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Women advance in Oklahoma's most crowded state Senate primary



by **HANNAH PIKE**

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Julia Kirt said she was motivated to run for office based on the state of education. She is the executive director of Oklahomans for the Arts, which works with the state legislature to support arts education. [Photo provided by Shevaun Williams]

In a state where only seven of 47 state senators are female, two women and seven men entered the District 30 primary. Both women and one man advanced.

Historically, few women run for Oklahoma's Legislature. Those who do are elected at a significantly lower rate than men. But this year, more women ran. And almost as many women as men won in Senate primary races in which there were male and female candidates.

Julia Kirt earned almost 90 percent of the vote to become the District 30 Democratic nominee. Lori Callahan and John Symcox beat five other candidates to make it to the Republican runoff.

“What I've found is that people are ready for change, and for a lot of them ... they are really thinking having women in office is a good idea,” Kirt said, “I've heard men and women say that some of the problems with the way the Legislature is functioning are traditionally male traits.”

Stanford University, Vanderbilt University and University of Cambridge have written studies showing that female legislators tend to sponsor more bills than male legislators, especially in areas like education, health and civil rights. They also work more across party lines and focus on policies that support women and children, the research showed.

Neither of the female candidates in District 30 has asked for votes based on gender, but it is a difficult factor to ignore when Oklahoma has the second lowest percentage of female state legislators in the nation, 14 percent.

Symcox said that more women should run.

“There are so many women that are amazingly qualified,” Symcox said.

But he said candidates should be elected based on their qualifications, not just to increase the number of women. He said women who ask for votes based on their gender are doing a disservice to themselves.

“I just think we have a different voice,” Callahan said. “I’m not playing the gender card by any means. I just think you need more of us.”

Women in the state Senate

Even though many women made it through the primaries, most of these women are Democrats or Independents. The overwhelming majority of Senate seats, half of which are up for reelection this year, are currently occupied by Republicans. In order for women to increase their numbers, some seats must flip from Republican to Democrat.

If more Democrats and Independents are elected, though, the number of women in the state Senate could almost double.

Callahan made a video in April with fellow Republicans Nicole Miller, who is in the runoff primary for House District 82, and Nancy Sangiardi, who lost in her primary, that encouraged women to run for office. It has over 48,000 views on Facebook.

Callahan said the video was “risky” because it could have been interpreted as asking women to run against her party and her, but she wants women to be open to doing “more than just the (political) clubs.”

Three of Oklahoma's eight Democratic state senators are female, which is 38 percent. Four of Oklahoma's 39 Republican state senators are female, which is 10 percent.

“Women being recognized in the Republican party is super important to me,” Callahan said. “I just want women in general to feel OK.”

Kirt said she hopes more Republican women will run for the Legislature in the future.

“I really hope it is not like Democratic women and Republican men because I think we wouldn’t have the same effect in terms of bringing the mix of perspectives that we need,” Kirt said.

Five of the seats currently occupied by women are up for election, and only three of these races still have women in the running.

State Sen. Kay Floyd's District 46 seat is the only one guaranteed to be won by a woman again because she is running unopposed for reelection. Floyd will be the Senate Democratic leader in 2019, Oklahoma's first female Senate caucus leader.

“There is a difference in the way women are treated in politics, I believe, in Oklahoma as opposed to the way men are treated in politics,” Floyd said. “I think I see it most when I run bills, especially regarding issues that disproportionately affect women. It's sometimes hard for some of my colleagues to understand why legislation is needed to correct some things.”

Nevada has the second-highest rate of women in state Legislature, 40 percent. It recently passed bills, sponsored by female legislators, that made tampons tax-free, added workplace accommodations for pregnant women and made it more difficult for stalkers and domestic abusers to access guns.

Campaigning for District 30

District 30 became vacant after David Holt, a Republican, became Oklahoma City's mayor. In the primaries for the seat, however, the Democratic candidates received more votes than the Republicans. Kirt said she received three times as many votes as she expected.

Kirt's background is in nonprofit management. Callahan is a substitute teacher and small business owner. Symcox is a financial planner.

Symcox said the district, which includes parts of northwest Oklahoma City, Bethany, Warr Acres and The Village, is a hard place to campaign because of how different some parts of the district are from others.

“So where do you play the cards at, right?” he said.

Speaking with Republican voters outside their homes, Symcox is often asked what makes him better than Callahan.

“I’m the finance guy,” Symcox said every time.

Though Callahan received more votes than Symcox in the primary, some voters dismissed her qualifications. One man said she might be nice, but they need someone who is “business smart.”

According to a report by Political Parity, a nonpartisan platform helping women get elected, female candidates “experience greater scrutiny of their qualifications and appearances.”

Callahan said she often avoids wearing sandals while campaigning because of comments from men about her feet.

Female candidates also typically have more difficulty fundraising than male candidates. But Kirt has received \$164,270 in funds and in-kind contributions, while Symcox has received \$77,487. Callahan has received \$13,195, according to Oklahoma Ethics Commission reports.

Kirt credits this to her background in nonprofits and the connections she has made through them.

Callahan said she does not think money is the most important factor.

“If the voters like me and they trust me, then I think you can win on any amount of money,” Callahan said.

Kirt said that many new voters registered before the primary because of State Question 788 on medical marijuana, but she knows they care about other things, like education, and many people are disgruntled in general. She said she hopes this means continued engagement.

“I hope that people saw from the last election that if people show up, they truly can change the demographic and outcome of the election,” Kirt said of the June 26 primary.



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