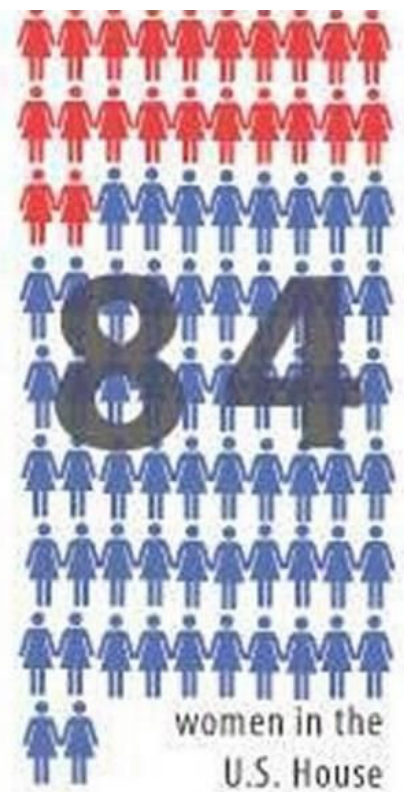




104
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FROM OUR INBOX

More women in public office may improve ethics

BY JOSEPH M. CENTORINO

Miami-Dade Commission on Ethics & Public Trust

March 30, 2018 08:55 PM

The “Pink Wave,” the recent increase in the numbers of women candidates for public office — driven in part by the extensive exposure of incidents of sexual harassment by men in powerful positions — may have beneficial collateral consequences for ethics in government.

The problems of sexual harassment or discrimination and government corruption are not unrelated. We know of instances where the demand for sexual favors by persons holding positions of public trust has been used as a form of extortion or even bribery.

We also know that women living or working in corruption-prone environments are uniquely vulnerable to the impact — financial and otherwise — of government corruption.

It is no coincidence that most public corruption, and sexual misconduct share the same genesis — the abuse of power, primarily by men. A leveling of the power equation between men and women could serve to reduce both problems.

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The evidence that having more women in government raises the level of public sector ethics is promising, though not conclusive. Studies conducted by the World Bank and Transparency International have shown that women are less likely than men to be involved as the perpetrators of corruption or other unethical activity in government.

Other evidence is anecdotal. Scandinavian countries, where female participation in elected office is higher and sometimes required by law, regularly lead the world in clean government rankings. And some notable experiments in Ukraine, Peru and Mexico, among others nations, have sought to lower police corruption with some success by increasing the numbers of women on police forces notorious for routine bribery.

There are any number of possible reasons for these findings, none of which seems wholly adequate to explain them.

One claim is that women are simply more ethical than men, a political non-starter in my opinion. That such a difference between the sexes may be a commonly-shared perception, however, provides its own support for reduced corruption, since bribery attempts are often directed at those deemed to be receptive to them.

Another possible reason is that the exclusion of women from the insider cabals that develop among mostly male cohorts insulates women from the corrupt corridors of political power. Credible enough, but not a game-changer in the long run if it means only that women will be

corrupted by power once more of them become insiders.

The explanation I favor, despite its being a gross generalization, is that women tend to be better listeners; that they are more likely to respect the viewpoints of others; and are more willing to compromise for the greater good.

Respecting and listening to the voices of others. That is how democracy is supposed to work. And something we seem to be losing in our poisonous political atmosphere.

So how does this relate to better government ethics?

For one thing, it seems logical that people who listen to others with respect and civility will be less opportunistic and less likely to cut ethical corners for political advantage. The Miami-Dade Ethics Commission has said as much in promoting the adoption of a Civility Oath in local government.

It is also telling that the evidence suggests that the anti-corruption advantage of having more women in government is linked to democratic rather than autocratic forms of government. Given the chance not only to listen but to speak and be heard, women's voices improve the ethical climate.

Whatever the reason, it can be argued that adding more women to the political mix somehow makes government more honest. We should be able to agree that adding women's viewpoints to male-dominated discussions is likely to provide perspectives, values, and habits of mind otherwise in short supply.

All of that is good for government. And, if the studies are correct, good for ethics as well.

If such a trend is to be self-sustaining, however, it cannot be limited to one political party or focused solely on women's issues. It has to be broad enough to appeal across the political spectrum. It must also find a reception among voters willing to put value on the long-term investment in democracy that electing more women to public office represents.

At a time when the polarization of political parties and some media outlets have undermined the effectiveness of our democratic system, more inclusion, more civility, more honest debate--including a greater ability and willingness to compromise and move government forward--would be welcome.

Electing more women to public office won't eliminate corruption. We know of a few women whose personal corruption has rivaled that of their male counterparts. But, it could pave the way to a more civil public discussion, greater consideration of opposing viewpoints, and an increased

capacity for government to accomplish something of value.

The First Amendment, the cornerstone of our democracy, may have been crafted by male Founders, but its continued survival and success may yet depend on the voices of women.

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