

# Women of Color in California's Legislature

## Increasing, but Still Not Representative

California's first Legislature met in December of 1849 but a woman of color would not be elected to it until 1966 – 117 years later. Over the past 49 years, 52 African American, Asian Pacific Islander and Latina women have served in California's state Legislature. These women of color represent 35 percent of all women ever elected to the Legislature. Historically most of these legislators, 88 percent, were elected as Democrats, although as of the 2014 election, three of the four Asian Pacific Islander women lawmakers are Republican.<sup>1</sup>

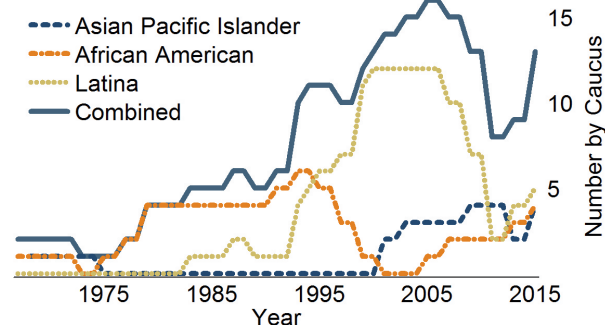
Today, three percent of Californians are African American women, seven percent are Asian Pacific Islander women and 19 percent are Latinas. Each of these groups of women legislators holds either four or five seats in the Legislature, equal to between three and four percent of that body.

In the current legislative session, 31 of California's 120 legislators are women. Of those 31, 13 are women of color. That's 11 percent of all legislators and 42 percent of all women legislators. In comparison, these three groups of women make up 29 percent of the state's population and 58 percent of all women in the state.<sup>2</sup> While it is clear that the number of women of color in the Legislature has sharply increased since 1966, it is still not proportional to the number of women of color in California's diverse population.

### TRENDS IN THE STATE LEGISLATURE

In 1966, Yvonne Brathwaite Burke and March Fong Eu, the first African American woman and the first Asian American woman, respectively, won seats in the Assembly. Twelve years later, in 1978, residents of Los Angeles elected African American Diane Watson to represent one of their Senate districts, making her the first woman of color elected to the Senate. Four years after this historic election, the first Latina, Gloria Molina, won her race for an Assembly seat in 1982. To date, no women legislators of color have identified as multiracial but this will likely change as California's

**Figure 1. Number of California State Legislators Who Are Women of Color, 1966-2015<sup>3</sup>**



multiracial population grows. Notably, no Native American women have won election to the Legislature.

The total number of women of color in the Legislature varied between one and two until 1979, when their numbers increased to four. They averaged five to six per year through 1990, and their numbers jumped to 10 in 1993. This paralleled an increase in the total number of women legislators that year. The number of women of color peaked at 16 in 2005, fell by half in 2011 and then rebounded to 13 in 2015.

Between 1966 and 1978, all women of color elected to the Legislature served in the 80-member Assembly. They numbered four or five for a decade starting in 1982 and peaked at 11 in 2007. Ten women of color currently serve in the Assembly.

Diane Watson was elected to the 40-member Senate in 1978. She remained the only woman of color in that body until 1992 when Teresa Hughes joined her. In 2000, the number of women of color in the Senate peaked at six. The Senate maintained between four and six women of color for the decade afterwards before dropping down to two in 2011 and then increasing to three in 2015.

Of the 52 women of color elected to the California Legislature, 96 percent (50) were first elected to the

Assembly, and 69 percent (36) served in the Assembly for their entire state legislative careers. Twenty-five percent (13) started in the Assembly and later moved to the Senate. Two women of color have served only in the Senate, Diane Watson and Janet Nguyen, who is currently serving her first term. To date, no woman legislator started in the Senate and later moved to the Assembly. Term limits, enacted in 1990 and revised in 2012, have resulted in increased turnover, giving more women the opportunity to be elected, but also limiting their time in the Legislature.<sup>4</sup>

## TRENDS BY ETHNICITY

### African Americans

A total of 14 African American women – 27 percent of all women of color – have served in the Legislature since 1966. Notably, Karen Bass became the first woman of color – and only the second woman – to serve as Speaker of the Assembly when her peers elected her to that position in 2008.

Teresa Hughes became the second African American woman lawmaker when she was first elected in 1975. She served in the Assembly and Senate, and at 26 years is the longest serving woman of color in the Legislature's history. Three other African American women won elections in the 1970s and each served between 14 and 20 years. Today, this tenure is impossible because of term limits. In fact, Teresa Hughes was unable to run for a third Senate term in 2000 for this reason. All four of the African American women legislators currently serving were elected in or after 2010.

### Asian Pacific Islanders

Since 1966, 11 Asian Pacific Islander women have been elected to California's legislature. However, between 1974, when March Fong Eu left the Legislature to become Secretary of State, and 2000, no women from this group served in either house. Carol Liu became the first Asian Pacific Islander woman elected to the Senate in 2008. She is also the longest-serving Asian Pacific Islander woman legislator, currently in her thirteenth year, and the only woman of color currently serving in the Legislature who was elected before 2010. The other three Asian Pacific Islander women legislators currently in office were elected in 2014 and are serving their first terms. The 11 Asian Pacific Islander women legislators elected have been of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Taiwanese and Vietnamese descent.

### Latinas

Between 1982 and 2015, 27 Latinas have served in the Legislature, more than the Asian Pacific Islander and African American women legislator groups combined. By 1995, Latina legislators were the majority of women of color in the Legislature. From 1999 to 2006 they were almost the only women of color elected to the Assembly and Senate. Their numbers dropped after 2008, and by 2011 there were only two Latina legislators serving. Currently, five Latina legislators are in the Assembly, all elected in or after 2010. No Latinas serve in the Senate.

## TRENDS IN PARTY AFFILIATION

Of California's 52 women legislators of color, 88 percent (46) were elected as Democrats and 12 percent (six) as Republicans. All African American women legislators and 25 of 27 Latina legislators have been Democrats. Until 2014, seven of the eight Asian Pacific Islander women elected were also Democrats. However, all three of the Asian Pacific Islander women legislators who entered office in 2014 are Republicans. One Democrat is currently serving as well. This recent development has changed this group's historical party affiliation to 64 percent Democrat and 36 percent Republican. Currently, Asian Pacific Islander women legislators are the only women of color group with a majority of – or any – Republican members.

## ENDNOTES

1. California Secretary of State (1918-2014). *Statement of the Vote* and Special Election Results website at <http://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/prior-elections/special-elections/>.
2. United States Census Bureau, 2007-2011 American Community Survey, Tables S0101 Age and Sex, B1001 Sex by Age (Hispanic or Latino), B01001D Sex by Age (Asian Alone), and B01001B Sex by Age (Black or African American Alone)
3. Data for Figure 1 and methodology can be found at <http://www.library.ca.gov/crb/15/CALegislativeWomenofColorData.xlsx>.
4. For more information about women in California's Legislature see <http://www.library.ca.gov/crb/14/S-14-023.pdf>.

*This Short Subject was prepared at the request of Assemblywoman Christina Garcia, on behalf of the California Legislative Women's Caucus.*

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