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Gendering Yankee Ingenuity: Electing Women in New England¹

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Abstract

This article provides systematic documentation of women in elected office in New England both cross-sectionally and longitudinally with an over one-hundred year accounting of women's presence in elected office. Compared to other regions, New England is, on the whole, better at electing women but there is substantial variation between the six states. To examine why this is the case, we focus on state legislatures and compiled a database of the election margins in all district-level state legislative races in the six New England states from 1990 – 2022. We find that legislative professionalization and party competition drive the differences in women running for office and achieving office in New England. The less appealing the position is, as measured by legislative professionalization in each state, the more likely women are to run for office as well as obtain office. The more electorally competitive the Democratic and Republic parties are in a state, the more likely it is that women obtain office.

¹ A article version of this article appears in the forthcoming edited volume, *More Than Blue, More Than Yankee: Complexity and Change in New England Politics* (University of Massachusetts Press). The volume is edited by Amy Fried of the University of Maine and Erin O'Brien of the University of Massachusetts Boston. Fried in 2024-25 President of the New England Political Science Association (NEPSA). Other contributors include past NEPSA Presidents Scott McLean (Quinnipiac University) and Maureen Moakley (University of Rhode Island) as well as current and past members of the NEPSA Executive Council (Rachael Cobb, Suffolk University; Jerold Duquette, Central Connecticut State; Christopher Galdieri, Saint Anselm College; Erin O'Brien, University of Massachusetts Boston). The book will be available for purchase Fall 2024 at [University of Massachusetts Press](https://www.umasspress.org/).

New England is a good place for women seeking elected office. Breaking a glass ceiling decades ago in 1948, Margaret Chase Smith, a Republican from Maine, became the first woman elected to the U.S. House and Senate. Elaine Noble, a Democrat from Massachusetts was the first out gay or lesbian individuals elected to the state legislature in 1974. Today, national political figures like Senators Susan Collins (R-ME), Elizabeth Warren (D-MA), and Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH) come from the region as do influential officials like Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley (D-MA). New England is the only region where each state has, or has had, a female governor. Among those is Gina Raimondo (D), the former Governor of Rhode Island and Biden Administration Commerce Secretary. As of 2023, three New England states rank among the top ten states for the percentage of women in their state legislatures: Vermont (#5), Rhode Island (#7), and Maine (#8). Five of the six New England states are in the top half of states when it comes to electing women to the state legislature (CAWP 2023). Regionally, only the Southwest rivals New England on this metric.

This does not make New England a utopia from the perspective of electing women. Vermont was the last state in the union to send a woman to Congress, only rectifying this in 2022 with the election of Democrat Becca Balint (Shivaram 2022). Massachusetts ranks among the bottom half of states in sending women to the state legislature (O'Brien 2022) and only popularly elected a female governor in November 2022. Moreover, the women elected in New England are not racially diverse but are overwhelmingly white.

This article both documents and explains these realities. We find that “blue” is central to understanding women’s electoral success in today’s New England. The women the region elects are overwhelmingly Democrats. But that does not tell the whole story—it takes “more than blue”

to understand the substantial variation among the New England states when it comes to electing women.

To see how far women have come in being elected to office requires a close, deep look at multiple offices. After discussing how having women in elected office matters for public policy and democratic legitimacy, we present data on the make-up of each New England state's congressional delegations, statewide constitutional officers, and state legislatures. We compile the gender breakdown for each state as well as the party affiliation and race/ethnicity of the women currently in these offices, comparing these numbers to the United States congressional averages, which serve as a benchmark. However, what is happening now is only a snapshot and may, in fact, be anomalistic. Thus, the second part of the article compiles and discusses an over 100-year database of the percentage of women serving in each state's legislature since suffrage. The last third of the article tests whether or not the degree of professionalization of the legislature and degree of party competition explain the variation exhibited amongst the New England states. What emerges is a full portrait of each New England state's propensity to elect women as well as a methodologically robust examination of why the states differ in their propensity to send women to elected office.

Why Does Women's Representation Matter?

Some readers might wonder why women's representation matters. If elected officials are charged with representing their districts, and the residents of said districts both choose their leaders and have this choice honored, why do the demographics of elected officials matter? The answer involves descriptive and substantive representation (Dodson 2006; Reingold 2012; Dolan, Deckman, and Swers 2021). Descriptive representation encompasses the impacts of seeing women in office. Young girls and boys see women as legitimate leaders, girls are more

likely to view politics as a “natural” vocation, and policy outcomes are viewed as more legitimate by the people the more legislative body or executive office approximates the population. Substantive representation is also advanced as women enter elected office—especially as they reach a critical mass. Female legislators, like all politicians, are motivated by re-election and represent their geographic districts (MacDonald and O’Brien 2008). Beyond these considerations, women legislate differently. They ask previously unvoiced questions in committee, prioritize different policy issues, and advance “women’s interests” beyond their district (Swers 2002). So having gender parity in elected office is far more than just a “feel good” proposition—substantive changes occur when women are elected. The variation among the New England states in women’s elected representation matters, therefore, for both political socialization and public policy.

The State of Women in New England Elected Offices

New England’s Congressional Representation, 2023

Getting elected to Congress is the penultimate goal of many politicians—one of three co-equal federal branches of government, prestigious, and able to influence the national policy agenda. Plus, many politicians reason, it is a good route to the White House.

There is substantial variation among the New England states when it comes to gender and their congressional delegations. Because the delegations are small—especially in Maine (4), New Hampshire (4), Rhode Island (4), and Vermont (3)—the percentages can shift dramatically with the addition or loss of one female member of Congress. Hence, these numbers are best paired with other offices to get a fuller picture. But Congress is the highest legislative body in the United States and whom a state sends there matters a great deal for descriptive and substantive representation.

