriers to retention and women are forced from office regardless of intention. Our discussion of female legislative careers centers on the barriers that women face and the different forms of support that help encourage them to stay. Recruiting women to office is only half the story, it is important to understand why women continue to leave the legislature at a faster rate than seats are filled. If recruitment efforts only lead to short-term service, women in office will

¹Quoted in the Nevada Independent, <https://thenevadaindependent.com/article/nevada-grows-majority-female-legislature-after-2020-election-with-more-than-60-percent-of-seats-to-be-filled-by-women> Last accessed, January 27, 2022

never parallel the population.

In understanding some of the factors that contribute to women leaving office, states, organizations, and women can work to overcome some of these barriers and encourage women to stay in office longer. Specifically, we focus on forms of institutional and personal support and how they can influence a female lawmaker's decision to stay in office. We examine these effects on the rate of female turnover in the 50 states from 2002-2018. To illustrate the importance of keeping women in office we start by looking at the Nevada legislature and some of the other factors that led to its female majority in the legislature. We aim to offer guidance in how rules, incentives, and support can help to bolster the presence of female lawmakers already serving in the states.

The Case of Nevada

In order to better understand the role that the legislature plays in maintaining female membership, we turn to the Nevada legislature. This examination sheds light on the barriers women faced and how they were able to overcome them. The purpose of this brief examination is to illustrate how the reasons why females serve or leave can be very personal and extend beyond what can be measured using an index, such as term limits. What we learn from the Nevada legislature, and the women who serve, can help other states work toward having more women in elective office.

The gains made by female lawmakers in Nevada were not achieved by simply having more candidates (Haynes and Butcher 2021). Even if every female who leaves office is replaced by a new female legislator, representative proportions do not change. In addition, as a state with term limits, women are consistently being forced out of office once they have served 12 years. For a substantive increase in female lawmakers, as seen in Nevada, it is necessary for females to replace male legislators at a higher rate than they are leaving *and* for female incumbents to stay in office longer.

Barriers and Successes

Women face numerous personal barriers rooted in negative assumptions, stigmas, and less encouragement to run for office. In the case of Nevada, the most impactful issue for female candidates was the assumption of ineptitude. In an interview, Assembly member Danielle Monroe-Moreno recalled an encounter with a male colleague who was surprised that female legislators were actually “smart” (Rodriguez 2021).

In our examination of Nevada and the lawmakers who serve there, we found that leading up to the female majority there were a litany of instances where females were either not taken seriously or their issues were misrepresented. Such instances included the comparison of the necessity of tampons to jock straps and the blatant disapproval of pay equity (Wax-Thibodeaux 2019). Some female members even received consistent anonymous phone calls sexually harassing them (Wax-Thibodeaux 2019). These experiences are indicative of the environment female lawmakers sometimes face within the legislature. With assumptions of inadequacy, downplay of female-centric policy, and sometimes overt aggression, it is easy to understand how a prospective female candidate may choose not to involve herself, or even choose to leave the state legislature.

The presence of more women in office appears to have helped alleviate some of these barriers. One such instance was the election of State Senator Nicole Cannizzaro as the Nevada Senate Majority Leader in 2019, the first female to serve in the role. As more females take seats in the Nevada legislature, more male incumbents will realize their effectiveness, creating a more open environment. In this way, an increased female presence helps to increase female representation.

The placement of women in leadership was not the only help that female candidates received; we have found that there was also an increase in party support. Both the Democratic and Republican parties have focused on the recruitment of females more heavily in recent years. Democrats have historically done a better job at maintaining female representation. In fact, a super-majority of females in state legislatures are Democrats, and Democrat fe-

males have been gaining seats at a much faster rate than Republicans (Fadel and Birkeland 2019). The difference in Nevada however, is that Republicans have begun to put forth a higher proportion of female candidates than in the past.

After the 2020 elections, Republican lawmakers gained four seats in the legislature, two of them being females (Messerly and Rindels 2020). Although these two female Republicans beat incumbent females, therefore not contributing to the gain in female representation, the fact that 50 percent of Republican gains were females does represent a shift in party support of candidates. This seemingly insignificant shift indicates a responsiveness on the side of Republicans that needs to continue and spread in order to increase female representation among the states.

In addition to increased recruitment from political parties, female incumbents have been working to specifically recruit others to fill open seats and challenge incumbents (Fadel and Birkeland 2019). Assemblywoman Maggie Carlton noted that female lawmakers have been working extremely hard to recruit, educate, and encourage more females to run for legislative office (Snyder 2020). In doing so, making females realize how important it is to hold seats in the legislature. This also serves the purpose of filling seats vacated by female law makers after they reach their term limits. These experiences from the Nevada illustrate the obstacles for female lawmakers, including negative stigma and female reliance on encouragement to run. These observations conform to the idea that institutional rules and norms are responsible for disproportionate female representation (Schwindt-Bayer and Squire 2014).

In the case of Nevada, the rate of turnover appears to be an important component to legislative representation. The higher the turnover rate, the less stable the standing demographics become. Therefore, in order for Nevada to maintain its female majority, the turnover rate of females must remain as low as term limits will allow. Nevada has been able to maintain a low turnover rate for newly elected female legislators. Of the 34 females who began serving since 2017, all but 4 are still serving today (*Center for American Women and Politics*). The new cohort of female lawmakers (since 2017) represents nearly 77 percent

of all females in the legislature (*National Conference of State Legislatures*). This statistic combined with Nevada's term limits indicate that within the next 8 years the majority of these females will term out of office.

