

## **Whither Republican Women in New England?**

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### **Abstract**

New England boasts many accomplishments for women in government, including the first-ever, all female Congressional delegation in New Hampshire. Yet, the representation of women in New England state legislatures varies dramatically by party. Over the past three decades, Democratic women made impressive gains, while Republican women withered. Not only has the number of Republican women in New England legislatures declined, but even more tellingly, women have decreased as a percent of Republican legislators. This is all the more surprising given it has occurred while women have been making great strides in terms of educational and professional attainment. This research suggests that the Republican party's shift rightward has made the party a less welcoming place for women candidates and office holders, especially for the traditionally moderate Republican women of New England. In contrast, the representation of Democratic women appears to be bolstered by the region's high female workforce participation, the political opportunities offered by citizen legislatures, and the moralistic or civic-oriented political cultures found in several New England states.

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### **Whither Republican Women in New England?**

Women remain significantly under-represented at all levels of elective office in the United States. As of summer 2014, women compose less than 20 percent of Congress, 24 percent of state legislators, and only 10 percent of governors (CAWP 2014). Some scholars assumed that women's political representation would climb steadily as women entered the workforce and became better represented in the candidate eligibility pool (Darcy, Welch, and Clark 1994). Yet, this has not happened. Since the 1992 "year of the woman," women's representation has increased slowly. In fact, the 2010 elections saw a decrease in the number of women serving in state legislatures, as well as the first decrease in the number of women in Congress in thirty years (CAWP 2014).

Scholars have investigated a variety of reasons for women's stalled progress including potential recruitment bias by party elites (Niven 1998; Sanbonmatsu 2006) and the gender ambition gap (Elder 2004; Lawless and Fox 2005). A significant and largely overlooked reason for women's continued under-representation is the "withering" of Republican women. In the 1980s, women in elected office were about equally likely to be Republicans or Democrats. Since the early 1990s, however, Democratic women have made steady gains, while the progress of their Republican counterparts has stalled and in some cases reversed (Elder 2012a, 2011, 2008; Palmer and Simon 2004). The result is a sizable partisan gap wherein Democratic women far outnumber Republican women in elective office at both the national and state level. As of 2014, Democrats form 80 percent of women in the U.S. Senate (16 of 20), 76 percent of women in the U.S. House (60 of 79), and 64 percent of women in state legislatures, 1136 out of 1787 (CAWP 2014). The withering of Republican women in elected office not only constrains women's ability to achieve proportional representation, but holds consequences for the policy outcomes, image, and electoral fortunes of the two parties.

This research explores the dynamics of the partisan gap in New England. New England represents an interesting region for this exploration because it is characterized by high rates of female educational, professional, and economic achievement, as well as having a generally progressive reputation, which, in theory, should lead to rates of women's representation higher than the nation overall (Ransford, Hardy-Fanta, and Cammisa 2007, 29-30). In fact, New England was an early leader in terms of women's representation, and today the region stands out for several notable achievements. In the wake of the 2012 elections, New Hampshire became the first state to elect an entirely female congressional delegation, as well as electing a female governor (Seeyle 2013). Moreover, women are better represented among U.S. Senators and House members from New England than the nation overall.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, women form 32 percent of state legislators in New England as opposed to 24 percent nationally (CAWP 2014).

Despite these encouraging statistics, the representation of women in New England lags far behind women's proportional representation in the population and behind where many would predict given the distinctive characteristics of the region. An article titled "Women in New England Politics" asks "why has this region not achieved a higher degree of equality for women in the political arena given the overall progress women have made in the areas of educational attainment, employment, earnings, and health and well-being—factors usually indicative of growing political equality for women?" (Ransford, Hardy-Fanta, and Cammisa 2007, 29-30).

This research focuses on a significant and previously unexplored factor hindering the representation of women in New England—the partisan gap. In other words, a major reason for women's stunted political representation in New England, similar to the country overall, has been the strikingly divergent trajectories of Democratic and Republican women office holders.

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<sup>1</sup> As of spring 2014, women form 33 percent of U.S. Senators from New England as opposed to 20 percent nationally. Women form 44 percent of the U.S. House members from New England House members as opposed to 18 percent nationally (CAWP 2014).

Admittedly, the New England of 2014 is a tough environment for all Republican candidates, both male and female.<sup>2</sup> Yet, this research shows that not only have Republican women in New England declined in terms of absolute numbers, but that they have declined as a portion of Republican state legislators over the past thirty years. Thus, Republican women are withering in terms of their presence and presumably influence within their own party caucus.

This research focuses on the representation of Democratic and Republican women in state legislatures for several reasons. On a practical level, the larger number of cases at the state legislative level allow for more robust trend analyses. Moreover, state legislatures design policies from minimum wage to health care to reproductive rights that greatly affect the lives of women, as well as all people living in the United States. Research shows that women legislate differently from men, and that legislatures composed of more women members produce policies that are more responsive to the interests of women and children (Carroll 2001a; Dodson 2001; Thomas and Welch 2001). Finally, state legislative office represents the most common pipeline for higher level elective office (Fitzsimmons 2012).

This study begins by presenting trends in the representation of Democratic and Republican women state legislators in New England compared to the nation as a whole, seeking answers to the following questions: Does the withering of Republican women in New England mirror that of the nation overall or are the dynamics distinctive? When did the partisan gap among women legislators emerge, and what does this timing tell us about possible causes? Next, this study compares the representation of Democratic and Republican women legislators across each of the six New England states, which allows us to see whether Republican women are having an equally hard time in all New England states or if some states are more welcoming to Republican women than others. The final section explores explanations for the partisan gap by

