

Election 2010: Women rise to the challenge

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Nearly two decades after 1992's historic election in California of two women to the U.S. Senate, an unprecedented crowd of well-funded, viable female candidates for statewide office aims to make 2010 another Year of the Woman in state politics.

In California - which has produced the first female House speaker, Nancy Pelosi, Sens. Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer, and 20 women in Congress, nearly half the state's delegation - the bumper crop of women in next year's election have names like Meg, Carly, Kamala and Michela.

The presence of these women on the 2010 statewide ballot, complete with seasoned campaign teams and enough money to make them formidable, represents a change for both major parties and could alter the political landscape here for years to come.

"We think of California as a cutting-edge state, and you lead the pack in a lot of things. Certainly, in terms of the number of women in Congress, that's not even debatable," said Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University, which tracks female political candidates and their progress nationwide.

Recruitment

Walsh said next year's ballot is especially impressive because "it's harder to recruit women to run for office - and the party structures on both sides aren't doing as much recruitment as they should. Men wake up in the morning and say, 'I'd be the best legislator California has ever seen.' And women need to be encouraged."

On the GOP side, gubernatorial candidate and former eBay CEO Meg Whitman and U.S. Senate candidate and former Hewlett-Packard CEO Carly Fiorina, both groundbreakers in corporate America, aim to break new ground in their party - which has never nominated a woman for either office in California.

On the Democratic side, the pack includes San Francisco District Attorney Kamala Harris, a candidate for state attorney general; Los Angeles Supervisor Janice Hahn, who has an exploratory committee to run for lieutenant governor; and San Francisco Supervisor Michela Alioto-Pier, who is running for state insurance commissioner.

Secretary of State Debra Bowen, a Democrat, says what California voters see in 2010 may represent the long-hoped-for "generational change" in gender politics.

Bowen recalls how her own rarefied status - as one of just six women ever to be elected to statewide office - was brought home at her 2007 swearing-in, when she was surrounded by past and present statewide elected officers. She had "the only bright suit" in a sea of dark male attire.

Money and culture

Money, as much as culture, is still to blame for what remains of the considerable hurdles to women seeking higher office, Bowen said.

Studies show that "women are actually much more self-critical on making the decision on whether to run or not," said Bowen. "And while they think about it, the gentleman they're running against - who never gave it a thought - has already raised half a million dollars."

Republicans Fiorina and Whitman are in high income brackets and in the position to self-fund their campaigns.

Many women who are Democrats say they're surprised - and even disappointed - that their party doesn't have a woman competing in the 2010 gubernatorial race, after the historic 1992 elections of Feinstein and Boxer as well as two races where female Democrats were nominated for governor, Kathleen Brown in 1994 and Feinstein in 1990.

"It's remarkable that everyone who has the possibility has declined, except the gentleman who's made it his lifelong occupation," former state Sen. Carole Migden said of Jerry Brown.

Migden said many women still hope that a female candidate with strong political backing will jump into the Democratic race for governor. "It's getting late, but it isn't insurmountable," she added. "We're all seeing Jerry has some money, and it's a door No. 1 choice. But there may be people who want door No. 2."

Unique challenges

Democratic pollster Ben Tulchin said the women on the 2010 ballot will face some unique challenges. Fiorina, should she beat Assemblyman Chuck DeVore in the June primary, could face a brutal first: an all-female U.S. Senate race against Boxer, who's been very successful in cultivating women's support.

Harris will get kudos because she's the sole woman in the pack of attorney general candidates, Tulchin said, and get brickbats because voters have favored male candidates deemed "tough on crime" for that job.

Walsh of Rutgers said no matter the outcome of next year's races, women are increasingly seeking political office.

"What you have at play here is some positive fallout of term limits," she said. "You see women in state legislatures or county government who are termed out, and what not too long ago could seem like a risk is now an opportunity.

"They can't stay where they are," Walsh said, "and they have got to move on."

Women to watch in next year's elections

Some key female candidates for statewide office in 2010, along with their opponents in the primaries:

Republicans

Meg Whitman: The former eBay CEO is running for governor against former South Bay Rep. Tom Campbell and Insurance Commissioner Steve Poizner.

Carly Fiorina:

Hewlett-Packard's former CEO is running for U.S. Senate against Assemblyman Chuck DeVore of Irvine.

Michelle Park Steel: The member of the state Board of Equalization from Palos Verdes (Los Angeles County) and the state's highest-ranking Republican woman will seek re-election to the state tax board.

Democrats

Kamala Harris: San Francisco's district attorney faces a crowd of men seeking nomination for attorney general and, if elected, would be the first woman, African American and Indian American in the job.

Janice Hahn: The Los Angeles city councilwoman has formed an exploratory committee to run for lieutenant governor, a job held by Democrat John Garamendi until his election this month to the Bay Area's 10th Congressional District.

Gloria Romero: The state senator from Los Angeles aims to become the state schools superintendent, a non-partisan office with high visibility.

Michela Alioto-Pier: The San Francisco supervisor is running for insurance commissioner against former Assemblywoman **Patty Berg** of Humboldt County.

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