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Opinion

## Women are underrepresented in Congress

Story by Lauren Russell | February 11, 2009  
*Montana Kaimin*

Amid all the excitement of our new president shopping for the new first puppy, grooving to the tunes of Mary J. Blige and fighting to keep his beloved Blackberry, I almost forgot about a surprising headline a friend e-mailed me right after the election: "Record Numbers of Women to Serve in Senate and House."

According to the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP), "More women than ever will serve in both houses of Congress" in the 111th Congress, which convened in January. And the percentage of congressional seats that women now hold is?

Seventeen.

After a historic presidential election, featuring the first major black male candidate, the first major female candidate and the second woman ever to run for vice president, we ended up with a piddly 17 percent female representation in Congress — 17 women in the Senate and 74 in the House.

The approximately 150 million women in this country are currently represented at the federal level by 91 of 535 seats.

Before I get too disparaging of these "record numbers," I should note that these races were significant. CAWP director Debbie Walsh said, "Many women were nominated for winnable seats, so more women won. Along with incumbents seeking re-election, we saw women contending for competitive open seats and challenging vulnerable incumbents. This year, women were positioned for success, not merely offered up by parties as 'sacrificial lambs.'"

At the state level, 73 women hold statewide elective executive offices across the country; women hold 23.2 percent of the 314 available positions. The percentage of women in state legislatures is at 24.3 percent. We have eight female governors.

During much of the two-year presidential campaign, I found myself questioning just why it had taken us, the country that declared its independence under the creed "All men are created equal," almost 233 years to see such a "historic" race featuring — gasp! — two women.

Other developed nations have relatively long histories of female leaders, notably India with Indra Gandhi, who served as prime minister twice (one time included three consecutive terms) before her assassination in 1984, and current president Pratibha Patil, and Britain with Queen Elizabeth, Queen Victoria and Margaret Thatcher. Women currently lead twelve countries — including Germany, The Philippines, Latvia, Argentina, Bangladesh and Liberia — some of which have societies where women certainly enjoy fewer opportunities and freedoms than American women.

Some would probably argue that the low representation of women in higher office is partly due to a lack of capable, competent women who choose to run for office. But it's not that we lack these women. With more women than men now enrolled in college, there are plenty of smart women out there.

We need to encourage an environment in which women want to run for office and do so as contenders, not just "sacrificial lambs" put out for the sake of running a woman. While Hillary Clinton opened the way for more little girls to dream of one day being president, hopefully a few more will dream of being senators or representatives, allowing more female voices to be heard at the national level.

For all the hype over 18 million cracks in the glass ceiling (referring to Clinton's supporters), until we have around 267 cracks in the U.S. Capitol, we still have a ways to go.

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