As the first column of Table 1 shows, one New England state currently sends no women to Congress—Rhode Island. New Hampshire sends a majority female delegation to DC (75%), Maine has gender parity (50%), the Massachusetts delegation is just over one-third female (36.4%), and the Vermont delegation is exactly one-third. These four states exceed the percentage of women in the US Congress in 2023 (27.9%) while Connecticut nearly parallels the Congressional average with 26.6 percent of its chamber being female.

Table 1. New England Women's Representation in Congress and Statewide Executive Office, 2023		
	Congressional Delegation	Statewide Executive Office
CT	26.6% (2/7)	33% (2/6)
party	2Ds	2Ds
race/ethnicity	1 bl, 1 wh	1 bl, 1 wh
ME	50% (2/4)	20% (1/5)
party	1D, 1R	1D
race/ethnicity	2 wh	1 wh
MA	36.4% (4/11)	83.3% (5/6)
party	4Ds	5D
race/ethnicity	1 bl, 3 wh	1 bl, 4 wh
NH	75% (3/4)	0% (0/3)
party	3D	n/a
race/ethnicity	3 wh	n/a
RI	0%	20% (1/5)
party	n/a	1D
race/ethnicity	n/a	1 afro-la
VT	33% (1/3)	33.3% (2/6)
party	1D	2D
race/ethnicity	1 wh	2 wh
U.S.	27.9% (149/535)	30.3% (94/310)
party	106D, 42R, 1Ind	52D, 40R, 2NP
race/ethnicity ¹	10 as-am/pi, 27 bl, 19 la, 2 nat-am, 1 m-e, 94 wh	4 as-am/pi, 10 bl, 8 la, 1 nat-am, 72 wh

Data source: Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP). 2022. "State Fact Sheets 2022." New Brunswick, NJ: Center for American Women and Politics, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University-New Brunswick. <https://cawp.rutgers.edu/facts/levels-office/state-legislature/women-state-legislatures-2022>

¹ Numbers exceed total "n" as some women identify with more than one racial or ethnic group

The first row under each state in Table 1 provides the party breakdown of the female members of Congress from that state and the second row shows their race or ethnicity. This compilation makes evident that the women New England sends to Congress are overwhelmingly white Democrats. Only Maine sends a Republican to Congress and that same woman, Senator Susan Collins, is also the only Republican woman in the New England congressional delegation. The Democratic party bias among female members of Congress in New England is more pronounced than Congress as a whole—91.7 percent Democrats in New England while 71.1 percent of the female members of Congress are Democrats.

Ten of the twelve female members of Congress from New England are white and two are Black. Three of the four whitest states in the nation are in New England—Vermont (95.6%), Maine (95.4%), and New Hampshire (93.7%) (World Population Review 2022). That the women these states send to Congress are white is thus reflective of the vast majority of their population. But Rhode Island, Connecticut, and Massachusetts are comparatively more diverse with 79.4 percent, 77.5 percent, and 77.8 percent of the population being white. Still, Rhode Island's first ever female member of Congress is white. Connecticut and Massachusetts both send one Black female to the House—Jahana Hayes and Ayanna Pressley, respectively. The relative whiteness of New England's population compared to other regions of the country is important context, but it is still the case that in 2023 just 16.6 percent of the women sent to Congress from New England are of color while that figure for the whole of the U.S. Congress is 39.6 percent.

New England's Representation in Statewide Executive Offices, 2023

The number of constitutional officers differ by state with Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Vermont having six while Maine and Rhode Island have five, and New Hampshire just three. At a minimum, all include the Governor, Attorney General and Secretary of State. But for

Maine where the governor runs statewide while the other constitutional officers are selected by a combined vote of the state legislature, each officer runs statewide and serves in the executive branch. The second column of Table 1 provides the gender breakdown of each New England state's executive officers.

It is evident that gender representation in statewide executive offices is not a mirror image of a state's congressional delegations. The caveat that comparisons are influenced by the small numbers of statewide elected offices is again relevant. That said, these too are top spots with substantial ability to affect policy in each state. Who is occupying them matters. And while Rhode Island and Vermont send no women to Congress, 40 percent and 50 percent of their executive officers, respectively, are female. Connecticut and Massachusetts also perform better for women's representation when it comes to constitutional officers rather than Congressional delegations—Connecticut marginally (33% vs. 26.6%) and Massachusetts substantially (83.3% vs. 36.4%). Maine and Massachusetts are the only two New England states with a sitting female governor. New Hampshire's small congressional delegation is 75 percent female, but none of the Granite State's constitutional officers are female.

Another takeaway from Table 1's compilation of statewide executive officers is that the Democratic dominance among female elected leaders in New England holds. Of the eleven women serving as executive officers, all are Democrats.

Women of color are underrepresented even when we take into account the relative whiteness of much of the region. Three women serving in the New England Constitutional Offices identify as women of color—Connecticut Secretary of State Stephanie Thomas (Black), Massachusetts Attorney General Andrea Campbell (Black), and Rhode Island Lt. Governor Sabina Matos (Afro-Latina). This translates to 9.6 percent of the region's statewide executive

offices being held by women of color—and none in the corner office. For comparison, women of color make up the following percentages of the population in each state: Connecticut, 17.5 percent; Maine, 3.6 percent; Massachusetts, 14.9 percent; New Hampshire 5.1 percent; Rhode Island 14.7 percent; Vermont 3.7 percent (O’Brien 2022, 264). The United States is approximately 20.3 percent women of color.