The presence of term limits in Nevada makes the notion of retention all the more important. It can be difficult to recruit candidates in a state with term limits, knowing that the time is finite. With a large portion of Nevada's female legislators being new, the importance of legislator retention becomes greater. The retention is made more impressive by the fact that members of the Assembly serve 2-year terms, doubling the number of elections they must win over time.

The Careers of Female Legislators

The history of female lawmakers goes back to before women even had the right to vote in federal elections. In 1894, three women were elected to the Colorado legislature and once women gained the right to vote the number of women in office slowly increased (Sanbonmatsu, Carroll and Walsh 2009). It was not until the 1980s that there was a noticeable increase in the number of women serving in elective office, but this leveled off around 20 percent.

Since the 1980s, state legislatures have seen an increase from 10.8 percent to 31.1 percent of seats being occupied by female lawmakers. Although there is now greater representation of women than ever before, they are still inadequately represented given that women make up more than 50 percent of the population. In 2009, New Hampshire became the first state to have a female majority in a single legislative chamber. Nevada had the first overall female (out of all legislators) majority 10 years later. By 2021, Nevada reached a female majority in both chambers with 60.3 percent of the seats being occupied by female legislators.

While women have been gaining legislative seats throughout the states, this has been a slow and rather unequal development. For example, Nevada and New Hampshire have experienced rapid growth in the number of female legislators, while other states saw little

to no increase. Despite this success, there still exists high levels of female turnover, thus complicating the achievements of female representation in state legislatures. In order to better understand the rates of female turnover however, it is necessary to examine the status of female representation in state legislatures overall.

While there has been a recent increase in the number of women and minorities who serve in state legislatures, these institutions historically developed around white men (Reingold 2019). That being said, women infiltrated states legislatures before they did Congress, making state legislatures the perfect avenue to explore the development of female legislative careers. The rate of female legislators is not determined by just the rate of females who run for office, but by the rate at which women are able to retain their seats (Darcy and Choike 1986). Given the right conditions, it is better for a legislature to maintain the number of women who already serve rather than to focus on solely recruiting new women (Darcy and Choike 1986).

Recruitment to Office

Even with the increase in female representation women remain at a disadvantage. There is a notable discrepancy between the number of male and female legislators, a topic that has received a great deal of attention. There exists a multitude of theories as to why this is, most of which center on recruitment and entrance to office. For example, women are more hesitant to enter office (Fox, Lawless and Feeley 2001), women have greater family obligations (Sanbonmatsu, Carroll and Walsh 2009), and face gender stereotypes counter to running for elective office (Anzia and Bernhard 2021). Yet, when women do run for office they are just as successful as male candidates (Kurtz 2015).

Females are less likely to initiate their run for office, whereas men are more likely to decide to run on their own. According to *The Center for American Women and Politics*, more the twice the number of women are recruited to office, whereas men are more likely to initiate a run themselves without being recruited. Women, more than men, cite that they ran for

office because they were recruited by a female elected official or party member (Sanbonmatsu, Carroll and Walsh 2009).

Not only are women less inclined to run, when they do they are more likely to run in contested elections resulting in lower success rates (Niven 2006). The *Center for American Women and Politics* cites recruiting women as the number one need to gain more female seats because women are more likely to run *after* being asked. In a similar vein, women are also more likely to report being discouraged to run for office by those around them (Sanbonmatsu, Carroll and Walsh 2009, 10)

What we know about women in office is primarily centered around efforts to recruit females to the legislature. Historically, it has been difficult for both parties to recruit women to office. Given this, parties and organizations have stepped up their recruitment efforts. Organizations such as *She Should Run*, *Vote Run Lead*, and the *Center for American Women and Politics* are all centered on women and have efforts to recruit female candidates, as well as provide electoral support. Those candidate who have a stronger support system tend to be more successful in their electoral pursuits (Mariani 2008, 14).

According to the *Center for American Women and Politics*, most female lawmakers are a part of these types of organizations and rely on their support. For example, women, of both parties, are more likely to receive support from “women’s groups” (*Center for American Women and Politics* 2001). In addition, female lawmakers frequently attempt to recruit a female to replace them on their way out of office (*Center for American Women and Politics* 2001). Female leaders are especially important for recruiting female candidates, as they recruit more women more often (Sanbonmatsu, Carroll and Walsh 2009, 14).

Even with the different recruitment efforts in place, there has been minimal long term growth in the number of female legislators. Given this, we cannot come to rely on recruitment efforts alone. While efforts to engage more women and encourage greater representation are important, there needs to be greater attention on the women who currently serve in office and how to get them to stay.

Barriers to Retention

There are a multitude of reasons that lead a legislator to vacating their seat, what we know is more about legislators as a whole and not women in particular. In Congress, departures are a result of whether or not a member is satisfied with serving in the institution (Moore and Hibbing 1998). This satisfaction includes a calculation of the benefits (financial and prestige), as well as the ability to advance (Matland and Studlar 2004; Moore and Hibbing 1998; Hall and Van Houweling 1995). Many struggle with the opportunity costs of serving, positional stagnation, or general dissatisfaction (Francis and Baker 1986). Others may leave due to specific family obligations (Blair and Henry 1981), financial costs (Hall and Van Houweling 1995), and a lack of room for growth within the institution (Moore and Hibbing 1998; Hall and Van Houweling 1995). There are a plethora of reasons why a legislator may leave, but each of these reasons are a result of a personal decision and do not account for institutional pressures.

