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Women leaders gain ground in NJ politics

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New Jersey inaugurated its first lieutenant governor, Kim Guadagno, yesterday but that was just one of a few firsts this year for women in state government.

While the spotlight may be on the state's executive branch now, women made strides in the state's legislature also. Assemblywoman Sheila Oliver, D-Essex, took office last Tuesday to become the state's first black female and second overall female speaker of the Assembly, while Rutgers School of Law-Camden graduate Senator Barbara Buono, D-Middlesex, rose to a position as the legislative body's majority speaker. "To have women in such significant leadership roles really marks a change in politics in the state of New Jersey," said Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at the Eagleton Institute of Politics.

The state now ranks 16th in the nation in terms of the percentage of women serving in state legislature, she said.

"When I think of 1776 to the year 2010, and I represent only the second woman given the opportunity to exert leadership, I think that says something very significant about our state and access that has been denied to women," Oliver said.

Although she has only been in office for one week, the assemblywoman already has an idea of what she would like to see for the future of the state. Job creation will be among her top legislative priorities.

"There are too many New Jerseyans out of work," she said. "As a result of that, businesses can't expand and grow."

Having women in top positions in government will change the focus of the legislation in New Jersey.

"[Women] do bring a different perspective to the process of making policy and the process of governing," Walsh said. "We would expect to see that these women will bring some different issues to the agenda."

CAWP research has shown that women in government tend to hold issues affecting women, children and families as priorities, she said. They also value transparency in government, which Walsh said CAWP will be looking out for as Oliver and Buono progress in their offices.

Although the top executive office is now held by Republican Gov. Chris Christie, there should be a "healthy back and forth" between the executive and legislative branches, Walsh said.

Democrats make up the majority of the state legislature, but they will still have to cooperate with the Christie administration if they expect to make progress, Oliver said.

"We are all going to be placed in a forced partnership with one another," she said. "It's going to force compromise, it's going to force give-and-take."

Getting more everyday citizens involved in politics is also important to Oliver.

"I would like to encourage more young people to get involved at the community level," Oliver said. "When you don't have full citizen participation, you have a handful of people who control, make laws and influence the destinies of everybody."

She mentioned local government bodies and boards of education as good places for interested young people to start.

Sidrah Sheikh, a School of Arts and Sciences junior, said though she tries to follow politics closely and knows of many female mayors, she was unaware that women had such prominent roles in New Jersey.

"I think it's good [that women are more involved in government], but I still don't like the fact that they don't get that much publicity ... You should hear about them more," she said.



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