

Attitudes toward women in N.J. politics are changing

By Peggy Ackermann/Statehouse Bureau

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Star-Ledger File Photo

Former New Jersey Governor Christie Whitman unveils the gubernatorial portrait of herself in June 2001 that hangs in the State House.

When future Gov. Christie Whitman wanted to run for a Somerset County freeholder seat, Republican Party screeners asked about her education.

It didn't take a diploma to figure out she needed to be more qualified than the men who also wanted the party's nomination in that 1982 race.

"I was the only one who was asked whether or not I had a college degree," Whitman recalled. "It wasn't until after I got on the board that I realized there was only one other member of the board — they were all men — who had a college degree. And in fact, a couple of them had never gone to college. And yet for some reason, it was important that I have a college degree."

She won that seat, and 11 years later, Whitman was elected governor. Her political upswing began the way most do in New Jersey — school boards and municipal and county governments are largely the farm teams for higher elective office.

Scads of women now hold those local posts, though far fewer have won seats beside men in the state Senate and Assembly — and none currently sits in Congress, where only a handful of women have served since 1960. Despite those slower gains, two of the state's top four jobs — Assembly speaker and lieutenant governor — are now held by women.

Interviews with some of New Jersey's most powerful women, past and present, and research show attitudes about women in politics are changing, though women in office say they often are undervalued and underestimated. Female legislators in the state have united their efforts, bonding across party lines to form a women's caucus.

"There has been a concerted effort to identify and recruit more women to run for office at every level in New Jersey,"

said Deborah Walsh, director of Rutgers University's Center for American Women and Politics. "This kind of change doesn't just happen."

Up and downs

New Jersey ranked 15th nationally for its percentage of female lawmakers when members of the current 214th Legislature, including 34 women, took their seats in January, Walsh said. That was a drop from the 11th place the state held in the previous session, but up from the 43rd spot it occupied in 2004.

"If you had told me four years ago that we would be 11th or 15th, even though we were 43rd, I'd say, 'You're crazy,'" Walsh said. "But here we are."

There is, of course, the other side of the statistics: Though they compose a little over half the population, women make up only 28.4 percent of the Legislature. Breaking it down, the 80-member Assembly is 32.5 percent female, with 26 women, and the 40-member state Senate is 20 percent, with eight, Walsh said.

For their part, male party leaders have been gravitating toward the electability of women in races from school boards on up, and two of the male candidates in the last gubernatorial contest chose female lieutenant governor running mates.

"It's extremely important to me to see the ranks of women grow," said Sen. Loretta Weinberg (D-Bergen), who lost her bid last fall for the lieutenant governor's job. She recalled judges in the '90s — not so long ago — telling domestic-violence victims to "go home and be nice to your husband."

Whitman, who now runs a consulting firm, said party leaders pay lip service to the need to run women candidates, "but they're still not convinced." She didn't get the attention of men in her party until she nearly toppled former Sen. Bill Bradley (D-N.J.) in 1990. That made many of them more enthusiastic about backing her gubernatorial bid in 1993. She doesn't necessarily think men's motivations are anti-woman, however.

"You tend to go to your buddies, your people that you're comfortable with, that you know, that you have a beer with. And you don't have a beer with the ladies," she said. "They're still not looking at it from what's the best thing to represent the district. Some of them are enlightened and are doing a good job of recruiting women, but there's still not enough of those."

The experiences of other women illustrate how slowly political equality can evolve.

In 1972, freshman Sen. Wynona Lipman (D-Essex) began a 27-year tenure that ended with her death in 1999. She was the chamber's first female African-American member and just the third woman to hold a Senate seat in modern times.

When Lipman arrived in Trenton, there were no ladies' lavatory facilities for her in the Senate chamber. The other senators didn't consider installing a restroom, so while they had a private men's lavatory, Lipman had to leave the chamber and use a public bathroom down the hall. That wasn't convenient, or always simple.

"She had to run the gantlet of lobbyists ... the citizenry," said Jeffrey Laurenti, now director of foreign-policy programs for the Century Foundation in New York, but back then an aide to Sen. Joseph Merlino (D-Mercer).

