

Power corridors give way slowly: Female politicians face multiple hurdles.

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May 16--WASHINGTON -- Hillary Clinton, the first woman with a serious shot at the presidency, and Nancy Pelosi, the first female House speaker, have attracted endless attention as symbols of women's new prominence in American politics.

Equally important are the many female lawmakers who have quietly risen to leadership positions on Capitol Hill, especially as a result of the last election.

At the same time, women are making only moderate progress growing their ranks on the Hill. They make up about 16 percent of each house of Congress. And although the 16 women serving in the Senate and 74 in the House are a record for both houses, they represent a net gain of just two female senators and three representatives in the last election.

In spite of women's high-profile gains on the U.S. political landscape, the progress of women into positions of power remains mixed.

"Women are coming into the institution slowly, not in leaps and bounds," said Sue Carroll, a professor of political science and senior scholar at the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University.

The ranks of women in the U.S. House were kept in check last November by close losses for incumbents such as Nancy Johnson (R-Conn.) and Anne Northup (R-Ky.), races where women ran against each other, and the losses of hopefuls such as Tammy Duckworth, who lost her race in Illinois' 6th Congressional District.

One of the reasons it is taking time for women to accumulate influence is that the system confers leadership based on seniority, said Michele Swers, assistant professor of government at Georgetown University.

"The average age of a woman in politics is older than that of a man," Swers said, pointing out that Pelosi waited until after her children had grown to run for Congress. Several younger women with children are serving in this Congress, and that is relatively new, Swers said.

Similarly qualified female and male candidates have an equal chance of being successful in a race, but women are significantly less likely to consider running, according to a Brown University study conducted in 2004.

"We just haven't had as many women recruited," said Rep. Judy Biggert (R-Ill.), who said she considered running for public office only after she was approached.

Incumbents, most of whom are men, usually win their elections, and that creates another obstacle for women, said Ellen Moran, executive director of EMILY's List, an organization that provides money to female Democratic candidates who support abortion rights. "But this is a tremendous momentum-building year," she said. "As the electorate sees more women setting the agenda at the table, we're going to see more women enter the political stream."

Indeed, women have moved into a number of powerful positions in Congress. In the House, for example, Rep. Louise Slaughter (D-N.Y.) is chairwoman of the powerful Rules Committee, and Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.) is the ranking member, or top Republican, on the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Reps. Stephanie Tubbs Jones (D-Ohio) and Nydia Velasquez (D-N.Y.) preside over the Ethics and Small Business Committees, respectively. In the Senate, where 16 women now serve, Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) sits at the helm of the Rules Committee and Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) heads the Environment Committee.

"Having women in key positions is absolutely critical to what they're able to do," said Rutgers' Carroll. "There's no question that the more women move into those key positions, the more likely they are to have influence."

Women's influence has already engendered noticeable differences in discussions on the Hill, several female lawmakers said.

"To everything we bring a slightly different perspective, including the big issue, which is the war in Iraq," said Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.). "We get up not only as congresswomen but as women and mothers, and we bring a somewhat different tone to the debate."

style," Stabenow said. "Barbara [Boxer]'s first action as chairman of the Environment Committee was to have a hearing for every interested member of the Senate to testify for 10 minutes on their thoughts. ... I think it shows the way women approach problems: with a broader, team-building, inclusive style."

That means not only focusing on subjects that traditionally interest women -- such as health care, child care and education -- but building an informal forum for discussion.

"I hold bipartisan 'power workshops' when new women are elected to the Senate to make sure my new colleagues have the tools they need to succeed," said Sen. Barbara Mikulski (D-Md.), the dean of Senate women. "We also hold monthly bipartisan dinners and strategy sessions to bring the women together."

Creating a supportive "old girls' network" and extending it beyond the District of Columbia is essential to ensuring that there will be future generations of female leaders, said Victoria Budson, founding executive director of the Women and Public Policy Program at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government.

"The pipeline issue is an extremely important issue," Budson said. "The majority of candidates in the U.S. are still located by party leaders asking them to run, and social networks tend to replicate themselves."

Clearly the notion of women running for high office is no longer a novelty. "I did not run saying, We need to get a woman in there," said Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.), who was elected in November. "I am a woman, it's true. But I ran on what I wanted to do in Washington."

In the House, lawmakers are growing accustomed to female leadership. "We've all gotten used to saying 'madam chair,' " Schakowsky said. "It doesn't sound odd now as we go about our business."

These changes are promising, Budson said.

"We're going to have a generation of women growing up having never known a presidential cycle where there wasn't a woman candidate running," she said. "We're going to have a group of children who, when they imagine the speaker of the House, they only see a woman."

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