

Monday, Dec. 22, 2008

RULES OF THE GAME

Long Road Ahead For Women Seeking Office

DESPITE GAINS MADE IN 2008, THE CAROLINE KENNEDY SENATE DRAMA REVEALS OBSTACLES LEFT TO BE OVERCOME

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by [Eliza Newlin Carney](#)

Caroline Kennedy may or may not succeed **Hillary Rodham Clinton** in the U.S. Senate next year. But in one respect, Kennedy is already walking in Clinton's shoes: Her campaign to convince New York Gov. **David Paterson** to tap her for Clinton's soon-to-be-vacant seat has pushed gender politics front and center yet again.

Women had much to celebrate and to bemoan in this election, say political observers. "2008 was extraordinary, and in some ways painfully ordinary," said **Debbie Walsh**, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University's Eagleton Institute of Politics.

Kennedy is arguably no less prepared for public office than a long list of men who entered politics after careers in professional sports.

On one hand, the candidacies of Clinton and of GOP vice presidential candidate **Sarah Palin** made history, drawing national attention to women voters, to media coverage of female candidates, and to work/family issues. As Walsh put it: "Gender was front and center from beginning to end."

On the other hand, despite some significant female gubernatorial and Senate wins, the number of women serving on Capitol Hill will increase by only a handful in the next Congress. And in the state legislatures, the percentage of seats held by women will jump by only a small fraction -- from 23.7 percent to 24.2 percent, [according to a report](#) [PDF] by Walsh's organization.

"We saw, ultimately, very little change in the numbers of women holding office pre- and post-election," Walsh said. At this rate, she added, "It's going to be a long time before we see anything resembling parity in the House of Representatives or the U.S. Senate."

Of course, the debate over whether Kennedy should succeed Clinton is not just about gender. It's about the political and class privileges that come from being a Kennedy. The daughter of former president **John F. Kennedy**, Caroline Kennedy would hold the seat held by her late uncle, **Robert F. Kennedy**. If appointed to succeed Clinton, who is President-elect **Barack Obama's** choice for Secretary of State, Kennedy would have to seek election to serve beyond 2010.

"It's a unique situation," said **Ellen Malcolm**, president of EMILY's List, the political action committee that supports Democratic women in favor of abortion rights. "And obviously Caroline Kennedy, as a Kennedy, is a unique figure on the political scene."

But the question invariably arises, as it did during the presidential race, whether Kennedy faces a different standard because she is female. Her work as a lawyer, author, philanthropist and public education advocate arguably makes her no less prepared for public office than a long list of men who entered politics after careers in professional sports. (Ex-Sen. **Bill Bradley**, D-N.J., who sought the Democratic presidential nomination in 2000, comes to mind, as does former Rep. **Jack Kemp**, R-N.Y., who also ran for president and was GOP nominee **Bob Dole's** running mate in 1996.)

Yet Kennedy has faced persistent questions about her qualifications. It's a common problem for women whose unpaid community service work counts for little when they seek political or even professional posts, noted Walsh: "What she's confronting is a real challenge that women do face, [which] is that the experiences that women bring are not seen as valuable."

Debates over double standards are obviously subjective, particularly when it comes to media coverage. But recent polling data show that average women, when asked about how Clinton and Palin were treated by the media, overwhelmingly perceived an unfair bias.

Seventy-one percent of women in a [recent Lifetime Networks survey](#) said that it was easier for a male candidate to be covered seriously by the media. The survey of 600 American women was conducted Nov.

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"Women in our survey said it's definitely harder to be a woman candidate," said Lifetime senior vice president of public affairs **Toby Graff**. "[Respondents said] women get different scrutiny, they're not taken as seriously, and the attention they receive is different and not necessarily fair."

From Malcolm's perspective, media coverage of the race included "shockingly old-fashioned, sexist attacks." Her group ginned up **thousands of e-mails** to MSNBC after commentator **Chris Matthews** used words like "she-devil" and "witchy" to describe Clinton. Matthews ultimately apologized on the air.

Still, Malcolm pointed to important gains in 2008: Women won tough gubernatorial races in North Carolina and Washington state, as well as four Senate contests (including two challengers). Eleven new women were elected to the House, though with retirements and defeats their overall numbers will increase only from 71 to 75.

The number of women in the Senate will either remain steady or increase from 16 to 17, depending on who replaces Clinton. Other female contenders for her post include Reps. **Carolyn Maloney** and **Kirsten Gillibrand**, both Democrats.

And a substantial gender gap helped land Obama in the White House: exit polls show he won women by 56-43 percent and men by 49-48 percent.

Women's biggest challenge as candidates, Malcolm said, remains the power of incumbency, and the absence of open seats. Electing women to office is "a very slow process... because the odds are stacked against putting any newcomers into top office," she said. "It's a closed system."

Little wonder that Kennedy is lobbying so hard to fill out Clinton's term.