

Why hasn't Minnesota elected a female governor?

By [Briana Bierschbach](#) | 10/08/15

On a chilly April day in 2010, Margaret Anderson Kelliher stepped up to the podium in Duluth to accept the DFL Party's nomination for governor.

One by one, the then-speaker of the Minnesota House thanked the four men she beat to get there, including Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak and three of her colleagues in the Legislature. It had taken nine hours and six ballots, but it was a historic moment — no woman had ever made it that far in the political process in the race for Minnesota's chief executive.

"We are going to make sure that, just as we have won elections in the past, we are going to together build a strong, strong campaign across this state as we go on to victory in August and victory in November," Kelliher told a cheering crowd of activists. "DFLers, are you ready to make some history?"

But history came to a screeching halt that August, when former U.S. Sen. Mark Dayton narrowly defeated Kelliher in a three-way DFL primary race for governor and went on to win the general election.



Margaret Anderson Kelliher



Minnesotans have elected more female lieutenant governors than any other state, not to mention women to congressional seats and the U.S. Senate. Minnesota has the fourth highest number of women serving in its Legislature in the nation, and women have served in all of the state's constitutional offices, save one — the governor's office.

"Being the chief executive officer in government has become the highest glass ceiling for women to break through," said Debbie Walsh, director of the [Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University](#). "It's long overdue when you look at the kinds of women [Minnesota has] in leadership and who are really active players in the state."

An open seat in the governor's office in 2018 could change that. Dayton is stepping down after two terms, and already more than a half-dozen women from both parties are being discussed as potential top-tier candidates. On the DFL side, that includes popular U.S. Sen. Amy Klobuchar, Lt. Gov. Tina Smith, Attorney General Lori Swanson and state Rep. Erin Murphy. For Republicans, House Majority Leader Joyce Peppin, Rep. Jenifer Loon, and state Sens. Michelle Benson, Karin Housley and Julie Rosen all land on operatives' lists of potential candidates.

"Just look at the presidential campaign; you see more and more women leaders stepping up. It puts another crack in that ceiling," said Jennifer DeJournett, president of [Voices of Conservative Women](#), a group that works to recruit and help elect Republican women to office. "That's what I kind of feel like with this governor's race in Minnesota. It's gotten so many cracks in that glass ceiling and we just need the right person to shatter it."

Building a bench

Kelliher, who did not return a call for comment, was by no means the first woman to take a shot at winning the governor's office. In more recent state history, State Auditor Judi Dutcher and DFL state Sen. Becky Lourey both sought the DFL endorsement for governor in 2002. Lourey famously dropped out of the race and threw her support to Dutcher, saying, "It's time for a woman." Senate Majority Leader Roger Moe ultimately won the endorsement but lost the race to Tim Pawlenty. Lourey sought the endorsement again in 2006, but lost it to Attorney General



Jennifer DeJournett

Mike Hatch.



MinnPost file photo by Jana Freiband
Former state Sen. Becky Lourey

On the Republican side, longtime GOP activist Sue Jeffers challenged Pawlenty in the 2006 primary but lost. In 2010, former State Auditor Pat Anderson planned to seek the GOP nomination for governor but ultimately switched to run for state auditor. State Sen. Julie Rosen strongly considered a run for governor in 2014, but her campaign never materialized.

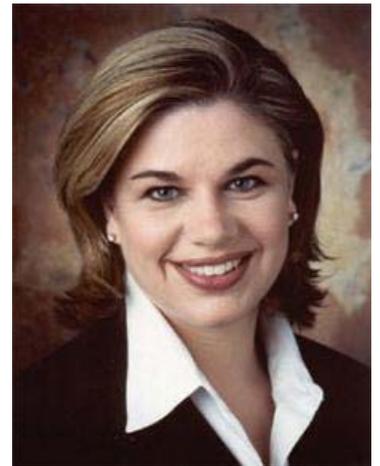
DFL Party Chairman Ken Martin said it should be no surprise so many women candidates are being discussed for governor in 2018 — Minnesota has built a strong bench of female candidates over the last decade.

In 2006, Klobuchar was the first woman elected to represent Minnesota in the U.S. Senate. That same year, Swanson was elected as the first-ever female attorney general. State Auditor Rebecca Otto was also elected that year. Thirty years ago there were only 29 women serving in the Legislature, but there are currently 67.

Minnesotans have also elected women to serve as lieutenant governor in nine consecutive elections, more than any other state, but the job has yet to serve as a springboard for the governor's office (one person opined that it's "the place where women's political careers go to die").

But Smith, elected alongside Dayton in his second term, is the most active lieutenant governor in recent history, often participating in high-level negotiations with (or in place of) Dayton. That has politicians talking about her as a potential governor candidate in 2018, and she hasn't closed the door to that option.

