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If not Clinton, who could be Madame President?

By Nicole Gaudiano, Gannett News Service

WASHINGTON — Unlike any woman before her, Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton was able to raise record-breaking sums of money, mobilize millions of voters and show she was qualified to be president.

The rise and fall of her quest to be the Democratic nominee begs the question: What will it take to put a woman in the White House?

"It's like, wow, it took this long and if it's not Hillary, then who? And if it's not now, when?" said Democratic pollster Celinda Lake.

It has been more than two decades since another New Yorker, Geraldine Ferraro, ran as Walter Mondale's vice president in 1984, raising hopes among women back then that a Madame President could soon be the next step.

Other women had run before, including New York Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm in 1972, and others ran after, including Sen. Elizabeth Dole, R-N.C., and former Democratic Sen. Carol Moseley Braun. But none came anywhere near as close as Clinton.

In a speech Tuesday night, Clinton again talked about parents who told their daughters and sons they can be whatever they want to be, and about the women in their 90s who came out to support her.

"They were born before women could vote, and they wanted to be part of making history," she said.

With only 16 women serving in the Senate and eight female governors, experts see a somewhat narrow pipeline for women with presidential potential. Even in state legislatures, where presumptive Democratic nominee Barack Obama of Illinois served before being elected a senator in 2004, the percentage of women has hovered in the low-to-mid-20s for the last decade.

"It may be awhile before we see this again," said Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University. "It's a thick glass ceiling."

Ideally, the next female contenders would have executive experience and crossover appeal, would come from a large state and would have an established fundraising network, experts say. Military or foreign relations credentials also would help.

It's possible Clinton could run again in 2012 if Sen. John McCain of Arizona, the presumptive Republican nominee, is in the White House.

Other female contenders mentioned by political experts are:

Kansas Gov. Kathleen Sebelius, 59, Democrat.

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Pros: She's a Democrat who won in a red state and she attached herself to Sen. Barack Obama's wing of the party by endorsing him early.

Cons: Kansas is not exactly a hotbed of Democratic activism. And if Obama wins the White House and re-election, Sebelius would be 67 if she ran in 2016.

Arizona Gov. Janet Napolitano, 50, Democrat.

Pros: She is relatively young and, as a governor and former attorney general and prosecutor, she has a lot of the right kind of experience for successful Democrats in national elections.

Cons: While she has been able to reach out to moderate Republicans as governor, she may not be liberal enough to prevail in a Democratic primary. She defended Anita Hill in the Clarence Thomas hearings, a red flag for national Republicans.

Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin, 44, Republican.

Pros: She is young, with a reputation as a maverick and a compelling up-from-the-bootstraps personal story.

Cons: She is unknown, from a small state, and doesn't have a great relationship with her party in her own state.

Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison of Texas, 64, Republican.

Pros: She has a steady, reliably conservative reputation in the Senate.

Cons: Age. And some think her real goal is to be governor of Texas. She hasn't been tested in a tough race.

American University professor Karen O'Connor sees potential in a younger crop of Democratic U.S. representatives, including Kathy Castor and Debbie Wasserman Schultz of Florida and Stephanie Herseth Sandlin of South Dakota, because of their name recognition in their states and their ability to excite voters.

"I see those women as being in the position to be senator or governor," said O'Connor, director of the university's Women and Politics Institute. "I still think the path is to have been a governor."

A CBS News poll released Tuesday found 69% of women and 57% of men hope to see a woman elected president in their lifetime, and higher percentages — 72% of women and 65% of men — see that as likely.

Of the 712 registered voters polled, 76% of women and 60% of men said Clinton's candidacy has made it easier for other women to run. The margin of error was plus or minus 4 percentage points.

"Clinton's helped to make it normal," said Marie Wilson, president of The White House Project, a nonpartisan group that trains women to run for office.

The group trained 500 women in 2006 and is on track to train more than 2,000 women this year.

"She's paved the way," Wilson said. "And we'll see more women following in her footsteps."

Some women, however, are getting tired of the wait.

Clinton supporter Mazie Todd, of Anderson, S.C., thinks Clinton won every debate and feels "just entirely mad" about how the campaign has unfolded. Raised when women were taught to pick marriage over college, Todd had hoped the first woman president would take office during her lifetime.

"I'm 71," said Todd, a former delegate to her state's convention. "They'd have to just about hurry up."

Contact Nicole Gaudiano at ngaudiano@gns.gannett.com.

Contributing: Chuck Raasch

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