There are different barriers that female incumbents face when it comes to pursuing reelection. One such problem that female candidates face is that they tend to be held to higher standards when running for reelection than do male candidates (Holman, Mahoney and Hurler 2021). Other barriers facing female incumbents include: less media coverage, increased competition, and an overall lack of encouragement when running (Lazarus and Steigerwalt 2018). Also hindering the reelection prospects of female candidates, they are less likely to be assigned to prestigious committees or gain leadership positions (Thomas and Welch 1991). When running in a safe party district, female candidates are encouraged to drop out of the race and run for a more contentious seat (Niven 2006).

Perhaps one of the greatest barriers for service, for all members, is legislative term limits. There are 15 states with legislative term limits, which have the ability to influence the rate of turnover in ways that are not so easily measured. Legislative term limits present a unique barrier to office in the way that they restrict members for serving for long periods of time. While term limits themselves may not be a deterrent to legislative service, they do artificially

create turnover by forcing members from office, when they may have otherwise continued to serve (Butcher 2022).

Beyond these personal and sometimes political barriers, there are different elements of the legislature that can prevent women from serving in office long-term. For the purpose of this examination we focus on those elements that can be changed. While it is difficult to change legislative behavior or proceedings, there are elements of the job that are more flexible. We argue that the level of support offered by the legislature is a contributing factor to female retention. Pulling from previous research on legislative careerism, we center our examination on resources provided by the legislature including those offered by legislative professionalization, the presence of women’s caucuses, and the support of female leadership.

Broadly speaking, institutional design has long played a role in the careers of lawmakers. In particular, legislative professionalization and term limits have had a strong role in shaping the careers of members and how long they serve. Institutional rules play a significant role in the behavior of members so it can be assumed that those same rules can affect their careers as well (Squire 1992, 1988; Shin and Jackson III 1979; Rosenthal 1974). Generally, the increase in legislative professionalization, and the benefits that it brought, worked to decrease turnover as it encouraged members to stay in office longer (Rosenthal 1974). This is representative of a more recent trend specifically within American legislatures; of a relatively low rate of turnover since the 1990s (Squire 2006; Matland and Studlar 2004).

An increase in legislative professionalization not only benefited the legislature but those who served. The added incentives encouraged lengthier careers, which were ultimately met with disdain among citizens. The various rules of a legislature can affect not only who runs for office but how long incumbents are willing to continue to pursue elective office. Specific to female lawmakers, recent research has indicated that states with higher professionalization see a decline in female representation (Schwindt-Bayer and Squire 2014).

In addition to the benefits provided by legislative professionalization, women are uniquely tied to political organizations and their female colleagues. The presence of female leaders

in the legislature may indicate to new female members that a lengthy career and ambitious goals are possible. Part of the success of female lawmakers comes from the support of their female colleagues (Mariani 2008; Flammang 1985). According to the *Center for American Women and Politics*, roughly half of female lawmakers were part of a women’s caucus in 2001. With this, nearly 90 percent of female lawmakers have come to rely on relationships with their female colleagues (*Center for American Women and Politics* 2001, 7).

According to a report from the *Center for American Women and Politics* (2001), most female lawmakers are a part of a group (either formally or informally) of women that regularly meet to discuss policy and legislation. Also important to the success of women is the presence of female leaders. Over time, women have been gaining more leadership positions, having more women in key positions of power can help ensure greater legislative success (Mariani 2008). While women tend to respond that they greatly value the relationships and support of their female colleagues, there is a caveat. Some of the responses around female support are partisan in nature; women who are members of the Democratic party tend to report support at higher levels than do Republican women.

Evaluating patterns in legislative careerism provides a window into understanding both how the legislature functions and how it affects those who serve in it. Specifically, the rules of the legislature can influence a female’s path to office (Schwindt-Bayer and Squire 2014, 647). For this analysis, we utilize legislative careers as a method to better understand how female lawmakers are influenced by the institutional and political rules of the legislature. Given that we know little about female lawmakers and their decisions to stay or leave office, this study sheds light on additional methods to increasing the number of female lawmakers in office.

We anticipate that the factors which influence the careers of female lawmakers will be different in states that have term limits as social ties and connectedness may mean less to members who know they will not be around for a long time. However, the lack of experience of those who serve in term-limited states may force them to rely on these mechanisms of

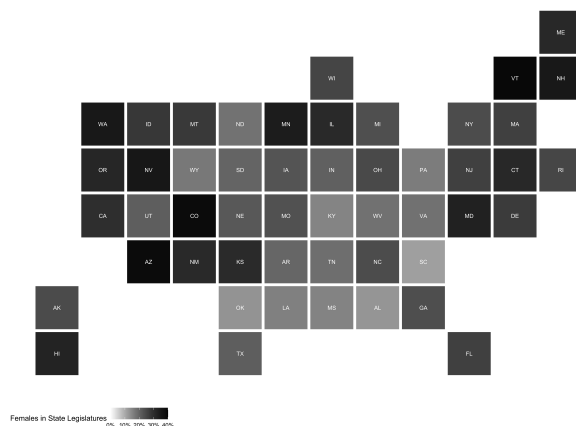
support to a greater extent. Other key differences in the careers of term-limited lawmakers include fewer incumbent losses (Masket and Lewis 2007; Penning 2003), fewer retirements (Butcher 2021; Moncrief, Powell and Storey 2007), and there is an overall increase in political ambition (Mooney, Wood and Wright 2007; Straayer 2003).

