

Why GOP is trending away from women in state legislatures

A study shows that the percentage of women in the Republican caucuses of state legislatures is shrinking – a concern, since statehouses develop political talent for the national stage.

By **Linda Feldmann** | Staff writer/ July 20, 2009 edition

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Ask a Republican strategist to name the party's rising female stars, and chances are you'll get a sigh. There just aren't that many.

What's more, one key part of the GOP's farm team of female political talent is shrinking. Since 1995, the percentage of women in the Republican caucuses of state legislatures has been steadily declining – from 19.1 percent to 15.8 percent today, according to the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University.

Democratic women, by comparison, have been steadily rising as a percentage of their party's state legislative caucuses, from 22.2 percent in 1995 to 31 percent today. Just 21 years ago, in 1988, Republican women were slightly ahead of Democratic women in their respective state legislative party caucuses – 16.4 percent versus 15.3 percent.

"Women are having a pretty tough time within the Republican Party," says Debbie Walsh, the center's director.

The question is: Why? Research indicates that Republican women in state legislatures tend to be more politically moderate than their GOP male colleagues, says Ms. Walsh.

As the two main parties have grown increasingly polarized, some Republican women have looked at the political landscape and seen grim prospects in the primaries, which can be low turnout affairs dominated by the most committed (read conservative) voters. So some women just opt not to try.

Another cause could be term limits. When state legislative term limits started going into effect in 1996, some political observers thought they would benefit women, as more seats opened up. But in fact, women legislators themselves have been forced to give up their seats because of term limits and have not been replaced by women at the same rate.

In Ohio, the number of Republican women in the state House has gone from 14 to six since term limits took effect in 2000.

"Women have got to step forward; they can't wait to be asked to run," says Jo Ann Davidson, former speaker of the Ohio House and former co-chair of the Republican National Committee.

“They don’t have enough self-confidence, they’re not willing to take the risk, quite frankly, and it may not be the right time in their lives,” says Ms. Davidson, who has worked for years to recruit and train GOP women to run for office.

Another new factor may be the “Clinton-Palin” effect. In their recent runs for national office, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin both underwent withering personal and at times sexist attacks in the media.

Susan MacManus, a political scientist at the University of South Florida in Tampa, says she has heard younger women say they don’t want to run for office after what Secretary Clinton and Governor Palin went through.