

[Back](#)

Article published Dec 21, 2008

Women rule! N.H. Senate hits national milestone for gender

Granted, the words "all men are born equally" were penned June 2, 1784, and since then changes were made to the New Hampshire Constitution to prohibit discrimination, and the section on the Legislature describes the role of its "members."

But maybe, lawmakers say, it's time to update some of the wording nonetheless.

After all, it's women running the show now in Concord, marking the first time in United States history women make up the majority of a legislative body, in this case the 24-member Senate.

"I've been talking about that with a couple other folks so that it is gender neutral," Sen. Kathleen Sgambati, D-Tilton, said of tweaking the document's language. But "all of us have filed our bills this session so I think it may have to wait until next time around when we're not so focused on the budget."

Senate Majority Leader Maggie Hassan, D-Exeter, had a similar opinion.

"Yeah, it probably would be an appropriate thing to do at some point," she said.

Following the November election, when the Senate went from 10 to 13 female members, the milestone has been getting a lot of attention, including from ABC's "Good Morning America."

Of the 13, six hail from the Sunday Citizen's readership area. Joining Hassan and Sgambati are Democratic Sens. Jacalyn Cilley of Barrington, Amanda Merrill of Durham, Martha Fuller Clark of Portsmouth and Deborah Reynolds of Plymouth. Sen. Sylvia Larsen, D-Concord, retained her job as Senate president.

In the House — where women chair 16 of the 22 standing committees — Rep. Terie Norelli, D-Portsmouth, is back as speaker.

The lawmakers say the attention the milestone has received is warranted, but they stress that their focus is on the challenges that await with the revenue-stifled state budget.

"I'm thrilled to death that we've broken that barrier," Cilley said, "and now let's get on to work and stop talking about it."

Hassan also looked to the work ahead.

"The excitement over being the first female majority is also tempered with our own sense that this shouldn't be such a big deal," she said, "and it's also tempered right now by all of our senses that we have issues of historic proportion."

Feelings are mixed or developing on whether the new majority will be more responsive to women's issues. Advocates have pointed to inequities, whether it's a correction system designed for men or that women earn 72 cents for every dollar that men make for comparable work.

There have been gains for women in places like the corporate world, said Sylvia Gale, executive director of the New Hampshire Commission on the Status of Women, "but it's still not equal, and we still have so much more to go, at the very lowest levels of living and the very highest levels of power and authority."

Rachel Roulliard, executive director of The New Hampshire Women's Policy Institute, said the state's public servants are known for putting "the entire needs of the state first." When it comes to whether the Senate's new majority is going to handle things differently, she said, "I think all of us are waiting to see how that plays out."

Hassan warned against stereotyping the ways women may govern.

But, she added, "I do think women historically have been raised to kind of focus on the long-term health and security and well-being of their family ... and I do think we bring that viewpoint to the Legislature, and therein you see it sometimes in the way women work at a particular problem."

Reynolds said there likely wouldn't be "any fundamental, dramatic change" in the state Senate's approach.

"There are more women in the majority who are Democrats and some who are Republicans," she said, "and we're going to continue to have policy differences and things we can come to agree on that cross party lines."

Of the 13 female senators, all but two are Democrats.

For Sgambati, a former deputy state health commissioner, "what's important" is being able to provide schoolchildren with "faces in important positions where they can see themselves in the future."

Merril, entering her first term in the Senate, is the fourth woman to represent her district. The Statehouse isn't new terrain for her after serving in the House for nearly a decade before working in the House majority office the last four years.

"Right from the beginning," she said, "I saw women in positions of power and influence and having a great deal of respect in the House."

New Hampshire women have been blazing trails in the state for decades, setting milestones in and outside the political arena along the way.

Sen. Betsi Devries, D-Manchester, was the first woman to serve as a firefighter in that city before retiring.

Women gained the right to vote across the nation in 1920, and two Granite Staters, Mary Louise Rolfe and Rollinsford native Jessie Doe, immediately sought office through successful write-in campaigns.

A half-century later — in 1971, when there were 70 female legislators — then-House Speaker Marshall Cobleigh appointed a record number of women to leadership posts (five to chairmanships and five to vice chairmanships), likely more than in any other state in the union up to then, according to Virginia Drew, director of the Statehouse Visitor's Center.

There will be 141 women in the House this session, 19 more than the 2005-06 biennium, according to the House clerk's office.

"Percentage-wise, we have that many more seats, so it's easy for us to surpass everyone," Drew said. But "it shouldn't take away from it, because we could just as easily elect men to all those positions."

Across the nation in 2008, women held 425, or 21.5 percent, of the 1,971 state senate seats and 1,325, or 24.5 percent, of the 5,411 state house seats, according to the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University.

Hassan said women's modern ascent in state politics represents a "logical progression" in a small state where face-to-face contact can break through stereotypes and the people's business — government — is largely left to volunteers, especially in the 424-member Legislature where the pay is \$100 a year.

Members of the "new female majority" say they didn't end up in office because of their gender, but rather because of individual merit.

"I didn't run as a woman. I ran as a candidate," Cilley said.

In the Statehouse, Cilley's walk to the Senate chamber brings her past the portrait of fellow Berlin native Hilda Constance Frederika Brungot, the late lawmaker who followed her father into the Legislature and served more than 40 years in the House, beginning in 1931.

She remains the state's longest-serving female lawmaker, Drew said. But insiders and historians also may remember her as the woman who — near the end of her term, when she was in her 80s — lost her coveted aisle seat after whacking a male counterpart over the head with her cane because he betrayed her on a retirement issue.

Recalled as "peppery and argumentative," Brungot's pioneering ways crossed gender lines, as detailed in the millennium edition of "The New Hampshire Order of Women Legislators." When legislators' work began to drag into the summer heat, the book says, she motioned "to allow them to shed coats," not to mention allow smoking to begin at "high noon" when the House was in session.

Cilley said she carries a touch of regret when it comes to Brungot, as Cilley at age 19 or 20 rented a small, second-floor apartment from her, but never picked her brain about the job she'd come to hold.

"I wished we spent hours talking," Cilley said.

Following lawmaker's swearing-in ceremonies Dec. 3, Hassan was home when she became struck by the screensaver on her 15-year-old daughter Meg's computer screen. It said, "She's trying to save the world and maybe she will."

"It's totally normal to her that her mother is a politician, a state leader," Hassan said. "It doesn't occur to her that this is a little unusual."