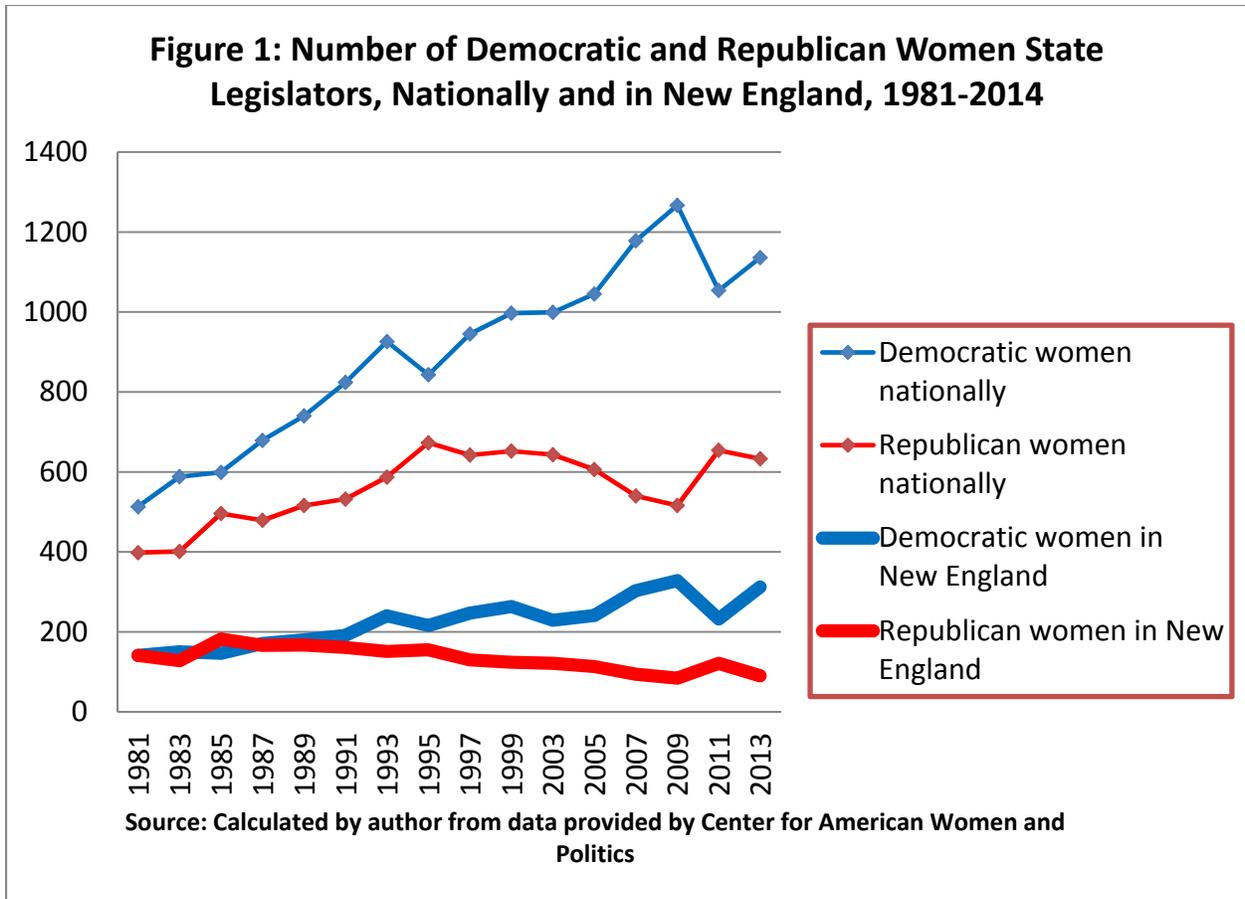
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<sup>2</sup> The one exception is the New Hampshire state Senate, where Republicans outnumber Democrats 13 to 11.

looking at variations in state characteristics across the New England states. More specifically, it explores whether women's presence in the eligibility pool, the state's political opportunity structure and political culture, and the strength of the Christian Right within each state's Republican party provides analytical insights as to why the representation of Republican women has declined, while Democratic women continue to make advances.

### **The Withering of Republican Women State Legislators in New England**

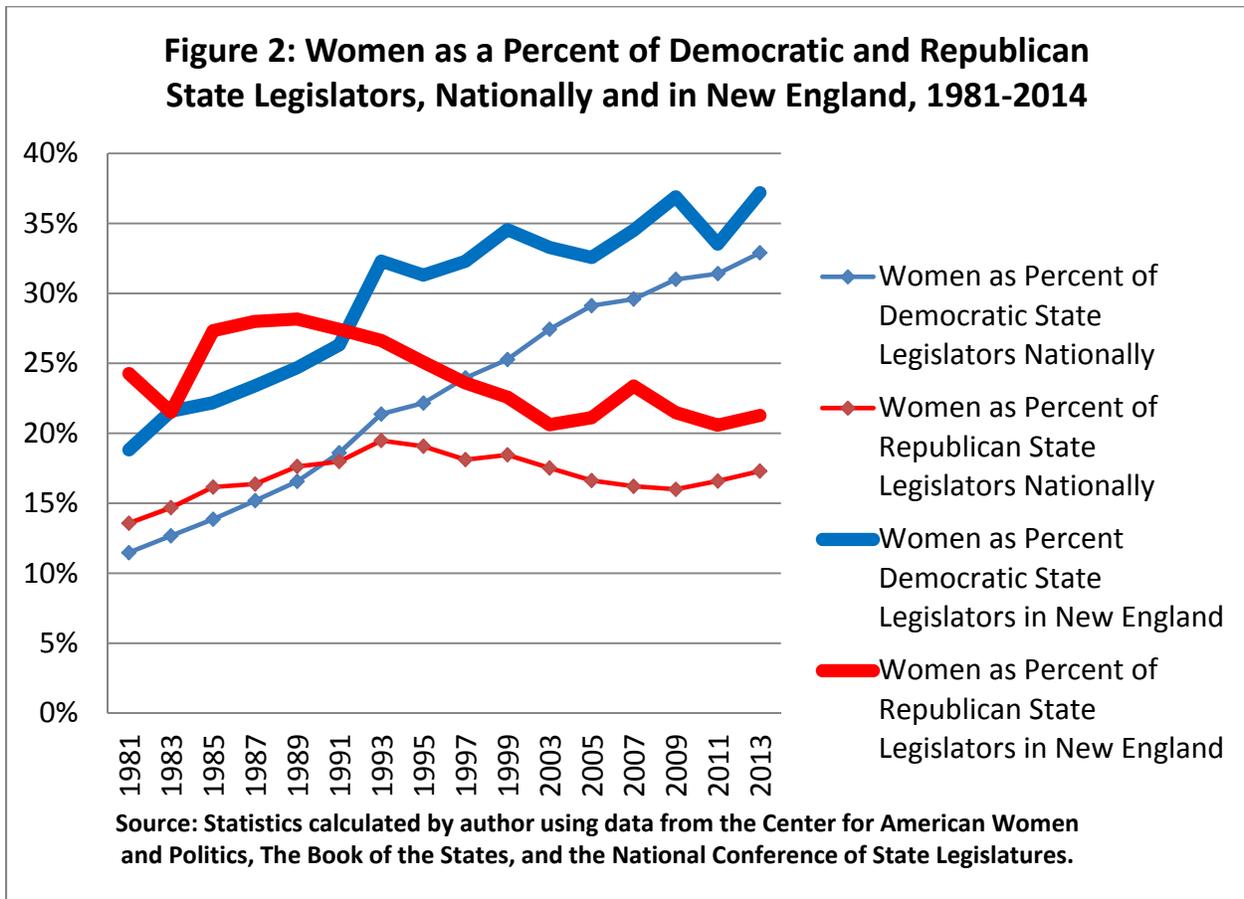
Figure 1 shows the absolute number of Democratic and Republican women in state legislatures nationally compared to New England, over the past three decades. The national trend line shows that Democratic women have outnumbered Republican women from 1981 through the present, which is not surprising given that Democrats maintained an advantage in state legislatures nationally throughout the 1980s. However, over time the number of Democratic women continued to increase while, from the mid-1990s onward, the number of Republican women declined.