New England Women Representation in State Legislature, 2023

We now turn to state legislatures. In many ways this metric is more compelling for comparison across states as the number of individuals who serve in the state legislature is far greater than the Congressional delegations or Constitutional officers. State legislative bodies reflect the regional particularities of a state, are comparable across states, and send substantial numbers of individuals to their chambers. They also regularly form the pipeline to more prestigious positions in the U.S. Congress and the statewide Constitutional Offices (McGlen et al. 2010; Mariani 2008; Ransford, Hardy-Fanta, and Cammisa 2007, 31). Thus, these bodies tell us much about the state’s preferences for electing women and whether or not women will be in the higher-ranking offices soon.

The United States Congress is 27.9 percent female (CAWP) as of 2023. The first column of Table 2 shows that every New England state legislature bests the congressional number. Vermont is tops in New England when it comes to electing women, 45 percent, with Rhode Island close behind, 44.2 percent, and Massachusetts comes in last with 31.5 percent. Compared to the percentages of women in the fifty state legislatures, all but Massachusetts exceeds the national average. Vermont (#5), Rhode Island (#7), and Maine (#8) are all in the top ten with New Hampshire and Connecticut ranking 17th and 18th, respectively. Massachusetts is 27th among the fifty states (CAWP 2023).

Table 2. New England Women's Representation in State Legislature, 2022

	Women ¹	Women of Color in Population ²	Women of Color as Percentage of Chamber ³	Women of Color as Percentage of Women Serving
CT	34.2% (64/187)	17.5	5.9% (11/187)	17.2% (11/64)
party	43D, 21R		10D, 1R	
ME	42.5% (79/186)	3.6	.54% (1/186)	1.3% (1/79)
party	54D, 24R, 1I		1D	
MA	29.5% (59/200)	14.9	5% (10/200)	16.9% (10/59)
party	54D, 4R, 1I		10D	
NH	34.4% (146/424)	5.1	1.4% (6/424)	4.1% (6/146)
party	96D, 50R		6D	
RI	44.2% (50/113)	14.7	9.7% (11/113)	22% (11/50)
party	45D, 5R		11D	
VT	41.7% (75/180)	3.7	1.7% (3/180)	4% (3/75)
party	57D, 13R, 5I		3D	
<p><i>Data Sources:</i></p> <p>¹ Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP). 2022. "Women in State Legislatures 2022." New Brunswick, NJ: Center for American Women and Politics, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University-New Brunswick. https://cawp.rutgers.edu/facts/levels-office/state-legislature/women-state-legislatures-2022</p> <p>² Figures for computing women of color in the state population are from U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts.</p> <p>³ Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP). 2022. Women Elected Officials Filter Tool. New Brunswick, NJ: Center for American Women and Politics, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University-New Brunswick. Asian-American/Pacific Islander, Black, Latina, Middle Eastern/North African, Multiracial alone, Native American/Alaska Native/Native Hawaiian, other.</p>				

When women serve in NE state legislatures, they are most likely Democrats. Blue. But here there is variation among the six states. The first row under each state provides the party breakdown of the women in the state's legislature. Roughly two-thirds of the women serving are Democrats in Connecticut (69.6%), Maine (73.1%), and New Hampshire (66.5%). In Congress, 72.3 percent of the women serving are Democrats. This means the party imbalance is actually lower in CT and NH compared to the United States Congress while Maine almost directly

mirrors Congress. In Vermont, 85.2 percent of the women serving are Democrats. Massachusetts (92.1%) and Rhode Island (90%) witness near exclusive dominance of Democrats over Republicans amongst female legislators—far more than other New England states and the Congressional percentage. Both states’ legislatures are extremely unbalanced in favor of Democrats.

New England Women of Color’s Representation in State Legislature, 2022

Column two in Table 2 provides the percentage of the population in each state that is women of color. Columns 3 examines the relative strength of women of color in New England state legislatures in 2022.¹ Compared to the percentage of women of color in the state (column 2), all New England states fall short in proportional representation in the legislature (column 3). Some shortfalls are more dramatic than others. Two states, Rhode Island and Vermont, are 1.5 times and 2 times short of proportional representation for women of color in the legislature compared to the population of women of color in the state.² Connecticut, Massachusetts are both 3 times short and New Hampshire 3.5 times. Maine has the greatest disparity at 7x—0.54 percent of the legislature is women of color while the state is 3.6 percent women of color; however, its Speaker of the House is a Black woman.

Table 2’s column 4 presents the percentage of women of color serving *among* female state legislators. Unsurprisingly, the three whitest states in New England (and three of the top four whitest in the nation), have small percentages of women of color amongst the women serving—Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont. Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island—more diverse, and in the case of CT and MA, more populous—elect more diverse women’s caucuses.

Of the forty-two women of color serving in New England state legislatures, all but one is a Democrat—Connecticut State Representative Kimberly Fiorello, born in Seoul, South Korea, is a Republican. This means that 97.6 percent of the women of color serving as state legislators are Democrats.

What does all this suggest? Compared to other regions, New England is, on the whole, better at electing women. How effective the various New England states are, however, often depends on the level of office. States with parity or near parity for constitutional officers can have no women in the Congressional delegation (Rhode Island and Vermont) while, in the case of Rhode Island, can also be best in the region for electing women to the state legislature. New Hampshire features three of four female members of Congress but no female statewide elected officials. Connecticut, Maine, and Massachusetts have rough parity between their congressional delegation and constitutional officers—but Massachusetts lags in electing women to the state legislature. When women are elected to any of these offices in New England though, they are most often Democrats. Underneath this trend, and especially in the state legislatures, we see that Massachusetts and Rhode Island elect female Democrats almost exclusively whereas the other New England States include some Republican representation—if not parity. Women of color are under-represented across all offices even once we take into account the lack of diversity within some New England States.