Data & Analysis

There are two important components to increasing the number of women serving in state legislative office, recruitment and retention. In our assessment of female legislative careers we want to focus on the latter, retention, as recruitment alone is unable to lead to a lasting increase in female legislators on par with the population that they represent. Specifically, recruitment only helps to fill seats that are being vacated, there must be longevity of current in addition to recruitment to fill seats previously occupied by members of any gender. We center our analysis on the various levels of support offered by the legislature, as female lawmakers note that support is of great importance to them.

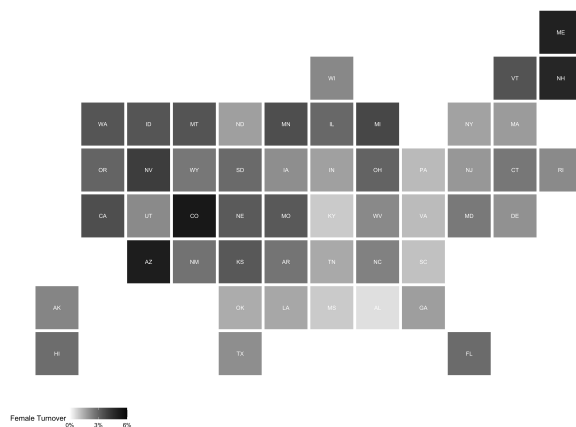
In order to test the factors that pertain to retention of female lawmakers we evaluate the rate of turnover in the 50 states from 2002-2018. The rate of turnover serves as an indicator for a lack of retention as people leave office. First, we note the different types of support that women may receive while in office, institutional and personal. Second, we compare how these factors have the potential to influence women who serve in term-limited states differently. We suspect that the “support” factors will have less influence on the retention of female lawmakers in term-limited states. It is important to note that the rate of female turnover is low, especially in comparison to male turnover, because there are fewer women serving, therefore there are fewer women leaving. Additionally, turnover rates in states with term limits often appear higher because of the artificial turnover that is caused by term limits (see Butcher 2022).

Figure 1: Average Percent of Seats Occupied by Female Legislators, 2002-2018



For reference, see Figure 1, which displays the average percent of seats occupied by females in each state. The average percent of seats occupied by females among all states is roughly 25, with a low average of 11 in South Carolina and a high of 38 percent in Colorado.² Figure 2 illustrates the average rate of turnover for each state. The national average of total female turnover from 2002-2018 is 2.57 percent.³

Figure 2: Average Rate of Total Female Turnover, 2002-2018



²The specific percentages for each state can be found in Appendix Table A1, as well as the average percent of turnover for each state.

³The average rate of total turnover is the average of turnover from all years, looking at just election years (electoral turnover) misrepresents the decisions of members to stay or leave in non-election years, especially for those states that have 4-year terms.

The rate of total female turnover is measured as the percent of females leaving office at the end of each year in the whole legislature, out of the total number of legislative seats. Information on female turnover was leveraged using the *Center for American Women and Politics* legislator database.⁴⁵

We argue that the rate of female turnover is dependent on the support provided to members. Prior research has demonstrated that institutional and electoral rules influence the careers of legislators, but we emphasize the levels of support provided by the institution as well as the levels of personal support. In particular, we look at the salary and staff provided by the institution, using components of Squire’s professionalization index.⁶ Having a higher salary and more staff can help to alleviate some of the pressures of serving and are a component of support offered by the legislature. Salary is measured in the thousands of dollars, while staff is measured as the number of personal staffers assigned to a legislator.

Internal legislative support is the second factor necessary to understanding the longevity of service, this not only concerns institutional support but also support from other members. Using information from the *Center for American Women and Politics*, we include an indicator for each year that a state has at least one female leader in 4 key positions. These positions include the Speaker Pro Tempore, Speaker of the House, Senate President Pro Tempore, and the Senate President.⁷ Another form of internal support for women is the presence of a legislative caucus. Not every state legislature has a dedicated caucus, but those that do come in 3 forms: bipartisan, Democratic, and Republican.⁸ We want to understand the role of bipartisan caucuses in particular, given that they are more expansive

⁴⁵These data are publicly accessible at <https://cawpdata.rutgers.edu/women-elected-officials>

⁶We did find some discrepancies in the recording of turnover rates. In a total of 18 instances (in 13 states) turnover was under reported. In tracking down the differences in turnover rates we found that most of the differences were due to resignations or prematurely leaving office, in these instances we adjusted the rate of turnover.

⁷We do not include the average days in session here, as it is not a form of institutional support for members. Rather it can be a hindrance so it is used instead as a control variable for the full model.

⁸Given the great variation that exists among leadership positions and roles in the 50 states this small list is the most comprehensive in order to compare the states.

