

A Difference That Makes A Difference

Is It Better to Be a Woman in Vermont or a Gal in Mississippi?

According to the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR), it is better to be a woman in Vermont than a gal in Mississippi.

Why? Well, in an analysis of the status of women in the states, the IWPR had several reasons for ranking Vermont as the best state for women and Mississippi as the worst. For example, in Vermont women had greater economic autonomy and enjoyed greater reproductive rights than did women in Mississippi. This is only a partial answer to the question, however. To learn the rest of it, we must ask: Why would women have greater economic autonomy and more reproductive rights in Vermont than in Mississippi?

The comparative approach to answering this question involves looking for other differences between Vermont and Mississippi—differences that might explain the variance in the status of women. Some candidates for those explanatory differences are presented in Table 1-1. This table shows the top five and the bottom five states in the IWPR rankings, the dominant political culture in each state, and the percentage of state legislators in each state who were women in 2014. Notice any patterns?

You may have caught that all the top five states have either moralistic or individualistic cultures, and all the bottom five states have traditionalistic cultures. Therefore, political culture might explain some of the difference in women's status. States in which the dominant political values stress the importance of everyone getting involved might offer more opportunities for women. So might states in which such values emphasize hard work as the predominant basis for getting ahead in life. States in which the dominant political values stress leaving the important decisions to established elites might offer fewer opportunities for women because, traditionally, elites have been male.

Also, take a look at the proportions of women in the state legislatures. On average, about one third of state legislators in the top five states are women. In the bottom five states, that average is halved—only about 16 percent of state legislators are women. This is a difference that can have considerable impact. A number of studies show that women legislators tend to support

TABLE 1-1

Politics and the Status of Women in the States: Some Variables

| Five Best States for Women | Dominant Political Culture | Percentage of State Legislators Who Are Women |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------|---|
| 1. Vermont | Moralistic | 40.6 |
| 2. Connecticut | Individualistic | 28.3 |
| 3. Minnesota | Moralistic | 33.8 |
| 4. Washington | Moralistic | 32.7 |
| 5. Oregon | Moralistic | 30.0 |
| Five Worst States for Women | Dominant Political Culture | Percentage of State Legislators Who Are Women |
| 46. Oklahoma | Traditionalistic | 13.4 |
| 47. Arkansas | Traditionalistic | 17.0 |
| 48. Kentucky | Traditionalistic | 18.1 |
| 49. South Carolina | Traditionalistic | 12.9 |
| 50. Mississippi | Traditionalistic | 17.2 |

Sources: Amy Caiazza, Misha Werschkul, Erica Williams, and April Shaw, *The Status of Women in the States* (Washington, DC: IWPR, October 2004), <http://www.iwpr.org/publications/pubs/the-status-of-women-in-the-states>; Daniel J. Elazar, *American Federalism: A View From the States* (New York: Crowell, 1966); National Conference of State Legislatures, "Women in State Legislatures: 2014 Legislative Session," April 1, 2014, <http://www.ncsl.org/legislators-staff/legislators/womens-legislative-network/women-in-state-legislatures-for-2014.aspx>.

more progressive policies, are more likely to pay attention to women's issues, and are more likely to push these issues into law.^a

Thus, states that have more women in their legislatures are more likely to respond to issues such as reproductive rights, violence against women, child-support policies, and family-leave benefits. All these factors contribute to the IWPR's calculations. Why is Vermont a better state for women than Mississippi? A comparative answer to that question is that Vermont has a political culture that is more likely to encourage and support political participation by women and also has a greater female presence in its state legislature.

^a Michele Swers, "Understanding the Policy Impact of Electing Women: Evidence From Research on Congress and State Legislatures," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 34, no. 2 (2001): 217–220.