

Women in the Kansas Legislature: Perspectives from Oral History Interviews

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The interviews

In 1990 and 1991 two faculty members from Washburn University² interviewed women who were serving in the Kansas Legislature. Several of those legislators and other women who have served in the Kansas legislature were interviewed almost 30 years later, in 2019 through early 2021. These most recent interviews were conducted by the Kansas Oral History Project (KOHP), with partial support from Humanities Kansas. The interviews capture the interviewees' perceptions of their legislative experiences.

Below is a table showing the 20 interviews of women legislators conducted by KOHP, at the time of this writing, along with the interviewees' tenure in the Legislature and political party. A relatively long span of time is reflected in the service of these legislators, from 1975 to 2020. Four of the 20 interviewed by KOHP (Ginger Barr, Martha Jenkins, Ardena Matlack, and Donna Whiteman) served in the Legislature when the Washburn University interviews were conducted but were not interviewed at that time. Christine Downey began her service in the Legislature after the Washburn project had ended.

Interviewees by Years Served, Party, and Chamber				
Name	First Session	Last Session	Party	Chamber
Jayne Aylward	1979	1990	R	House
Ginger Barr	1983	1990	R	House
Nancy Brown	1985	1994	R	House
Rochelle Chronister	1979	1995	R	House
Darlene Cornfield	1991	1996	R	House
Christine Downey	1993	2004	D	Senate
Sheila Frahm	1989	1994	R	Senate
Martha Jenkins	1985	1990	R	House
Audrey Langworthy	1985	2000	R	Senate

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² Sara Waitstill Tucker, B.A., M.A., Ph.D., Professor of History, 1975-2009; Barbara Burgess, B.A., M.S., Ph.D., Director of Kansas Studies and Assistant Professor of Mass Media, 1986-2003.

Interviewees by Years Served, Party, and Chamber				
Name	First Session	Last Session	Party	Chamber
Janis Lee	1989	2010	D	Senate
Ardena Matlack	1975	1984	D	House
Lana Oleen	1989	2004	R	Senate
Nancy Parrish	1980	1992	D	Senate
Marge Petty	1989	2000	D	Senate
Jo Ann Pottorff	1985	2012	R	House
Sandy Praeger	1991	2002	R	House/Senate
Alicia Salisbury	1985	2000	R	Senate
Susan Wagle	1991	2020	R	House/Senate
Joan Wagnon	1983	1994	D	House
Donna Whiteman	1984	1991	D	House
Summarized from <i>Women in Elected State Offices Kansas 1919-2019</i> , compiled by the staff of the Reference Division State Library of Kansas. Topeka, Kansas, 2019.				

Of the women interviewed, Jo Ann Pottorff and Susan Wagle served the longest in the Kansas Legislature, 28 and 29 years, respectively. Ms. Praeger and Ms. Wagle were the only interviewees to have served in both the House and Senate.

While the majority of those interviewed began their first terms in the Legislature in the 1980s, four took office in the 1990s and three were elected in the 1970s. Thus, the perspectives of the interviewees cover the years during which the number of women in the legislature was increasing.

The interviewers asked the women about their backgrounds, their motivations for running for legislative office, the help and support they received for their legislative campaigns and, once in office, their networking experiences, committee assignments, and legislative priorities. They were asked what they took away from their legislative experiences and the advice they would give to others who may be interested in running for the legislature or another government position.

Central to those questions was eliciting unique experiences of being among the minority of legislators serving at the time. Women always constituted a minority of Kansas legislators. Specifically, the highest portion of legislators who were women was in 1999 at 33.3% ([Center for American Women and Politics](#)).

Interviewees were asked to reflect on such questions as whether being a woman made a difference in how these women: ran their campaigns; juggled family life and, in some cases, non-legislative career obligations; served and responded to their constituents; and achieved their legislative priorities. Specifically, the interviewees were asked how their perspectives shaped the institution of the Kansas Legislature. And how the institution, in turn, shaped their own perceptions of their contributions to the legislature, their communities, and the state of Kansas as a whole.

In terms of methodology, not all women were asked the same questions. Nor were the interviewers the same, particularly for those who interviewed the women in more recent years. All the interviews can be accessed at the Kansas Oral History Project [website](#).