⁹We only include information on legislative caucuses, not political caucuses. Arkansas is the only state we found to have a dedicated Republican women’s caucus, most states have a bipartisan caucus.

than partisan caucuses and can unite women from both sides of the aisle.⁹

There are also electoral considerations for the potential return to office, we account for two election-specific traits. First, we include the percentage of open seats. Open seats can occur for a number of reasons, but generally, result in increased female candidacy (Silva and Skulley 2019; Lawless and Fox 2008). Second, we include the percentage of safe seats because newcomers are less likely to challenge an incumbent, especially one in a safe seat.¹⁰ Last, we control for the average number of days in session for members. For many, more time in session can be seen as a barrier to service given that lawmakers often have other obligations, such as jobs or families.

Given that the percentage of turnover is bounded, we estimate a time series regression to examine the different institutional factors that influence female legislative turnover. We assess each chamber independently, the results of this analysis can be seen in Table 1.¹¹ The table includes an analysis of the separate components of support for female lawmakers in all states and only states with term limits.

In the lower chamber, there are few differences that exist for female retention between all states and those that have term limits. To start, an increase in the salary for members appears to significantly decrease the rate of turnover, this remains true for those who serve in term-limited states. Interestingly, members who have more staff support are more likely to leave the legislature. The reasoning behind this is likely that those who have more staff support are the very same members who are better equipped to advance to higher office. In this instance, it is more likely that turnover is attributed to advancement rather than retirement.

Turning to the different factors of personal support, there appears to be no strong relationship between having female leaders in the lower chamber and retaining female members.

⁹Arkansas is the only state with a Republican caucus, there are 6 states with Democratic caucuses, and 24 states with a bipartisan caucus. A more comprehensive list can be found in Appendix Table A3.

¹⁰We utilize the standards set by Holbrook and Van Dunk (1993) for safe seats and open seats.

¹¹Nebraska and Maine are both dropped from this analysis because they are strongly correlated with the control variables.

Table 1: OLS Regression of Legislative Support and Female Retention

	Lower Chamber		Upper Chamber	
	All States	Term-Limited	All States	Term Limited
Salary (<i>thousands</i>)	-0.020** (0.009)	-0.052** (0.023)	-0.008 (0.007)	-0.059* (0.031)
Staff Support	0.093* (0.048)	0.277*** (0.041)	0.042 (0.040)	0.128** (0.050)
Female Speaker Pro Tem	-0.551 (0.328)	-0.896 (0.821)		
Female Speaker	-0.571 (0.385)	-0.803 (1.128)		
Female President Pro Tem			-1.106*** (0.310)	-1.101*** (0.353)
Female President			-0.203 (0.428)	-0.589 (1.973)
Bipartisan Caucus	-0.498* (0.279)	-1.707*** (0.326)	-0.236 (0.241)	0.048 (0.363)
Uncontested Seats (%)	-0.034*** (0.008)	-0.026** (0.009)	-0.023*** (0.007)	-0.003 (0.009)
Safe Seats (%)	-0.003 (0.010)	0.018 (0.020)	-0.008 (0.012)	-0.032 (0.031)
Days in Session	0.014** (0.005)	0.023 (0.021)	0.006 (0.006)	0.049 (0.027)
Constant	4.147*** (0.758)	2.798 (2.226)	3.294*** (0.959)	3.503 (3.049)
Observations	813	221	813	221
R-squared	0.070	0.069	0.046	0.068

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Note: Nebraska and Louisiana are excluded due to missing election data.

However, the presence of a bipartisan female caucus does significantly decrease the rate of turnover. This relationship is highly significant ($p < .01$) in those states that have legislative term limits, as members have less experience and have become increasingly reliant on the support of others to succeed (Straayer 2003).¹²

Looking at the other variables that can either support or inhibit the retention of female variables, it would be remiss to ignore potential electoral effects. While the percentage of safe seats does not appear to influence the relationship, the percentage of uncontested seats does. When there are more uncontested seats, female turnover declines. When they do not face an opponent women are more likely to return successfully, which may indicate that women are either unsuccessful against challengers or choose to not pursue reelection when facing an opponent. At the same time, it is of interest that women are either not serving in partisan-safe districts or it is not a factor, more likely the former.

Another barrier known to influence the career behavior of members is the time commitment, or *days in session*. Among all state lower chambers, those that require a greater time commitment have more women leaving. What is worth noting is that this relationship does not carry over for the states that have term limits. Rather, states with term limits are less likely to see a significant effect because members have a finite amount of time and are less likely to vacate their seats prematurely (Butcher 2021).

In the upper chamber there are more differences that exist between in all states as compared to just states with term limits. Beginning with the electoral support, salary significantly decreases turnover for those states with term limits but is insignificant for those without. With limited ability to serve in a term-limited legislature, it is no surprise that those that pay well entice members to stay. However, those term-limited states that have greater staff support see greater legislative turnover as members are better able to move on to other elected positions.

What is perhaps most unique about these results are the differences in the influence of

¹²Straayer (2003) also notes that, in the case of Colorado, the level of experience for house members declined at a greater rate than those in the upper chamber.

leadership support. Surprisingly leadership support does not matter in most instances, aside from one. In the upper chamber, when there is a female *President Pro Tempore* turnover rates decline. Of the 4 positions that we examine this is the only one that seems to matter for rates of turnover. It is unclear as to whether this is attributed to the number of females that serve in this position or if there is some other extraneous factor.

The electoral factors that may contribute to retention have mixed results. While the percentage of safe seats is not significant for all states or term-limited states, the percentage of uncontested seats is negative and significant for all states, but not those with term limits. According to the model, the percentage of uncontested seats matters less for members in term-limited states, likely because so few elections are contested. Whereas in other states there may be greater competition for senate seats overall, which means that uncontested seats can boost female retention. Last, the length of a legislative session does not appear to influence the careers of members regardless of the type of legislature that they serve in.

