



Do Tax-Funded Campaigns Increase the Percentage of Women in State Legislatures?

By Alexandra Cordell

Note: The following report is an updated version of an Issue Analysis originally published by the Center for Competitive Politics in August 2008 and last updated in August 2013. This version has been edited to include data from two additional legislative sessions in Arizona and Maine, occurring from 2013-2017, as well as data for the United States Congress from 1991-2017.

Issue

Advocates of taxpayer-funded political campaigns, often called “clean elections” or “public financing” by their proponents, claim that these systems provide the ability for an increased number of diverse, non-traditional candidates to be elected to public office.

To this end, increases in the number of women in state legislatures are frequently touted as an example of the success of tax-financed campaign programs. Supporters have claimed that “[p]ublic financing... elevat[es] the voices of everyday people... [and helps] women leap over one of the major hurdles [they] have to getting elected.”¹ According to these proponents, replacing voluntary private contributions to candidates with taxpayer dollars will eliminate or at least diminish the alleged problem of reduced fundraising opportunities for female candidates.

¹ “Howard County Women Support Publicly Funded Elections,” Democracy Initiative. Retrieved on July 11, 2017. Available at: <https://medium.com/unite4democracy/howard-county-women-support-publicly-funded-elections-7765a7847c71> (April 10, 2017).

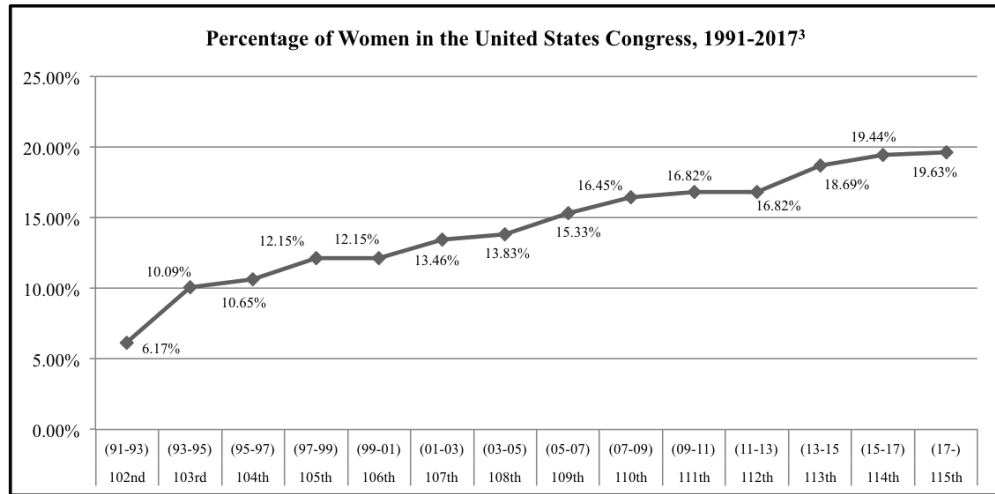
If this claim is accurate, we would expect to see a rising percentage of women legislators in Arizona and Maine, two states that have provided taxpayer funds to qualifying legislative candidates since the 2000 election cycle. The following research examines legislator gender in Arizona and Maine in order to evaluate the claim that taxpayer-funded political campaigns have increased the number of women able to successfully win elected office.

Analysis

For decades, there has been a marked increase in the number of women running for all elected offices across all 50 states. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, “[t]here are six times as many women serving in state legislatures today than in 1971. By 2009, their portion had grown from a meager 4 percent to nearly 25 percent.”²

The progress women have made in winning elections and obtaining leadership positions in state governments is significant. On a national level, the percentage of women in the United States Congress has experienced a steady growth over the past few decades – without taxpayer-funded elections. Since 1991, the number of women in Congress has increased (or

² Karl Kurtz, “Who We Elect: The Demographics of State Legislatures,” National Conference of State Legislatures. Retrieved on July 11, 2017. Available at: <http://www.ncsl.org/research/about-state-legislatures/who-we-elect.aspx> (December 1, 2015).