Changes in the Composition of the Kansas Legislature and Legislatures Across the Country

The first woman elected to the Kansas Legislature was Minnie Grinstead who was elected to the House in 1918 ([Kansas Historical Society](#)). Until 1974, there were never more than four women serving in the Kansas Legislature at any one time. But that began to change with the 1974 election. Ardena Matlack (Sedgwick County), one of the KOHP interviewees, began her service in the Kansas House of Representatives in 1975. That year witnessed an increase in the number of women legislators in the House, from four to eight. Rochelle Chronister, representing Neodesha, followed Ms. Matlack in 1979. Thirteen women, a historic high at the time, served in the House in 1979.

Nancy Parrish, Shawnee County, became a member of the Kansas Senate in 1980, joining one other woman in the 40-member Senate, Jan Meyers of Johnson County. From 1929 when the first woman began serving in the Senate until Ms. Parrish became a Senator, there was never more than one woman serving in the Kansas Senate at any time. (State Library of Kansas, *Women in Elected State Offices: Kansas 1919-2019*, Topeka, April 2019.)

In 1981, there were only four female Senators (two Republicans and two Democrats), a net gain of three from the previous year but still only 10% of the 40-member body. The House membership in 1981 included 18 women, divided evenly between Democrats and Republicans, but still a small portion (14%) of the overall House membership of 125. ([Center for American Women and Politics](#)).

The percentage of women in the Kansas Legislature climbed from the mid-1970s until the early 2000s, but has vacillated in the years since, remaining slightly below 30% most of the time. The total number of female legislators (combined Senate and House) in Kansas doubled from 22 in 1981 to 44 at the time of the initial interviews (1991), peaked at 55 or a third of the total legislative body in 1999, and was 29% in 2019-2021, when most of the second set of interviews was conducted. ([Center for American Women and Politics](#))

This overall upward trend in women elected to the Kansas Legislature from the early 1980s to the present is compared to the U.S. average which has also increased gradually over the years. Kansas ranked 30th in terms of the proportion of women serving in a state legislature in 2021. The U.S. national average is slightly higher at 30%. Nonetheless, there are significant differences among states with Nevada's women legislators accounting for over 60% of that state's legislature in 2021, compared to West Virginia's at less than 12%. ([Center for American Women and Politics](#)).

Contributing Factors to the Changing Composition

Several factors contributed to a growing number of women seeking legislative seats in the 1980s. These included, among others: role models of influential women in leadership positions, more women in the workforce, and more college-educated women.

Influential Women in Political Leadership Positions

In recent decades, several women achieved significant stature in public office. Notable women who sought or attained prominent roles on the national scene in the early 1980s included Geraldine Ferraro, the Vice-Presidential nominee in 1984, and the first woman to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court (1981), Sandra Day O'Connor. And on the international scene, one could hardly help but notice the game-changing impact of Margaret Thatcher who served as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1979-1990.

As reported by [Pew Research](#), women have made considerable progress in securing positions in the U.S. House of Representatives, from 2% in 1965 to 27% in 2021 and 2% in 1965 to 26% in the U.S. Senate.

Kansas women had their own role models in Congress: U.S. Senator Nancy Kassebaum who served from 1978-1996 and Representative Jan Meyers (Kansas Third District) who served from 1985-1996. Indeed, Senator Kassebaum was the first woman elected to the U.S. Senate to fill an open seat without previously filling an unexpired term. Senator Kassebaum also was the first woman to represent Kansas in the U.S. Senate. Senator Kassebaum may have had an impact on an early election of Jayne Aylward to the Kansas House,

[U.S. Senator] Nancy Kassebaum [is someone] I always have held very highly, but she actually ran the same year I did, which I have to say, may have been part of my campaign strategy because people got us confused. They would think that I was Nancy Kassebaum. It's like, "That's good. I can go with that." She definitely was someone who kept me inspired to continue to run. (Aylward, Jayne, [Interview by Alan Conroy](#), June 18, 2021)

Senator Kassebaum and Representative Meyers established connections with other women interviewed for this project, either by encouraging them to run, mentoring them, or giving them campaign and fundraising advice. Representative Meyers served in the Kansas Senate from 1973 until 1984, so she had a natural connection to the women who came after her in the Legislature. For example, in her interview, Audrey Langworthy mentioned that she had worked on Jan Meyers' campaign. Sheila Frahm, who represented Kansas in the U.S. Senate when Bob Dole ran for President, recalled in her 2020 interview the period when Kansas was represented by two women senators, Nancy Landon Kassebaum and herself, "It was [an] extraordinary opportunity to serve in the United States Senate with Nancy Kassebaum. There were two senators from California, two women. We sort of made up that—we balanced each other in many ways. . . . Nancy and I, certainly that was the first time that sort of thing had happened from Kansas, and quite a treat." (Frahm, Sheila, [Interview by Joan Wagnon](#), November 13, 2020, p. 9.)