In order to better understand the extent to which institutional incentives and barriers affect the rate of female turnover, we present Figures 3 and 4. The values at which these variables are set can be found in the Appendix (Tomz, Wittenberg and King 2001). In each figure we evaluate how changing the support for female members (X) can change the rate at which females leave (Y). For example, we want to see how the change in salary from the 25th percentile to the 75th percentile, an increase from roughly \$12,000 to \$46,000, alters the rate of turnover.¹³ In addition to the different support variables of interest, we also examine the potential changes that are a result of electoral and time barriers.

¹³For all binary variables we assess a change from 0-1, for all other variables we look at a change from the 25th percentile to the 75th percentile. More specific information and values can be found in the Appendix.

Figure 3: Change in Predicted Rate of Turnover for All States

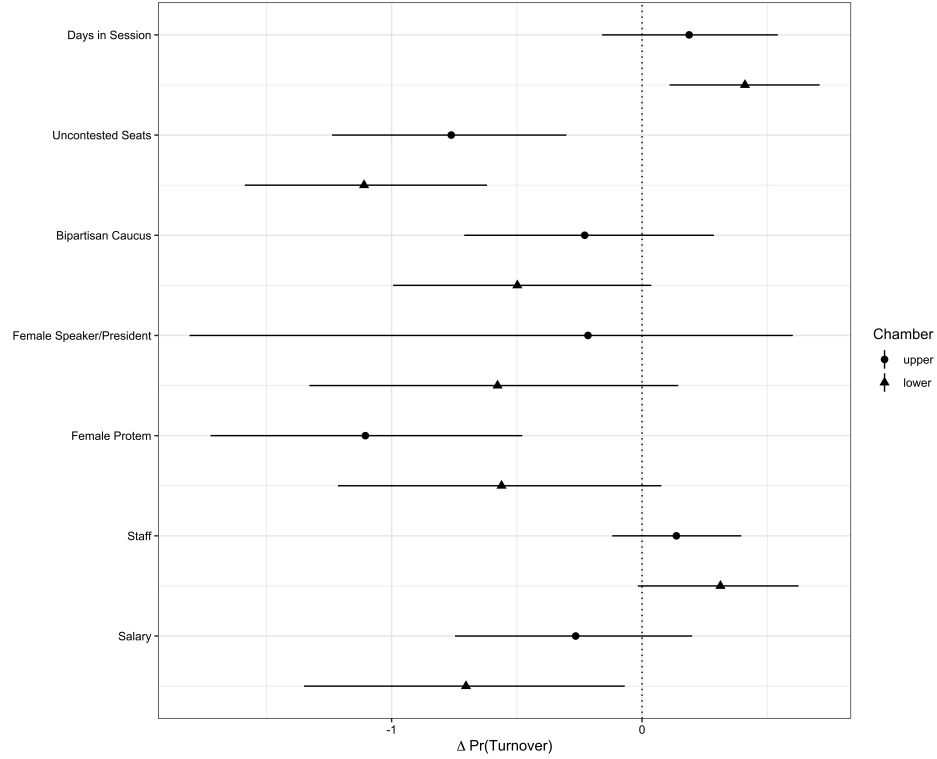


Figure 3 presents the predicted values of female turnover for all states. The change in the predicted rate of turnover when increasing salary results in a decrease in turnover of .7 percent. The most substantial change to the rate of turnover is the percent of uncontested seats. A shift from roughly 19 to 52 percent of uncontested seats results in a predicted rate of turnover for the upper chamber at around 2.5 and around 3 percent for the lower. While much of the results across the chambers are similar, there is a notable difference in regards to the average days in session. The barrier of time in session is a significant factor for increased turnover in the lower chamber but not in the upper. Overall, while some of these variables have the potential to significantly effect turnover the overall substantive effects appear to be minimal, given that we are often referring to less than 1 percent difference in the rate of turnover. However, the constant indicates that female turnover is only around 4 percent, making a 1 percent change significant for those women who serve.

