

**Testimony of Cary Brown, Executive Director of the Vermont Commission on Women  
Senate Committee on Institutions  
February 13, 2020**

**RE: S285, an act relating to the State House Artwork and Portrait Project Committee**

Good afternoon. My name is Cary Brown and I am the Executive Director of the Vermont Commission on Women. I'm pleased to have the opportunity to speak with you today about the efforts to diversify the artwork in the Vermont State House.

The Vermont Commission on Women believes that women of all ages must have access to the benefits and privileges of community leadership and participation in civic life. To that end, we support the following outcomes:

- Women are equally represented in Vermont's legislature and elected office
- Women are active participants, voters, and influential leaders in their communities and in the state
- Women and men are equally represented in appointed office and in the private sector

There is an adage commonly used in social equity work: "You can't be what you can't see." We understand this to point out the challenge of imagining yourself in any setting – be it a job, a career field, a sports team, a musical group, a club or a board room or even a conversation – when there is nobody there now who you can identify with. We know that when young women visit automotive training programs at their career centers and see only men, or when they pass a construction site and see only men, or when they look at the CEOs of the most successful companies and see almost all men, that it's that much harder for them to think of those fields as ones they might go into themselves.

There is an interesting body of research around gender stereotypes called the Draw a Scientist Test, in which children are asked to draw "a scientist" with no other instruction, in order to see how stereotypical beliefs regarding scientists are expressed, and when they develop. The research started in the 1950's and this particular test was developed in 1983. At that point the vast majority of people drew lone men – almost 89%.<sup>1</sup> A few people drew groups, and the vast majority of those were groups of men.

An updated version of the test was done in 2017, and while there were more women depicted in the drawings (along with significantly more with no gender indication), the rate of men drawn was still twice that of women, depicted both alone and in groups.<sup>2</sup>

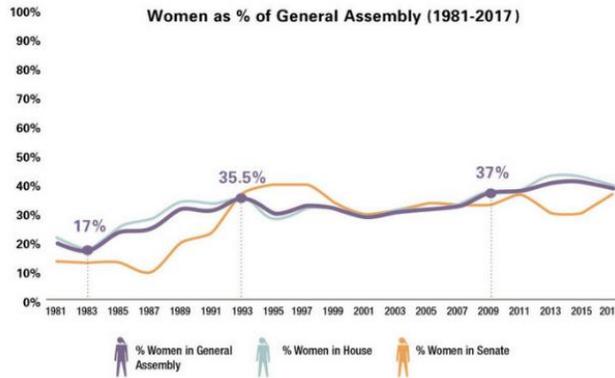
The studies have not focused on the race or ethnicity of the scientists in the drawings, but it wouldn't be surprising to learn that children more often draw white people.

<sup>1</sup> <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/3474/4993435c3d3a42f29354bece2d822527e3cc.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/3474/4993435c3d3a42f29354bece2d822527e3cc.pdf>

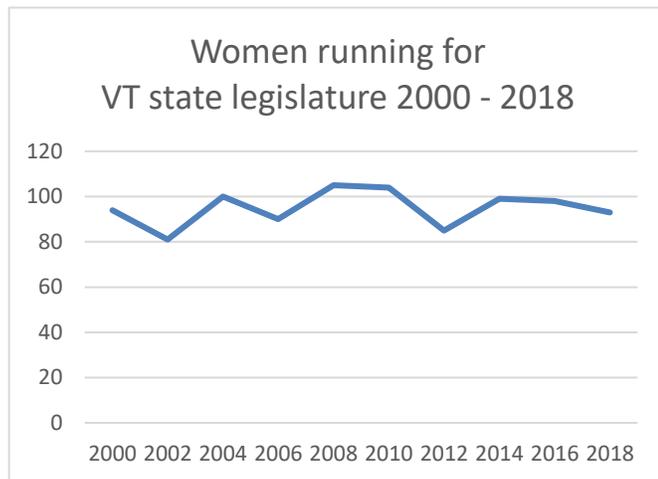
Research supports the idea that exposure to counterstereotypical role models reduces gender stereotyping, in both boys and girls. Girls who are exposed to such role models and other educational materials depicting females in nontraditional careers express greater aspiration to pursue those careers.<sup>3</sup> So we know that it does indeed make a difference when people can see themselves in all settings.

Women are well-represented in the Vermont General Assembly, at 40% today. There was a strong increase of women in the 1980's, but then things slowed considerably. The percentage of women in the state house today is just 4.5 points higher than it was 23 years ago, in 1997.



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Additionally, we have not been seeing an increase in the number of women running. The number of women running for the state legislature in Vermont is almost exactly the same now as it was almost two decades ago (94 in 2000 and 93 in 2018).<sup>4</sup> While in much of the rest of the country, 2018 saw record numbers of women running for office, our numbers actually dipped slightly that year.



The current exhibit on Vermont Women in the State House that has just opened is a fantastic depiction of some of the history and current achievements of Vermont women in politics. It is an excellent example of the kind of deliberate and pro-active steps that need to be taken in order to counteract years and years of underrepresentation. Unfortunately, this is an area in which we can't simply assume that time will take care of the problem on its own. It will take conscious effort to find ways to make our State House walls more accurately reflect the diversity of leadership and achievement in our state.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.02264/full>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/women-candidates-state-leg-historical-summary#vt>

A quick review of some other states' efforts to change the views in state house art found just a few interesting examples:

- The Ohio State House has a Ladies Gallery – a dedicated room with a permanent exhibit honoring the first women to serve in its legislature, as well as all the women who have come since then. It includes not just portraits, but also historic items, clothing, and other artifacts relating to the women legislators and the history of the suffrage movement in Ohio.
- The Rhode Island state house has recently opened a new exhibit area for contemporary and local art.
- The Maine Arts Commission operates an Art in the Capitol program that features local artists.
- South Carolina's portraits go beyond just politicians and war heroes, and include a poet laureate.

Vermont is already taking a broader approach to consideration of what constitutes art that is worthy of hanging in the State House, and a State House Artwork and Portrait Project Committee could provide an even more structured and deliberative means to continue to expand that. The committee may be able to identify creative ways to diversify the art, such as shifting focus from white male dominated areas such as military achievement, and working with those providing art on loan to ensure more representation of women and people of color.

The Vermont Commission on Women is happy to be included in the list of potential members for this committee, and is happy to serve, should this bill pass.