State Legislatures across New England, 1921-2023

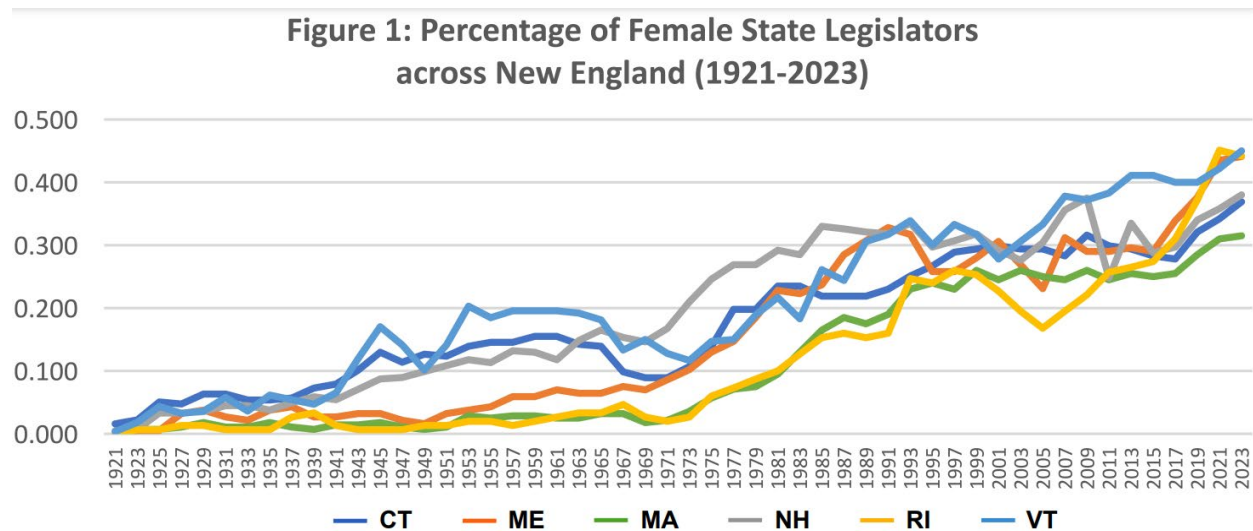
Do the above trends hold over time? Are they unrepresentative snapshots? To assess this possibility, and to garner a fuller understanding of New England's taste for electing women, we turn to a longitudinal database of all the women elected to each of the New England states legislature since suffrage.

Data from The Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) at Rutgers University was used to compile our New England states' database. For years 1921-1973, the searchable database provided the raw number of female state senators and state representatives by state. Each woman was coded for their party affiliation, also recoverable via filters in the CAWP database. For years 1975-2023, CAWP provides summary fact sheets reporting the percentage of women serving by state for each session. These percentages were entered directly into the longitudinal database. The summary fact sheets, however, did not provide partisanship breakdowns nor race and ethnicity. For these additional considerations, we returned to the searchable database. For race and ethnicity, each state was searched separately so that all women who served and were coded by CAWP as "Asian American/Pacific Islander," "Black," "Latina," "Middle Eastern/North African," "Native American/Alaska Native/Native Hawaiian," "multiracial alone," "White," or "other" appeared.

The resulting longitudinal dataset provides the most comprehensive accounting of women in New England state legislatures since women won the right to vote. We prefer it to an analysis over time of local government officials because each state has a comparable legislature rather than the often particularistic local government set-ups. As noted, state legislatures also send large numbers of senators and representatives to the State Houses whereas congressional delegations and Constitutional officers are small in number and thus subject to far more unique electoral considerations beyond the state's taste for electing women over time.

Figure 1 presents the percentage of women in each of the New England state legislatures since suffrage. This more robust data source helps us discern several trends among the six states. First, no state has reached fifty percent parity in over one hundred plus years since women gained the right to vote. Second, while there is a gentle upward slope over the course of the

panel, progress is not a clear linear path. States hover around the same percentage for years. Take Connecticut for an example—between 1997 and 2007 it remained around 30 percent. From 1995 to 2017, Massachusetts held close to 25 percent. Steep improvement is not the norm.



Third, New Hampshire and Vermont generally lead the pack in electing women over the course of the one-hundred years depicted. New Hampshire experiences dramatic gains and losses between 2009 to 2023 though while Vermont continues to be a leader over most of the full panel.

Fourth, Rhode Island and Massachusetts are laggards. For almost the whole of the 102-year panel, these two states register the lowest percentage of female legislators. Maine too ran with these back-of-the-pack states until the late 1960s when it began electing women at rates more commensurate with the New England states.

Fifth, Rhode Island has experienced a dramatic turnaround as of late. In 2013, 27.4 percent of the RI legislature was female. In 2015, the exact same percentage held and in 2017 there was a slight uptick to 31 percent. In 2019, however, the percentage jumped to 37.2 percent and in 2021 it reached 44.2 percent and held there in 2023. This places Rhode Island second in New England and seventh in the United States for electing women to their legislative branch.

The last takeaway from Figure 1 is central to the puzzle we unpack in the final third of this article. Figure 1 shows us that there is substantive variation among the six states in electing women to the legislature despite sharing many regional political sensibilities. By 1949, Vermont, Connecticut, and New Hampshire had legislatures at or above ten percent female. The other three New England states are in low single digits with Massachusetts and Rhode Island hovering near zero. Through the post war years and into the mid-1960s, the gap between Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and the other New England states expands. In 1981, Massachusetts and Rhode Island finally cross 10 percent while New Hampshire's legislature is 30 percent female, and all other New England states are above 20 percent. The late 1990s through most of the 2000s sees growth among all the New England states, and a few years of more compression between them, but by 2023 the gap is back up to almost fifteen points between the top New England state, Connecticut (45%), and the bottom state in the region, Massachusetts (31.5%). This gap between percentages of women in the state legislature is all the more seismic when we highlight that the current ceiling for percent women in New England legislatures is 45. From the vantagepoint of regional comparison, the biggest story is that New England does not perform as a block over the one-hundred-and-two-year timespan when it comes to electing women.

