Commentary

You Have to Create the Right Pipeline: Why California Has Never Elected a Woman Governor

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California has produced some of the most important women leaders in American politics in recent decades. Nancy Pelosi was the first woman Speaker of the House, and Kamala Harris was the first woman Vice President. Four California women have served as US senators, more than any other state. Yet California remains one of 20 states where a woman has not served as governor. This isn't for lack of trying. Since 1978, 16 women have appeared on primary ballots and three have been party nominees.[1]

The 2026 gubernatorial election is an open seat. Will this be the election where California makes state history and elects a woman governor? Why have so many women run and none have won? Political science research, our own data gathering, and journalistic accounts provide a few possible insights.

Structure matters. Our research finds that California has three structural features that create more opportunities for women gubernatorial candidates: no pre-primary endorsements, gubernatorial term limits, and the separate election of the governor and lieutenant governor (Jeydel and Wilkerson 2024). This may help explain why California has had 16 women on gubernatorial primary ballots. However, another key structural element in California—legislative term limits—may discourage women with the "right" political experience from running for governor. While California is a leader in producing elected federal officials, it ranks in the middle for women state legislators and elected statewide executives. Politically ambitious women from California may be more likely to run for federal office and then remain in DC where there are no term limits and they can accrue power (Rosenhall 2020). Relatively few senators run for governor (Ballotpedia n.d.; Ostermeier 2021).

The impact of political events. The second Trump presidency may provide an opening to elect a woman governor in California. Our research found three surges in the recent history of women candidates for governor: a Republican surge after Sarah Palin's run for VP in 2010; a Democratic surge in 2018 centered around the Clinton nomination, Trump's victory in 2016, and the #MeToo movement; and in 2022 a Republican counter-surge (Jeydel and Wilkerson 2024). Given the impact of previous political events on the likelihood of women running, the second Trump presidency may impact how many women run for Governor and the chance of electing one to the office.

[1] This does not include two recall elections in 2003 and 2021.

Not all pipelines lead to the Governor's Mansion. California has elected numerous women to state and federal office: three senators, 49 members of the US House, and nearly 200 state legislators.[2] But not all political experience is equal when running for governor. Why? Political scientists Fox and Oxley (2003) find that women self-select to run for feminine-defined offices and are more likely to run and win legislative offices and lesser executive positions. Women are less likely to run for masculine-defined executive offices (Fox and Oxley 2003) or for local offices like mayor (Holman 2017).

Masculine-defined offices are those offices that are identified with policy areas that voters typically associate with men, and feminine-defined offices are those that are identified by voters as dealing with policy areas typically associated with women. Neutral offices are those that voters do not associate with a particular gender. Masculine-defined offices include governor, attorney general, treasurer, controller, tax commissioner, and agricultural commissioner. An example of a feminine-defined office is secretary of education, while neutral offices include secretary of state and lieutenant governor. This distinction matters because, as Fox and Oxley (2003) find, it impacts the political paths that women see as open to them and thus choose to pursue.

Since 1978, all but one of the California general election gubernatorial candidates have come from one of three backgrounds: masculine-defined statewide executive office, masculine-defined local office (mayor of a major California city), or political outsider.

- Masculine-defined statewide executive office: Seven nominees previously held masculine-defined statewide executive office, including one woman, Kathleen Brown, who served as Treasurer.
- Masculine-defined local office: Five nominees were elected as mayor of Los Angeles, San Diego, or San Francisco, including one woman, Diane Feinstein, who served as mayor of San Francisco.

Since 1978, 13 women total have held statewide executive office and five have served as mayors of major cities. However, only seven of those 13 served in traditionally masculine-defined executive positions: three as State Treasurer, three as State Controller, and one as Attorney General. Only 12 women have served in positions in California that could likely lead to a major party nomination for governor.

A new pipeline, political outsider. Five nominees since 2002, four of which were men, had no elective office experience. Four had a background in business, including Meg Whitman, an executive at several corporations including eBay. One, Arnold Schwartzenagger, was an actor. There may be a new pipeline to elected executive office emerging, that of the political outsider path. It's also worthy to note that this path has so far only been taken by Republicans.

Alternate pipeline, succession. Another pipeline to governor is succeeding a governor who resigns or is recalled from office. Of the 51 women who have served as governor in the 50 states, 13 first became governor through succession. Commonly, this is through the position of lieutenant governor.[3] While being lieutenant governor is not positively correlated with women running for

[2] The numbers discussed in this section come from author analysis of data provided by the Center for American Women and Politics (n.d.).
[3] Five states do not have a lieutenant governor.

governor (Jeydel and Wilkerson 2024), it is a path for women *to become* governor through succession. Aside from the recalled Grey Davis, no California governor has left office mid-term since Earl Warren left the governorship to become Chief Justice of the United States in 1953. And only three California lieutenant governors have ever gone on to serve as governor (South 2023). Only two women, including incumbent Eleni Kounalakis, have served as lieutenant governor.

It is harder to win in the most populous states. Six of the ten most populous states—California, Florida, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Ohio, and Georgia—have yet to elect a woman governor. Rosenhall (2020) notes that the size of California is a barrier to women running for governor. Former gubernatorial primary candidate, Delaine Eastin, echoes this sentiment (Christopher 2018). Our research confirms that this anecdotal evidence is accurate, indicating a negative and significant relationship between the population of a state and the presence of women on the primary ballot (Jeydel and Wilkerson 2024).

Running for statewide office in California is expensive for all candidates. With eleven distinct media markets, fundraising is critical. Sanbonmatsu, Rogers, and Gothreua (2020) find that women gubernatorial candidates in both parties have lower average fundraising totals than men. Furthermore, they find that Democratic women do not self-finance at the same rate as men which they note is not surprising given the gender gaps in wealth and income between men and women. The fundraising picture is even bleaker for women of color. This is why Toni Atkins dropped out of the race (Barabak 2025). Meg Whitman is a notable exception. She spent $144 million of her own money to run for governor in 2010 (AP News 2011), the largest amount of self-funding of any gubernatorial candidate in the United States.

The outlook for 2026 and beyond. As of late October 2025, there are three women among the eighteen currently declared candidates in the 2026 California gubernatorial race. Of the three, only Democrat Betty Yee fits the background of successful candidates of the last 50 years: she has served as the state controller, a masculine-defined office. Katie Porter served three terms in the US House and unsuccessfully ran for US Senate in 2024; her political experience is not a typical path to the governorship. Furthermore, her decision not to accept PAC money presents a challenge for raising enough money to run in California's expensive media markets. Republican Sharifah Hardey is a political outsider who has run unsuccessfully for local and state office in the past. Two other women—Eleni Kounalakis, the current two-term lieutenant governor, and Toni Atkins, a former State Senate President Pro Tem—announced but later withdrew from the race.

A partial solution to overcoming the obstacles to electing a woman governor in California may be a concerted effort by party organizations to create a pool of women with the political experience that has historically led to the governor's office. Women have not historically been part of the behind-the-scenes political networking where future party nominees for governor are vetted years in advance (Kamal 2021). Without the relevant political experience, the pool of likely women who can win the governorship will remain small. Women need encouragement to run for masculine-defined offices, not simply legislative positions. While there are active efforts by Democrats and Republicans, in California and nationally, to recruit and train women to run for office (Rose 2014), those efforts have not produced enough women with the right political experience to run and win the governor's mansion.

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