Workforce and Educational Attainment

The growing participation of women in the workforce, along with increased numbers with higher educational credentials, corresponds to the growing number of women in legislatures across the country and in Kansas. According to the [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), women’s participation in the workforce had increased significantly in the U.S. to almost 58% in 1990 from 1950 when only 34% of women worked outside their homes. The growth of the percentage of women working outside the home slowed in the 1990s but peaked in 1999 (60%), then gradually declined to 57% in pre-pandemic 2018.

The occupations of women in the Kansas Legislature reflect the changes that occurred nationwide from the time of the first woman to serve until the present. Beginning in the mid-1970s, along with the uptick in the number of women serving in the Kansas Legislature, the portion who listed an occupation other than ‘homemaker’ or ‘housewife’ increased dramatically. However, each of the first four women to serve in the Kansas Legislature (1919-1922) identified themselves as having professional occupations: lecturer, lawyer, social worker, and journalist. With one exception, all the women who were interviewed for the KOHP had completed college and several went on to obtain other credentials.

Name	First Session	Last Session	Occupation
Jayne Aylward	1979	1990	Farmer, Stockwoman
Ginger Barr	1983	1990	Cemeterian
Nancy Brown	1985	1994	Association Director
Rochelle Chronister	1979	1995	Homemaker
Darlene Cornfield	1991	1996	Homemaker
Christine Downey	1993	2004	Teacher
Sheila Frahm	1989	1994	Landowner, Farm Wife
Martha Jenkins	1985	1990	Law Student, Attorney
Audrey Langworthy	1985	2000	Public Service
Janis Lee	1989	2010	Farmer, Rancher
Ardena Matlack	1975	1984	Teacher, Homemaker
Lana Oleen	1989	2004	Educator, Homemaker
Nancy Parrish	1980	1992	Teacher, Homemaker
Marge Petty	1989	2000	Consultant
Jo Ann Pottorff	1985	2012	Real Estate Associate
Sandy Praeger	1991	2002	Bank Exec., Legislator, Consultant
Alicia Salisbury	1985	2000	Public Service
Susan Wagle	1991	2020	Small Business Owner, Investor
Joan Wagnon	1983	1994	YWCA Exec. Director
Donna Whiteman	1984	1991	Attorney

Name	First Session	Last Session	Occupation
Summarized from <i>Women in Elected State Offices Kansas 1919-2019</i> , compiled by the staff of the Reference Division State Library of Kansas. Topeka, Kansas, 2019.			

The interviewers for the KOHP project asked how the women negotiated the balancing act of other career obligations, young children, and even pursuing advanced degrees while serving in the Legislature. If they had younger children while in office, they appeared to have had support from husbands or parents. However, several women were either “empty nesters” or had children who were transitioning to college at the time they initially ran for office. Some of the women interviewed did not have other jobs or careers while they served in the Legislature and, if they did, the jobs and careers may have had flexible hours, such as real estate, a law practice, or a jointly managed business that allowed for the completion of job-related tasks during weekends.

Those women legislators with younger children tended to keep their children in the schools of their hometowns so as not to disrupt their routines but there were notable exceptions, such as the decision of Sheila Frahm (Thomas County) to bring her youngest daughter to Topeka so that she could access resources for the visually impaired. Darlene Cornfield (Sedgwick County) likewise brought her children to Topeka and even nursed her baby while the House was in session. Ms. Cornfield reported that she and three other women legislators in the House were expecting babies in 1991.

Seven of the interviewees lived within commuting distance of the Statehouse in Topeka and were able to live at home while they served in the Legislature, among them Ms. Salisbury, Wagnon, Parrish, Petty, and Barr all represented districts in Shawnee County. Ms. Praeger represented a district in neighboring Douglas County and Ms. Langworthy represented a district only about an hour away in Johnson County. So that fact alone may have affected their decisions to run for office. For example, Ms. Salisbury from Topeka said, “I don't know if I'm made up differently from other people or not, but I'm not positive that I would have as much interest in serving in the legislature if I were commuting [for] office.” (Salisbury, Alicia, Washburn interview [transcript](#), no interviewer identified, undated, p.14).