"That has been happening for some time. It has been deliberate by the DFL to recruit strong women candidates," Martin said. "It's not by accident that you are starting to hear women candidates mentioned on the gubernatorial level."



Judi Dutcher

Barriers for women candidates

Across the nation, 37 women have held the title of governor, and six states currently have female chief executives. Yet it's taken longer than most expected to get women involved in gubernatorial politics in Minnesota, a state with a progressive reputation. Groups like Voices of Conservative Women on the right and **Women Winning** on the left have tried to engage and recruit women candidates, but there are obstacles. Studies show women are much less likely than men to think they are qualified to run for office. Women also react more negatively than men to many aspects of modern campaigns.



Lauren Beecham
Women Winning

Lauren Beecham, executive director of Women Winning, is also fighting a gap in political ambition between men and women. Many women don't grow up thinking about being president or governor. "We want to help break down barriers that might keep them from being involved in the political process in the first place," she said. "We talk to potential candidates about things like, what does it take to be a qualified candidate to run? What does it take to win? We want them to leap into the campaign with faith."

Women are also less likely than men to receive the suggestion to run for office — from anyone. At the same time, women generally also need to be approached and asked to run for office multiple times before they will jump in.

"Traditionally, women who run for any office feel like they need to be asked a few times before they make that leap," said DeJournett. "They tend to do a lot of research beforehand, and the timeline for women candidates has always been longer. Whereas a gentleman candidate might wake up and say sure, 'I'll run, give me some lawn signs.'"

University of St. Thomas professor Debra Petersen, who has spent years studying political communication surrounding women, said many women who have successfully run for office don't talk about their gender much. That's a problem, she says.

“Many women don’t say much about the value of being a female in politics. With Hillary [Clinton] in 2008, that was one of the criticism by her supporters,” Petersen said. “This time around she’s doing more of that, what would be the value of having a female president? She’s talking about that this time, and that’s what women who are considering running for office need to hear more of.”

But getting all the way to the oval office or the governor’s office is a step the nation and many states haven’t taken yet. “Some think voters may be more comfortable with women as legislators, because it fits in many ways the stereotypes about women in general,” Walsh said. “They work well with others, and do well in committees as opposed to the place where the buck stops. Those stereotypes are changing, but it’s taken time.”

Both parties see opportunity

Nationally, four of the six sitting female governors are Republicans, but the Republican Party of Minnesota has yet to endorse a woman candidate for governor. Republican Party Chairman Keith Downey says they don’t try to categorize or label candidates. “It’s a natural process, and as more and more women come into the system they inevitably win and do a great job,” he said. “We have more women in politics than ever before.”

Benson, a two-term Republican state senator from Ham Lake, ran as the lieutenant governor candidate alongside fellow Sen. Dave Thompson last cycle. They didn’t make it through the endorsement process, but Benson said she hasn’t closed the door on running for governor one day.

“It is a big mountain to climb. I’ve watched two very good men try to do that,” Benson said.

But she added that people are “looking for for something new, something different.”

“Women have the the ability to lead, and they are really sharp thinkers who really approach the world in a different way,” she said. “I think it would energize a lot of Republicans to say, ‘You know we are different. We are not engaged in the war on women. We have talented people willing and ready to step up.’”



State Sen. Michelle Benson

For Martin, the two-term chair of the DFL Party, the next two election cycles are pivotal moments for the nation (he’s a supporter of Hillary Clinton’s campaign for president) and for Minnesota.

“I think it’s really exciting when you think about the list that everyone talks about, three of the four top names mentioned are women candidates. It’s a sign of how far we’ve progressed as a state,” Martin said. “But it can’t be just that again, where we have this list of candidate and then we don’t elect them. At some point we need to elect a women president and we need a woman governor in this state.”

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Briana Bierschbach reports on public affairs, higher education, politics and other important topics and issues in the news.



COMMENTS (15)

Why hasn't Minnesota ever elected a Sioux governor?

SUBMITTED BY DENNIS TESTER ON OCTOBER 8, 2015 - 10:42AM.

I mean, after all we were the original residents. Maybe politicians of all makes and models should just concentrate on getting elected on the merits of the good ideas they propose instead of what they look like.

Talk and action

SUBMITTED BY RAY SCHOCH ON OCTOBER 8, 2015 - 10:56AM.

When Ms. Benson says 'You know we are different. We are not engaged in the war on women. We have talented people willing and ready to step up' it would have more credibility in this household if there was some evidence of the first two sentences. I've no doubt there are some smart and talented (defining political "talent" – male and female – remains elusive, but let's give everyone the benefit of the doubt) women on the Republican side, but so far, I see no evidence that they're significantly different from their male counterparts, and in particular, I see no evidence that they've abandoned, much less publicly criticized, the quite well-documented hostility of Republican males to women and women's issues. Too many women who like to call themselves "conservative" are active participants in what their detractors will call – with some accuracy, I think – the "war on women."

