

THE GRANITE STATE'S NEW, SOFTER LOOK

Even the women who planned to take the majority in the New Hampshire Senate were surprised by the outcome.



Senate Majority Leader Margaret "Maggie" Hassan says she was surprised how well women did in last fall's election.

BY GARRY BOULARD

The unprecedented sweep of women elected to the New Hampshire legislature last fall, giving them for the first time in history a majority in the state Senate, came as a surprise even to those who were trying to encourage more women to run for what is known as the General Court.

"It didn't occur to us until late last summer or early fall as we were looking over our slate of candidates that we had so many women and could very possibly end up with

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a majority in the Senate," says Senate Majority Leader Margaret "Maggie" Hassan. "We knew we had done well, but we didn't know how well."

The number of female legislators in the Senate went from 10 to 13, two more than their male counterparts.

"It very much came as a surprise, even though we thought it could happen," says Senate President Sylvia Larsen, who credited voters for recognizing the abilities of women.

"I hope that someday having a female majority like this may not be newsworthy, but will be accepted the same way that President Obama is accepted for his abilities and

not his race," she says. "We hope we will be seen for our agenda and not our gender."

OUT IN FRONT

The victory of the female candidates put New Hampshire in the forefront of states with elected female leaders. With a woman in the U.S. Senate, one in the U.S. House and 144 of 400 in the House, women now make up 37 percent of New Hampshire's elected leadership.

Only two states have a higher rate of elected women: Colorado at 39 percent and Vermont with 37.2 percent.

"It is a victory for New Hampshire to be in this category," says Debbie Walsh, the director of the Center for American Women and Politics. "But it is important to remember that New Hampshire is also a state that has historically elected women in very large numbers and high percentages to its state legislature. With the exception of 2001 and 2006, New Hampshire has always been in the top 10 in terms of its rank in the percentage of women serving in the legislature."

The female takeover of the Senate also had much to do with which way the political winds were blowing in New Hampshire last fall. Democrats from Obama on down swept the state, and because there were a lot of Democratic women on the ballot, that helped, too.

"It's true that our state has always had a high percentage of women in the legislature," says House Speaker Terie Norelli. "But it is also true that the Democratic caucuses in both the Senate and House have a higher percentage of women than the Republicans. So when the Democrats became a majority, the women in both chambers rose to leadership positions."

Already included in that leadership is Representative Mary Jane Wallner, first elected to the House in 1980. The executive director of the Merrimack County Day Care Services, Wallner has long been known as a hard



HOUSE SPEAKER
TERIE NORELLI
NEW HAMPSHIRE

worker and consensus-builder. In December 2006, Norelli named Wallner House majority leader.

That selection surprised many, including Wallner. "It's not a role I've ever thought of myself in," she says. "The microphone is not my strong point."

Even so, Wallner jumped into her new role enthusiastically, telling the *Concord Monitor* that she particularly wanted to make new legislators feel welcomed in the House, so that "they'll get as much enjoyment and feel as successful as I have over the years."

CONSENSUS APPROACH

Since the election, the female-led Senate has tackled a variety of issues, but perhaps none as controversial as allowing same-sex marriages in a late-April vote. The vote was close, 13-11, and may have hinged on a late compromise that made a distinction between civil and religious ceremonies. A revised version of the bill passed both chambers in June, and was signed by Governor John Lynch.

That distinction was the product of Larsen's approach to building consensus through long hours of discussion.

"From the start, we created an agenda of what we wanted to accomplish, and we really worked to accomplish that," says Larsen. "We spent a lot of hours in caucus working on developing and sharing different ideas and getting to the point where we agreed on what our major issues would be."

Larsen approached the same-sex marriage issue in much the same way. "We were extremely cautious about what we were doing," she says. "Polling helped some members feel more comfortable, but it was not until the night before the vote that we found a compromise people thought would honor various religious opinions while also recognizing and eliminating discrimination."

That approach won the favor of Senator Sharon Carson, a Republican who appreciates what she describes as the "collegial atmosphere" in the New Hampshire Senate.



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"It does feel like we are working together," says Carson.

BALANCING ACT

The legislative work ethic fits with what women seem to do naturally, believes Carson. "Look at women in their everyday lives. We are all multi-taskers. Many of us have jobs while we are in the legislature, and we are either parents or grandparents. We balance our legislative duties along with our work and family. Women are good at doing that."

On the day of the same-sex vote, Renée Loth, columnist for the *Boston Globe*, wondered if the New Hampshire legislature was taking on such issues as same-sex marriages and, in the House, allowing the use of medical marijuana, because women had risen to leadership positions in both chambers. Women are more interested in such issues as "funding programs for children, the environment, and health care," wrote Loth. "Men are more libertarian, tending to be skeptical of government solutions and protective of individual rights."

Norelli is not so sure. "It's hard to say. But

it's true that a lot of what women do revolves around being the primary caregivers in our families. We are the ones involved in our kids' education, taking family members to the doctor and so on.

"So some of the issues that we are focused on might have more to do with caring about other people. That's a reflection of our realm of experience or the realm that we operate in on a daily basis."

But Carson cautions that as more women win legislative seats, they will represent an increasingly wider spectrum of interests. "I've seen it already: There are women who are involved in social issues," she says. "But you would be surprised at the number of women who are very interested and active in fiscal issues."

Either way, Hassan thinks the number of women elected to statehouses both in New Hampshire and elsewhere is going to grow, largely because of party recruiting efforts designed to get more women to run.

"I think it is generally true that women become involved in running for elective office only when they are asked," she says. "Men tend to volunteer to run for office or assume that it may be something that they want to do."

"Other states and entities might look at whether they are fostering an environment where women feel that they should run and can run and are being asked to run."

When and if that happens, says Hassan, "the number of women in the process can only increase."