The proximity of these women’s homes to the State Capitol meant they faced different challenges than the women who lived further away, such as Janis Lee, who had to drive 4.5 hours to go home to Kensington, KS on the weekends. As a result, she generally had to limit face-to-face communication with constituents to set times during weekends in her district.

Being away from families also took its toll for those legislators with taxing weekend commutes to their homes. As Janis Lee commented:

For the twenty-two years I was in the legislature, the most time my husband and I had together was usually the Saturdays when he would drive me to some parade. We were in thirty parades a year. Usually in the summertime when I was going to parades, he and I would go together, if he could.

The sad thing about that is I would get in the car and fall asleep, and he'd drive. I didn't realize how tired I was until I left the legislature, and we started doing things together with him driving, and I didn't fall asleep. (Lee, Janis, [Interview by Joan Wagnon](#), October 14, 2019, p. 21)

Today, with email and other forms of electronic communication, expectations of legislators' accessibility have undoubtedly changed since the 1980s and early 1990s. However, expectations of accessibility in those years were certainly different for those women from Topeka who lived among their constituents during the legislative session and would encounter them in grocery stores, restaurants, or religious gatherings. For example, in discussing constituents' efforts to contact their legislators about a pressing policy issue, Sheila Frahm from Colby told Joan Wagnon who formerly represented Topeka:

In your legislative district, right there in Topeka, you were more like what I was in Colby with the school board. You run into people at the grocery store. When I was in Topeka and you were in Topeka with the legislature, your constituents didn't talk to me about it. They didn't know me. (Frahm, Sheila, [Interview by Joan Wagnon](#), November 13, 2020, p 14.)

Did Women Shape the Kansas Legislature?

There is no way to definitively know whether women's presence in the Legislature changed its operations because there is no baseline set of metrics against which to measure such changes. However, we have the perceptions of interviewees regarding how they contributed to changing the climate in the legislature. Most of the observations of the interviewees were of policy and perspective changes.

In the early 1980s, there were only 22 women in the Legislature, a mere 13% of the total body. As the numbers grew and women became more of a presence in the Legislature, so did anecdotal examples of women changing the dynamic of the Legislature by banding together to effect change – but not always in legislative procedures. An example was the need for a woman's restroom near the Senate chamber. As recalled by former senators Langworthy and Praeger, it took an orchestrated effort of several new women senators to move the institution to meet that need.

Three women who were elected to the Senate in the early 1980s also were often referred to as “the skirts” by their male counterparts. Perhaps reflecting the novelty of women in the Legislature as described by former Senator Audrey Langworthy:

. . . So, the three of us, Jeanne Hoferer, Alicia Salisbury, and myself were freshmen together. We were all put in the same office of 143 North. We tended to walk to the Senate Chamber at 2:00 together, and we quickly became known as “The Skirts.” “The Skirts have arrived.” In my growing up or in teaching or in my volunteer work, I had never felt any discrimination, but it was kind of here because the men—it was a Good Old Boys Club, and we were invading, so to speak. It got easier the next term because [the number of women in the Senate] doubled again. I think the max ever were fourteen. I'm not sure in the Senate it has ever been any more than that. (Langworthy, Audrey and Sandy Praeger, [Interview by Joan Wagnon](#), October 18, 2019, p.1).

An example of women coalescing around a policy issue was cited in a conversation with four former House members. The “Steel Magnolias,” a bipartisan group of women legislators in the House, sought policy changes, predominantly for children and families. Its formation began with opposition to the Governor’s recommended budget for the Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services. (Jenkins, Martha, Ginger Barr, and Nancy Brown, [Interview by Joan Wagnon](#), October 18, 2019)

Overall, the women interviewed did not report experiencing overt gender discrimination. Several acknowledged, however, the paternalistic and patronizing attitudes of an older generation of “good old boys.” Interviewer Burdett Loomis asked Rochelle Chronister, (Wilson County), “In large and small ways, was the Legislature, even in the early ’80s, a pretty sexist place?” Her response was:

Yes, it was. I don’t think there was any doubt about that. You know, I had one of the doormen say to me one time—I don’t know how we got in this conversation, although I used to talk to doormen a lot. I talked to a lot of people. [Chuckles.] And he said to me, “Rochelle, when you get to the stage where you have women who can just be chair fillers and nobody pays any attention to it, you will have true equality.” And I thought that was one of the smartest things I’d heard anybody say. And I remembered it for years. (Chronister, Rochelle, [Interview by Burdett Loomis](#), January 22, 2015, p. 17.)

