

FEMALE OFFICIALS IN THE FEMINIST CAPITAL:  
THE CASE OF SANTA CLARA COUNTY

JANET A. FLAMMANG  
*University of Santa Clara*

UNTIL RECENTLY, most studies of elected women in the United States have had a national or state focus,<sup>1</sup> in spite of the fact that most female officials serve at the county and city levels. In 1980, 15,320 out of a total of 16,136 female officeholders nationwide were in city and county governments. Furthermore, while women as a percentage of elected officials remained fairly constant between 1975 and 1980 at the congressional (3 percent) and state (10 percent) levels, their proportions doubled in county positions (from 3 to 6 percent) and tripled in municipal posts (from 4 to 13 percent) (CAWP 1981a).

Studies of women in local government began in earnest in 1975. In that year the Center for the American Woman and Politics (CAWP) conducted a national survey of women in municipal and county (along with state and congressional) offices (Johnson and Stanwick 1976). CAWP's 1977 survey included a comparison sample of male officeholders (Johnson and Carroll 1978). While there have been a few other reports from nationwide samples (e.g., Karnig and Oliver 1976; MacManus 1976; Welch and Karnig 1979), most of the literature on women in local office consists of case studies scattered throughout the country: Connecticut (Mezey 1978b, 1980a, 1980b); Westchester County, New York (Lee 1976); New York City (Van Hightower 1977); Pennsylvania (King and McAuliffe 1976); suburban Chicago (Merritt 1977, 1980); Houston (MacManus 1981); and Hawaii (Mezey 1978a, 1978c).

Enough cases and nationwide studies have been generated so that one can begin to find patterns in women's local-level officeholding and to draw comparisons with officials in higher positions. One of the most striking patterns to emerge at all levels is that, compared to men in office, women have distinctive recruitment patterns and attitudes (Johnson and Carroll 1978). While such differences do not emerge in every local study (see, for example, the mixed results in Stewart's [1980] anthology), they have been sufficiently consistent to draw scholarly attention to the precise nature of and reasons for such differences.

This article seeks to contribute to this line of inquiry through a case study of Santa Clara County, California. This area has gained media

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Chamberlin 1974, Darcy and Schramm 1977, Diamond 1977, 1979, Dubeck 1976, Frankovic 1977, Gehlen 1969, Githens 1977, Githens and Prestage 1979, Gruberg 1968, Kelly and Boutillier 1977, Kincaid 1978, Kirkpatrick 1974, Lamson 1968, Mandel 1981, Prestage 1977, Stoper 1977, Tolchin and Tolchin 1976, Welch 1978, Werner 1966, 1968, and Werner and Bachtold 1974.



attention as the "feminist capital of the nation" because of its impressive number of elected women, including San Jose's Mayor Janet Gray Hayes (1975-82) and female majorities on both the San Jose City Council and the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors (1980-present). Such majorities are extremely rare. In 1978 only *six* city councils had female majorities and only 6 percent of cities had female mayors (Welch and Karnig 1979). Because of these majorities, the area is a good test case of women's distinctive recruitment and attitudes. It is important to understand how so many women came to hold local public office and whether their majority status affected their understanding of women's doing politics differently from men.

In 1982 I conducted detailed, open-ended interviews<sup>2</sup> with local officials in order to determine women's recruitment patterns and political attitudes. As for recruitment, female candidates benefited from Santa Clara County's favorable political climate, effective women's organizations, and district elections. Confirming findings elsewhere, women were advantaged by an affluent, highly-educated and "clean government" electorate, and by effective women's groups. However, the importance of district elections for the success of female candidacies was a surprise. As will be discussed below, women have been thought to be slightly disadvantaged by such elections and advantaged by citywide races.

As for attitudes in office, women and men were equally supportive of women's issues, probably because both recognized the strong voting bloc of activist women in the county. However, female officials had distinctive conceptions of power and politics, which were voiced by feminists and non-feminists alike. Media attention to their numerical majorities caused them to reflect on women's way of doing politics differently. While a women's point of view on politics has been found in other studies, what was surprising here was the extent to which women spontaneously linked this point of view to their homemaking and childrearing experiences. The ease with which they made these connections can be attributed in part to the absence of restraints usually felt by women as token members of a social group (Kanter 1977). As majorities, they were under less pressure to conform to male norms and expectations and freer to voice a "female consciousness."

Our consideration of differences between female and male officials in Santa Clara County begins with a look at women's recruitment as a function of a favorable political climate, effective women's organizations, and district elections. We then turn to attitudinal differences: a women's point of view on politics and the significance of homemaking and child-rearing experiences.

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<sup>2</sup> All direct quotes from local officials, as well as background information about them, is drawn from the following 1982 interviews, unless otherwise specified: Councilmember Blanca Alvarado (August 26), Supervisor Rod Diridon (July 21), Councilmember Nancy Ianni (August 11), Councilmember Shirley Lewis (October 6), Supervisor Zoe Lofgren (August 12), Councilmember Lu Ryden (August 18), Councilmember Pat Sausedo (September 27), Supervisor Susanne Wilson (July 22).