Representational Variation in New England: Legislative Professionalization and Electoral Competition

The final third of this article assesses why there is such variation among the New England states. The first explanation, which holds in part for New England, is that there is an inverse relationship between a state legislature's professionalization and the presence of women (Ransford, Hardy-Fanta, and Cammisa 2007). Said differently, the less prestigious the position, the more likely one is to see women. Women's path toward political incorporation has seen this elsewhere—women are disproportionately responsible for the more mundane, less prestigious

campaign work or overrepresentation on PTAs rather than top spots like superintendent or mayor (Evans 1980; McGlen et al. 2010).

State legislatures are not created equal. Professional legislatures are “associated with unlimited professional sessions, superior staff resources, and sufficient pay to allow members to pursue legislative service as their vocation” (Squire 2007, 211). Squire’s seminal measure of legislative professionalism include salary and benefits, time demands of legislative service, and staff and other resources. Where these component parts are high, the incentive to serve is greater, members are incentivized to build legislative skills, legislation gets more focused attention and is more apt to tread into complicated matters, and staff and legislator turnover is lower (Squire 2007, 213).

Based on this metric, Squire’s (2017) latest ranking of the New England states for professionalism is Massachusetts (#2), Connecticut (#13), Rhode Island (#28), Vermont (#33), Maine (#41) and New Hampshire (#50). This means that Massachusetts is the second most professional, resource-rich, state legislature in the country and New Hampshire is dead last.

The National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) also developed a measure of the “capacity of legislatures to function as independent branches of government, capable of balancing the power of the executive branch and having the information necessary to make independent, informed policy decisions....[It] consider[s] the amount of time legislators spend on the job, the amount they are compensated, and the size of the legislature's staff” (NCSL 2021). The NCSL is a five-tiered, colored scale ranging from green (full-time, well-paid, large staff) to gold (part-time, low pay, small staff). It places the New England states in essentially the same order as Squire—Massachusetts in light green (a two on five-point scale), Connecticut in

gray (a three on a five-point scale) and the other four New England states all “gold lite” which amount to a four on the five-point scale.

The professionalization explanation seemingly does an effective job explaining why Massachusetts consistently ranks last in New England for electing women to the state legislature. Simply put, the job is attractive. It pays well and is relatively resourced. Given the long history of sexism in the United States, it is thus not particularly surprising that the New England state with the objectively best working conditions is the same one that has been most resistant to incorporating women. Connecticut’s current position of second from the bottom for electing women is, likewise, in keeping with the professionalism explanation. Connecticut and Massachusetts do the worst in electing women in New England, in part, because their legislatures are the most professionalized and, thus, attractive to work in. Over the course of the over one-hundred-year panel, the general trend of New Hampshire and Vermont leading the way for electing women is also in keeping with these states’ low legislative professionalism scores. Today, the four best states for electing women to the state legislature in New England are the ones ranked 28th (Rhode Island), 33rd (Vermont), 41st (Maine) and 50th (New Hampshire) for legislative professionalism. Women are more apt to win when the job is not as lucrative, resourced, or full-time.

But legislative professionalism as the explanation for variation amongst the NE states in electing women to the state legislature is not consistent with all the data points. For instance, there has been a dramatic recent shift in Rhode Island’s propensity to elect to women to the state legislature even as its legislative professionalism score is but 28 out of 50 states. This suggests that legislative professionalism is indeed a key factor in explaining the differences between the percentages of women in New England state legislatures but that it is not complete.

To more fully understand the presence of women elected officials in the region, we turn to the role of electoral competition. A prominent scholarly strain of work on political parties finds that electoral competition encourages parties to expand their electoral base by mobilizing new constituencies (Key 1949; Schattschneider 1942, 59; Schattschneider 1960, 95; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). So, when Democrats and Republicans are evenly matched, they fight to expand their base with untapped constituencies.³ Running more diverse candidates is a popular strategy for doing so (Sanbonmatsu 2002).

Yes, Democrats dominate in modern New England but there is variation in how electorally competitive the GOP is in each state. We hypothesize that, overtime, where electoral competition is stronger, those states will be more likely to see women win legislative office. Importantly, the party competition hypotheses holds regardless of which party is ascendant—it is simply the fact that in New England the Democratic party is more dominant in the modern era. This hypothesis is counterintuitive to those who view the Democratic party as more responsive to “women’s interests.” That is true on policy outputs (Swers 2002) but, perhaps, not candidate selection. Democrats are more likely to elect women than Republicans *but*, we hypothesize, they are most likely to do so at the state-level when they experience electoral threat at the ballot box by a competitive state GOP.

Our Database: New England Legislative Races & the Electoral Competition Hypothesis

To formally test this hypothesis, we looked at the election margins in all district-level legislative races in the six states from 1990-2022 (with the exception of Vermont, for which 2022 election data was unavailable). Election margins, the percentage vote difference between two candidates, are recognized measures of electoral competition (Mayhew 1974; Holbrook and Dunk 1983) with the most advantageous indicator too accounting for whether or not the race was

contested (Holbrook and Dunk 1983). Therefore, district-level data for each of the six New England states was compiled for votes cast for each candidate, total votes cast in each district race, and whether or not the race was contested. From there, the percentages of votes cast for the top two candidates was subtracted from one another creating the election margin. For district races featuring only one candidate, the percentage was 100 percent. Districts were also coded according to whether any female candidates ran for legislative office in each general election from 1990-2022. Names of female candidates, the district races and years in which they ran for office, party affiliation, and their election results were confirmed using CAWP's State Legislative Women Nominees Database (1992-2021), CAWP's searchable Database on Women Elected Officials by Position, and Ballotpedia.

