

Published: Oct 26, 2008 12:30 AM

Modified: Oct 26, 2008 03:53 AM



Amanda Wray, 20, who worked at the State Fair this year, plans to vote a split ticket. She thinks there is resistance to female leadership. 'For women, it will be harder to get more votes,' she said.

Staff Photo by Shawn Rocco

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## Women's strides put tracks on N.C. ballot

### State leads Southeast in female officeholders and candidates

**BY BARBARA BARRETT, Washington Correspondent**

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RALEIGH - From Sarah Palin, a hockey mom and Alaska governor, to a Franklin County judicial candidate who rolled out pink campaign signs, women appear all over the Tar Heel ballot this year.

In Durham, four of five candidates for county commissioner are women. In Wake County, five women are running for the state legislature. Statewide, three women are running for the U.S. House of Representatives.

Both U.S. Senate candidates are women, and Lt. Gov. Beverly Perdue wants to be governor. If things work out a certain way, the majority of the Council of State -- a 10-member group of statewide elected officials -- could arrive at work in heels.

"It's amazing, isn't it?" said Barbara True-Weber, a political scientist at Meredith College. "We are now at a point where the pool of women who are experienced and eligible is deep enough and wide enough that they're eligible for those senior positions."

The trend in North Carolina reflects an upswing in women's roles in politics nationally. Women have been at the center of the presidential contest this year, first with Sen. Hillary Clinton and now with Palin, whom Republicans see as the key to claiming women's votes. Women are now a majority of registered voters in North Carolina, and some strategists say female candidates bring out female voters.

In a year when change is the mantra, the possibility of more women in office could usher in new ideas and new styles of leadership.

Perdue does not emphasize her gender on the stump. But she doesn't hesitate to bring it up to counter claims that she has become part of state government's good-old-boy network.

"Look at me," she told reporters recently. "Do you think I'm part of the status quo? I've been the odd woman out all my life."

Perdue points out that when she first ran for the legislature two decades ago, people warned her she'd never win.

#### Women's quiet gains

Perdue is among the women who have been quietly making gains in North Carolina in recent years. Although women make up just 26.5 percent of the legislature, the state ranks first in the Southeast in female state lawmakers, according to a study by the Center for American Women and Politics.

This year, there are 12 women running for nonjudicial statewide offices or for Congress -- putting North Carolina second behind California.

"The fact that you have this many women running is a pretty amazing thing, especially in executive areas," said Marie Wilson, founder and president of the White House Project, a nonpartisan organization working to elect a female president.

Consider, for example, the road paved ahead of Palin, the GOP candidate for vice president.

Elizabeth Dole, the first female senator from North Carolina, made significant headway as a presidential candidate in 1999. She soon dropped out, but her candidacy opened doors for Clinton, who came close to becoming the 2008 Democratic nominee for president.

"Women are starting to step up, run for office and make a change," said April Fortunes, 32, of Chatham County, a McCain

supporter with two children and a job as a cardiac nurse.

"I've been saying that this is our time," Wilson said. "If we get enough women running and getting these seats, it will really change things. People are seeing that having men has not really saved us."

The big question is: Will all this estrogen make a difference?

Karolyn Thomas, 36, a day care director in Creedmoor, thinks so. "They probably have more values where children are concerned," said Thomas, who supported Clinton in the primary. "It seems to me a lot of women are more family-oriented."

### **Leadership traits**

A national study by the Pew Research Center in August showed that adults ranked women as high as or higher than men on seven of eight leadership traits such as honesty, intelligence and creativity. Men were seen as more decisive than women.

Voters around the Triangle said they would rarely, if ever, base their vote on a candidate's gender, but many do consider gender among other factors.

"There may not even be any wars if there were more women [in office]," said Frankie Johnson, 65, an Apex woman supporting McCain and Dole. "I think women know how to deal, how to compromise. Your normal everyday woman deals with compromises every day."

Studies show that once in office, women are more likely to find success through negotiation and more likely to collaborate on legislation rather than go it alone, said Ilana Goldman, director of the Women's Campaign Forum, a nonpartisan, pro-choice organization that has endorsed Democrats Perdue for governor and state Sen. Kay Hagan for U.S. Senate.

"[Women] are not about ownership," Goldman said. "They're more likely to reach out."

### **The last barrier**

Despite the gains, women still face resistance.

When Clinton faced Sen. Barack Obama in the May primary, it wasn't uncommon for men to tell reporters they were uncomfortable with the thought of a female commander-in-chief.

James Joyce, 75, of Durham, sat in a Hardee's restaurant last week with his wife discussing women's roles in politics.

"I don't have anything against a woman running," he said. He might support Perdue as governor, he said, but wouldn't want a female commander-in-chief. "I don't think a woman fits in the military at all."

His wife, Wyola, 75, responded: "I think if more women were in Congress, we'd see less wasted money."

Amanda Wray, 20, of Raleigh, notices resistance to female leaders as she studies to join the police academy.

"It's harder for women to get equal pay, to even get into the police academy," Wray said. "For women it will be harder to get more votes. People think women are soft, not as tough as men."

### **Different priorities?**

Goldman said voters seem to wonder where a woman's priorities lie, especially if she's a mother.

"If we elect a woman governor who has young kids, and we have a crisis in the state, will they prioritize their family or prioritize the state?" she said, describing some voters' thinking.

Women have long been seen by voters as more ethical and fair-minded than men, Wilson said. That may be one reason they've done so well in judicial races.

Five women are on the ballot in statewide judicial races alongside eight men. There could be a majority-female state Supreme Court if challenger Suzanne Reynolds unseats Robert Edmunds Jr. In Franklin County, District Judge candidate Amanda Stevenson has planted pink campaign signs around the countryside.

The state's voter registration is 55 percent female, said Tom Fetzer, a Republican strategist in Raleigh. And absent any other information about candidates -- as in judicial races that are both nonpartisan and low-profile -- women will often vote for other women, he said.

That portends well for the women on the ballot this year.

Cherry Smith, 59, a Raleigh Republican, said she cast an early vote last week for several women in the judicial races.

"They have a very good balance, and emotional side. They would show more compassion toward people," she said. "I think women are go-getters. And if there's something they want, they get it."

True-Weber, the Meredith professor, said such candidates stem from the flood of women heading to law school about 30 years ago, then working their way through the system.

The same is true in other races, she said.

"We're starting to see the fruits of those labors," True-Weber said. "They get educated. They get experienced. I see that as a sign of women being integrated into the political system."

(Staff writers Benjamin Niolet and Mark Johnson contributed to this report.)

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## **BY THE NUMBERS**

19 - The ranking of North Carolina among 50 state legislatures in the number of women

1 - The ranking among legislatures in the Southeast

26.5 - The percentage of women in North Carolina's legislature

38.3 - The percentage of women in the top-ranked state legislature, Vermont

2 - Female members of U.S. House of Representatives serving North Carolina

1 - Female U.S. senator serving North Carolina

2 - Women running for that Senate seat

4 - Women now serving in nonjudicial statewide elected positions in North Carolina

9 - Women running from major parties for nonjudicial statewide elected office

1 - Number of women running for governor

CENTER FOR AMERICAN WOMEN IN POLITICS AT RUTGERS UNIVERSITY, N.C. BOARD OF ELECTIONS

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