

THE OPINION PAGE

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OTHER OPINION

Milestones but slow progress for ND women

Laura Eisenhuth was elected North Dakota superintendent of public instruction in 1892, when the state was just three years old. She was the first woman elected to a statewide office in the United States.



MIKE JACOBS
Grand Forks Herald

In 1933, Minnie Craig became speaker of the North Dakota House of Representatives, another first in the United States. Woman had presided over legislative bodies, but none in a permanent role.

These milestones are points of pride in the state, but they obscure the truth that North Dakota was otherwise late in accepting the role of women in politics.

The constitution adopted at statehood allowed women to vote only in school elections; their participation helped elect Eisenhuth. Amendments extending the right to vote were introduced in each legislative session from 1901 to 1911, and in 1913, the bill passed. As a constitutional amendment, it required approval at the 1914 election. The voters – all men – kept it out of the constitution.

Montana approved women's suffrage in 1914, and in 1916, Montanans elected the first woman ever to serve in the U.S. House of Representatives.

In North Dakota, by contrast, no woman has ever served in the U.S. House, and none served in the U.S.

Senate until 1992, more than a century after statehood. Jocelyn Burdick took the so-called "widow's route" to the office; she was appointed when her husband, Quentin Burdick, died in office. Jocelyn Burdick served for a few months; at age 97, she is now the oldest living former U.S. senator.

Heidi Heitkamp became the first woman elected to the Senate from North Dakota in 2012. She lost the seat in 2018.

South Dakota elected its first woman senator in 1938 and Minnesota in 2006. In both states, other women had reached the Senate earlier through the "widow's route." Coya Knutson, who grew up at Edmore, N.D., represented northwestern Minnesota in the U.S. House from 1954 to 1958. Her career ended when her estranged husband wrote a famous letter urging "Coya, come home."

Of the six "northwestern expansion states" -- North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, Washington, Idaho and Wyoming, admitted in that order in 1889 and 1890 -- North Dakota was the last to adopt women's suffrage in 1919, trailing Wyoming by 29 years, Idaho by 23 years, Washington by nine years, Montana by four years and South Dakota by a year.

North Dakota proved an especially difficult state for suffrage advocates, though not for lack of effort. Elizabeth Preston Anderson was an active and outspoken advocate of women's suffrage -- and of Prohibition. Some historians have speculated that the

combination was too much for North Dakotans -- though in the event women got the right to vote before men got the right to drink. That didn't happen until Prohibition was repealed nationally in 1933.

Another possible explanation is the role of Gilbert Asheville Pierce, who vetoed a women's suffrage bill passed by the Territorial Legislature in 1885, four years before statehood. Pierce was popular in North Dakota, partly because he favored admission of two states rather than only one. He became the state's first U.S. senator.

Even the tidal wave of popular democracy that brought direct election of senators and initiative and referendum to the state was not great enough to bring women the right to vote. That didn't occur until 1919, when North Dakota ratified the suffrage amendment -- one of several landmarks in that memorable year 100 years ago.

Still, voters didn't go out of their way to encourage women to vote; in 1920, voters -- at last including women -- defeated a measure that would have allowed women to use absentee ballots if they lived more than a half mile from their polling place.

The state's record of electing women to public office has improved; there were more women serving in the 2019 session than served in the first 80 years of statehood.

Since 1920 -- the first year in which women voted for most statewide offices -- 21 women have won office, but

they are concentrated in a few offices and shut out of several others. There has never been a woman insurance commissioner, secretary of state or governor.

Five women have served as state treasurer, four as superintendent of public instruction, four on the Supreme Court, two on the Public Service Commission and two as lieutenant governor. Women have served as attorney general, auditor, agriculture commissioner and tax commissioner -- in each office once.

This record exaggerates the number of individual woman office holders. Heitkamp was tax commissioner and attorney general. Berta Baker was successively treasurer and auditor -- rolling up a total of 28 years in office. The lieutenant governor candidates ran on a ballot with male gubernatorial candidates.

Clearly equal representation in state office is overdue -- and that fact might encourage the lengthening list of women dreaming of being the state's first female governor.

Wrong again: Mike Nowatzki, Gov. Doug Burgum's press officer, points out that Shannon Roers-Jones was legislative sponsor of Burgum's higher education governance initiative, not the Theodore Roosevelt Library legislation.

To clarify, no petitions have been approved for circulation by the secretary of state and so no referenda are pending -- though the threat is out there.

