

Choice champions change

By Melissa A. Rinehart | Posted: Tuesday, October 31, 2017 11:00 pm

Choice champions change. I'm a firm believer of having options during election season. Indiana statistics for unchallenged races don't bode well for us as a democratic society. Last year, 84 percent of incumbents had no opposition during their party's primary and one-third of the general election races fielded no oppositional party challengers. While this begs for redistricting reform, it's just another hoop, albeit huge, for women to jump through when considering a run for political office.

Of a half million elected positions in the United States, only 20 percent are held by women. Women hold 20 percent of 535 Congressional seats and 25 percent of State legislature seats. Fewer than 40 have served as governors and only 27 states have had a female governor. Unfortunately, Indiana is not one of those states and our two largest cities, Fort Wayne and Indianapolis, have yet to produce a female mayor. Of 150 Indiana General Assembly seats, 30 are currently held by women — eight in the State Senate and 22 in the State House of Representatives, for a total of 20 percent. And, at this time, only two Indiana Congressional seats are held by women, both in the House of Representatives. A female Senator remains to be elected in Indiana. So, while women continue to comprise 50 percent of the American population and Indiana, respectively, we're still underrepresented politically.

In spite of these obstacles, many women have come out of the political shadows this past year. Several, including myself, have stepped forward. The "why" behind considering a run for office is a serious ask and it took me awhile to answer this question. I decided to do my research and spoke to several area politicians and community leaders for their input. I also read a great deal. More importantly, I considered the issues I'm passionate about, who I identify with most, and which offices coalesce well with my core values. The answer quickly revealed itself — township trustee. I've long worked with and advocated for marginalized populations, and have lived on the economic margins intermittently as a single parent for years. This office's focus on poverty relief and emergency services, as well as many other responsibilities, is an office that resonates with my purpose for serving others.

Over the past year, female-driven political organizations like Emerge, VoteRunLead, Emily's List and She Should Run have all reported an unprecedented surge of women inquiring about a political run. According to Emily's List, more than 15,000 have reached out to this non-partisan organization for more information, another 7,000 offered to help another woman run for office, and eventually 1,000 candidates came forward. I'm glad I stand with good company. But, it's not about being a woman. It's about servant leadership. It's about bringing a variety of ideas to the table. Female candidates offer diversity in thought and experience. And, statistically, they tend to be more responsive to constituents, work well collaboratively, and support gender-salient issues ranging from education to health care to the economy. Who doesn't want that for our communities?

Even though it's 2017, gender parity doesn't exist in the political arena or elsewhere for that matter. More women and our male allies need to recognize the untapped potential here. I'm inspired to see so many grassroots efforts supporting women and minorities considering a run for office. From political leadership

camps offered for young women in Washington, D.C., to teen leadership forums held in Indianapolis, I look forward to seeing where this momentum takes us. I'm inspired more every day and remain committed to serving others. Choice on the ballot ensures a healthy democracy. Choice challenges the status quo. Choice champions change.

—**Melissa A. Rinehart**, a Fort Wayne resident, is an applied anthropologist and works as an educator, researcher, author, consultant and community advocate. With the support of Associated Churches of Fort Wayne and Allen County, she's leading the effort for Welcoming Fort Wayne.