

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Women's Leadership in the U.S. Congress and the AVMA's House of Delegates: Exploring Parallels and Looking Forward

By Dr. Donald F. Smith and Julie Kumble

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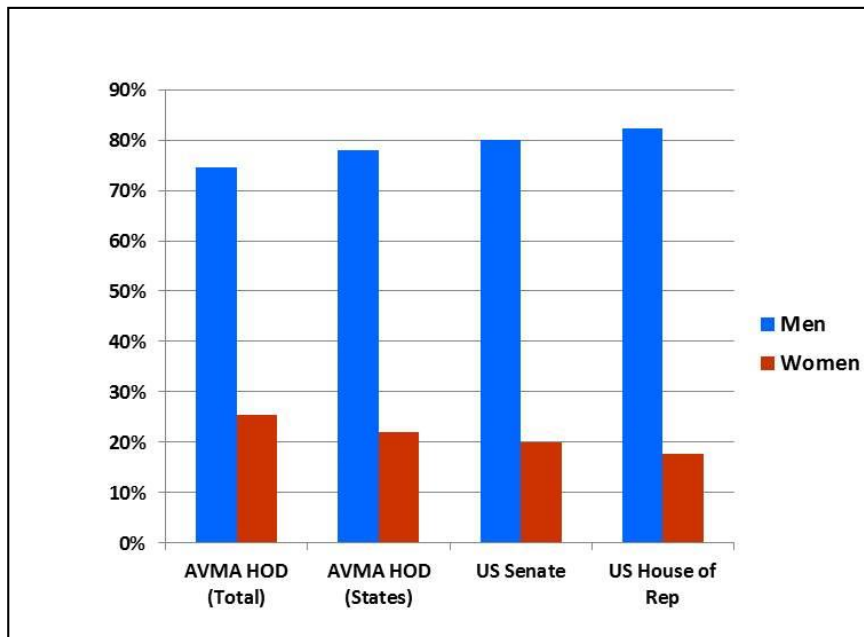
As veterinarians watched the election returns in November 2012, most eyes were on the top of the ticket or on specific congressional, state or local races. However, behind the focus on the presidential bid and the glare of the media on contentious local races something else was happening as the election of women to Congress reached historic proportions. For the first time, 20 women hold seats in the Senate and 17% of our delegates to the House of Representatives are women.

What is particularly fascinating to us is how closely the gender distribution in the 113th Congress approximates the number of women representatives in the House of Delegates (HOD) of the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA).

The HOD is the AVMA's principal governing body and consists of 52 delegates, one from each state including the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico; plus 14 members from allied professional associations that include specialty, species and career-based organizations. For each delegate, an alternate is also a sitting member of the House.

Only delegates (not alternates) can vote within the HOD, and their votes are weighted in proportion to the population of their respective states. For example, California has 47 weighted votes and Texas has 41. At the other end of the population scale, Wyoming and Vermont have four and five weighted votes, respectively. The allied groups each have two weighted votes.

The graph below compares the gender proportions in the 113th Congress to the 2012-13 HOD. We further segmented the data in the first two columns for those HOD delegates and alternates who are state representatives (104 total) from the total number of delegates and alternates that includes allied group representation and AVMA leadership (134 total).

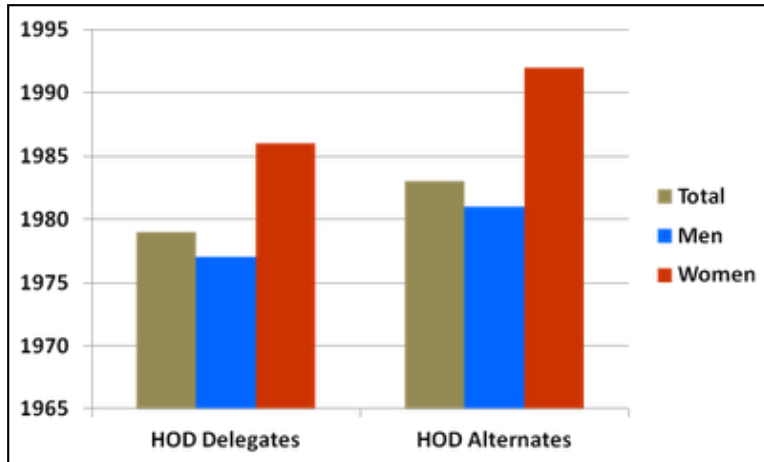


Percentages of Women and Men in the 113th US Congress and in the AVMA's House of Delegates

The proportions of women in the HOD and in Congress are consistent with other sectors, from academia to business to politics, where women hold only an average of 18% of the top leadership positions. In contrast, women currently earn 57% of college degrees, with gains above 50% achieved in the last decade. In the veterinary profession, women graduates have outnumbered men since the early 1980s, earning over 80% of veterinary degrees for almost 20 years.