Turning to the numbers for New England, Figure 1 shows that in 1981, there was exactly the same number of Republican and Democratic women serving in state legislatures. Republican and Democratic women maintain rough parity through 1991. Yet from the mid-1990s to the present, the number of Republican women declined while the number of Democratic women more than doubled. As of summer 2014, there are 51 fewer Republican women in New England state legislatures than there was in 1981.

Given the shifting fortunes of the parties in state politics over time, as well as the reality that New England has become a heavily Democratic region, it is critical to not only look at the absolute number of Republican and Democratic women legislators, but to examine the levels of women’s representation within their party caucuses. Figure 2 controls for these partisan shifts by

showing women as a percent of Democratic state legislators and Republican state legislators over time, both nationally and in New England.



Although Democratic women outnumbered Republican women in absolute numbers throughout the 1980s, Figure 2 shows that women actually formed a larger share of Republican legislators nationally during this decade. Starting in the 1990s, however, Democratic women came to outnumber Republican women as a portion of their party’s legislators, an advantage that has continued to increase.

Similar to the trends on the national level, Figure 2 shows that among New England legislators, women were better represented among Republicans than Democrats throughout the 1980s, and that across the 1990s women steadily decline as a percent of Republican legislators.

What is particularly striking about New England is that, as of 2014, women have a lower level of representation among Republican legislators than they did in 1981. Thus, while women were making tremendous strides in terms of education and occupation across the last three decades, the Republican legislators in New England were becoming more male-dominated.

Taken together, Figures 1 and 2 indicate that the timing and dynamics of the partisan gap in New England largely mirrors the partisan gap on the national level except that New England represents a more extreme version. In both cases the fate of Republican women legislators starts to encounter trouble in the early 1990s and never recovers, but in the case of New England the representation of Republican women does not just slow, but actually reverses. Over the same time, Democratic women legislators continue a strong upward trajectory. Elder (2012a) and Thomsen (2014, 2012a, 2012b) argue that a main driver of the partisan gap among women elected officials is the increasingly distinct ideologies and reputations of the two parties, and this explanation appears to fit the dynamics of the partisan gap in New England particularly well.

Over the 1980s and 1990s, the two major parties became increasingly ideologically polarized and underwent what some have characterized as a realignment concerning the appropriate role of women and mothers, changes driven in part by the increased influence of religious conservatives within the Republican party and the increased influence of feminists within the Democratic party (Baer 1999; Freeman 1999, 1997, 1993; Jewell and Morehouse 2000, Wolbrecht 2000). While the Republican party did not come out and oppose women's involvement in public office (Sanbonmatsu 2004), it not so subtly increased its emphasis on the desirability of more traditional roles for women. Starting in 1980, for example, the Republican party dropped its support for the Equal Rights Amendment in its platform and in its place began championing the vital role of homemakers. The 1992 Republican platform accuses Democrats of

“forcing millions of women into the workplace” and declares that “the well-being of children is best accomplished in the environment of the home” not in child care centers. The Republican party also has opposed policies, including the Family and Medical Leave Act and publicly funded child care, aimed to help working mothers (Elder and Greene 2012, Chapter 3).

As Figures 1 and 2 show, the Republican party’s shift rightwards coincides with the decline of Republican women legislators in New England. Thus, the more conservative ideology of the Republican party appears to have undermined its ability recruit and support women elected officials in New England as well as nationally.<sup>3</sup> Along similar lines, Thomsen’s (2014a, 2012) theory of party fit posits that the increasingly conservative reputation of the Republican party has made women, who are disproportionately represented among Republican moderates, less interested in seeking office. Meanwhile, the Democratic party’s commitment to equality for women in the public sphere and support for policies to help women balance career and family, appears to provide a more welcoming environment for women thinking about a political career. Bolstered by the support of feminist groups explicitly seeking to elect more women, and armed with a message supporting an active role for women in the public sphere, the Democratic party has been successful in recruiting and electing more women candidates to state legislatures in New England in almost every election cycle.

### **The Withering of Republican Women in New England: A State by State Comparison**

Table 1 shows women’s representation among Democratic and Republican legislators in 2014, as well as the percentage point change in their level of representation over the past three decades, for each of the six states in New England. Most studies focusing on understanding

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<sup>3</sup> While Figure 1 and 2 provide data on women elected officials, rather than women candidates, other research (Elder 2012b) has shown these same trends characterize women state legislative candidates within the two parties.

women’s representation in state legislatures use women’s overall level of representation as their dependent variable. What Table 1 reveals is that these overall statistics mask big differences by party. Women form a greater share of Democratic legislators than Republican legislators in each of the six states of New England and, in several states, the different levels of representation for women in the two parties is striking. For example, women form 46 percent of Democrats and only 19 percent of the Republicans in the New Hampshire state legislature. The consistent and, in some cases, quite dramatic gap suggests that whatever factors are supporting the entrance of Democratic women into state legislative politics do not work the same way for Republican women, an issue explored further in the next section.

**Table 1:** Women as a Percent of Democrats versus Republicans in New England State Legislatures in 2014, and change over time.

State	<b>Women as Percent of Democratic Legislators, 2014</b>	Percent change in women Democrats from 1981 to 2014	<b>Women as percent of Republican legislators, 2014</b>	Percent change in women Republicans from 1981 to 2014
Connecticut	<b>31%</b> (37/121)	+12	<b>27%</b> (18/66)	<b>-3</b>
Massachusetts	<b>27%</b> (44/166)	+19	<b>22%</b> (7/32)	+6
Maine	<b>39%</b> (42/108)	+17	<b>18%</b> (13/73)	<b>-6</b>
New Hampshire	<b>46%</b> (105/229)	+15	<b>19%</b> (36/192)	<b>-10</b>
Rhode Island	<b>28%</b> (28/101)	+18	<b>18%</b> (2/11)	+6
Vermont	<b>49%</b> (56/114)	+19	<b>29%</b> (14/49)	+13
New England	<b>37%</b> (314/839)	+18	<b>21%</b> (90/423)	<b>-3</b>
United States	<b>33%</b>	+22	<b>17%</b>	+3

The left half of Table 1 focuses on the Democratic party and shows that over the past thirty years women have made strong inroads among Democratic state legislators across New England, ranging from an increase of 12 percentage points in Connecticut to 19 percentage points in Vermont and Massachusetts. Some research indicates that women candidates are disadvantaged as legislative seats become more valuable (e.g. Norrander and Wilcox 2005; Ransford, Hardy-Fanta, Cammisa 2007). Yet what we have seen among Democratic women in New England is the opposite. Over the last three decades, women have increased their representation among Democratic legislators at the same time the Democratic party has gained seats and power in New England legislatures. As of 2014, women form a significant block of Democratic legislators in all New England states. In fact, women represent 49 percent of Democratic legislators in Vermont and 46 percent of Democratic state legislators in New Hampshire.

