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Maine racks up electoral firsts for women

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In an election year marked by historic firsts, Chellie Pingree made sure Maine got in the act.

Before Nov. 4, the Pine Tree State never elected a Democratic woman to Congress, including from Pingree's southern and coastal 1st District, and it never saw women comprise the majority of its four-member congressional delegation.

But now things are different. Pingree joins U.S. Sens. Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins, both Republicans, and longtime Rep. Michael Michaud, a Democrat, as part of the state's congressional delegation.

Pingree's victory gave Maine the distinction of being the first state in the history of the United States to have a delegation in which women outnumber men, said Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University.

While other, larger states with bigger delegations have more than three women in their delegations "proportionally, you win," Walsh said.

Maine's firsts come on the heels of several advancements made by women in politics in recent years. The 2006 election set a record with at least 70 women elected to the U.S. House. U.S. Rep. Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., also became the chamber's speaker.

The momentum carried through to the next election, bolstering Democratic New York Sen. Hillary Clinton's presidential bid and setting her on a path to likely serve as President-elect Barack Obama's secretary of state, which would mark the third time in three administrations that a woman held the post.

While Walsh sees Pingree's election as "another example of the progress we are making," Pingree, a North Haven resident and former head of Common Cause, a citizen activist group, said women can't rest with the victories.

"The truth is we still have a long way to go to have an equal number of men and women" in elected office, Pingree said. So far the results have served to make "it more clear women compete as equals and not a unique member of the gender."

As of last month, women made up just 16.4 percent of the 535 seats in Congress — 88 seats, 72 in the House and 16 in the Senate, according to the Rutgers center. Of those women, 63 are Democrats and 25 are Republicans.

At the state level, the 1,751 women serving in a Legislature amount to 23.7 percent of lawmakers overall. Democrats, at 1,200, greatly outnumber the 537 Republicans and those not affiliated with either party.

Walsh said it's not surprising Maine would be the place to experience so many firsts in a single year, including at the state level, where Pingree's daughter, Hannah, is rising through the ranks.

"You have a long history of women's political participation," Walsh said.

Before reaching the Senate, Snowe served 16 years as a representative from the state's more rural 2nd District. Before Snowe, Margaret Chase Smith, also a Republican, held the seat from 1940 to 1949 and then served in the Senate, becoming the first woman to serve in both houses.

Maine State Rep. Hannah Pingree, a North Haven Democrat, is entering her fourth term. Having served as majority leader, she's poised to become House speaker, which would make her the second woman to hold the position in the state and, she said, one of a dozen or so women to hold the post in any state government.

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Her leadership role will take on even greater meaning, she said, when the Senate votes this week to make State Sen. Libby Mitchell, D-Vassalboro, the body's president. With both houses being guided by women, she said, "it may cause us to focus on slightly different issues."

Women bring a different perspective to governing, whether the issue is health care, home care, elderly care, college affordability and economic development for small businesses, the Pingrees said.

"I think women are going to put those on the front-burner," Chellie Pingree said.

When it comes to international relations, she said, "I think women are more prone to use diplomacy first."

Hannah Pingree said women still generally tend to take on more of their family's responsibilities, like maintaining a budget, and those skills carry over into the political arena.

The Center for American Women and Politics, which conducts scholarly research about women's political participation, ranked Maine as 10th in 2008 when sizing up women's participation in state government.

Ahead of Maine were New Hampshire and Vermont, which had the top rank. But the Green Mountain State is among four states — along with Delaware, Iowa and Mississippi — that have never sent a woman to Congress, according to the center.

In the current Maine Senate, 12 of 35 members, and 46 of the 151 state House members, are women. One has to go back to 1986 to find a time when there were fewer than 10 women in the Senate and back to 1977 when there were fewer than 30 female House members.

There's one area in which Maine is behind its neighbor, New Hampshire, and other states — it's the only state that has not elected a woman as governor.

The Granite State picked Democrat Jeanne Shaheen to be its first elected female chief executive in 1996 (in 1982, Vesta Roy, then Republican Senate president, briefly served as acting governor after Gov. Hugh Gallen died). This year voters made Shaheen the first woman to represent the Granite State in the U.S. Senate.

Combined, the victories made Shaheen the first woman to ever serve in both positions, Bonnie Erbe wrote in a U.S. News blog post.

New Hampshire also made history two years ago after electing U.S. Rep. Carol Shea-Porter, a Democrat, as the first woman to represent the state in Congress.

The Rutgers center ranked the state third in 2008 based on the fact that 10 of 24 senators, including the president, and 140 of 400 House members, including the speaker, were women. Following the November election, the Senate included 13 women, giving it the distinction of being the first such body in U.S. history to have a female majority.

Chellie Pingree said she doesn't expect a crush of women-oriented issues to flood her office more than other proposals. She said she sees her gender being "less about issues" and "more about being a role model."

"I think it's a great inspiration to young women to look at this and say, 'Wow, this is a place for women,'" Pingree said.

The representative-elect knows something about being inspired by women. After all, she may not have sought, and won, higher office if it wasn't for her daughter.

It all goes back to 1991, when the duo ventured off their island community to hear former Colo. Rep. Pat Schroeder speak at a rally. Pingree, who was chair of the local School Board at the time, ran into someone who said the local state Senate seat was opening up.

"I kind of laughed it off," she said.

Then her daughter spoke up.

"It was kind of like having a 15-year-old kid say to you 'What's holding you back? This is something you can do,'" she said.



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