Another observation, this time from Christine Downey (Harvey County), suggested that the behavior of her male colleagues may have been more nuanced:

I don't remember anything particular in terms of patronizing, which may have occurred, and I just didn't catch it, or discrimination in that way, but I saw it occur with other situations where I felt like the woman that was the head of that committee was perhaps diminished in her ability to bring things forward or directed by male leadership to do this or that, but it wasn't overt. (Downey, Christine, [Interview by Dale Goter](#), August 2, 2019, p. 4.)

Women and men also appeared to take different approaches in supporting legislation and the presence of different approaches may have changed the institution to some extent. At least that was the perception of Lana Oleen (Riley County) and Janis Lee (Smith County) in a conversation facilitated by Joan Wagnon. The example they used was a bill on auctioneering that they both supported in committee. In their view, the men on the committee tended to tell stories and were less concerned with debating facts. Yet, neither woman said they felt discriminated against in the Senate. They generally noted that their male counterparts respected them if they showed they were knowledgeable and had good information.

Women did not need to have a formal position of leadership in a chamber or committee to provide leadership on issues for which they had expertise and commitment. Indeed, many such initiatives were described by the interviewees. As far as the committees and issues to which the women legislators gravitated, education was often mentioned, in part because public school funding is a common concern for constituents in every legislative district and in part because so many of the women interviewed had expertise in education due to having served on school boards, lobbied on their behalf, or being educators prior to becoming legislators.

Committee assignments dealing with health and human service were less sought after, but health and social service issues meshed with several of the interviewees' occupational backgrounds. Occupations in health, like education, were historically more characteristic of women than men in legislatures across the country (Susan J. Carroll & Kira Sanbonmatsu, *More Women Can Run: Gender and Pathways to the State Legislatures*, p. 121).

Another sought-after assignment mentioned by the women was the budget committee in the respective chambers (House Appropriations/Senate Ways and Means). Perhaps the reason for that response is that state agency budgets affect so much public policy of direct interest to constituents. However, few freshmen are seated on those committees, an observation made by several of the women interviewed.

Among the interviewees, several chaired or served as the ranking minority party member on the Kansas Legislature's "work horse" committees, Ways and Means/Appropriations, Assessment and Taxation, and Federal and State Affairs, in particular. For example, Ardena Matlack, a Democrat, served as the first woman to chair the House Federal and State Affairs Committee in 1978 when the Democrats were briefly in the majority in the House. (Ms. Matlack moved up from the Vice-chair's seat when in mid-term the Chair of Federal and State Affairs was assigned to chair another committee.) Later, Ginger Barr, a Republican served as Vice-chair, then Chair of the same committee from 1987-1990. Susan Wagle chaired House Federal and State Affairs, and House Assessment and Taxation prior to moving to the Senate. Janis Lee served as the Ranking Minority Leader of the Senate Assessment and Taxation Committee. Audrey Langworthy was Vice-chair and then, Chair of Senate Assessment and Taxation. Alicia Salisbury served as Vice-chair of Senate Ways and Means. Rochelle Chronister was the first woman to chair the House Appropriations Committee.

That said, many women cited legislative priorities that defined their committee assignment preferences based on their prior experiences as business owners, attorneys, and local government officials, as well as board members of local chambers of commerce. In fact, the use of the term "women's issues" in interview questions received some push-back from a few interviewees who pointed out the issues were more appropriately characterized as "family issues" that applied to men as well as women. For example, Lana Oleen observed that her understanding of "women's issues" had evolved from her first to her second interview: "I think I have a better understanding of what are termed "women's issues." I still hold the fact that I think there are family issues. I think that there are certainly issues that reflect women's interests more than men's, and I still try to figure out what the men's issues are. . . . It's people's issues."

In response to a question posed in some interviews about the women's mentors (which was not defined or interpreted uniformly by interviewees), several legislators mentioned men, often in political leadership positions, as well as other women. A few interviewees could not identify a mentor. Women in the Legislature served as mentors as they attained leadership positions and even after their legislative service. For example, Rochelle Chronister, in her capacity as Assistant Majority Leader of the House, recruited women to that chamber and mentored them once they began serving. Another, Donna Whiteman (Reno County) mentored women legislators after she left office.