Compared to their Democratic counterparts, Republican women are under-represented in all six New England states, and there are no states where women form more than 30 percent of Republican legislators. Women Republicans have their highest levels of representation in Vermont, at 29 percent, followed by Connecticut, at 27 percent. The statistics presented in Table 1 combine state house and senate data, but it is worth noting that going into the 2014 elections, there are no Republican women serving in the state senate in Maine, Massachusetts, or Rhode Island and only one Republican woman serving in the state senate in Connecticut. Perhaps most striking is that, compared to the consistent double digit gains of Democratic women, women actually declined as a percent of Republican legislators in Connecticut, Maine and New Hampshire over the past three decades.

Although Republican women legislators in New England have fared poorly over time and continue to fare poorly in comparison to their Democratic counterparts, it is important to note that women form a higher share of Republican legislators in New England than nationally (Table 1). The comparative success of Republican women in New England, however, may be a hollow victory, as it means Republican women are achieving higher levels of representation in a region where the Republican party is significantly marginalized. In fact, it may be that Republican women do better in terms of representation in New England compared to other regions of the country precisely because Republican seats in New England are viewed as less valuable by their party.

**New England Case Studies: The Role of the Eligibility Pool, the Political Opportunity Structure, State Culture, and the Christian Right in Shaping the Partisan Gap**

Table 2 documents how the six New England states vary on factors shown in prior research to promote or hinder women's representation in state legislatures including: women's representation in the eligibility pool, the political opportunities and constraints created by the structure of the legislature, the state's political culture, and the strength of the religious right in the state's Republican party (Arceneaux 2001; Darcy, Welch and Clark 1994; Elder 2012a; Norrander and Wilcox 2005; Scola 2013). A small body of literature has documented that some of the factors typically thought to promote or hinder women's representation in state legislatures are significantly mediated by party (Elder 2012a, 2011; Sanbonmatsu 2002). The information in Table 2 allows us to see how these factors play out in the six New England states. The first column of the table presents three statistics for each state as a reference point: women's overall level of representation in the state legislature as of 2014, as well as the statistics featured in Table 1, showing women as a percent of Democratic and Republican state legislators.

Table 2: Distinctive Characteristics of New England States and the Partisan Gap

State	Representation of women in state legislatures overall and by party	Percent Women in Work Force	Type of Legislature	Term Limits	State Political Culture	Christ Right Strength
CT	Overall: 29% Democrats: 31% Republicans: 27%	62.8	Mixed	No	Individualistic	Weak
ME	Overall: 30% Democrats: 39% Republicans: 18%	61.0	Citizen	Yes	Moral	Moderate
MA	Overall: 25% Democrats: 27% Republicans: 22%	62.0	Professional	No	Individualistic	Weak
NH	Overall: 33% Democrats: 46% Republicans: 19%	65.6	Extreme Citizen	No	Moral	Moderate
RI	Overall: 27% Democrats: 28% Republicans: 18%	63.7	Citizen	No	Individualistic	Weak
VT	Overall: 41% Democrats: 49% Republicans: 29%	67.1	Citizen	No	Moral	Weak

### *Women in the Candidate Eligibility Pool*

The second column in Table 2 shows the percent of women in the workforce in each New England state based on 2010 data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor statistics. Research shows women are better represented in states where there are more women in the candidate eligibility pool, a concept which studies have operationalized as the percent of women in a state's workforce (Arceneaux 2001; Darcy, Welch and Clark 1994; Norrander and Wilcox 2005; Rule 1990). In other words, the more qualified women there are in a state, the more women there tend to be in the state's legislature. Interestingly, the small body of research looking at women's representation disaggregated by party has shown that women's labor force participation has been a stronger predictor of women's presence among Democratic legislators than among Republican legislators (Elder 2012a; Sanbonmatsu 2002).

Table 2 reveals that all six New England states have women's workforce participation levels that are higher than the national average, which is 58.6 percent. The effect of women's labor force participation, however, appears mediated by party. The states with the highest levels of women's workforce participation are also the states with the highest levels of women among Democratic state lawmakers. Yet there does not appear to be a correlation between women in the eligibility pool, as traditionally defined, and women's representation among Republican legislators. In fact, Vermont and New Hampshire, the states with the highest level of women's workforce participation, also have the largest gaps between the representation of Democratic and Republican women. Thus, the New England case studies are consistent with previous work indicating that women's workforce participation is a more effective pipeline for Democratic women than Republican women.

One reason for the partisan effect of women's workforce participation may be rooted in the realignment the parties have undergone in terms of the appropriate role of women and mothers (Elder and Greene 2012, Chapter 3; Wolbrecht 2000). Given the Republican party's growing emphasis on rhetoric and policies supporting traditional roles for women, Republican women who work, especially mothers who work, may feel less encouraged to run for office within their party. Meanwhile, the Democratic party's commitment to equality for women in the public sphere and support for policies to help women balance career and family, may provide greater motivation for women thinking about a political career. Additionally, the partisan effect of women's workforce participation may stem from the fact that, comparatively speaking, Democratic women are more likely to be in the workforce, while Republican women are more likely to work in the home (Sanbonmatsu 2002). In fact, intriguing new research suggests that Democratic women are overrepresented, in comparison to their Republican counterparts, in the

educational and professional pipelines that typically lead to political careers (Crowder-Meyer and Lauderdale 2014). While being a full-time homemaker was not an uncommon path to service in state legislatures in 1981, when close to 17 percent of women state legislators cited it as their profession, a 2008 survey found that virtually no women legislators cited full time homemaking as their career (Carroll and Sanbonmatsu 2013, 72). The disappearance of the homemaker route to state legislative office, combined with Republican women's lower levels of representation in professional jobs leading to political careers, may be constraining their potential growth as state legislators.

***The Political Opportunity Structure: Legislative Professionalism, Size, and Term Limits***

The next column categorizes each New England state according to type of legislature: professional, mixed, or citizen (NCSL 2009). Research finds that states with highly professional and well paid legislatures have fewer women in their legislatures (Arceneaux 2001; Norrander and Wilcox 2005). Norrander and Wilcox speculate that this is because "full time legislatures attract a stronger pool of male competitors who make electoral victory more difficult" (2005, 187). In comparison, the low pay and prestige, as well as limited work hours, of citizen legislatures make them more welcoming environments for women seeking office.

