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No Breakthrough for Women Politicians November 20, 2008



WASHINGTON -- It is time to stop kidding ourselves. This wasn't a breakthrough year for American women in politics. It was a brutal one.

The glass ceiling remains firmly in place -- not cracked, as Hillary Clinton insisted as she tried to claim rhetorical victory after her defeat in the Democratic nominating contest. It wasn't even scratched with the candidacy of Sarah Palin as the Republican vice presidential nominee -- unless you consider becoming an object of national ridicule to be a symbol of advancement. As divergent as these two women are ideologically and temperamentally, as different as are their resumes, they both banged their heads -- hard -- against the ceiling. Both were bruised. So was the goal of advancing women in political leadership.

Even if President-elect Barack Obama chooses Clinton as secretary of state, no ground will be broken. Clinton would be the third woman to hold the post. And there is no longer anything extraordinary in a president naming women to his Cabinet. Franklin D. Roosevelt did it first, when he appointed Frances Perkins as labor secretary in 1933. Since then, every president but Harry Truman and John F. Kennedy has named women to the Cabinet or to Cabinet-level posts, according to the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University. Bill Clinton holds the record: He appointed 16 women overall, and at one point about half of those serving in Clinton's Cabinet were female.

But, we are invariably told, surely there are enough women moving through the "pipeline" of lower offices so that someday, some woman from *somewhere* will win the presidency or the vice presidency. Well, here is how things stand: Eight women will serve as governors in 2009, the same as this year. The proportion of women serving in statewide elective office actually has dropped since it reached a high of about 28 percent in 2000; it is now about 24 percent, according to the center.

The Senate will add one woman next year, bringing the number of female senators to 17. Ten newly elected House members are female. This means that as the class of 2008 enters the Capitol's marble halls, it will include less than half the number of women who first won office in 1992 -- the so-called "year of the woman."

Including incumbents and newcomers, a record number of women will be serving in Congress, but still only 17 percent of its members will be female. This is where that record places us: on a par with the legislative representation women have achieved in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean. The United Nations, which tracks women's global political advancement, says that at this rate, it will take women in the developing world 40 years to reach parity with men.

How long will it take us? We already are well into the fourth decade since the contemporary women's movement of the 1970s spawned a generation that sought to claim an equal place in the halls of power.

Those who watched the media's sexist hazing of both Clinton and Palin often rationalize this treatment as the result of these two candidates' particular personalities and the legitimacy -- or presumed illegitimacy -- of their campaigns. But Barbara Lee, whose Boston-based family foundation has conducted extensive research of gubernatorial races involving women, routinely identifies the same undercurrents in state campaigns. Voters demand more experience of a woman candidate, and judge her competence separately from whether she is sufficiently "likable." Male candidates typically must clear only the competence bar to be judged -- as Obama indelicately put it during a primary debate -- "likable enough."

"We heard that over and over again -- that no woman is ever right," Lee says of her focus groups. "They like the concept of it but when it comes to a real, live, breathing candidate, they don't."

Lee summarizes the disparate assessment this way: "There are no female Arnold Schwarzeneggers." That is, no woman will ever burst into politics, capture the voters' imagination and be catapulted into high public office without a lick of experience.

Yet American women are a majority of the population and a majority of the electorate. They earn more than half the bachelor's and master's degrees, a level of educational achievement far exceeding that of women in developing countries. There must be some reason we don't do any better than women in impoverished, rural regions of the world where cultural norms oppress women.

Maybe it is because our culture isn't so different after all.

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