Figure 4: Change in Predicted Rate of Turnover for Term-Limited States

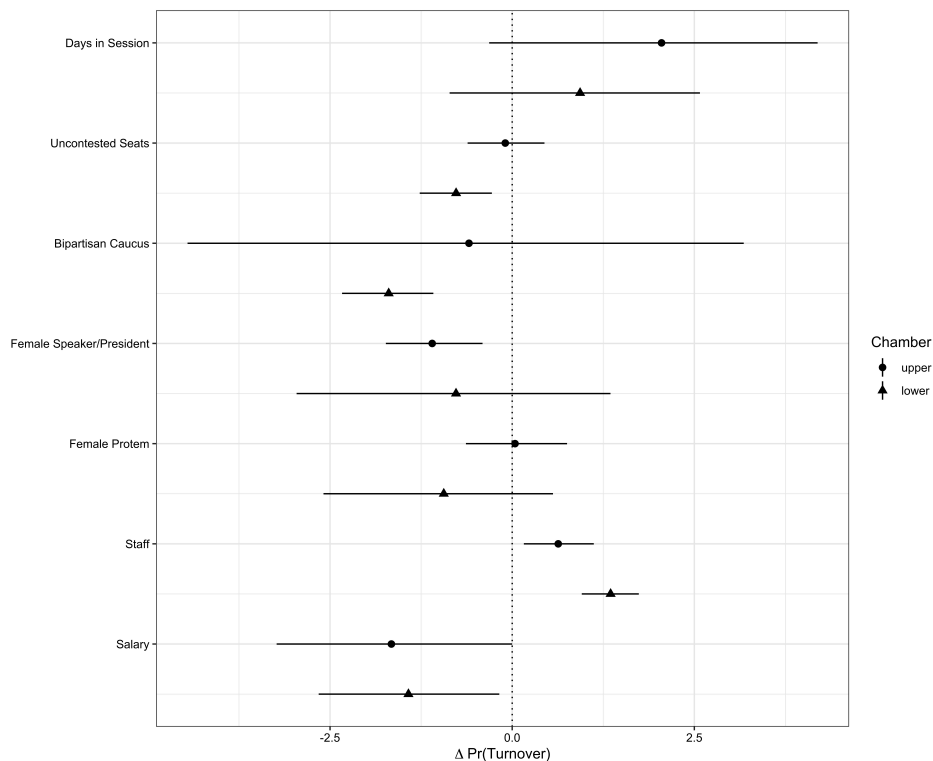


Figure 4 contains the predicted change in the rate of turnover for just those states that have term limits.¹⁴ With a baseline of 2.8 percent turnover in the lower chamber and 3.5 percent in the upper there is much greater variation in the states that have term limits.¹⁵ The predicted values represented in Figure 4 indicate that there are different factors that influence those who serve under term limits, albeit slight.

The effects of salary are significant in both chambers and can lead to an average decrease in turnover of just over 1 percent. Unique to states with term limits, an increase in staff results in an increase in turnover for both chambers. In the lower chamber this can increase turnover by over 1.5 percent, which brings turnover more in line with the turnover rate of all states.

The results of this analysis indicate that women are effected by the various mechanisms

¹⁴It is worth noting that these predicted values are based on fewer actual observations as there are only 15 states with term limits.

¹⁵Referring to the *Constant* in Table 1

of support that surround them, but this appears to vary based on where women serve and the level of experience that they have. Most notable, those who serve in the lower chamber have a stronger relationship with bipartisan caucuses. Whereas those who serve in the upper chamber tend to have stronger tie to leadership support. The most consistent factor affecting the rate of turnover for female lawmakers is salary, which is also one the easiest things to change in theory, but in reality is often very difficult. Overall, this analysis lends insight into the barriers and mechanisms of support that female lawmakers face.

Discussion & Conclusion

Since legislative bodies have existed in the United States, females have been underrepresented. Nevada is the only state legislative body to achieve a female majority in both chambers, even then, they did not do so until 100 years after women gained the right to vote. Females hold a majority in at least one chamber in three states currently (Nevada, Colorado, and New Mexico), but overall are still nowhere near a proportionate legislative make up as compared to men.

We offer nothing new in regards to the importance of having female lawmakers, as this has been concluded time and time again. What we offer is an extension to the works that examine the careers of female lawmakers. While much of the research centers on recruitment efforts and how to get women to run for office, we propose there is a secondary area where attention ought to be devoted; that is retention. It is not enough to simply recruit women to office if they do not stay long-term, which is part of why the number of females in office stalled out at 20-25 percent for several decades. In order for women to actually increase their legislative presence, efforts must be centered on not only recruitment but retention as well.

We argue that while there are barriers to legislative service there are also a number of support systems in place that can encourage women to stay in office longer. Namely, we look at sources of institutional and personal support. When the legislature offers members

greater support to do their job, there is less of a burden upon them. Similarly, the presence of female leadership or caucuses can offer support for women who tend to highly regard those personal connections. We test our theory of retention by looking at which factors of support influence the rate of female legislative turnover. To better understand how female lawmakers are influenced, we also look at those who serve in term-limited states as there are notable differences in the careers of lawmakers who face term limits.

We find that legislative salary is the greatest support mechanism for reducing the rate of turnover among all states. Interestingly, staff support tends to increase legislative turnover. This finding may actually be a result of political ambition, those who have better staff support are better equipped to advance and subsequently leave office. This factor does warrant further study. We also uncover that the mechanisms of support tend to have greater influence in those states with term limits. As far as personal support, having female leaders does help to decrease the rate of turnover, but not in all instances. What is perhaps most interesting is that personal support (of one form or another) tends to decrease turnover in those instances where lawmakers have the least amount of experience, i.e. lower chambers or term-limited states.

Darcy and Choike (1986) theorized that a legislature must not only recruit females but create an environment that keeps females in the legislature. In our examination of female turnover, we find that this combination of efforts is imperative to an increase in female representation. As a state with 12 year legislative term limits in both chambers Nevada has slightly accelerated turnover. This consideration is of particular importance to the other 14 states that have legislative term limits. Nevertheless, other lessons, such as the importance of female-focused recruitment, the necessity of a welcoming environment within the legislature, and increased support for females will prove integral in others states' attempts to achieve a similar legislative makeup to Nevada. The end goal of these recruitment and retention efforts being a number of female legislators proportional to that of the population.

