

Despite Haley victory, no SC 'Year of the Woman'

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COLUMBIA -- It's easy to look at Rep. Nikki Haley's demolition of her three male rivals and pair South Carolina with California, which saw two female business leaders win GOP primaries for U.S. Senate and governor.

The common thread is bright red: Both Haley and California's GOP Senate nominee Carly Fiorina saw their popularity climb after former GOP vice-presidential nominee Sarah Palin endorsed them. But it is premature to say the year of the woman has dawned in the Palmetto State.

When women lost on Tuesday, they lost big.

Consider Eleanor Kitzman, the lone woman in the four-way lieutenant governor's GOP primary who came in last, as did Christina Jeffrey, the only woman in a five-way contest for the 4th Congressional District.

In the race to succeed retiring Rep. Don Smith, R-North Augusta, Dea Baldwin scored less than half what her male rival won for the open seat. And in another Aiken County race, Susan Swanson attracted less than half of the 72 percent support garnered by Rep. Roland Smith, R-Warrentonville. Across the state in Horry County, Mande Wilkes, a Republican woman, lost by 9 points to incumbent Rep. Nelson Hardwick.

Some women lost by smaller margins.

In Beaufort County, Kate Keep came in last in a three-way race for Hilton Head Island's 123rd House district seat, though her 31.4 percent support was just a hair under the lesser of the runoff candidate's 33.6 percent of the vote.

It's unclear how big a role gender played in the election, amid the insider hype of anti-incumbent vitriol, the power of the Tea Party, the effects of a Mark Sanford endorsement versus the endorsements from former state first lady Jenny Sanford and Palin, both which are widely said to have boosted Haley to victory.

Haley received 49 percent of the vote and faces U.S. Rep. Gresham Barrett, who collected 22 percent, in the June 22 GOP runoff.

If Haley becomes the Palmetto State's next governor, it will be a first for the state. But South Carolina would need a much greater shakeup than anything the November election could deliver before the state could shed its boys' club reputation.

South Carolina ranks last in the nation for the number of women who hold elective office, according to the Center for American Women and Politics. There are no women serving in Congress, in statewide elected executive position, or in the S.C. Senate. Of 124 S.C. House lawmakers, 17 are women.

Among those 17 seats, Rep. Rita Allison's isn't changing hands.

The Lyman Republican easily fought off challenger Abe Mills, for the 36th S.C. House seat. And Republican Sheri Few received 59 percent of the vote to opponent Tony Lamm's 41, in a race to challenge the Democratic incumbent, Rep. Anton Gunn of Columbia.

In April Few had linked Gunn with President Obama while campaigning on the state Capitol grounds alongside Haley and the S.C. Policy Council's leader Ashley Landess. Few's victory suggests that for women, alliances and endorsements could be especially critical.

In mid-May Haley campaigned with Palin and former Jenny Sanford, events that marked a turning point in Haley's then-underdog campaign.

In at least two federal races, gender and coattails can be safely counted out as any significant variable in the outcomes.

In the 3rd Congressional District race, Jane Dyer, who was the Democratic nominee in 2008, defeated Brian "Ryan B" Doyle, a convicted felon who had sued the S.C. Democratic Party for allegedly thwarting his political ambitions.

In the U.S. Senate race, incumbent Jim DeMint, whose ultra-conservative credentials have earned him national fame since he began speaking out against President Obama, crushed Susan Gaddy.

For women candidates who weren't jettisoned Tuesday, the June 22 runoff offers hope.

Elizabeth Moffly faces Mick Zais in the Republican runoff for superintendent of education. Zais beat Moffly 26-19 percent in the Tuesday vote. And in the 6th Congressional District primary, Nancy Harrelson, one of two women in a three-way race, will compete in a Republican runoff with Jim Pratt.

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