Interviewees were asked about their approach to achieving their legislative objectives. They did not necessarily view those objectives from the same perspective. A few cited bills and initiatives of which they were most proud. Jo Ann Pottorff and Darlene Cornfield both observed there was already too much

legislation and did not consider passing bills with their names on them to be among their primary legislative goals.

The legislative agendas of bill and committee assignments are determined by several organizational leadership positions. Therefore, a few words about the Kansas Legislature’s organizational leadership structure may be in order.

The House and Senate each has its own organizational hierarchy. In the House, the members of the majority party elect the Speaker, Speaker Pro Tem, House Majority Leader, House Assistant Majority Leader, House Majority Whip, and House Majority Caucus Chair. The members of the minority party have, other than Speaker, the same positions plus, at present, two more: Agenda Chair and Policy Chair.

During the time the House interviewees served in the Legislature, the majority party in the House was in Republican hands except for 1977-1978 and 1991-1992, when Democrats held the majority.

In the Senate, the members of the majority party elect the President, Vice President of the Senate, Senate Assistant Majority Leader, and Senate Majority Whip. The minority party members elect the Senate Minority Leader, Senate Assistant Minority Leader, Minority Whip, Senate Minority Agenda Chair, and Senate Minority Caucus Chair. During the time the Senate interviewees served in the Legislature, the majority was held by Republicans.

The margin of party control varied over the years. As was observed in the interviews, the greater the margin of the majority party, the less input the minority party had in shaping public policy. When the margin was tighter, there was more incentive for compromise and for bipartisan strategies to be adopted.

Many of the women interviewed for KOHP assumed leadership positions in their respective chambers and in committees, including committees that dealt with issues not commonly considered ‘women’s issues’, such as Taxation, Ways and Means, or Appropriations. In terms of organizational position, several “firsts” for women Senators included President (Susan Wagle, Sedgwick County), Majority Leader (Sheila Frahm, Thomas County) and Vice-President (Alicia Salisbury, Shawnee County).

House and Senate Leadership Positions		
NAME	ORGANIZATIONAL	COMMITTEE
Rep. Jayne Aylward		Chair Computers, Communication, and Technology; Vice-chair, Agriculture and Livestock; Vice-chair, Federal and State Affairs; Vice-chair, House Economic Development
Rep. Nancy Brown		Ranking Minority member, Chair, Local Government Committee
Rep. Rochelle Chronister	Assistant Majority Leader	Chair, Appropriations Committee

House and Senate Leadership Positions		
NAME	ORGANIZATIONAL	COMMITTEE
Sen. Sheila Frahm	Majority Leader	Chair/Vice-chair, Joint Committee on Administrative Rules and Regulations
Sen. Audrey Langworthy		Chair, Assessment & Tax Committee
Sen. Janis Lee	Assistant Minority Leader	Ranking Minority Member, Assessment and Taxation Committee
Rep. Ardena Matlock		Chair, Federal & State Affairs Committee
Sen. Lana Oleen	Majority Leader	Chair, Government Organization Committee; Chair, Federal and State Affairs Committee
Sen. Marge Petty		Ranking Minority Member, Ways and Means Committee
Rep./Sen. Sandy Praeger	Senate Vice-President	Chair, S. Public Health and Welfare Committee
Rep. Jo Ann Pottorff		Chair, Arts & Cultural Resources Committee; Chair, State Building Construction Committee; Vice-Chair, Appropriations Committee
Sen. Alicia Salisbury	Vice-President	Chair, Commerce Committee; Chair, Labor, Industry and Small Business Committee; Vice-Chair, Ways and Means Committee; Vice-Chair, Education Committee
Rep./Sen. Susan Wagle	Speaker Pro Tem (House) President (Senate)	Chair, House Federal & State Affairs Committee; Chair, House Assessment and Taxation Committee
Rep. Joan Wagnon		Chair and Ranking Minority Member, House Assessment and Taxation Committee
Rep. Donna Whiteman	Majority Leader, Assistant Minority Leader	

How did the Kansas Legislature Shape the Women's Perspectives of Their Contributions?

Most but not all the interviewees came to the Legislature with some exposure to how it worked. Several were lobbyists or followed issues of great concern to them as citizens. Others served in local government, on school boards, or had spouses or other family members who had preceded them in politics, such as Alicia Salisbury (Shawnee County), Nancy Parrish (Shawnee County), and Ardena Matlack (Sedgwick County).