There's plenty of residual sexism in the DFL as well, I'd guess, but with more women in statewide elected office, the DFL is in a far better position to appeal to women as both candidates and voters in that context.

Married women vote republican

SUBMITTED BY DENNIS TESTER ON OCTOBER 8, 2015 - 11:52AM.

If you Googled that line above you'd find out that most married women vote republican. The alleged "gender gap" we hear about in the press is because most single women and women of color vote democrat.

We never seem to see stories in the press about how the democrats need to worry that they've lost married women or white women or white married people in general. Maybe reporter Bierschbach should look into that one.

Married women vote republican

SUBMITTED BY JAMES MILLER ON OCTOBER 8, 2015 - 12:22PM.

Ah Mr. Tester, where do you get your "facts" from? See <http://www.people-press.org/2015/04/07/a-deep-dive-into-party-affiliation/>:

Gender differences are evident in nearly all subgroups: For instance, Republicans lead among married men (51%-38%), while married women are evenly divided (44% Republican, 44% Democratic).

The right candidate

SUBMITTED BY HIRAM FOSTER ON OCTOBER 8, 2015 - 12:49PM.

Within the last few years, it's been a series of somewhat unlikely events that has prevented women from being elected governor. I look back to Margaret and the election of 2010. She had the endorsement, but had the bad luck to run against Dayton. Had Margaret been just a bit stronger as a candidate, a bit clearer perhaps on why she wanted to be governor, she would be in her second term today.

Going forward, the DFL nomination in 2018 right now, is largely Amy Klobuchar's for the taking. She just doesn't want to take it. With Amy out, the list of potential DFL candidates is very long. IMO, the key for a woman candidate to succeed is for DFL women to unify around one candidate. But the problem there is that there are a number of DFL women leaders who like their chances, which sort of argues against the argument, if anyone is making it, that there is some sort of prejudice preventing a woman from being elected governor. It's not that there isn't prejudice by the way, it's a factor, just far from being a deciding or determining factor.

Forgotten candidate?

SUBMITTED BY DON CASEY ON OCTOBER 8, 2015 - 1:22PM.

Before any of the female gubernatorial candidates mentioned, there was former Lt. Gov. Joanne Benson. Benson, who served as lieutenant governor in Arne Carlson' second term, was a candidate in the 1998 Republican primary -- entering as the early favorite. She lost the primary, however, and the

party nominee, Norm Coleman, lost to Ventura in the general election.

And another forgotten.....

SUBMITTED BY PHIL FUEHRER ON OCTOBER 8, 2015 - 4:19PM.

As a major party, the Independence Party ran Hannah Nicollet for governor last year.

The problem is that Republican women who

SUBMITTED BY WILLIAM GLEASON ON OCTOBER 8, 2015 - 1:51PM.

are "moderate" have a hard time surviving. I'll remind everyone that Jen DeJournett's excellent operation is specifically dedicated toward "conservative" women.

Unfortunately, conservatives when running for statewide office have little or no chance. And MOST of the female GOP candidates are conservative.

There are some women on the GOP side who are willing to go against the grain, like Jenifer Loon. She might make an attractive candidate. But remember when she did this that ANOTHER CONSERVATIVE woman, Sheila Kihne, tried to rub her out.

Lord love a duck.

Meanwhile, the DFL seems to have a surfeit of legitimate female candidates. Some of the local right wing talk hosts have already been screaming bloody murder about the Lieutenant governor, since she looks like a good candidate. Doesn't look promising for the GOP in the short run.

And In The Next Gubernatorial Race

SUBMITTED BY MIKE WORCESTER ON OCTOBER 9, 2015 - 7:09AM.

If I were a gambling person -- and I'm not but let's pretend here shall we -- I'd be willing to bet that in the next gubernatorial race, the top tier candidates for the DFL will be at least three women: the Lt. governor, attorney general, and auditor. There is nobody in the state senate that jumps out at me as being viable, at least not on paper so far.

I'd be curious to hear what other folks think about this potential scenario.

Voting for the best, not the sex or skin color

SUBMITTED BY CHAD QUIGLEY ON OCTOBER 9, 2015 - 7:23AM.

How about we get back to voting for the person who is best qualified for the job instead of the one whose gender or skin color has been waiting in the wings long enough? This isn't American Idol people, this is our lives these politicians are running and ruining. Look at what 8 years of "the first black president" has done to this country. We definitely don't need to vote for Hillary just because she has hung on this long and she's a woman. Same goes for state office. Vote for the best qualified, not the one who is PC at the time.

Is that all there is?

SUBMITTED BY BERYL JOHN-KNUDSON ON OCTOBER 9, 2015 - 8:29AM.