It is important to note that Nevada is not the only state to experience gains in female

representation, but it is the only state that has achieved a majority in both chambers of its state legislature. There has been steady growth in female representation among the states, Colorado has seen a significant growth in female representation, nearing a majority, where 44 out of 100 members are female (Frank 2022). This research is just the first step in understanding how to maintain and strengthen female candidacy in the states, by focusing on longevity. Future research should center more on the different reasons that females leave office, such as leaving for Congress. It is also going to be imperative to discover how legislatures can maintain high rates of female incumbency/low turnover and provide enough female candidates in the pipeline for higher office. While increasing the number of seats held by females in state legislatures is important, it needs to be extended to other state and federal offices. Until there is a strategic plan in place to increase the retention of female lawmakers these gains will be unsustainable.

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A1: The Average Percent of Seats and Total Turnover for Female Lawmakers, 2002-2018

	Women	
	<i>Average Percent of Seats</i>	<i>Average Percent Turnover</i>
Alabama	12.69	0.55
Alaska	24.22	2.25
<i>Arizona</i>	37.58	5.03
<i>Arkansas</i>	19.69	2.61
<i>California</i>	29.75	3.53
<i>Colorado</i>	38.82	5.29
Connecticut	29.79	2.55
Delaware	27.04	1.99
<i>Florida</i>	26.18	2.83
Georgia	23.53	1.74
Hawaii	32.35	2.79
Idaho	27.90	3.36
Illinois	31.04	2.89
Indiana	20.67	1.69
Iowa	22.59	2.08
Kansas	30.52	3.28
Kentucky	15.22	0.90
<i>Louisiana</i>	15.85	1.55
<i>Maine</i>	31.15	4.93
Maryland	32.73	2.50
Massachusetts	26.26	1.79
<i>Michigan</i>	23.33	3.74
Minnesota	34.15	3.54
Mississippi	15.25	0.91
<i>Missouri</i>	23.08	3.25
<i>Montana</i>	27.61	3.37
<i>Nebraska</i>	21.85	3.24
<i>Nevada</i>	35.57	4.01
New Hampshire	35.34	4.76
New Jersey	26.18	1.86
New Mexico	30.93	2.68
New York	23.98	1.66
North Carolina	23.88	2.35
North Dakota	17.81	1.71
<i>Ohio</i>	24.60	3.03
<i>Oklahoma</i>	13.03	1.46
Oregon	31.63	3.01
Pennsylvania	16.18	1.21
Rhode Island	25.09	2.13
South Carolina	11.45	1.07
<i>South Dakota</i>	19.94	2.86
Tennessee	18.45	1.52
Texas	20.90	2.08
Utah	20.87	2.15
Vermont	39.28	3.40
Virginia	17.90	1.18
Washington	35.21	3.36
West Virginia	17.87	2.15
Wisconsin	25.13	2.18
Wyoming	16.93	2.55
Total	24.98	2.57

Note: States in italics have term limits

A2: Variable Summary

Variable	Mean	Min	Max	Source
Salary	30.53	0.1	100.1	Squire Index, 2015
Staff Support	4.462	0.35	17.51	Squire Index, 2015
Female Speaker Pro Tem	0.1224	0	2	Center for American Women and Politics
Female Speaker	0.06	0	1	Center for American Women and Politics
Female President Pro Tem	0.1506	0	2	Center for American Women and Politics
Female President	0.06706	0	2	Center for American Women and Politics
Bipartisan Caucus	0.48	0	1	National Conference of State Legislatures and Original Collection
Uncontested Seats (%)	36.6	0	82	Hoolbrook Van Dunk Index, Updated by Butcher
Safe Seate (%)	80.23	19.58	97.6	Hoolbrook Van Dunk Index, Updated by Butcher
Days in Session	57.57	21	131.5	Squire Index, 2015

A3: States with Female Legislative Caucuses

State	Caucus Type
Alabama	Bipartisan
Alaska	Bipartisan
Arkansas	Republican
California	Bipartisan
Colorado	Democratic
Connecticut	Bipartisan
Delaware	Bipartisan
Florida	Bipartisan
Georgia	Bipartisan
Hawaii	Bipartisan
Illinois	Democratic
Indiana	Democratic
Kentucky	Bipartisan
Louisiana	Bipartisan
Maryland	Bipartisan
Massachusetts	Bipartisan
Michigan	Democratic
Nevada	Bipartisan
New Jersey	Bipartisan
New Mexico	Bipartisan
New York	Bipartisan
North Carolina	Bipartisan
Ohio	Democratic
Oklahoma	Bipartisan
Oregon	Democratic
South Carolina	Bipartisan
Utah	Bipartisan
Vermont	Bipartisan
West Virginia	Bipartisan
Wisconsin	Bipartisan
Wyoming	Bipartisan

A4: Predicted Values Information

Variable	Set(X)	Change
Salary (<i>thousands</i>)	Mean (30.5)	p25(12) - p75(46.061)
Uncontested Seats (%)	Mean (36.6)	p25(19.444) - p75(52.482)
Staff Support	Mean (4.462)	p25(2.150) - p75(5.870)
Safe Seats (%)	Mean (80.23)	p25(77.381) - p75(90.517)
Days in Session	Mean (57.57)	p25(40) - p75(70)
Female Speaker Pro Tem	Median (0)	0 - 1
Female Speaker	Median (0)	0 - 1
Female President Pro Tem	Median (0)	0 - 1
Female President	Median (0)	0 - 1
Bipartisan Caucus	Median (0)	0 - 1