Ten years later, Rep. Millicent Fenwick (R-5th Dist.) lost her chance at a Senate seat when her opponent convinced enough voters she was too old to sit in it. Fenwick was 72 at the time. The 58-year-old candidate who won, U.S. Sen. Frank Lautenberg (D-N.J.), took some geezer flak when he ran for re-election three years ago at age 83, but it didn't stick at the polls. Now recovering from stomach cancer, Lautenberg says he's planning to run again in 2014.

An era of change

In Whitman's administration in the next decade, every top policy-making post was held by a woman at one time or another, and she also named Deborah Poritz to be the state's first female attorney general and first state Supreme Court chief justice. The governor's choices did not go unnoticed among 1990s male politicians.

"Very early on, the men started muttering about the Estrogen Palace," Whitman recalled. Then there was the running commentary on her tweed wardrobe and never-mussed hair.

"There were times when you sort of thought, at least I did, that I was running for prom queen instead of CEO of a state of 8 million people," she said. Once she was referred to as "clearly a Tom Kean in pearls."

"I just never wore pearls again," Whitman said.

Senate Majority Leader Barbara Buono (D-Middlesex), the first woman to hold that post, and Lt. Gov. Kim Guadagno, the state's first lieutenant governor, both said wardrobe and appearance actually can work in women's favor.

"People tend to underestimate women, and I think the important thing is to use that to our advantage," Buono said.

She said she was nearly passed over to head the powerful Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee in 2008. There was a deal, but despite her work ethic and seniority, she was not part of it. Not about to be sidelined by the guys, Buono said she lobbied Senate members and fought it out. In the end, she became the committee chairwoman and this year traded up, leaving that post for the majority leader's job.

"It just was an excruciatingly long and torturous process," Buono said of the battle to chair the budget panel. She said she learned to be tough early on and cited two occasions when men tried to persuade her not to run for a seat one of their cohorts coveted. In one case, "five labor guys" paid her a visit to make their request. Buono wished them well and turned them down flat.

"You can't focus on them or dwell on them," she said of arm-twisters.

Guadagno, who was Monmouth County's first female sheriff, agreed with Buono, a fellow attorney.

"Oh, that happens all the time," she said of both the political and prosecutorial worlds. "It's not a bad thing, let them underestimate you.

"Imagine what the organized crime figures thought when I walked into the room to prosecute them," Guadagno said. If they thought she was a pushover, they soon learned otherwise. "They went to jail."

Best seat in the house

This year, Assembly Speaker Sheila Oliver (D-Essex) got to put her name on the best seat in the lower house. She may have been in the right place at the right time, but she said there also was something else at play.

"I was prepared," Oliver said.

It was actually a handful of men who vaulted her to her leadership position in a power grab that put Senate control in the hands of a southern New Jerseyan and gave northern New Jersey the Assembly leadership as a consolation prize. The deal made Oliver, the first African-American woman to preside over the Assembly, the third most powerful person in state government.

And yet, "even though we are in the year 2010, I believe women continue to be viewed differently in politics," she said.

"I had to have the executive director inform the men that I would prefer if they would not address me as 'dear,'" Oliver said soon after becoming speaker. Referring to her predecessor, she pointed out, "they didn't call Joe Roberts 'dear.' "

Elected officials, Walsh and Joseph Marbach, a political scientist at Seton Hall University, all agreed women bring different experiences, perspectives and problem-solving skills to legislative debates. Oliver, for example, has fought for housing and educational opportunities for the disadvantaged. Noting her background, Marbach suggested those with political laryngitis might now find they have a voice.

"I think the interests of women and minorities will be elevated," he said.

Walsh said women are more likely than men to think government should be more transparent and inclusive — two themes Oliver addressed when she took her oath of office. She also said national research shows female legislators are more likely than their male counterparts to work on legislation that affects women and children. It's not that men don't

care, Walsh said, but rather the perspective women bring.

Weinberg, who began her career in the Legislature as an assemblywoman in 1992, remembers "drive-by deliveries" and the fight she and then-Assemblywoman Rose Heck (R-Bergen) led to get a law Whitman signed to end 12-hour hospital stays for new mothers and their babies. Their strategy was unquestionably unique to New Jersey politics.

"Rose and I would do a duet," Weinberg said. "We would use words and we'd kind of drag them out, 'breaaast-feeding, bleeding.' "

"The guys would be shifting in their seats," she recalled. Then they'd give in. "Whatever you want — just get out of here and stop describing it to us."

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