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Women crowd North Carolina ballots

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ST. PAUL, MINN. - The nomination of Sarah Palin for vice president means that voters in North Carolina this year have the chance to elect women at every level of government.

Beyond Palin's historic role as the first GOP vice presidential nominee, Democrat Beverly Perdue could become North Carolina's first female governor. Six women are running for other statewide executive offices such as labor commissioner and state treasurer, and five are running for seats on the state's top courts.

And no matter what, a woman will win the election for U.S. senator. The lone man in the race is a Libertarian candidate who is only token opposition.

"I think it's great. It's time we got women out there," said Kim Cotten of Pittsboro, chairwoman of the N.C. Federation of Young Republicans and a delegate to the Republican National Convention. "Regardless of party, I think there are some qualified women on both sides."

Women have made strides in attaining political office in the past 30 years. Yet it was 24 years after Democrat Geraldine Ferraro's run for the vice presidency before another woman got a place on a national ticket.

Though women compose more than half the electorate, they hold 16 percent of the seats in the U.S. Senate, 16 percent of the U.S. House and 26 percent of the seats in the state legislature. Nationally, North Carolina ranks 19th in the number of women in its state legislature, according to the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University.

"We've got a lot of catching up to do, don't we?" asked Margaret Haynes, a Wilmington real estate agent who was a delegate to the Democratic National Convention.

"It's a building, growing thing," said state Labor Commissioner Cherie Berry, a Republican who is seeking re-election. "I don't put a lot of stock in whether women are being held back, because I don't think they are."

"Look at the ticket in North Carolina. ... You start adding them up, and there are a lot of women on the upper part of the ballot."

Yet many Democrats are still sore that Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton fell short in her effort to win their presidential nomination.

"The glass ceiling definitely still exists," said Karen O'Connor, director of the Women and Politics Institute at American University.

State Sen. Kay Hagan, a Democrat, recalled that on her first day in office 10 years ago, she walked into the legislators' cafeteria only to be asked to leave.

"That would never happen to a man," said Hagan, who is challenging Republican incumbent U.S. Sen. Elizabeth Dole.

Still, Hagan said of this fall's ballot, "It's an exciting time. Women are very involved in running for public office. And they win."

Former U.S. Sen. Bob Dole, Elizabeth Dole's husband, recalled that in the late 1960s, women went to the Senate to finish their deceased husbands' terms.

"It's changing," Bob Dole said.

They like what they see

Palin's nomination energized men and women at the Republican convention, but Republican women especially said they were thrilled.

"She's like a dream candidate," said Jeanne Smoot, a Raleigh delegate and former member of the Reagan administration. "She started at the PTA level. I think women can identify with that. And she's pretty. And she's an athlete."

Nancy Mazza, a Greensboro delegate and former president of the N.C. Federation of Republican Women, said young women will look up to female politicians and see that they can run for office.

"I think Palin is opening many doors, many windows with lots of opportunities for women," Mazza said.

Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics, said women often bring different experiences to their roles as elected officials. Research shows, she said, that Republican and Democratic women are more likely than men to tackle issues that affect women, children and families.

Even as McCain operatives blasted the media for stories about Palin's family, U.S. Rep. Kay Granger, a Texas Republican, said Palin's experience would affect her decisions.

"She's been a working mom, and so it really makes a difference the way she approaches that," Granger said. "Things like, for instance, flex time."

But the races can be difficult. Some men last spring said they wouldn't vote for Clinton because they didn't think a woman could be commander in chief. Some women slammed Palin for wanting to be vice president while mothering five children.

And in the U.S. Senate race, gender-tinged barbs fly both ways. First, a Democratic ad alluded to Dole's age. Then Dole fired back, comparing Hagan to a yappy dog.

Women have faced barriers over the years, including in fundraising.

"There's been the good ol' boy network of corporate donors, in particular because these boardrooms are full of men," said Charlotte Mayor



With Sarah Palin's nomination, women are running at every level.
AP Photo by Paul Sancya

Pro Tem Susan Burgess, a superdelegate to the Democratic convention.

Tougher than thou

And in many ways, female candidates still feel the need to exude toughness.

Clinton ran on a national security platform, airing the "3 a.m." ad questioning whether Barack Obama had the gumption to deal with international crises in the dead of night.

Palin packs heat and hunts moose. And she bragged of fighting "good ol' boys" in Alaska to earn her governorship.

Cotten, chairwoman of the N.C. Young Republicans, said she's never had trouble working with male colleagues. "If there is a glass ceiling, it's because we put it there," Cotten said. "It's whether you're willing to fight for it."

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