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This Nov. 3, 2008 file photo shows Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, D-N.Y., as she waves while campaigning for Democratic presidential candidate Sen. Barack Obama, D-Ill., in St. Charles, Mo. Depending on your political tastes, Hillary Rodham Clinton, Sarah Palin or even Tina Fey could be considered Woman of the Year. But here's the harder question: Was this the Year of the Woman? (AP Photo/Jeff Roberson, FILE)



A mixed bag for women this election year

By JOCELYN NOVECK – 3 days ago

NEW YORK (AP) — Depending on your political tastes, Hillary Rodham Clinton, Sarah Palin or even Tina Fey could be considered Woman of the Year. But here's the harder question: Was this the Year of the Woman?

Some touted it as such, and in many ways it was a watershed election season: The first viable female presidential candidate — and she almost won. A female vice-presidential nominee — and she was a Republican. And a president-elect who's appointing women to high-profile Cabinet posts and supports family friendly policies.

Yet talk to women's advocates, and you'll get differing views as to just how well things turned out. Some are cheered by the general sense that women are becoming more prominent in the highest echelons of politics. Others are discouraged by what they see as disappointingly slow progress getting women into leadership positions up and down the political food chain.

Such mixed emotions are apparent in the voice of Lois Mickelson, a Florida voter who proudly chose Clinton as her candidate in the primaries, only to see her lose a bruising nomination fight to Barack Obama, then get passed over as his VP pick.

This week, she found satisfaction in seeing Clinton chosen by her erstwhile rival for the plum job of secretary of state. "I was pleased," says Mickelson, 61, a small business owner from Wellington, Fla. But she takes a more measured view of the overall task of getting women into leadership in this country.

"We seem to still be lacking," she says. "It's a very tough road. You need the strength of a samurai warrior. But I hope we are headed in a new direction."

Interviews with several women's advocates yield a consensus on a few points of clear progress. The historic run of Clinton has probably inspired a generation of young women to get involved in politics, says Marie Wilson, president of the White House Project, which trains women to run for office.

Wilson notes that Clinton's perseverance, especially toward the end as she faced defeat, was a source of pride for many. "The fact that she got up every day and worked and kept going was so inspiring to women," she says.

Ellen Malcolm, president of Emily's List, which backs female candidates who support abortion rights, was in New Hampshire the night of Clinton's first primary win.

"I met her on the rope line," Malcolm says. "She said, 'Ellen, do you realize I'm the first woman that's ever won a presidential primary?' We had a big hug. It was a terrific moment."

Even though Clinton ultimately lost, "she was tough, smart and did a phenomenal job," says Malcolm, who feels the election cycle was wonderful for women. "She really did put 18 million cracks in that ceiling."

And Palin? "She may have slipped on some of those pieces of glass," says Malcolm. Some of the Alaska governor's most vocal opponents have gone farther, suggesting she metaphorically plastered over some of those cracks. But however you feel about John McCain's love-her-or-hate-her vice-presidential nominee, many say her presence on the scene signaled progress for women.

"Whatever her qualifications" — and they were hotly debated after those shaky exchanges with Katie Couric, promptly immortalized by Fey — "every time we get a woman in that position, it has the effect of normalizing women in that position," says Wilson.

And we can't forget, she adds, that it was the Republicans who nominated Palin, a party traditionally less supportive of women in the workplace, particularly those with small children. Suddenly the party was defending this mother's ability to balance the job with her family.

"Republicans put up a woman for vice president, and that's inspiring," Wilson says.

Still, overall, she finds the election year was a disappointment for women. Why? Because there was little trickle-down from symbolic gains made on top. In Congress, there was a net gain of one female senator, from 16 to 17. That's a record number, but still a small percentage to those who'd like to see gender parity in the 100-member body. If Clinton is replaced by a man, that gain is gone.

In the House, there was a net gain of three women. The number of female governors — nine — remains the same (and one of them, Arizona Gov. Janet Napolitano, has been tapped to be homeland security chief.) "We're really not moving the dial," says Wilson. At this rate, her group calculates it'll be 2063 before parity is achieved in Congress.

Women's groups do see bright spots: In North Carolina, Beverly Perdue was elected the state's first female governor — and the state retained a female senator when Democrat Kay Hagan unseated Elizabeth Dole. In New Hampshire, former Gov. Jeanne Shaheen defeated Republican Sen. John Sununu.

But overall growth has been very slow, says Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University. Which is why she calls it both an extraordinary year and an ordinary one, too.

The problem, Walsh says, is that when it comes to female candidates, "the bench is very small." And that's significant because Clinton and Palin didn't come from nowhere: one's a senator, one's a governor. "We need more women in the pipeline," Walsh says — especially governors, since so many presidents come from those ranks.

Who are the most promising faces in that pipeline? Among Democrats, Napolitano and Gov. Kathleen Sebelius of Kansas, who chaired the Democratic convention, have dramatically increased their profiles, and there's the just-elected Perdue, as well as Shaheen. Among Republicans, for now, Palin seems to be the new face of the party.

One troubling aspect to this year's race: the perception among so many women that sexism, particularly in the media, is alive and well. They point to caricatures of Clinton as a nutcracker and references to her voice as chalk on a blackboard. They are still galled by the memory of MSNBC host Tucker Carlson saying that when he sees Clinton he reflexively crosses his legs.

As for Palin, she was denigrated, many feel, by references to her looks and descriptions of her as

"hot" — though her opponents argue she helped feed such characterizations by winking at audiences, as during her debate with Sen. Joe Biden.

On the other hand, this may turn out to be the year that launched a real psychological shift, with young people, especially, seeing that a woman can run a hugely competitive campaign for president.

Such an effect is, as yet, incalculable, as is the effect on young blacks of seeing the nation elect its first black president. But there are hints of how this election year may have changed perceptions: In June, two-thirds (67 percent) of adults felt America was ready for a woman president, according to a CNN/Opinion Research Corporation Poll.

That's up from a CBS News Poll in January 2007, a year before Clinton's New Hampshire win, when 54 percent of adults felt that America was ready to elect a woman president.

Also energizing women is the sight of important national security posts going to females — Clinton as the top diplomat, Susan Rice as U.N. ambassador, Napolitano as homeland security chief. What global changes, women wonder, might be in store under their influence?

That's partly why Eleanor Smeal, one of the nation's most prominent feminists, is so optimistic.

"It's a lot more than those 18 million cracks," says Smeal, president of the Feminist Majority Foundation. "It's the perception that women can be anything."