Table 2 shows that four of the six New England states have citizen legislatures and suggests that citizen legislatures provide more opportunities for Democratic than Republican women. Democratic women have their highest levels of representation in the states with citizen legislatures, with the exception of Rhode Island, which is discussed more below. In contrast, Republican women have their lowest levels of representation in three of the four states with citizen legislatures: Maine, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island.

New Hampshire has a unique state legislature, so it is worth looking at this case in more detail. The National Conference of State Legislatures classifies New Hampshire as having a “most traditional” legislature since legislators are paid only \$100 per year (National Conference of State Legislatures 2009; Seeyle 2013). Additionally, New Hampshire has the largest state house in the nation, with 400 seats, which is even more remarkable given the relatively small population in the state (Seeyle 2013). Some argue that the “volunteer” nature of the legislature combined with its relatively low barriers to entry have produced a legislative system that is very open to women candidates (Ransford, Hardy-Fanta, and Cammisa 2007; Seeyle 2013).

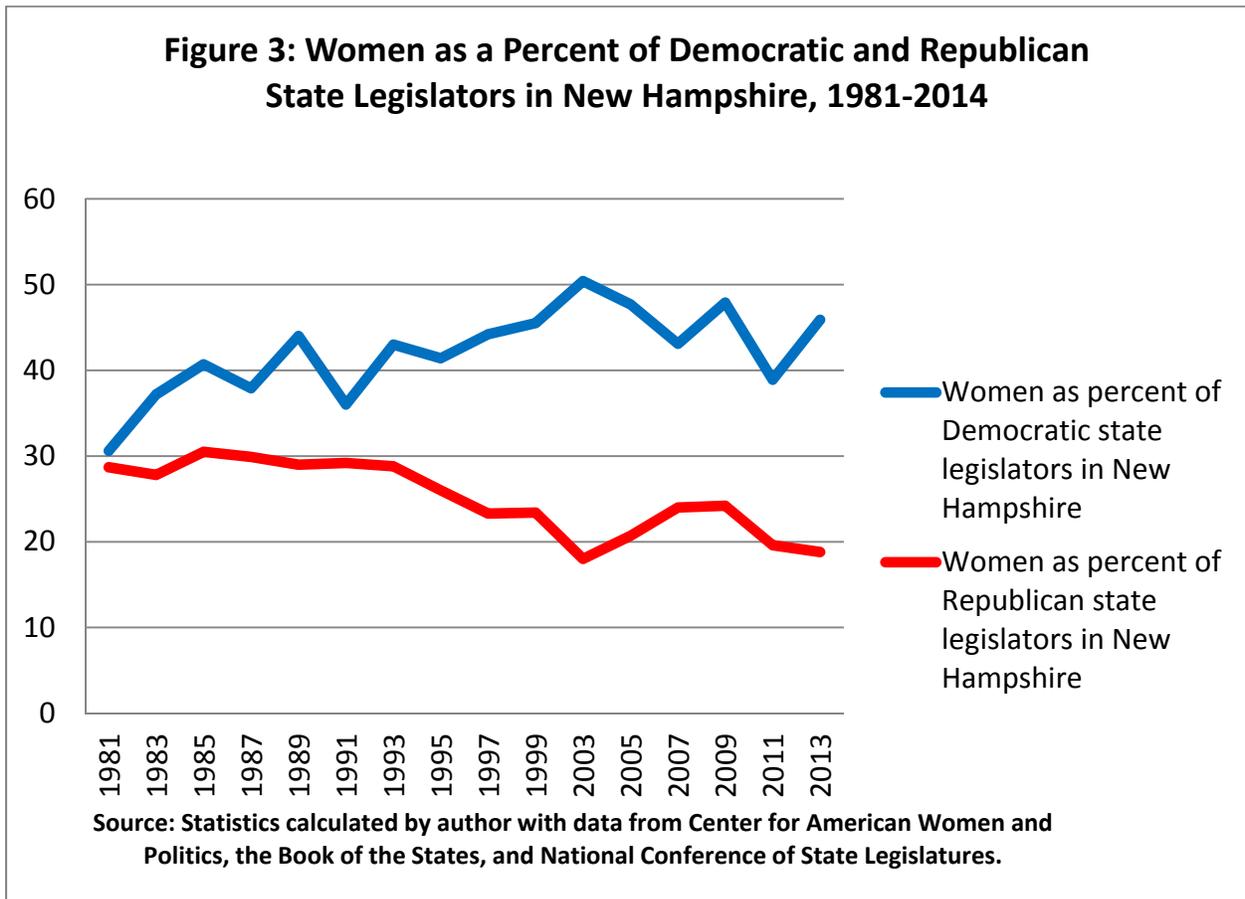


Figure 3 disaggregates women’s representation in the New Hampshire state legislature by party and shows that the opportunities provided by New Hampshire’s unique state legislature have primarily benefitted Democratic women. Women have formed a greater share of Democratic

than Republican legislators across the entire time period of this study and, today, New Hampshire is characterized by having the most pronounced partisan gap in New England. What is notable is that women's strong representation among New Hampshire Democrats is not a new phenomenon, but one that goes back decades. Women formed more than 40 percent of Democratic state legislators as early as 1985, and, in fact, in 2005 women formed more than 50 percent of Democratic legislators. Given the strong pipeline of Democratic women in New Hampshire, it is not surprising it became the first "pink" state, electing a woman governor and sending an entire female Congressional delegation to Washington (Seeyle 2013). In contrast, starting in 1993, women's representation among Republican legislators in New Hampshire has declined. Thus whatever openings New Hampshire's uniquely accessible legislature once provided to Republican women have diminished, perhaps because Republican women are receiving less encouragement and support than their Democratic counterparts to take advantage of such opportunities.

The size of the legislature, or rather the changing size of the legislature, also appears to be a factor in the partisan gap in Rhode Island. Rhode Island has a citizen legislature, but it has not proven to be as welcoming for women as other New England citizen legislatures. One reason for this may be the fact that Rhode Island dramatically reduced the size of its state legislature from 150 to 113 members<sup>4</sup> in 2003 (Fitzpatrick 2002). At the same time legislative pay was increased from \$300 to \$10,000 annually (Fitzpatrick 2002). These changes made the seats in the Rhode Island legislature more competitive and more valuable, which in turn disadvantaged women (Ransford, Hardy-Fanta, and Cammisa 2007, 32; Fitzpatrick 2002).

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<sup>4</sup> The House of Representatives was reduced from 100 to 75 members and the Senate was reduced from 50 to 38 (Fitzpatrick 2002).

