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Making strides

Women gaining in politics, but still underrepresented

By Trevor Stokes,
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Matt McKean/TimesDaily

Alabama Supreme Court candidate Deborah Bell Paseur shakes hands with supporters while making a political commercial at Wilson Park in Florence.

It's no secret that women are underrepresented in politics, from the smallest town all the way up to the White House.

The Shoals is no different. Approximately 20 percent of qualified candidates for Shoals municipal elections are women.

Hypothetically, if all women won their political races, 34 of 91 council seats, or 37.4 percent, would be held by women in Colbert and Lauderdale counties. Of the 11 mayoral seats, only one female is running.

To give a fairer assessment, women made up nine out of 60 incumbent candidates, or 15 percent, for both council and mayoral seats.

Women have made certain strides locally.

In 2004, 14 percent of the 210 candidates in cities and towns in the Shoals were women, according to data from TimesDaily archives. In 1996, 15 percent of the 221 candidates were women. Statistics for 2000 were not available for all cities.

Nationwide, information on the number of women seeking municipal office is lacking, said Gilda Morellis, of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, N.J.

She estimated that 200,000 council and municipal seats are contested throughout the nation.

"It's daunting," Morellis said of trying to assess how many women might be represented.

Clues exist as to how women in Alabama are faring in politics at the state level, and it doesn't look good.

In 2008, Alabama ranked 48th in the nation for women in state politics, according to data compiled by the

Center for American Women and Politics.

In the state Legislature, four of 35 state senators and 14 of 105 state representatives are women. South Carolina ranked last in the nation for women in state legislatures behind Oklahoma, according to the data.

"Men are more willing to jump in on their own," said Barbara Norrander, a professor of political science at the University of Arizona who focuses on women in state legislatures.

"Perhaps (politics) is something women haven't traditionally thought of."

Many issues cause women to enter politics typically a decade or later than men, Norrander said.

Women's role in child rearing, the incorrect perception that women cannot raise as much money as men and the need to have a career with a flexible schedule may impede women from entering the political arena, Norrander said.

"Do they have the ability to go to meetings and go to the state Legislature for two to three months and work that into their career?" Norrander gave examples of lawyers and businessmen who may have workplace flexibility to accommodate such demands.

Political scientists are not studying the phenomenon as much since the 1990s because of the increasing commonality of women active in politics and the difficulty of tracking the hundreds of politicians at the local levels, Norrander said, but the trend of women in office may increase.

"More women in office helps other women run," she said.

Recent elections have shown how far women can go in politics, particularly New York Sen. Hillary Clinton, who nearly clinched the Democratic nomination for president this spring.

Further, high-profile politicians such as House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice have given women political role models.

"Women are more prone to sell themselves short when it comes to what difference their voice makes," said Deborah Bell Paseur, the Democratic candidate for the Alabama Supreme Court who faces Republican candidate Greg Shaw.

Although men and women may share similar concerns - a strong economy, a safe environment to raise their families - women "tend to minimize their ability to be a significant voice in the community," Paseur said.

Also, there are the realities of running a campaign.

"It's difficult for anyone - man or woman - to subject their families to the rigorous schedules and the sometimes negativity (that can be) endured in a campaign," Paseur said.

"Maybe women are more reluctant to subject themselves and their families to the possibility of having things said that aren't true."

Paseur, who resigned in April as Lauderdale County district judge, said her circumstances permitted her to devote time to a statewide campaign.

Margaret Lovett, former president of the Republican Women of the Shoals, said that for many women, education about the political process is key to getting involved.

"Women have always been good at analyzing situations, solving problems and budgeting money - this is what most of these offices do," Lovett said.

"It's hard, as most incumbents will tell you, to break the glass ceiling to get into politics," she said.

"(Women) need to make sure they have leadership training so they have the skills of a certain office and know some of the challenges that they'll be faced with," Lovett said.

The cultural landscape can also play a role.

"I think part of that (lack of women in politics) comes back to Southern culture where we let our menfolk talk for us," said Joan Farneman, Waterloo City Councilwoman who is uncontested for Place 1. "We influence our men to do what we want but we don't aggressively do it."

Farneman, a multi-term council woman, was born and raised in Louisville, Ky., and has lived on both coasts and in Hawaii while her husband was in the Navy. She has lived in Waterloo for the past 24 years.

"That may be why I'm a little more outspoken," Farneman said. "Being a Navy wife, you have to be more independent than some other people."

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