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Women inspired by gains in government

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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 435-member U.S. House, 75 women were elected, an increase of four from the current Congress. The fourth seat was just announced last week when Democrat Mary Jo Kilroy of Ohio was declared winner of what was the longest congressional race of the 2008 political season. The outcome had been stalled by legal issues over provisional ballots.

In the 100-member U.S. Senate, the number of women remained the same at 16. An additional woman was elected but that gain could be lost when Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, D-N.Y., becomes secretary of state in the Barack Obama administration. Some women's groups have urged that a woman be appointed to fill Clinton's seat.

At this rate, it will be 2063 before women gain parity in Congress, according to The White House Project, a nonprofit group that teaches women how to run for office.

But women achieved record numbers in state legislatures, increasing their ranks by 35 to 1,784 lawmakers. Women now make up nearly a quarter of all state legislators.

New Hampshire voters made history by making women the new majority in its 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.

The number of female governors rose and then fell as President-elect Obama announced the picks for his Cabinet. Immediately following the election, it appeared that there would be eight women serving as governors in 2009 — the same as this year. That number increased to nine when New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson was nominated as Obama's Commerce secretary, a move that would elevate Lt. Gov. Diane Denish to the state's highest post. But the number then dropped by one when Arizona Gov. Janet Napolitano was chosen as Obama's secretary of Homeland Security. The nominations must be approved by the Senate.

"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 record is held by President Bill Clinton, who appointed nine women to his 19-member Cabinet during his second term. Obama so far has nominated seven.

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 hold that job was Madeleine Albright, who served in Bill Clinton's administration.

"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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Additional Facts

Cabinet picks

President-elect Barack Obama has nominated these women to serve in Cabinet or Cabinet-level positions:

- Ellen Moran, communications director.
 - Valerie Jarrett, senior adviser.
 - Melody C. Barnes, director of the Domestic Policy Council.
 - Christina D. Romer, chairwoman of the Council of Economic Advisers.
 - Janet Napolitano, secretary of Homeland Security.
 - Susan E. Rice, United Nations ambassador.
 - Hillary Rodham Clinton, secretary of State.
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