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National Organization for Women of New Jersey calls for strict adherence of the one-man/one-woman rule in the formation of Political County Committees

The National Organization for Women of New Jersey is alarmed by a challenge issued by several groups in New Jersey led by the Central Jersey Progressive Democrats. On Thursday, a lawsuit was filed in Superior Court to overturn the 70-year-old state law requiring seats on county political committees to be divided equally between men and women.

New Jersey statute N.J.S.A. 19:5-3, often referred to as the “county committee election statute,” is found in the bylaws of both parties. The argument is that removal of this statute to allow two women to serve from a single district and thereby increase female membership in the county parties. This contention, while noble, seeks to overturn internal rules of private organizations. Moreover, we believe that this is a misguided assumption. In fact, we anticipate and demonstrate that the suspension of this statute will result in more cases of two males serving a single district than two females.

To state that this rule is ‘antiquated’ and ‘is no longer needed’ or that “[g]ender should not play a role in politics in this day and age’ is absurd. This buys into an assumption that women have achieved equality and no longer need reinforcement by statute to ensure equal representation. We reject the idea that the statute somehow demeans women or “suggest[s] an inferior view of a woman's ability...” and argue that it was in effect put in place to ensure that the intelligence and ability of a woman was present and given equal account.

While it is true that women have made many strides in politics, it is no secret that we are severely underrepresented. Women are over 51% of the electorate and yet in New Jersey, women serve in 37 of 120 seats of our legislature (30.8%) and only two of our 14 federal representatives are female (14.3%). Women not come far enough in politics in New Jersey to abandon the little bit of legislation that supports gender equity.

“In New Jersey, women in politics still face an uphill battle. At the local level the number of women mayors is at around a dismal 15%. Not only do we not have enough women in leadership roles currently, we lack a bench to recruit from. This rule ensures that women who want to engage politically will get a fair share of the seats at the table, thereby providing women at the local level with a point of entry to become involved,” says Mayor Colleen Mahr, Executive Vice President of the Union County chapter of the National Organization for Women and First Vice Chair of the Union County Democratic Committee.

One place that women in politics could be guaranteed parity was in representation in the County Committees of the Democratic and Republican parties due to the stipulated rule. Now even that is in jeopardy. In recent years, county clerks in Cumberland, Essex, Hunterdon, Mercer and Passaic have chosen to move away from the statute. Close inspection of the committee lists in those counties reveals that the county committees have in fact **resulted in overwhelmingly more male/male pairs serving a district rather than female/female** (in more than a



3:2 ratio). It also does not come as a surprise that the only county party committee where there ARE more women serving (Hunterdon Democrats) is led by a woman.

“Having been involved in politics in New Jersey for the last twenty years, the push to abandon a law that has only served to enhance the role of women in the Party is truly frustrating. I serve in a leadership role as one of only a few women, so I speak from a position of knowledge and understanding. The rooms I go into rarely have more than a couple of women at the table. Abandoning this law in the guise of equality is a misguided attempt to fix a problem that will only become even worse. Hunterdon County is in a unique position because we have used the opportunity to engage more women. But what about when the County Chair does not look like me – just look at the statistics and that should tell you exactly what will happen...” stated Arlene Quiñones Perez, Chair of the Hunterdon County Democratic Party.

The United States Supreme Court has made it clear that it is not for the legislature to interfere in the structure of a political organization. In its ruling, *Eu v. San Francisco County Democratic Cent. Committee*, 489 U.S. 214 (1989), the Court upheld that “As we noted in *Tashjian*, a political party's "determination . . . of the structure which best allows it to pursue its political goals, is protected by the Constitution." 479 U.S., at 224.’

The National Organization for Women of New Jersey thereby calls on all the County Clerks in New Jersey to abide by the bylaws of the political parties and enforce the one-man/one-woman rule. “Again,” says Diane Scarangella, President of the Northern New Jersey chapter of the National Organization for Women, “we have not come as far as we think or have been lead to believe by the establishment...a myth that supports the status quo. If we had, we wouldn't see a lack of enforcement. Clearly, we still need both men and women to see the need to advocate for gender equity and this type of statute supports that.”

For more information about NOW New Jersey, please visit www.nownj.org.

About National Organization for Women of New Jersey (NOW-NJ)

The purpose of NOW-NJ is to take action through intersectional grassroots activism to promote feminist ideals, lead societal change, eliminate discrimination, and achieve and protect the equal rights of all women and girls in all aspects of social, political, and economic life

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