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Record number of women to serve in Congress

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BY ERIN KELLY | GANNETT NEWS SERVICE

WASHINGTON — Although women failed to win the presidency or vice presidency this year, there will be a record number of female lawmakers serving in the 111th Congress and state legislatures across the country.

And that should ultimately increase the opportunities for women to reach the highest elected offices in the nation, analysts say. “The more women we get in the pipeline, the better,” said Debbie Walsh, director of the nonpartisan Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University in New Jersey.

In the 100-member U.S. Senate, the number of women elected rose to 17 — one more than the 16 serving in the current Congress. That may change if Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, D-N.Y., becomes the new secretary of state for President-elect Barack Obama. In the 435-member U.S. House, 74 women have been elected, an increase of three from the current Congress. That number could increase to 75 depending on the outcome of an Ohio race in which ballots are still being counted.

Women also achieved record numbers in state legislatures, increasing their ranks by 35 to 1,784 total lawmakers. Women now make up nearly a quarter of all state legislators. New Hampshire voters made history by making women the new majority in the state Senate — a landmark never before reached by any other state legislature.

Those gains are important in part because candidates for governor and Congress often come from state legislatures.

Still, experts say the gains have been frustratingly slow and small.

“I’m always happy to see the numbers moving in this direction, but I would certainly like to see greater gains at all these levels,” Walsh said.

She pointed to the fact that the number of female governors did not rise. There will be eight women governors serving in 2009 — the same as this year. That could increase to nine if New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson becomes commerce secretary in the Obama administration, a move that would elevate Lt. Gov. Diane Denish to the state’s highest post. But it could also drop by one if Arizona Gov. Janet Napolitano becomes Obama’s secretary of homeland security. “Most of our presidents come from the ranks of governors and senators, and our gains in those areas were small or nonexistent,” Walsh said.

The event this year that may have boosted women’s chances of winning the White House the most was Clinton’s unsuccessful attempt to win the Democratic presidential nomination. “While women still face serious hurdles in reaching the highest levels of elected office, Hillary has laid to rest any doubts about whether a woman has what it takes to run for president,” said Ellen Malcolm, president of EMILY’s List, which supports Democratic women candidates who believe in abortion rights.

But recruiting women to run for office is still more difficult than recruiting men, Walsh said. “Women’s lives are complicated,” she said. “They are more likely to be primary caregivers. They tend to wait until their children are older to run for office, while men are more likely to take on elected office when they and their children are younger. One woman told me that what she really needs for a career in politics is a wife.”

Still, there is another important chance for women to make gains as Obama chooses his Cabinet. Obama has the potential to break the record for appointing women, Walsh said. The existing record is held by President Bill Clinton, who appointed nine women to his 19-member Cabinet during his second term.

Women have been appointed to Cabinet positions by all but two presidents since President Franklin Roosevelt appointed a female labor secretary in 1933. Only Presidents Harry Truman and John Kennedy had no women in their Cabinets, according to the Rutgers’ center. If Clinton becomes secretary of state, she will be the third woman to serve in that post. She would replace current Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. The first woman to have that job was Madeleine Albright, who served under Bill Clinton.

“Every time the American people see women in these powerful nontraditional spots it’s an important breakthrough,” Walsh said. “And it will make a difference down the road.”

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