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AS ST. PAUL GOES ...

In State Legislatures, Democrats Are Pushing Toward Parity Between the Sexes

By [KIRK JOHNSON](#)

WOODBURY, Minn. — Three middle-aged Democratic women — a high school English teacher, an economist and an education lobbyist, none of whom had ever run for office — took on three Republican state legislators last year in this conservative, traditionally Republican town and swept the field.

Their victories — the crest of a wave that brought 14 new Democratic women into the Legislature — helped swing control of the [Minnesota](#) House of Representatives to the Democrats for the first time since 1998 and usher in a new moment of female political authority at the Capitol in St. Paul.

On the low rungs of the nation's political system in the state legislatures, Democrats are pushing close to real parity among men and women — a historic threshold that is changing more than mere numbers.

The new Democratic women, epitomized by the Woodbury Three, as they are known here, are focused on the bread-and-butter issues of the suburbs, like property taxes, schools and health care. They are the soccer-mom swing-voters of years past, now making the laws themselves, and that could end up changing both parties here and beyond.

“Are moderate suburban Democratic women the future of the party?” said Gary Moncrief, a professor of political science at Boise State University in Idaho who studies state politics. “That’s the question this raises. If that’s true, and you’re a campaign manager out there, then regardless of whether you’re [a Republican](#) or a Democrat, you’ve got to react.”

Minnesota is evolving, many experts like Professor Moncrief say, and could become a political battleground in the next presidential election. If that happens, then the Woodbury women and their sisters, in reshaping what it means to be a Democrat in the state, could have an impact far beyond St. Paul.

Representative Julie Bunn, an economist, former university professor and one of the Woodbury Three, said she thought that what happened in her election was only partly about party. “People were tired of both extremes,” Ms. Bunn said. “Many people, in my view, voted for us not because we were Democrats but because we were moderate voices.”

The Woodbury women coordinated with one another on logistics, from printing their campaign literature to sharing tips on the best prices for mass mailings. Their volunteers worked out of the same office and sometimes knocked on doors together.

Another member of the trio, Representative Marsha Swails, who is taking a leave from teaching Advanced Placement English in Woodbury to serve in the Legislature, said she thought people were also perhaps voting against men — or at least against the male-dominated political culture that can seem locked in battles of ego

and partisanship.

“People have a feeling about women — that they’re more reasonable than men,” Ms. Swails said.

An alternative view is that the Democrats did well in places like Woodbury because they essentially became Republicans in Democrats’ clothing.

“My opponent ran on a Republican agenda, but maybe it’s where the Democratic Party is going,” said Karen Klinzing, a two-term Republican from Woodbury who was unseated by Ms. Swails and is now an assistant commissioner in the State Department of Education. “If you look at her literature versus mine, there wasn’t much of a differentiation.”

Some people in Minnesota say a trend away from the old liberal feminist base signifies a triumph — the mainstreaming of female politicians who can no longer be pigeonholed about their beliefs or interests. Others say the new mood of caution and conservatism in the capital is a loss in the fight against imbalances against women that still persist in American society. Minnesota was among the first in the nation to enact domestic violence protections, equal pay requirements and parental leave legislation beginning in the 1970s.

“When we did unpaid parental leave in the mid-1980s, it was very new and very bold, but it was the time,” said Aviva Breen, the former director of the Commission on the Economic Status of Women, a bipartisan group created by the Minnesota Legislature in 1976. “Now I don’t see much inclination toward exciting new innovation like that.”

While what happened here was not repeated in Congressional elections, it was echoed in many other states, especially in the Northeast and West, where women made their biggest gains.

Nationally, Democrats picked up more than 320 seats in state legislatures — about 140 of them by women — and gained control of 10 chambers, 4 of them here in the Upper Midwest: the Minnesota House, the Wisconsin Senate and both chambers of Iowa [General Assembly](#). Republicans gained control of the Montana House of Representatives.

Almost everywhere, women were crucial to those Democratic margins. In the New Hampshire Senate, which swung to Democratic control for the first time since 2000, women outnumber men almost two-to-one in the new majority caucus.

The Oregon House of Representatives shifted to control by the Democrats, 38 percent of whom are women. In the Colorado House of Representatives, where Democrats increased their majority in 2006, women now constitute almost 49 percent of the Democratic caucus.

Republican women lost ground and saw their numbers slide everywhere but in parts of the South. There are now only 534 of them out of more than 7,300 party-affiliated state legislators nationwide, compared with 1,187 Democratic women, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures, a bipartisan group.

Among all Republican state legislators, the percentage of women has fallen to its lowest level since 1985, according to Professor Moncrief at Boise State.

“Republican women tend to be more moderate than their colleagues, especially in legislatures, and as their party has shifted to the right, they’re more vulnerable,” said Debbie Walsh, the director of the Center for

American Women and Politics at [Rutgers University](#) in New Jersey.

But there are hints that Minnesota Republicans may be changing as much, and as fast, as the Democrats in adjusting to the consequences of the election.

Gov. Tim Pawlenty, a Republican who barely kept his job last November and who has been mentioned as a possible candidate for vice president in 2008, said in his State of the State speech in January that schools, the quality and availability of health care, and property taxes are the issues of the moment. That is where the state's \$2 billion budget surplus should be focused, he said.

"You go to a place like Woodbury, they say, Keep my taxes reasonable, make health care cheaper, improve our schools," Mr. Pawlenty said in an interview in his office at the Capitol.

"What happened in the election was more a sense of disappointment or frustration with Republicans, particularly nationally, than it was a mass conversation to Democratic philosophy," he said.

But many of the Legislature's new Democrats said they thought that the governor — combative and conservative in his first term, pushing through deep cuts in spending and pressing for restrictions on [abortion](#) — has begun speaking to women and moderates.

"He was definitely speaking to a changed climate," Ms. Bunn said. "The wedge issues were gone."

The sunny weather could change as the Legislature addresses the session's big issues, including a proposed statewide expansion of all-day kindergarten, a universal health care plan and a transportation system that Democrats say needs billions of dollars for rebuilding bridges and highways and improving mass transit.

But Speaker Margaret Anderson Kelliher said she did not see a sign of hardball so far from the governor. She thinks it would be self-defeating.

"I think people want leaders who can get things done," Ms. Kelliher said. "And I think the governor probably knows that."

But if moderate Democrats do succeed in the Legislature, Republicans say, women like the Woodbury Three have a chance of becoming permanent fixtures in the suburbs.

State Senator Kathy L. Saltzman, the third member of the Woodbury caucus and a former education lobbyist, said she thought it was too soon to tell whether cooperation or conflict would prevail.

But she said she was convinced that the balance has shifted, and that the political center she and her colleagues were staking out now controls the field.

"I'm going to be moving between the 30-yard lines," Ms. Saltzman said.

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