Some of the legislators pointed to their personal values and philosophical positions as central to their campaigns and their legislative priorities. None of the interviewees cited a transformation of values or core beliefs during, or after, her years of service in the Legislature.

As noted, new legislators were often not given their first choices of committee assignments. Yet, two of the women interviewed discussed receiving committee assignments they did not request but which ultimately helped them while in the Legislature or in subsequent professional positions. For example, Sheila Frahm recounted her experience as Chair of the Joint Committee on Administrative Rules and Regulations, a position she did not request, citing how that experience proved useful to her in her subsequent position as Secretary of Administration:

. . . I brought some administrative understanding that probably no one else in the governor's cabinet could have. [Other cabinet members] knew their own agency, but I had a pretty broad—I could remember one of our newly appointed secretaries was kind of trying to process something through, and he wasn't understanding. But later he asked me, "How did you know that?" and I said, "Well, here's my Rules and Regulations Committee story." (Frahm, Sheila, [Interview by Joan Wagnon](#), November 13, 2020, p. 3.)

Similarly, Lana Oleen said of her experience as Chair of the Governmental Organization committee:

It was a very good experience, a learning experience, and I think one which helped me to be more grounded in having a better understanding of state government. Yes, I was representing a district, but I needed to know how [Kansas government] worked as well. (Oleen, Lana, [Interview by Joan Wagnon](#), October 14, 2019, p. 6.)

The 1980s and 1990s were a time of expanding fields of interest. Women were increasingly assigned to committees outside the traditional "women's issues." Two women (Nancy Parrish, and Marge Petty, both from Shawnee County) even decided to go to law school while they were juggling legislative obligations and family responsibilities. When asked why she decided to go to law school, Ms. Petty responded that it stemmed from her prior experience in elected office, her service on the Topeka City Council, noting the other Council members were lawyers with skills she felt she needed.

I think it's held me in good stead in the Legislature as well, because not only do you understand the language, which can get pretty technical at times, but it develops a process of thinking where you anticipate better what arguments are going to be and you don't ask a question unless you know the answer already. (Petty, Marge, [Interview by Sara Tucker](#) (Revised), January 10, 1991, p. 12.)

When asked what they valued most about their service in the Legislature, responses included: helping others and making a difference, helping find solutions to constituents’ problems, being productive and contributing to their communities and the state, and a frequently repeated observation, the opportunity to learn new things. Echoing similar sentiments from other women interviewed for the project, Nancy Parrish observed that the thing she liked best about the Legislature, as well as her subsequent state government positions, is that she learned a lot. “It didn’t matter what committee you were on, even if you were studying sewer districts across the state of Kansas in the hot summer in an interim committee, you still learned a lot.” (Parrish, Nancy, [Interview by Patty Clark](#), October 23, 2020, p. 10.)

Several women also mentioned the opportunities they had as legislators to meet new people. One way to meet new people and learn new things is through networking within the Kansas Legislature and outside it by way of multi-state and federal organizations, as well as travel to other states and countries to share experiences. Several women had leadership positions in the National Council of State Legislatures. Jo Ann Pottorff (Sedgwick County) spoke of the experience she had visiting Korea, Japan, and Germany to share legislative experiences with women in those countries.

Their years in the Legislature provided many of the interviewees with new or more refined skill sets, such as fundraising, public speaking and debate, and the persuasive and strategic thinking needed to get bills passed. They also cited developing a broader appreciation of and greater insight into what mattered to residents outside their districts and even in other parts of the world. Equipped with that heightened awareness and skills honed while they served in the Legislature, several interviewees subsequently became leaders in local government, state agencies, and the judiciary in Kansas.

Public Service Positions After Leaving Office	
Legislators	Public Service Positions After Leaving the Legislature
Jayne Aylward	Administrative Tax Judge, Kansas Board of Tax Appeals
Rochelle Chronister	Secretary of Social and Rehabilitation Services
Sheila Frahm	Secretary of Administration, Lieutenant Governor, US Senator
Janis Lee	Chief Hearing Officer, Kansas Court of Tax Appeals
Nancy Parrish	Secretary of Revenue, District Judge, Chief Judge of the District
Marge Petty	Director, Public Affairs and Consumer Protection at the Kansas Corporation Commission
Sandy Praeger	Insurance Commissioner
Joan Wagnon	Mayor of Topeka, Secretary of Revenue
Donna Whiteman	Secretary of Social and Rehabilitation Services

Other women interviewed for the KOHP project volunteered or worked for nonprofits or businesses, often using the expertise and knowledge acquired from their legislative years. For example, Nancy Brown (Johnson County) became the Executive Director of the Women’s Legislative Network at the National

Council of State Legislatures and Sheila Frahm became the Executive Director of the Kansas Association of Community College Trustees.