Using this data, we performed two logistic regressions to determine what factors increase the likelihood of a female candidate *running for state legislature* at the district level and the likelihood of a *women being elected to state legislative office*. Regression analysis offers the most rigorous test of the electoral competition hypothesis as it examines what effect, if any, electoral competition has for women running and winning while simultaneously controlling for an array of factors also related to why women run and win. Said differently, the advantage of regression analysis is that if electoral competition emerges as statistically significant, we know it does so even when we take into account the independent effect of the following: level of office being sought, whether or not there was an opponent in the previous district race, the party that won the seat in the previous cycle,⁴ and state. We hypothesize that districts with higher levels of electoral competitiveness in the prior general election will have higher likelihoods of being represented by a woman as well as having female candidate vie for that office (see Methodological Appendix for more detail on variable construction and modeling decisions).

The results are consistent with the electoral competition hypotheses. New England districts that exhibit more party competition are more likely to see women run for legislative office.⁵ Importantly, as we see in column 2 of Table 3, this holds true for both those seeking office *and* those elected. For every 1 percentage point *decrease* in the electoral gap between the top two candidates of differing parties from the prior election cycle, there was a 0.37 percent higher likelihood that a woman would win the seat. Women are more likely to run, and win, in New England where the two parties are more evenly matched.

Table 3: Logistic Regression Coefficients –District Level

Variable	Female Candidate (Standard Error)	Female Elected Official (Standard Error)
Electoral Competition _{t-2} (Difference in % of votes – top 2 parties)	0.9898093*** (0.0010472)	0.9963061*** (0.0012013)
Office (House relative to Senate)	1.039874 (0.0450148)	1.211982*** (0.0555255)
Opponent _{t-2} (Uncontested Race vs Contested)	0.6591039*** (0.0586471)	0.8625318 (0.08408)
Winning Party _{t-2} (Relative to Rep Party)		
Democratic	1.093451** (0.0413855)	1.48498 *** (0.0591091)
Independent	1.250262 (0.2869988)	1.255236 (0.2949021)
Other	0.7909684** (0.0754629)	1.173296 (0.1125375)
State (Relative to Massachusetts)		
Connecticut	1.503336*** (0.0842648)	1.154948** (0.0714792)
Maine	1.74901*** (0.1000556)	1.136201** (0.0720009)
New Hampshire	3.495179*** (0.2174491)	2.277542*** (0.1486471)
Rhode Island	1.111893 (0.069525)	1.270892*** (0.0832331)
Vermont	2.691599*** (0.1801906)	2.241769*** (0.1558573)
Electoral Competition _t (Difference in % of votes – top 2 parties)		0.9939833*** (0.0011892)
Opponent _t (Uncontested Race vs Contested)		0.81931** (0.0795388)
Constant	1.023199*** (0.1245093)	0.4886732 (0.0744299)
N	15,430	15,430

Note: * = p < 0.10; ** = p < 0.05; ***=p<0.01

Digging further into the state-level data from the logistic regression confirms the trends we saw among New England states for electing women in stunning fashion. Compared to districts in Massachusetts, districts in other New England states have higher likelihoods of women running for office: 50 percent higher likelihood for Connecticut, 75 percent for Maine, 250 percent for New Hampshire, 11 percent for Rhode Island, and 169 percent for Vermont. The same is true for women being elected to office: 15 percent higher likelihood for Connecticut, 14 percent for Maine, 128 percent for New Hampshire, 27 percent for Rhode Island, and 124 percent for Vermont. These likelihoods provide more context for the patterns uncovered in the longitudinal analysis: Massachusetts performs comparatively poorly in eliciting female candidates as well as in electing them compared to the other New England states. Worst in state legislative competitiveness in New England? Massachusetts ranks 46th among the 50 states (Ballotpedia). New Hampshire, by contrast, is second among the fifty states for state legislative competitiveness—and is 128 percent more likely to elect a woman than Massachusetts.

What does the rest of Table 3 tell us? First, compared to races for the state senate, races for the state house have higher likelihoods of female candidates running as well as being elected to office. This is likely due to the fact that the Senate is more prestigious than the House making it more attractive to men—especially when combined with the fact that women tend to run later in life, making it more difficult to achieve top offices. Second, female candidates are more likely to run for office in district races which were previously uncontested. Taken together with the previous finding on electoral competition, this result indicates that women in New England are more likely to enter those races they think they can win, running in previously contested districts with very narrow margins of victory or previously uncontested districts. Third, the data reveals too that compared to districts that voted Republican in the prior general election year, districts

that voted Democratic have higher likelihoods of women running (9.3% higher) and winning office (48.5% higher). This suggests that in New England, for the time period examined, Democratic districts are more inviting to female candidates. This aligns well with what we saw in the party breakdowns among Democratic and Republican women in all levels of office within New England. There are far more female elected officials among Democrats than Republicans.

New England Legislative Races and the Professionalization Hypothesis

We demonstrated how state rankings suggest that, in general, the more professional the New England legislature, the lower percentage of women amongst its office holders. But does this result hold up in our more compelling statistical analyses? Short answer: yes.

To formally test the professionalization hypothesis via the regression analysis tool, we collected data on the biennium salaries of legislators (i.e., base amount paid to legislators) from the Book of the States. We again constructed dependent variables that captured *women running in New England* (the ratio of total number of female candidates to district races for each state-year) and *women winning in New England* legislative races (percentage of district offices held by women for each biennium). Electoral competitiveness was again accounted for in the analyses.

Additional controls included the percentage of districts won by Democrats and percentage of districts won by Republicans in the previous election. This helps account for the fact that there are more female candidates who are Democrats than Republicans in New England. We also control for gender bias by including data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey on gender wage gaps, as measured by women's median earnings as a percentage of men's for each NE state's general election year (Altonji and Blank 1999; Bertrand 2011; Le Barbanchon and Sauvagnat 2022).