Somehow the desperate need to find a woman for governor seems like a token aspiration considering the choices in the above gallery...same old, same old political faces and figureheads whose party positions are so embedded it's nothing new or refreshing except; maybe Lori Swanson...Kelliher's okay too I suppose?

Black or white or chromosomal diversity is great but new faces; would be refreshing if party people can find them?

Best of luck...

"voting for the person who is best qualified for the job"

SUBMITTED BY WILLIAM GLEASON ON OCTOBER 9, 2015 - 8:48AM.

This comment implies that people may vote for Hilary Clinton BECAUSE she is a woman rather than being the best qualified.

Of the approximately ten major candidates for presidency on the GOP side, please Mr. Quigley let us know which of them is more qualified than Ms. Clinton and why?

Remember that electing someone has not just to do with "best qualified." If it were that simple we could just do a completely objective weighing of credentials and the matter could be settled without an election. Judging who is "best qualified" is a matter of opinion.

I believe it is legitimate to pick one candidate who is less qualified than another because that person has ideas and policy positions with which I am in better agreement than someone who is "best qualified" whatever that means.

a sign that something's broken

SUBMITTED BY BILL LINDEKE ON OCTOBER 10, 2015 - 12:02PM.

We can parse specific candidates for a long time, and this article does a good job laying out the recent history. But the lack of gender parity in state government, and in the governor's office, is a sign that something is broken in our political culture. Minnesota is ahead of the national average with 1/3 women at the legislature, but we're well behind Colorado and Vermont. 50% is the target for parity and we shouldn't expect anything less. We need our government to reflect our citizens.

Maybe because

SUBMITTED BY JOHN ELLENBECKER ON OCTOBER 11, 2015 - 4:17PM.

native people aren't a majority of Minnesota residents - women are. It is hard to understand how a majority has NEVER had one of its members elected governor.

I don't know, but it's interesting

SUBMITTED BY BILL WILLY ON OCTOBER 12, 2015 - 10:23AM.

There are 14 comments here right now, and (far as I can tell by the names) none have been made by women. I don't know what that says or has to do with the question of why a woman hasn't been elected governor of Minnesota, but wouldn't be surprised if it has at least something semi-central to do with it.

Relatedly (maybe), my initial response to that question when I first read this article the other day was the (maybe) overly simplistic explanation: Men.

Women had to organize, protest in the streets and just about duke it out with the early 20th century equivalent of Pinkerton strike breakers to be "granted" the right to vote in 1919 (by men -- because they weren't really American citizens?) which means that particular suppression of one segment of American society's Constitutional Rights lasted 50+ years longer than slavery.

And women having finally won that battle didn't mean the underlying cause went away, or that they magically gained the "equality" implied, any more than the Civil Rights Act provided it to African Americans. The same "principal" (or strange reality, whatever exactly it is) applies (times 10 or 100 or so) to what Dennis Tester mentioned about the Sioux (and Ojibwa) people of Minnesota (and all "tribes" of the entire U.S. -- the only "National Disgrace" that compares with and probably was worse than slavery, if that's possible).

Even though women have made "the most progress" of any "minority" (or, as John Ellenbecker points out, "majority minority"), they're still up against the same old thing, whatever exactly that old same thing is.

But, obviously, women are "on the way" and "closing fast." There will be a female governor of Minnesota, and woman will comprise the majority in the Minnesota legislature. It's only a matter of a little more time. No "group" of "previously" suppressed people has made as much progress in under 100 years than women, and despite the roadblocks and trip wires (blatant and subtle) put in their way (by whom?), it won't be long. And, as far as I'm concerned, it couldn't happen too soon.

On the upside, there's no denying men (largely) have made an array of amazing practical contributions to pragmatic life on Earth (like now totally taken for granted hot and cold running water, first class shelter, electricity, increased life expectancy, this thing we're all using right now to communicate, etc.). Unfortunately, men have also made (and continue to make) an equal, or near-equal, number of incredibly destructive, ugly, nasty contributions to the same thing that need to be "curtailed" (because stopping them all together would be hoping for way too much).

And, because of what appears to be "the nature of things," and because it seems unlikely men will be able to prevent themselves from driving the "Super Powerful" bus they've built off The Cliff (taking all the women and children with them), it looks like women are the only people that stand a chance of getting that (ultra basic) part of things straightened out.

Anyway... Other than, "probably something," I have no idea what all that does or doesn't have to do with why it (really) is no women have commented so far on the (good) question of "Why hasn't Minnesota elected a female governor?"

As far as my "Who?" two cents worth goes, although there are several possible candidates I think of anytime this topic comes up, the person that keeps appearing at the center of my mind's stage ("organically," without prompting or "inner debate") is Tina Liebling. She may cringe at the idea, but I have no doubt she would be an excellent candidate and Governor.