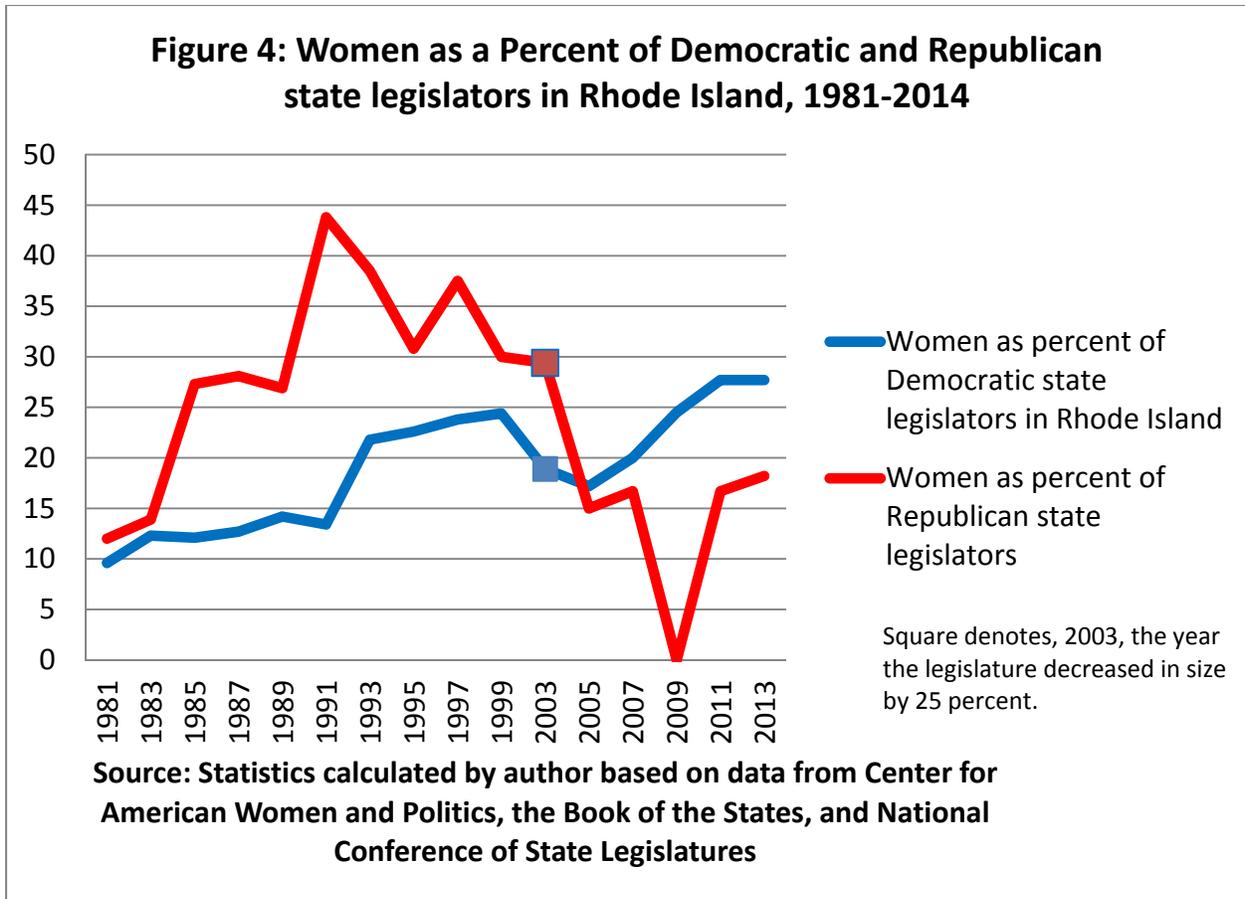


Figure 4 explores whether the changes in the Rhode Island legislature differentially affected the representation of Republican and Democratic women. Interestingly, women remained better represented among Republican than Democratic legislators in Rhode Island up until the 2003 changes were implemented. In the wake of the changes, there was an immediate and dramatic drop in women's representation, but the losses were much more pronounced among women in the Republican party. In just one election cycle, women dropped from forming 29 percent of Republican legislators to 15 percent. Republican women have not recovered from these losses, remaining under 20 percent of their party's legislators ever since. In contrast, although women in the Democratic party suffered a modest, two percentage point loss in the wake of the changes, they were able to adjust and achieve even higher levels of representation in the new more competitive legislative environment. Thus, the shift in Rhode Island to a more

competitive electoral environment was indeed detrimental to women's representation, but almost entirely by hurting Republican women.

The next column, labeled term limits, indicates that only one state in New England has implemented term limits. The citizens of Maine voted to institute term limits in 1993, and they went into effect in 1996 (NCSL 2013). Many thought the adoption of term limits might lead to more women in state legislatures since one of the largest obstacles to women's representation is incumbency (Darcy, Welch and Clark 1994). Somewhat surprisingly, studies have found the implementation of term limits has not always increased the representation of women (Carroll 2001b; Carroll and Jenkins 2005, 2001; Moncrief, Niemi, and Powell 2004). On the contrary, Ransford, Hardy-Fanta and Cammisa (2007) argue that term limits are one of the reasons Maine lags behind other New England states in terms of women's overall level of representation.