As hypothesized, an *increase* in salary is associated with a *decrease* in the ratio of female candidates running for office—as indicated by the negative sign on the biennium salary coefficient in Table 4. Depending on the state and year, a \$10,000 increase in biennium salary—\$5000 more for each term—could translate to seventeen to eighteen fewer female candidates running for district office! A similar relationship was found between legislative professionalism and females being in state legislative seats: higher salaries translate to lower percentages of districts with female elected officials. Hence, even with the inclusion of the control variables, legislative professionalization is negatively associated with women in New England both running for the state legislature and winning a seat.

Table 4: Pooled OLS Regression Coefficients –State Level

Variable	Ratio of Female Candidates to District Races * 100 (Robust Standard Error)	% of Districts with Female Elected Officials (Robust Standard Error)
Biennium Salary _{t-2} (Base salary for 2 years, lagged)	-0.4141354 ** (0.1103379)	-0.1485016* (0.0638649)
% Competitive Races _{t-2} (% races with margin of victory ≤ 10%)	0.5256615 (0.3520871)	0.3442549 (0.3175103)
% Races with an Opponent _{t-2}	-0.2391272 (0.2160564)	-0.1931332 (0.1225273)
% Dem Wins _{t-2} (% of district races won by Democrats)	0.2669644* (0.1344431)	0.1242575 (0.1001487)
% Rep Wins _{t-2} (% of district races won by Republicans)	-0.1053175 (0.1359665)	-0.0342052 (0.0802055)
Wage Equality (Women's as % of Men's Earnings)	0.437263 (0.2322222)	0.2506025 (0.1369851)
State (Relative to Rhode Island)		
Connecticut	35.96755 *** (7.592069)	19.80416** (7.113909)
Maine	31.58133*** (6.228833)	17.59834** (6.08647)
Massachusetts	34.07876** (8.791609)	8.350136 (4.834069)
New Hampshire	16.5952** (4.661206)	0.7958407 (3.492597)
Vermont	18.36232*** (2.607928)	10.50453*** (2.572287)
% Competitive Races _t (% races with margin of victory ≤ 10%)		-0.0813377 (0.1128732)
% Races with an Opponent _t		-0.1855919 (0.1218516)
Constant	-0.3783197 (18.01629)	17.6633 (8.404104)
N	71	71

Note: * = p < 0.10; ** = p < 0.05; ***=p<0.01

The data also revealed a positive, though not statistically significant, relationship between electoral competition (percentage of races with margins of victory less than or equal to 10%) and election of women to legislative office: higher numbers of competitive races in previous elections lead to more women being elected to office in subsequent elections. This is also true for the ratio of female candidates to district races. This suggests that *both* electoral competition and legislative professionalization drive differences among the New England states.

Conclusion

As a region, New England is comparatively good for electing women. Democratic women that is. But is it a liberal oasis of gender equity? Hardly. Only New Hampshire has a majority female Congressional delegation, and only Maine has exact gender parity among those it sends to Congress. Despite the fact women gained the right to vote just over 100 years ago, no New England state legislature has gender parity. Only two states have female governors. All New England states have significant gaps between the percentage of women of color in their population and the percentage of said women in office. There is substantial variation among the New England states for electing women overtime, but Massachusetts is almost always back of the pack with Vermont and New Hampshire generally leading the way. From the twin perspectives of descriptive and substantive representation then, New England largely falls short. Improvement, yes, but the evidence does not suggest that New England is on a pre-ordained path to representational equity. When it comes to who New Englanders see in office, and thus perceive as “natural fits” for politics, men remain the default. And, with women but rarely achieving parity in office, we also know that the agenda space, the issues state governments or state delegations prioritize, remains more likely to be centered around traditionally male priorities.

Our rigorous empirical analyses revealed two reasons for why the variation exists among the New England states in electing women—legislative professionalization and electoral competition. The more resourced the state legislature, and hence more prestigious, the less likely one is to see female candidates running for and being elected to these spots. Massachusetts vies for last in show over the 102-year panel and is worst in New England in 2023. Massachusetts is also the highest in legislative professionalism. Additionally, where party competition is low, women are less likely to run and win legislative seats. So the variation among the New England states in electing women is, in no small way, attributable to the variation in GOP party strength across the region. Where New England is “more than blue,” as measured by competitive elections between Democrats and Republicans, females are more likely to hold legislative seat.

In New England politics then, there is real irony in the fact that electing so many Democrats is, on average, better for representing women’s interests, but it is also more likely that women run where Republicans continue to put up an electoral fight. And, in another irony all too familiar to women, the less prestigious and resourced the legislature, the more likely one is to see women in said offices. Yankee ingenuity involves making do with less by using one’s wits – making it work despite lacking seemingly vital resources. In New England, women are more apt to be in elected positions that require using their Yankee ingenuity because the position they’ve won does not pay well nor provide full staff support. In electoral politics then, Yankee ingenuity is gendered.

