

Denogean: Political glass ceiling cracked, not shattered

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On my 18th birthday, a friend gave me a coffee cup with writing on the outside that said, "A woman's place is in the house ..."

On the inside of the cup, the thought was completed, "and in the Senate."

I loved that cup. The year I turned 18 was 1984, the same year Geraldine Ferraro was selected as Walter Mondale's running mate, making her the first female vice presidential candidate put forth by a major U.S. political party.

My birthday being in December, I didn't get to vote for the Mondale-Ferraro ticket. But because of Ferraro, the thought that I would someday see a woman elected president of the United States was deeply implanted in my subconscious.

I didn't imagine it would be another 24 years before a woman would even come close to being selected as her party's presidential candidate. But, finally, came this year's incredible race for the presidency.

In seeking her party's nomination, Democrat Hillary Clinton put 18 million cracks in that glass ceiling; and Republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin landed a Rockettes-high kick in her famed stilettos to nearly smash right through it.

Still, two weeks after the election, I'm not sure whether my old coffee cup is half-full or half-empty of its feminist spirit.

I am more hopeful than ever that I'll see a qualified woman elected to the highest office in my lifetime (God, please don't let it be another two decades). But the representation of women in positions of leadership remains a good news/bad news story.

We are making gains and serving in historic numbers, but progress is slow. Women, who slightly outnumber men in the population, remain vastly underrepresented in public office.

When the 111th Congress convenes in January, 17 women will serve in the 100-member U.S. Senate, according to the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers (CAWP) in New Jersey. That's a record, but up only one woman from the 110th Congress. Forgive me if I can't get excited about a 17 percent representation for women.

Similarly, a record 74 women will serve (out of 435 seats) in the U.S. House in 2009, up by three from the current House.

State legislatures (although not Arizona's) also saw small gains for women this year. Women will number 1,784 in state legislatures in 2009, making up 24.2 percent of all legislators, according to CAWP. That is up from the current 1,749 female lawmakers, or 23.7 percent.

Women will be in the majority in the New Hampshire state Senate - a first not just for New Hampshire, but for any state. Thirteen of the 24 senators are female, according to CAWP.

On the other hand, and there's no putting lipstick on this pig, the South Carolina state Senate won't have a single female member in 2009.

Regarding the tally of state CEOs, the total contingent of the country's female governors couldn't even field its own softball team. Female governors number eight with this year's election of Bev Perdue as governor of North Carolina and the re-election of Christine

Gregoire in Washington.

Women lost ground in Arizona. We picked up one congressional seat - Democrat Ann Kirkpatrick in the 1st District. But the state Legislature will go from 31 female members to 27 - 12 in the Senate and 15 in the House.

At a recent panel discussion on women in politics hosted by the University of Arizona women's studies department, former state Sen. Toni Hellon, a Tucson Republican, had some sound advice for those of us who worry about such things.

When it comes to the question of underrepresentation, Hellon said, "We have to put on our big girl panties and quit whining about it."

She didn't give much weight to a query about whether institutionalized sexism is responsible for the disparity in women's representation in politics.

OK, there was this one time when a man, upon seeing a sticker on her car identifying it as belonging to a legislator, asked if her husband was a legislator. That was irksome. But, really, Hellon said, she experienced far more discrimination in our state Legislature by virtue of being from Pima County than she did because of being a woman.

"If I was to dwell on those things, I would not have got anything accomplished," she said. "You have to let it go."

If you're interested in politics, just get involved, she advised. Stuff envelopes, make phone calls and help with fundraising, she said. It's a path to meeting and/or becoming one of the future power brokers.

I have a feeling we'd hear much the same wisdom from Ferraro, Clinton and Palin - three women who surely have earned the lace and flowers on their "big girl panties."

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