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Female leaders: More is not enough

BY SHANNON GARRETT

As our state Legislature convenes next week, Michigan can celebrate the most gender-diverse legislative body in its history.

It was perhaps voters' response to our troubled times that helped to elevate the record 37 women who will serve in the Michigan Legislature in 2009 – a total of 28 women (out of 110 representatives) were elected or re-elected to the House, joining the nine women now sitting in the Senate. These numbers represent real gains, particularly when you consider the broader national context. In a year of sweeping change, the U.S. Congress increased its percentage of female representatives by just 1% in 2008 – bringing our national representation to a mere 17% and earning us the distinction of being 69th in the world when measuring women's political leadership.

Michiganders should be proud to take the lead in electing so many women into political leadership. And on the surface, it would appear that women leaders are well-represented in our state's elected offices. Several of our top statewide seats are occupied by women, with Jennifer Granholm as governor, Debbie Stabenow in a U.S. Senate seat, and Terri Lynn Land as our secretary of state.

But our excitement over a female governor or a record high number of women serving in the state Legislature shouldn't distract from the formidable task still at hand. Michigan is still far from political parity. Gov. Granholm is the first female head of our state – a milestone – but with few women in the pipeline, Granholm may be the only female governor Michigan sees for a while.

The record number of women headed to the state legislature? They total 37 out of 148 seats – 25% of our democratic representation is hardly what you'd call parity. And women's leadership is woefully absent from our county and municipal governments across the state.

Why do these numbers matter? They matter because the data shows, when you include women, you change everything.

Prominent research groups – from the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University and the Women & Politics Institute at American University – have long noted that women leaders tend to include diverse viewpoints in decision-making, have a broader conception of public policy, and offer new solutions. They are also more likely to work across differences to complete objectives, form coalitions, and bring disenfranchised communities to the table. In other words, exactly the kind of leadership Lansing needs right now. When comparable numbers of women and men sit side-by-side in leadership roles, it not only redefines the way our most critical challenges are met, it helps both women and men become more effective leaders.

Let's face it: It's the only thing we haven't tried in Michigan. With all the corporate proposals, political rhetoric and clinical research around how to address our state's failing auto industry, our increasing unemployment, our growing energy needs and our bleeding economy, few have proposed turning to our state's greatest untapped natural resource: women—the very people who are currently holding together Michigan's families and communities with incredible intelligence, ingenuity and leadership every day.

This is the time to bring a critical mass of diverse and underrepresented voices into our policy debates. So think of a woman you know who should be sitting on your city council, your township board, the county commission or our state legislature. Now call her and ask, "Isn't it about time you ran for office?" The issues facing Michigan this year are too serious to be wasting the natural talent of our women leaders; we need all creative and socially responsible solutions on the table.

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