Mike Jacobs is a former editor and publisher of the Herald.

A landmark move the world should notice

The Washington Post The United States' cultural shift on same-sex marriage has been so pronounced, it is easy to forget that the centuries of discrimination, decades of activism and years of litigation that led to the Supreme Court's landmark ruling concluded not so long ago. It is also easy to take for granted that LGBTQ people have achieved a basic level of social acceptance, when there is still more work to be done in this country -- and far more abroad. The greatest civil rights fight of this century is not over.

In Asia, the world's most populous continent, life remains difficult for the LGBTQ community, as national leaders keep its members and other minorities officially marginalized out of concern about maintaining "social harmony" or "Asian values." That is why Taiwan's step to legalize same-sex marriage is so significant. Just as the island has for years put lie to the notion that democracy does not work in East Asian societies, it continues to show by example that liberal values and institutions are, in fact, universally applicable.

As is often the case in a liberal democracy, the process was tortuous but bent toward justice. Taiwan's supreme court in 2017 ordered the country's government to legalize same-sex marriage within two years. A vote subsequently indicated the idea did not yet command majority support. The ruling Democratic Progressive Party nevertheless ran and won on a platform that included approving same-sex marriage. Taiwan's legislature considered three bills -- two offered by conservatives and one, the most far-reaching, backed by the government. The government's bill passed May 17, to the cheers of rainbow-flag-waving activists outside.

Some of those activists noted that the bill did not guarantee full equality on matters such as adoption rights. But they were right to celebrate, as were LGBTQ people across Asia who were not directly affected but who took it as a landmark policy change for the continent. It also took a Supreme Court decision in the United States, with its long commitment to liberal values, to legalize same-sex marriage. If anything, Taiwan's turn toward marriage equality was more democratically legitimate, as the ruling party had promised to make it happen and an elected legislature decided to advance the most progressive of the options it considered.

Taiwan's move is not the only recent advance for LGBTQ people across the world. Botswana's high court on Tuesday struck down two colonial-era laws that criminalized gay sex. Last September, India's Supreme Court quashed a similar law stemming from the same period. There are hopes for progress in places such as Japan and Thailand. We doubt nondemocratic Asian nations will be quick to follow countries where liberal institutions are more entrenched. But as places such as Botswana, India and Taiwan treat their citizens more equitably, it will be only natural for those next door to wonder what can justify continuing discrimination within their own borders.

DOUBLE PLAY



IN THE MAIL

Hire military spouses, welcome new neighbors

To the editor, Each summer between 400 to 500 airmen move to Grand Forks Air Force Base and settle into new assignments as well as our community. About half move with a spouse and family.

Let us welcome this talent as the great new neighbors and workforce they are.

When we have a significant workforce shortage, military spouses are too often overlooked. Every two to four years, airmen and their spouses relocate and have to navigate the stress and pressure of new schools, new homes, making new friends, and finding employment to be a dual-income family. The spouses bring a tremendous work ethic, are well-educated, have diverse

experiences, and embrace learning. They learned to thrive in an ever-shifting work environment.

The Air Force promotes "service before self" which means they assume responsibility, are accountable, and committed to a higher purpose -- including family sacrifices to support military service. Military spouses share these values and beliefs, and make for excellent employees.

While our country experiences the lowest unemployment in five decades, military spouses are unemployed at a rate that hovers between 20 and 25% -- over five times the rate of their civilian counterparts. A recent survey showed that 55% of responding military spouses

experienced underemployment when a two-career, two-income family is a necessity. Finding a job is one of the top stressors of military families. Hopefully not here.

Companies nationwide have successfully implemented robust military spouse hiring programs and are seeing the benefits in employee morale as well as financially. Many employers learned the benefits of hiring veterans, and the same is now true with military spouses.

I encourage employers to commit to hiring military spouses, and state that commitment in their job postings.

In 2018, a majority of military spouses reported challenges in maintaining their

required professional licenses or certificates. Sen. Scott Meyer of Grand Forks was prime sponsor of SB 2306 that removed unfair licensing barriers for military members and spouses. The law calls for state boards and commissions to grant reciprocal professional or probationary licenses within 30 days as long as they are in good standing in the originating state and they have at least two years of professional experience -- a great solution to an unfair barrier.

Military spouses want to work. We want to make sure they have opportunities to work when they move here. Please welcome your new neighbors.

Bruce Gjovig
Grand Forks

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