The following graph shows the relative age distribution of delegates and alternate delegates for the HOD, using graduating year as a rough proxy for age. The mean year-of-graduation for each cohort is shown on the y-axis. For example, the mean year-of-graduation for all HOD delegates is 1979 (34 years ago). For women, the mean year-of-graduation is 27 years ago (1986). Male delegates on the other hand are older, with their mean year of graduation being 36 years ago (1977).

Not surprisingly, the alternates, who tend to be the more recently-appointed HOD members, are more likely to be younger. That age difference is seen in men as well as women.



*Distribution of House of AVMA's House of Delegates
by Year of Graduation*

To achieve a critical mass where women's roles become part of the norm in any sector, experts recommend a minimum of 30% women in leadership positions. The Wellesley Center for Women considers that proportion to be the minimum needed at the top levels for discourse and policies that reflect diverse populations. With the total population of women veterinarians now over 50% and growing faster than any other major profession, it is even more important to establish institutional frameworks to assure that the number of female HOD delegates and alternates reach and maintain at least the 30% critical mass as soon as possible.

Dr. Karen Bradley¹, an owner in a four-doctor veterinary practice, is the current HOD delegate from Vermont and also serves as the chair of the House Advisory Committee. This is a group of seven members who act as the executive body for the HOD. As the leading member of the HOD, Bradley has the opportunity and the responsibility to look ahead and consider the changing demographics in our profession from a leadership point of view.



Karen Bradley, DVM
Co-owner of Onion River Animal Hospital
(Photo provided by the American Veterinary Medical Association)

She comments:

"How states and allied groups identify HOD members varies greatly. Some states have many people waiting in line for their turn as a delegate, and others have to seek out people for the position. Some states even have a formal election from their membership. Though the Manual of the House of Delegates states that the term for delegates and alternates is four years, there is no limit to the number of terms imposed by either the Bylaws or the Manual. Without term limits, delegates can remain in office for decades."

"I am very fortunate to be in Vermont, a state with very active women veterinarians – and men willing to share the table. Our state VMA's Executive Committee has been approximately 50% women for the last 10 years whereas 20 years ago it was similar to the HOD and Congress with 20% or fewer women. What did Vermont do to effect this change? It seems that in our small state, the veterinarians active in organized associations tended to bring in new blood more frequently. After serving for a number of years they would seek out new recruits for committees and leadership positions and those happened to be women more and more as the population of veterinarians in Vermont became more female. And for what it's worth, Vermont's AVMA HOD delegation over the last 20 years has been four women and two men! "

Looking ahead and considering the changing demographics in our profession, we will do well to encourage more women to run as delegates, mentoring younger female veterinarians to take on leadership roles. This is a unique opportunity for the profession of veterinary medicine to serve as role model to other professions by striving to achieve and surpass the recommended critical mass point of 30% women representatives in our House of Delegates.

¹ Karen Bradley, DVM, is AVMA delegate to the House of Delegates from the State of Vermont. She is a 1996 graduate of the University of Georgia College of Veterinary Medicine, and is co-owner of the Onion River Animal Hospital in Middlesex, VT.

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Karen Bradley
Women in Veterinary Medicine

Gender in Veterinary Medicine
AVMA Governance
Women Leadership
US Congress
US Senate
US House of Representatives
Onion River Animal Hospital

ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.

Julie Kumble is Director of Grants and Programs, Women's Fund of Western Massachusetts, Easthampton, Massachusetts 01027. She can be reached at juliek@womensfund.net



*Julie Kumble, Director of Grants and Programs
Women's Fund of Western Massachusetts*
(Photo provided by Women's Fund of Western Massachusetts)