



Monday, October 27, 2008 |

Election will decide if SC Senate becomes all male

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Published: October 25, 2008

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — South Carolina could have the only state Senate in the nation without a woman politician depending on the results of the Nov. 4 election, which may well return the chamber to an all-male membership not seen in this state for three decades.

Three women candidates are trying to stop that from happening, but they acknowledge it's a steep task.

Two of the women, former state Rep. Margaret Gamble and Sumter 2 school board member Karen Michalik, face entrenched incumbents. The Republicans are trying to unseat, respectively, Democratic Sens. Nikki Setzler, who's had his job for nearly 32 years, and Phil Leventis, who's been in his office for 28 years, in an election during which Democrats are expected to turn out in record numbers for Barack Obama.

"It's always tough against an incumbent, especially if the incumbent has a coattail in the Democratic Party," said Donna Dewitt, chairwoman of the Columbia-based Southeastern Institute for Women in Politics.

The odds for Democrat Mandy Powers Norrell are considered better, because she's going for an open seat and has the Obama factor in her favor. But Obama is not expected to win in South Carolina and Norrell is a political novice challenging Republican Rep. Mick Mulvaney for a seat occupied by the GOP for 15 years.

Since 2003, South Carolina has ranked last nationwide in the percentage of women in its Legislature. Fewer than 9 percent of the state's 170 legislators are women, compared with top-ranked Vermont at 38 percent. Palmetto State voters have never sent more than three females to the Senate at a time, according to the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University.

But the retirement of Sen. Linda Short, D-Chester — who held the title of lone female senator for nearly three years — and the primary defeat in June of Sen. Catherine Ceips, R-Beaufort — who was seeking her first full term in the upper chamber — created the possibility of something unseen since 1979.

"The Senate is a lodge. I'm trying to get in the lodge," said Gamble, a former kindergarten teacher and retired University of South Carolina education professor whose major issue is early childhood education.

South Carolina's last-in-the-nation ranking — which also includes no woman in statewide or federal elected office — led to the creation of the Southeastern Institute in January. It aims to encourage and train women to run for office.

Debbie Walsh, director of the Rutgers center, said South Carolina needs such organized intervention.

"In terms of women's progress, it's an abysmal record," she said. "Women make a difference by being there, not just for the sake of counting the numbers and getting to equity. There are different life experiences that form the priorities of legislators. It's who they listen to and who they think about."

Research shows women are more likely to make issues that affect children their priorities, and to promote an open government that does the people's business in public, Walsh said.

Without women, some potential problems or issues simply won't occur to men, she said. She gave an example of a job training measure in Iowa that included no childcare component until a woman legislator raised the issue.

"It would make a bad statement in South Carolina to not have any women in the Senate. But I don't think people should vote for me because I'm a woman, but because I can relate to them on the issues," said Norrell, city attorney for Lancaster, who has also made public education the central part of her campaign.

Her opponent, Mulvaney, who's seeking a Senate seat after one term in the House, said his opponent's gender is not an issue, and he notes he's supporting a woman Republican to take his seat.

The election could add several women to the South Carolina House, which had 13 women the last two years — down from a peak of 20 in 1992.

Attorney Jenny Horne of Summerville, former Rep. Rita Allison, and former Greenville County Republican Party chairwoman Wendy Nanney face no Democratic opposition. Horne and Allison, who returns to the Spartanburg County seat she gave up in 2002 for an unsuccessful run for lieutenant governor, replace male legislators.

Six of the 11 female House incumbents on the ballot face opposition — two by other women — and several other state House races feature strong female candidates.

“I think women in general tend to be multi-taskers. We're collaborators and consensus builders — not that men can't be. But South Carolina needs more of that,” said Greenville City Councilwoman Chandra Dillard, who is vying for a seat after defeating Rep. Fletcher Smith in the Democratic primary.

Fort Mill Vision Center owner Deborah Long, who is running for Mulvaney's seat, said women need to be encouraged to run.

“Sometimes I think it doesn't occur to them to do it,” said Long, adding she didn't aspire to political office until she was asked to run in January. “It's one of those things where you think somebody needs to do something about the economy and education in South Carolina. When they looked at me and said, ‘What about you?’ it put me on the spot and I thought, ‘Why not me?’”

Reader Reactions

Posted by (Real Republican) on October 26, 2008 at 1:07 am

And who do the people of South Carolina have to thank for this?

What Time magazine correctly noted as one of the worst governors in the nation - Mark Sanfraud.

He campaigned against the only sitting female Republican in SC so he could get his college drinking buddy in office. Of course he will campaign for almost anyone as long as they have a plane or bags of funny money like Howie Rich.

A bigger fraud than the WMD's is the current buffon sitting in the governor's chair and the sooner his term ends the better off the state will be.

Education, unemployment, insurance, health care, you name it - he has done absolutely nothing other than to grandstand and showboat.

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