



Comments 7 | Recommend 0

# Is glass ceiling intact? Incumbency seems to be biggest block to getting women elected

09:39 AM CST on Sunday, November 9, 2008

By **CHRISTY HOPPE** / The Dallas Morning News  
[choppe@dallasnews.com](mailto:choppe@dallasnews.com)

AUSTIN – For all the talk of glass ceilings, it's the ground floor where women find themselves stymied.

Around the nation and in Texas, women were the largest voting bloc and the decisive factor in races from the presidency on down.

But female candidates have made skimpy progress. And it was no different this time around – Hillary Rodham Clinton and Sarah Palin notwithstanding.

Mrs. Clinton and Ms. Palin generated millions of votes, drew big, adoring crowds and huge campaign contributions, and raised the threshold of possibility.

But they got no further than Geraldine Ferraro did 24 years ago.

For many, their failure was devastating.

"It seemed so real and seemed so possible," said Debbie Walsh, director of Rutgers University's Center for American Women and Politics. "And then it wasn't."

One more woman joined the Texas Senate, and girls now make up 16 percent of that boys' club. Across the Capitol, in the House, female members still are outnumbered 5-to-1. Just eight of 50 governors are women. In Congress, women will remain 16 percent of the House membership, and one more woman has joined the Senate – for 17 out of 100 members.

"We're still seeing that slow, incremental growth that I feel I've been talking about for 28 years," said Ms. Walsh. "That slow, steady growth could get discouraging. But the good news is that it keeps moving in the direction of growth."

Women face the same chief obstacle as any political newcomer: incumbency. Open seats are rare. Overcoming the power, name recognition and money of incumbents is daunting.

In conventional elections, about 98 percent of congressional members win re-election.

Some optimism

But those who study elections and those who encourage women to run found hope in what they called an amazing year.

"This has been an election that was extraordinarily powerful at the presidential level, candidate level and the voting level. I think 2008 is a victory for women," said Ilana Goldman, president of the Women's Campaign Forum that recruits and trains women for public office.

Hours, weeks and months of coverage have shown powerful women seeking the highest offices, she said, recalling a photograph that showed the high heels of Ms. Palin from the stage and a row of awestruck little girls looking up.

Whether this translates into more women seeing themselves in the job, "we won't know for a couple or more cycles," Ms. Goldman said. "And the real impact might not be known for 20 or 30 years."

Most experts agree that Mrs. Clinton's candidacy vanquished doubt that a woman was capable of being president. And while debate raged over whether Ms. Palin with her experience was qualified to be president, the fight never touched on whether a woman was up to the job.

Meanwhile, the campaign forum and other groups nudge women into running for local offices. Virtually every female candidate now serving in national roles began like Ms. Palin, serving first on local councils, appointed boards and later risked seeking higher elective office, she said.

The biggest victory this time around?

"We're moving to 17 in the Senate," Ms. Goldman said. "It is a difficult place to be because 17 percent is not a number you would normally want to celebrate, but at the same time, let's recognize it as real progress."

Democrat Jeanne Shaheen beat out Republican Sen. John Sununu.

Democratic women

Ellen Malcolm, founder of EMILY's List, which recruits, trains and funds female candidates who will work for abortion rights, said that female officeholders are more apt to push for better health care, education and civil rights.

For Democratic women, she said, "it is clearly the best election for women in the past 16 years. We won big at every level. It is women who demanded change and elected the leaders to bring change."

In Texas, the net gain among women in the House was two – if Irving Republican Linda Harper-Brown can keep her seat; ballots are still being counted. In the 31-member Senate, Fort Worth Democrat Wendy Davis defeated a Republican incumbent to raise the number of women to a record-breaking five.

Robert E. Jones, political director of Texas' Annie's List modeled after the national political committee, found women active in their communities and began recruiting them 18 months ago to seek legislative offices.

In the races that Democratic women won, Annie's List provided candidate training and consultants, helped hire staff and provided tens of thousands in campaign contributions.

Women need to be encouraged in these offices because they often are constrained by the constant juggle of children and jobs. "Men will run no matter what else they have going on," Mr. Jones said.

In addition, most women when first approached will demur that they are not qualified for higher office. "You never hear that from men," he said.

"It's hard to recruit a woman because how do you say, 'Give us your next 16 months and get beat up by Republicans to earn a job that pays 600 bucks a month?' " Mr. Jones said. "But it is happening."

## LIBERAL WISH LIST

Liberal groups have a long list of priorities they'll push for when Barack Obama and fellow Democrats take full power in Washington. Among them:

**Criminal justice reform groups**

Eliminate sentencing disparity that is harsher on crack cocaine than powder cocaine.

Extend federal voting rights to people released from prison.

Restore welfare and food stamp eligibility to people with drug felony convictions.

## **Gay rights groups**

Outlaw workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity.

Expand hate-crimes laws to cover violence motivated by anyanti-gay bias.

Repeal the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy that bars gays from serving openly in the military.

**Feminist groups:**

Close the gender wage gap and increase the minimum wage.

Ratify the U.N. treaty to end sex discrimination.

**Reproductive-rights groups:**

Eliminate federal support for abstinence-only sex education and support comprehensive programs that include teaching about contraception.

Reverse the “Global Gag Rule” that bars aid to groups providing or promoting abortions.

Limit or overturn policies that interfere with abortion rights

**Immigrant-rights groups:**

Halt or cut back on workplace raids targeting illegal-immigrant workers.

Enact a comprehensive immigration overhaul that provides illegal immigrants with options other than deportation.

*The Associated Press*