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Michigan women try to break U.S. House barrier

Only 7 have represented state since 1837

DEB PRICE

Detroit News Washington Bureau

Washington -- Connie Saltonstall is working to become a member of one of the state's tiniest clubs: Michigan women elected to the United States House of Representatives.

The former Charlevoix commissioner is one of six female candidates in the midterm elections vying to succeed or unseat male congressmen in the state delegation.

If any win, it would be a rare victory. In a state that has a woman governor, senator and secretary of state, and has put women in other statewide and local leadership positions, voters have sent only seven to the House since its first congressman, Isaac Edwin Crary, was officially recognized in 1837.

That lack of representation means most Michigan women -- who make up 51 percent of state residents -- rely on men in the House to voice and fight for issues, such as women's health, federal money for day care and battered women's shelters and pay equity.

Women can bring a valuable perspective to a male-dominated House, the state's female members of Congress say, offering different experiences from the work force or as moms, wives and caregivers to elderly parents.

Saltonstall agrees.

"I have always believed it isn't enough to just complain about government," said Saltonstall, who is competing to fill the northern Michigan seat being vacated by Rep. Bart Stupak, D-Menominee.

She decided to run after Stupak threatened to derail health care legislation over abortion. "I felt like I had to stand up," said the 64-year-old mediator and abortion rights supporter.

This year, Michigan has three open seats. Four women and 22 men are running for those seats.

In addition, two women are challenging male incumbents in two other districts.

Republican Linda Goldthorpe, a 50-year-old attorney in McMillan, is also running for Stupak's seat; Lake County Commissioner Nicolette McClure, a 63-year-old Democrat, is running to fill the seat being vacated by Rep. Pete Hoekstra, R-Holland; and Louise "Ellie" Johnson, a 48-year-old Republican, is hoping to fill the seat open due to the retirement of Rep. Vern Ehlers, R-Grand Rapids.

Republican Pauline Montie, a 63-year-old businesswoman, is trying to unseat Rep. John Conyers, D-Detroit, and Democrat Natalie Mosher, a 66-year-old former teacher from Canton, is challenging Rep. Thad McCotter, R-Livonia.

The two women in the state's 15-member House delegation, Reps. Carolyn Cheeks Kilpatrick, D-Detroit, and Candice Miller, R-Harrison Township, are running for re-election. The deadline for candidates to file is Tuesday.

Mosher sees politics as a natural step for women, who, whether by nature or nurture or a mix, often enjoy giving back to the community and being of service.

"To me, running for Congress is the best way to give back to the community I care about," she said.

McClure believes women are the best advocates for issues disproportionately affecting women and children.

"You don't get good legislation to support the needs of women and children without women at the table," she said.

Goldthorpe, however, doesn't see her campaign as a boost for women.

"The fact that I am a woman has nothing to do with why I'm running," she said. "I don't really think of myself as a woman. I think of myself as a constitutionalist."

Training women

To help get women into office, the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University in New Jersey created the bipartisan "Ready to Run" program, an annual one-day training and recruitment effort. A decade ago, that state ranked 43rd in the number of women in its state Legislature. Today, it's the 14th, and one-quarter of the women elected went through the "Ready to Run" program.

"We find and recruit women," said "Ready to Run" program manager Jean Sinzdek, adding the center is launching the program in Michigan. "And we put pressure on party chairs and other movers and shakers to work to get more women in

office."

Of the women running in the open seats, Saltonstall may have the best shot, having gotten in early and pulling in big donations from national women's groups. The others face headwinds, such as little money and name recognition, or, in the case of McClure, running as a Democrat in a heavily Republican district.

Since it's extremely difficult to oust incumbents, who are re-elected more than 90 percent of the time, it's likely that if men win in the three open seats that they'll hold the seats for many years, said Jennifer Lawless, director of American University's Women and Politics Institute.

Lawless says her research unearthed a new gender gap -- in political ambition. As she puts it, "men tend to have it, and women don't."

When women run for political office, they are as likely to win as men, research shows.

But women are less likely to run, even those in the highest rungs of the professions that tend to produce the nation's politicians, according to a survey by Lawless and Loyola Marymount University political scientist Richard L. Fox of more than 2,000 men and women professionals.

Michigan trailblazers

That finding doesn't surprise Cheeks Kilpatrick, who traces her political career to "wanting to have a bigger impact."

She went from teaching high school business classes to serving in the state Legislature before heading to Congress.

"In the state House, you can help quicker. In the Congress, you can help bigger," she said about why she's running for her eighth term in November.

That desire to make an impact is also what drew Miller into politics. But women often are held back, she found when she was asked to recruit Republicans for office in 2008.

When Miller reached out to women, she realized their biggest obstacles were aversions to splitting family time between Washington and home and raising money for themselves.

The concern about the distance between Washington and home may explain why Michigan has seen breakthroughs for women in high elective offices that don't require constant out-of-state travel.

Miller said that influenced her decision. She held off running for the House until her daughter was a young adult.

Stabenow, a member of the Michigan congresswomen's club by virtue of having served in the House from 1997 to 2001 before moving to the Senate, says she's found women tend to get into politics because of a burning issue, not the title. For her, it was a fight to keep open a nursing home serving low-income seniors.

"My advice to women is, 'Don't wait to be asked.' Women have tended to sit back and help men get elected.

"And my second piece of advice is, 'Don't undervalue your experiences.' Being a mom can be one of the best experiences because you care that the schools are great and the streets are safe."

Additional Facts

Women from Mich.

Seven women have been elected from Michigan to serve in the U.S. House of Representatives:

Ruth Thompson, R-Whitehall, 1951-57

Martha Wright Griffiths, D-Detroit, 1955-74

Barbara-Rose Collins, D-Detroit, 1991-97

Lynn Rivers, D-Ann Arbor, 1995-2003

Debbie Stabenow, D-Lansing, 1997-2001

Carolyn Cheeks Kilpatrick, D-Detroit, 1997 to present

Candice Miller, R-Harrison Township, 2003 to present