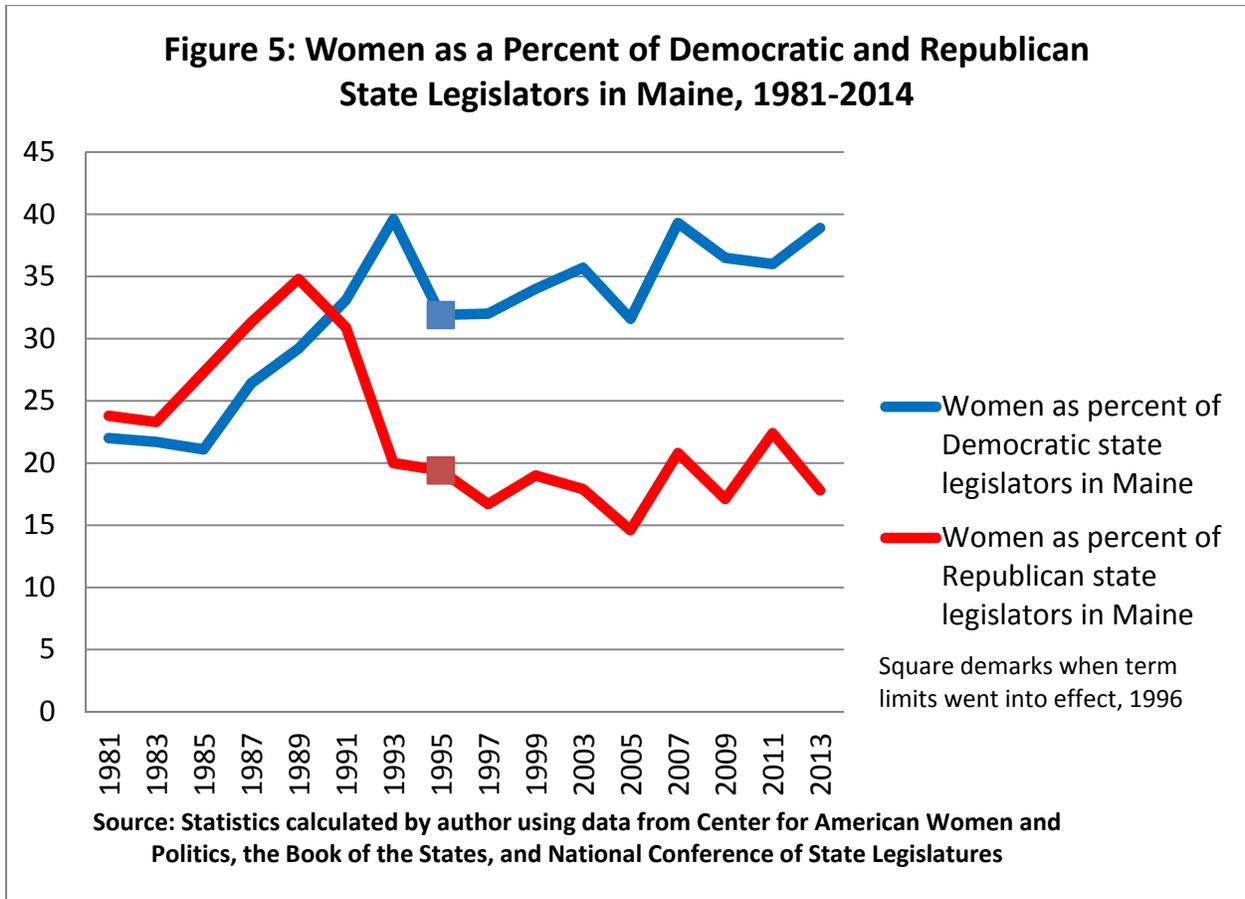


Figure 5 explores whether the effects of term limits differentially affected Republican and Democratic women in Maine. It shows that implementation of term limits, in 1996, was followed by a small drop in the representation of Republican women and essentially no change among Democratic women. In the eighteen years that the term limits have been in effect, women have increased their level of representation among Democratic legislators by seven percentage points while women have decreased among Republican legislators by one percentage point. As other researchers have noted, term limits force out women as well as men, and unless there is strong recruitment machinery geared at finding women candidates to their place, the open seats will not necessarily go to women (Arceneaux 2001; Carroll 2001; Carroll and Jenkins 2005, 2001; Moncrief, Niemi, and Powell 2004; Paxton, Painter and Hughes 2009). These results suggest the effects of term limits may be mediated by party, as there is a strong network of feminist oriented

women's organizations poised to help Democratic women take advantage of openings created by term limits, but not a parallel infrastructure for Republican women. Also, it is important to note that Republican women were suffering sharp declines in Maine well before the implementation of term limits. Thus while term limits did not advance their representation, they clearly were not the only factor driving down their numbers.

### ***State Political Culture***

The next column shows the categorization of the six New England states based on Daniel Elazar's state culture coding. Research shows that states with Traditional cultures have fewer women, while women do better in states with Moralistic cultures that emphasize civic engagement and view elective office as a means to advance the public good (Arceneaux 2001; Norrander and Wilcox 1998; Rule 1990; Scola 2013). Table 2 illustrates that half the states in New England are classified as having Moralistic political cultures (Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont) while the other half are classified as having Individualistic cultures (Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island), which are characterized by a more partisan, competitive and self-interested political environment (Elazar 1984).

Table 2 shows that New England states with Moralistic political cultures are associated with higher levels of women in office, but once again, only for Democratic women. The three states with Moralistic cultures are the three states with the highest levels of women's representation among Democrats in New England. In contrast, two of the states with Moralistic cultures, Maine and New Hampshire, have the lowest levels of women Republicans women in the region. Interestingly, this same pattern holds true nationally. In other words, across the country Democratic women have particularly high rates of representation in states classified as

having Moralistic political cultures, whereas Republican women have slightly lower levels of representation in states with Moralistic political cultures than in other states.<sup>5</sup>

### ***The Strength of the Christian Right***

One factor that may explain the low levels of representation of women among Republican legislators in Maine and New Hampshire may relate to the influence of the Christian Right in those two states. The last column in Table 2 shows the influence of the Christian Right on the state Republican parties in New England, based on a study by Conger and Greene (2002) which classified states as having strong, moderate, or weak levels of Christian Right influence within the state's Republican party.<sup>6</sup> In the late 1980s the Christian Right began a campaign of sustained grassroots activism within state Republican parties aimed at taking over the party apparatus, recruiting and training candidates, and pushing a conservative social agenda that promoted traditional families and gender roles (Green, Guth and Wilcox 1998; Persinos 1994). The Christian Right was successful in 'taking over' the Republican party in many states, but less successful in others (Conger 2009; Conger and Green 2002; Green, Rozell and Wilcox 2003). Scholars, as well as actual women office holders, have argued that Christian Right influence makes women, especially moderate women, feel less welcome in the party (Carroll 2002; Elder 2012a; Melich 1996).

Table 2 shows that the influence of the Christian Right is, not surprisingly, quite minimal in New England. There are no states where the Christian Right influence is classified as strong and four states where the Christian Right influence is classified as weak. That said, the two states

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<sup>5</sup> In states classified as having a Moralistic culture, women form 37 percent of Democratic legislators. In contrast women form only 16 percent of Republicans in states classified as having a Moralistic culture while forming 17 percent of Republicans in states with non-Moralistic cultures.

<sup>6</sup> Conger and Green's classifications were based on surveys, conducted in 2000, of knowledgeable political elites who were asked to assess the power of the Christian Right within their state's Republican party. This ordinal measure was modeled after the measure of Christian Right strength pioneered by Persinos (1994).

where the Christian Right is classified as having moderate influence, Maine and New Hampshire, are also states where Republican women now have the lowest levels of representation in New England. Further, it is interesting to note that the Christian Right increased its strength in the Republican party in New Hampshire, going from weak to moderate across the 1990s (Conger and Green 2002, Persinos 1994), which coincided with a decrease in women's representation among Republican legislators (see Figures 3 and 5). Thus, the pattern in New England is consistent with the findings of Elder (2012a) that greater Christian Right influence predicts fewer women among Republican legislators. This may be because state-level Republican parties with Christian Right influence are less likely to seek out and support women to run, or that Republican women may be less likely to view themselves as viable candidates in states where the Christian Right has a notable presence in their party.