stayed the same) each session. This trend has been mirrored in several states, with women currently comprising 24.9% of the total amount of state legislators in the United States.⁴

In particular, Arizona and Maine have historically been national leaders in electing women to their state legislatures. According to the Center for American Women and Politics, Arizona has ranked among the top ten states for the highest percentage of women legislators for 28 of the past 30 years, and ranked among the top five states for 23 of the past 30 years.⁵ Currently, Arizona is ranked 4th in the country for the proportion of women in their Legislature.⁶ Similarly, Maine has been among the top ten states for 14 of the past 30 years, and is currently ranked 7th in the nation.⁷

Arizona currently has the highest percentage of women serving in the Legislature (38.89%) since 1991. Prior to this year, however, the highest percentage of women legislators (37.22%) occurred in the 43rd legislative session (1997-1998), several

years before the state’s taxpayer-funded campaign program began. The 46th Legislature (2003-2004), the second cycle after the passage of tax-financed campaigns, saw the lowest proportion of women serving in the Legislature (27.78%) over the past 26 years. In the years before taxpayer-financed campaigns were introduced, the Arizona Legislature had an average of 34.11% of women legislators. That average has actually decreased to 33.72% under a system of tax-funded campaigns.

Maine’s experience is similar. The current Legislature saw the greatest representation for women in the State Legislature at 34.41%. Prior to this year, however, the most women serving occurred from 1990-1992 when 32.53% of legislators were women. The lowest representation for women in Maine came three election cycles after tax-financing began, when women made up just 23.12% of the Legislature. Without a system of tax-funded campaigns, women comprised an average of 29.03% of the Legislature. As in Arizona, that average has decreased to 28.87% under a system of taxpayer-financed campaigns.

Conclusion

Happily, the past decade has seen significant growth for women in politics. Both Maine and Arizona have led the way. These two states have long had greater female representation in their legislatures than much of the nation, as well as Congress.

Tax-financing programs, however, have had little to no impact on increasing the percentage of

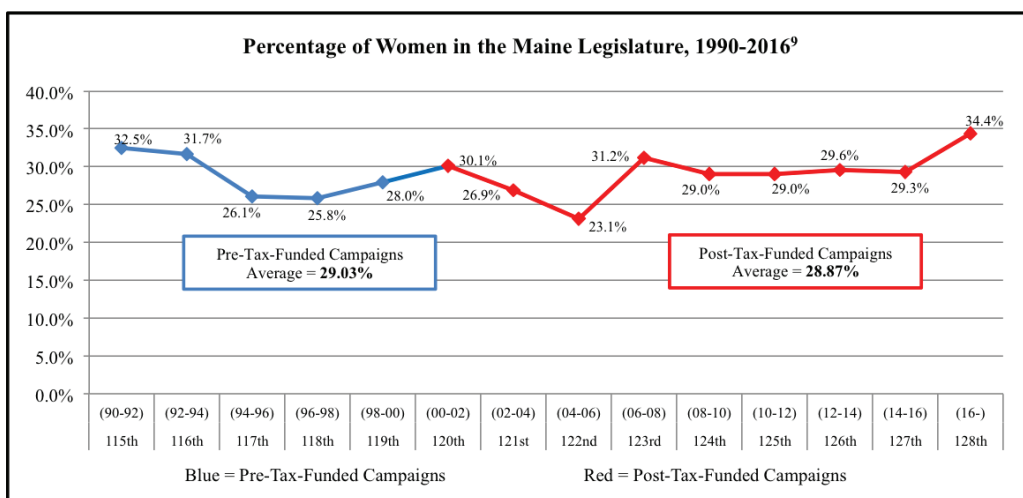
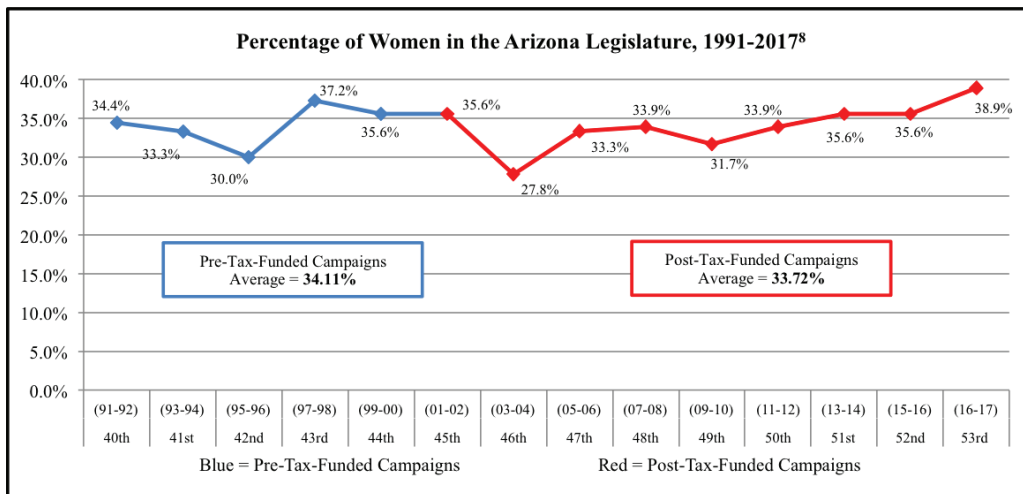
3 “History of Women in the U.S. Congress,” Center for American Women and Politics. Retrieved on July 11, 2017. Available at: <http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/history-women-us-congress> (2017).