Looking Back at What Changed

Many of the interviewees considered collaboration and bipartisanship to be important and desirable underpinnings to the approach for dealing with thorny public policy issues. While those efforts were most often impervious to gender in terms of strategy, there were occasions when a group of women proved particularly effective in getting bills passed. The example of the Steel Magnolias, referenced above, is one such an example. As several women explained, however, many issues related to taxes, the environment, water quantity and quality, and school funding were more likely to divide legislators along rural/urban lines than along political party or gender-based lines. In those instances, the rural/urban division presented opportunities for bipartisan alliances and compromise.

While certain issues invited compromise, others were much more difficult to resolve with the sides of the argument primarily divided along party lines. For example, in the mid-1980s to early 1990s, Kansas, like much of America, grappled with one of the most divisive issues – abortion – which stemmed from the controversial U.S. Supreme Court decision, *Roe v. Wade* in 1973. Wichita was the site of protests including civil disobedience during the summer of 1991 with the “Summer of Mercy” involving thousands of protesters from the anti-abortion group [Operation Rescue](#).

A few years later, in 1994, Newt Gingrich, Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, introduced his Contract with America which did not view bipartisanship and compromise as critical or necessarily desirable methods for achieving legislative objectives. The impact of that national rhetoric resonated in the Statehouse in Topeka.

Kansas was not inured to the changes in national political attitudes that devalued the perceived need for compromise. When asked how they viewed the climate in the Legislature during their last years of service and thereafter, several interviewees noted that there was more partisanship, less civility, fewer social interactions across party lines, more strident positions, and less respect for opposing positions. Sheila Frahm mentioned that caucuses became less cohesive as partisanship rose. Two women interviewed by KOHP commented that they retired because their party left them and Ardena Matlack said that she left in part because she was tired of dealing with the abortion issue.

On the other hand, not everyone viewed the thorny issue of abortion in that light. In 1997 a bill was passed that required a 24-hour waiting period from the time a woman made an appointment for an abortion until the procedure. Susan Wagle commented in her 2020 interview, that in her opinion, the bill was an example of compromise:

I negotiated that with Sandy Praeger. She was pro-choice; I was pro-life. We did the right thing. I think that was an example of passing a bill where pro-lifers would have wanted more, and the pro-choice community didn't want it at all, but we did what was right for the community. It was in the best interest of women's health care that we passed that. (Wagle, Susan, [Interview by Alan Conroy](#), December 18, 2021, p. 12.)

But while some things change, some things stay the same. In her recent interview, Ardena Matlack commented that some of the issues such as school funding, the need for government transparency, and abortion that had preoccupied the Legislature in the early 1980s remain issues today. In her observation, the means of communicating may be different now with electronic technologies but the legislative process itself is pretty much the same as it was 40 years ago.

Advice for Future Legislative Office Aspirants?

Forty years ago, several of the women interviewed for the Washburn project faced multiple challenges in gaining wider acceptance from their mostly male colleagues and forging a path for their voices to be heard and taken seriously. At that time, the impact of the late 20th Century iteration of the Women's Movement was still young in the halls of state legislatures (Center for American Women and Politics, "[Percentage of Women in State Legislatures.](#)"). Therefore, the gender-based challenges these women legislators faced are not likely to be the same as those facing women aspiring to elected offices today.

Despite these differences, however, some ingredients for success are likely to remain unchanged. Several of the former legislators offered advice to women (and in some cases men) considering legislative office, such as: know why you ran and be able to articulate your positions to your constituents; know your constituents and study those issues of most importance to them; be open to new assignments and do not be afraid to take risks; have a sense of humor; and be willing to work with others and make friends because you cannot do it on your own.

Finally, because these interviews focused on women's perspectives, we give the last word to Audrey Langworthy. Joan Wagnon asked her what advice she had for other women who are planning to go into politics or serve in the legislature. Ms. Langworthy replied: "I always encourage them to run because I think it's very helpful to have a woman's voice."