### **Implications and Conclusions**

In their 2007 article, "Women in New England Politics" Ransford, Hardy-Fanta, and Cammisa write that "virtually nothing has been published on the state of women in elected office in New England" (2007, 29), and go on to provide a basic history and description of women's representation in the region. The research presented here has sought to further address this deficiency in the literature and advance the argument that in order to understand women's representation in New England, as well as nationally, we must pay specific attention to the role of party. Focusing in on women's level of representation overall obscures strikingly different partisan dynamics in the representation of Democratic and Republican women state legislators in New England.

Over the past three decades, Democratic women have increased their representation in New England state legislatures while their party has increased its power in the region. Today, women form a sizable block among Democratic legislators in all New England states and, in recent years, Democratic women have held leadership positions in all state legislatures except Connecticut (NCSL 2014). This is particularly important given that Democrats control the legislatures in all of New England except the New Hampshire state senate. Most agree that movement towards proportional representation of women in legislative bodies is an important goal, not only because equal representation is normatively important in a democracy, but because it alters the deliberative processes, priorities, and outcomes of political institutions (e.g. Mansbridge 1999; Reingold 1992; Thomas 1994). The results of this study show that women are well positioned to play a meaningful role in shaping the agenda and actions of the Democratic party in New England.

Somewhat surprisingly, the strong success of Democratic women in the state legislatures of New England has been slow to translate into an equally strong performance in the U.S. Senate. The only women U.S. Senators from New England from 1995 through 2009 were Republican, Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins of Maine. The election of the first Democratic women from New England did not occur until 2008, when Jean Shaheen became New Hampshire's first female Senator. Moreover, Vermont has the dubious distinction of being one of only three states in the nation to never elect a woman to either chamber of Congress, despite women forming nearly half of the state's Democratic state legislators. One reason it has taken Democratic women so long to break into the U.S. Senate may be the distinctively long tenure of several of the region's U.S. Senators. Ted Kennedy represented Massachusetts in the U.S. Senate for 46 years, but once his seat was open, it did not take long for a Democratic woman, Elizabeth

Warren in this case, to gain entry. Given Democratic women's strong presence in New England state legislatures, one of the most effective pipelines for higher level office, when other long-serving Senators, such as Patrick Leahy, decide to retire, Democratic women should be well-positioned to compete for these higher level openings.

The comparatively stronger performance of Republican women in the U.S. Senate from New England may actually be an anomalous relic of the past. Once Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins won their Senate seats in Maine, their distinctively moderate politics as well as the gender neutral advantage of incumbency helped them win re-election time and again. Yet successful moderate Republican candidates--male or female--are becoming less common (Thomsen 2014a). Danielle Thomsen's research focused on the House side shows that over the past thirty years the entire delegation of Republican women has left the institution and has been replaced with much more conservative women members (Thomsen 2014b). A similar dynamic occurred in the U.S. Senate delegation from New England. The same year Olympia Snowe retired, a much more conservative Kelly Ayotte was elected. While New Hampshire was open to Ayotte's conservative candidacy in 2012, this seems a less plausible scenario in other New England states. Indeed, some have argued that the Republican party's shift to the right is adding yet another layer of challenge to the recruitment of women congressional candidates (Thomsen 2014a, 2012). In an interview with *The New York Times*, former Senator Olympia Snowe recently stated that "The Republican party's brand has veered so far right, it's not enticing for many potential women candidates to run as Republicans" (Hunt 2014). Finally, it is important to note that Olympia Snowe, like the majority of women in Congress, started her career in the state legislature (Elder 2008). Yet there are fewer Republican women serving in New England state legislatures today than three decades ago. Even more troubling, women now form a smaller share

of Republican legislators in New England than they did in 1981, and there are no Republican women in positions of leadership (NCSL 2014). Given this reality it is not surprising that, despite a major recruiting effort, the Republican party is struggling to find women to run for Congress in the 2014 midterm elections (Railey 2014).

The withering of Republican women in New England holds concerning consequences for the party as a whole. Republican women legislators hold different views on policy issues than their male colleagues (Epstein, Niemi, and Powell 2005) and their underrepresentation as states tackle issues such as minimum wage, reproductive rights, and health care, issues that disproportionately impact women, has substantive implications. On the national level, Republican women, especially the Republican women Senators of New England, have played a distinctive role in shaping their party's policies and finding solutions to important national issues (Weisman and Steinhauer 2013). Perhaps even more importantly, Republican women have played a crucial role in helping to moderate the image of their party. The withering of Republican women in New England will leave the party less able to appeal to women voters and counter accusations that Republicans are launching a "war against women" (Drusch 2014).

The analyses presented here reveal that several related factors appear to be driving the different trajectories of Republican and Democratic women elected officials in New England. Republican women began to "wither" in the early 1990s, the same time their party shifted rightwards and adopted a more conservative stance on women issues. In other words, the more conservative ideology and reputation of the Republican party appears to have negative consequences for its ability to recruit women from the sizable eligibility pool in New England states. We also see that women have declined as a share of Republican legislators in the two New England states where the Christian Right holds some sway. When competition intensified in

Rhode Island and term limits were enacted in Maine, Republican women were disproportionately pushed out of office.

In contrast, Democratic women appear to thrive in the moralistic, civic oriented culture and citizen legislatures characterizing many New England states. The Democratic party along with feminist organizations geared to elect liberal women to office, have been effective at recruiting women from the large candidate pools in New England states to take advantage of legislative openings. To some extent the recruitment of Democratic women may be taking on a self-reinforcing dynamic. As more Democratic women move into leadership positions in state legislatures, they may be particularly effective at inspiring and recruiting more women to run. Indeed, in the “pink” state of New Hampshire, many of the Democratic women leaders credit the encouragement and support they received from other Democratic women in attaining their positions (Seeyle 2013).

There are several ways the research presented here can be built on to further enhance our understanding of political parties and women’s representation in New England. It is important to extend the analysis to women in municipal elections as local level positions form an important pipeline for state legislative office, especially for women (Ransford, Hardy-Fanta, and Cammisa 2007). It would also be interesting to revisit the role of party in the election of women governors. Looking at data from 1976 to 2004, Stambough and O’Regan (2007) found the Democratic party was more likely to recruit women to run for governor in desirable open seats, while the Republican party recruited women to be “sacrificial lambs” running in races against incumbents. However, Republican women are now doing quite well in gubernatorial elections, as they currently form 4 of the 5 women governors. Exploring why Republican women have fared well in executive office, compared to their Democratic counterparts, may provide useful, additional

insights into the partisan dynamics of women's representation. Finally, exploring women's influence on policy making in their own party caucuses, especially in states where women now form close to 50 percent of Democratic legislators, could provide distinctive insights into the connection between descriptive and substantive representation.

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