Appendix A: Methodology for Regression Analyses

We performed two sets of logistic regressions to determine what factors increase the likelihood of a *female candidate running for state legislature* and the likelihood of a *women being elected to state legislature* at the district level. In the first set (Table 3), we hypothesized that districts with higher levels of electoral competitiveness in the prior general election (as measured by lower differences in the percentage of votes cast between the top two candidates in a district) would have higher likelihoods of being represented by a woman as well as having female candidate vie for that office. Other control variables included office sought (state house or senate) and dummy variables for the presence of an opponent in the previous district race, the party that won the seat in the previous cycle, and state. Some districts in New Hampshire and Vermont elect more than one candidate to office. For these districts, the winning party was assigned to the candidate with the highest number of votes. The percentage of votes won for each party does not reflect the total number of votes won by all candidates of each respective party but reflects the percentage of votes won by the candidate with the highest number of votes within each party. The difference in these percentages was used to measure electoral competitiveness. The regression model for women being elected to state legislature also included that district-year's overall level of electoral competitiveness and the presence of an opponent. Variables in the model denoted by t-2 subscripts represent values from the prior general election year.

$$\text{Female Candidate} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Electoral Competition}_{t-2} + \beta_2 \text{Office} + \beta_3 \text{Opponent}_{t-2} + \beta_4 \text{Winning Party}_{t-2} + \beta_5 \text{State}$$

$$\text{Female Elected Official} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Electoral Competition}_{t-2} + \beta_2 \text{Office} + \beta_3 \text{Opponent}_{t-2} + \beta_4 \text{Winning Party}_{t-2} + \beta_5 \text{State} + \beta_6 \text{Electoral Competition}_t + \beta_7 \text{Opponent}_t$$

In these models, 15,430 of all 17,081 observations—or district level races—were used in the analyses. Because data from the previous general election cycle were used in the logistic

regressions and because our observations begin from 1990, observations for 1990 for all state districts were dropped. If new districts had no parallel district reference in the previous election cycle, they could not be matched with lagged data for electoral competition, presence of an opponent, and winning party; these observations were dropped because of redistricting.

The second set of regression analyses (Table 4) formally tested the professionalization hypothesis. Using the New England districts database, collapsed to state-level, we constructed dependent variables that captured how many *female candidates ran for state legislature* (the ratio of total number of female candidates to district races for each state-year) and how many *women won NE legislative races* (percentage of district offices held by women for each biennium). We collected data on the biennium salaries of legislators (i.e., base amount paid to legislators). Though the aforementioned Squire Index incorporates three aspects of professionalism (i.e. salary and benefits, time demands of service, and staff and resources), Bowen and Greene (2014) have found that disaggregating the components of multidimensional scales and analyzing the components individually to be beneficial particularly since multidimensional scales such as the Squire Index are not updated annually. The [U.S. Inflation Calculator](#) was used to calculate each year's base salary in 2010 dollars. Electoral competitiveness was accounted for again. First, by determining the percentage of districts for each state and year where the margin of victory between the top two candidates was less than or equal to 10 percent—the margin that typically defines a “competitive race” (Ballotpedia). Second, electoral competitiveness was accounted for by including data on the percentage of districts where candidates faced an opponent.

Additional controls included the percentage of districts won by Democrats and the percentage of districts won by Republicans in the previous election as well as gender bias (voter bias and gender socialization). For the latter, 1-year estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau's

American Community Survey on gender wage gaps were used for each NE state, each general election year. The gender wage gap measured women's median earnings as a percentage of men's. We use a pooled OLS regression to determine whether the level of professionalism of NE state legislative offices correlates with fewer female candidates running for and winning state legislative office. Fixed effects and random effects regressions were run, but the Hausman specification test indicated that the random effects model was preferred. The Breusch-Pagan Lagrange multiplier (LM) test indicated that there was no significant difference across the states (i.e. no panel effect). Therefore, the pooled OLS regression was used with clustered standard errors.

$$\text{Ratio of Female Candidates} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Biennium Salary}_{t-2} + \beta_2 \% \text{Competitive Races}_{t-2} + \beta_3 \% \text{Opponent}_{t-2} + \beta_4 \% \text{Dem Wins}_{t-2} + \beta_5 \% \text{Rep Wins}_{t-2} + \beta_6 \text{Wage Equality} + \beta_i \text{States}$$

$$\begin{aligned} \% \text{Women in Office} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Biennium Salary}_{t-2} + \beta_2 \% \text{Competitive Races}_{t-2} + \\ & \beta_3 \% \text{Opponent}_{t-2} + \beta_4 \% \text{Dem Wins}_{t-2} + \beta_5 \% \text{Rep Wins}_{t-2} + \beta_6 \text{Wage Equality} + \beta_i \text{States} + \\ & \beta_7 \% \text{Competitive Races (at 10\%)}_t + \beta_8 \% \text{Opponent}_t \end{aligned}$$

Because the 17,081 observations at the district level were collapsed to the state-year level and lagged, there were only ninety-five units of observation (sixteen biennia for five states and fifteen biennia for Vermont, since 2022 data was unavailable). Gender wage gap data was only available for biennia from 1998 to 2020, so the number of observations was further reduced to seventy-one (twelve biennia for five states and eleven biennia for Vermont). 79.8 percent of the variance in the sample is explained by our model with statistically significant values for the biennium salary coefficient and state constants.

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¹ At time of writing, figures for new 2023 legislatures were not available.

² Because the percentages of women of color are so small in the states, we group them together in these calculations. This is *not* to say that the experiences of women of color are the same or interchangeable. It is simply the case that the “n” is so low of individual groups of women of color that presentation of the data necessitated grouping.

³ An opposing perspective is that tight electoral competition encourages demobilization of the other party’s core constituencies (Piven, Minnite, and Groarke 2009; Piven and Cloward 1988; Keyssar 2011).

⁴ Some districts in New Hampshire and Vermont elect more than one candidate to office. For these districts, the winning party was assigned to the candidate with the highest number of votes.

⁵ For every 1 percentage point decrease in the electoral gap between the top two candidates of different parties from the prior election cycle, there was a higher likelihood (1%) that a woman would run for district office. The predicted probabilities of a women running for a seat in the MA statehouse in a district in which a democrat had been elected in the prior general election drops from 0.43 for very competitive races (difference in percentage of votes = 0) to 0.38 for less competitive races (difference in percentage of votes = 20).