4 “Women in State Legislatures 2017,” Center for American Women and Politics. Retrieved on July 11, 2017. Available at: <http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/women-state-legislature-2017> (2017).

5 “State Fact Sheet – Arizona,” Center for American Women and Politics. Retrieved on July 11, 2017. Available at: http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/state_fact_sheets/az (2017).

6 *Ibid.*

7 “State Fact Sheet – Maine,” Center for American Women and Politics. Retrieved on July 11, 2017. Available at: http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/state_fact_sheets/me (2017).



women that are elected to public office. While, in the most recent legislative sessions, the number of women legislators in Arizona and Maine increased to its highest levels, the average percentage of women in both state's legislatures has actually dropped since taxpayer-financed campaigns were implemented in each state. Prior to this year, both states witnessed the highest number of women in their legislatures before the inception of their tax-funded campaign programs. Further, the lowest number of women elected in the past 25 years in

both states occurred under a system of taxpayer-financed campaigns.

Based on this research, advocates' claim that taxpayer-funded political campaigns increase the number of women elected to office is difficult to justify.

⁸ "State Fact Sheet – Arizona," Center for American Women and Politics. Retrieved on July 11, 2017. Available at: http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/state_fact_sheets/az (2017). The data for Arizona was calculated by averaging the percentage of women in the Arizona Legislature for both years of all two-year legislative sessions, in order to accurately account for any yearly changes over a two-year session. Segments of the graph shaded in blue represent years in which members of the Legislature were elected under a system of voluntary campaign contributions. Segments of the graph shaded in red represent years in which members of the Legislature were elected under a system of taxpayer-funded campaigns.

⁹ "State Fact Sheet – Maine," Center for American Women and Politics. Retrieved on July 11, 2017. Available at: http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/state_fact_sheets/me (2017). The data for Maine was calculated by averaging the percentage of women in the Maine Legislature for both years of all two-year legislative sessions, in order to accurately account for any yearly changes over a two-year session. Segments of the graph shaded in blue represent years in which members of the Legislature were elected under a system of voluntary campaign contributions. Segments of the graph shaded in red represent years in which members of the Legislature were elected under a system of taxpayer-funded campaigns. Maine's Legislature has different years than Arizona's because Maine's Legislature is seated in December while Arizona's Legislature is seated in January (e.g. Maine's 125th Legislature was officially seated in December 2010 before finally adjourning its two-year session in May 2012).



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2017 Center for Competitive Politics

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124 S. West Street Suite 201

Alexandria, Va 22314

(703) 894-6800

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