

No new dawn for women in politics

By **Jennifer L. Lawless**, Special to CNN

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Whitman, Fiorina, Lincoln, Haley won primary elections Tuesday
- Jennifer Lawless: It's good to celebrate victories of women in politics
- She says it's not a huge milestone since women are still severely under-represented
- Lawless: Political parties must systematically recruit women candidates

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Editor's note: Jennifer L. Lawless is Associate Professor of Government at American University, where she is also the Director of the Women & Politics Institute. She is co-author, with Richard L. Fox, of "It Still Takes A Candidate: Why Women Don't Run for Office (Cambridge University Press 2010." She ran in the 2006 Democratic primary for the U.S. House of Representatives in Rhode Island's second congressional district.

Washington (CNN) -- Today's newspapers, websites, and cable news programs imply that yesterday's election results signal remarkable progress for women in politics.

Referring to the victories of Meg Whitman, Carly Fiorina, Sharron Angle and Blanche Lincoln, CNN.com ran the headline, "Women Win Big in Tuesday Primaries." MSNBC.com followed suit, flashing across its homepage, "It's Ladies Night at the Ballot Box." The Washington Post ran a story entitled, "Women Triumph in Races Across the Country." And the Daily Beast summarized last evening's events by concluding that "Women Rule Primary Night."

It is the dawn of a new day, one in which both Democrats and Republicans understand the importance of electing women.

Except that it's probably not.

I am all for celebrating women's political progress and electoral fortunes. And I have no interest in minimizing the successes several women saw last night. Nikki Haley, a Tea Party candidate, overcame scandalous rumors and advanced to a runoff election which will be held in two weeks. If she wins the race -- and many expect that she will -- then Haley will be very well-positioned to become South Carolina's first female governor.

Meg Whitman, the former CEO and president of eBay, spent \$71 million of her own fortune to defeat Insurance Commissioner Steve Poizner in California's gubernatorial primary. Pollsters and pundits expect a tight general election race between Whitman and Attorney General Jerry Brown.

Whitman is the underdog, but if she wins, then she, too, will become her state's first female governor. Blanche Lincoln's surprising victory over Arkansas Lt. Gov. Bill Halter brings the U.S. senator one step closer to holding onto her Senate seat (although she still faces an uphill general election battle against Republican John Boozman). And there is no question that [Carly Fiorina](#) and Sharron Angle will give the incumbents they seek to defeat -- U.S. Sens. Barbara Boxer and Harry Reid -- much to worry about between now and November 2, 2010.

These women, however, represent only a fraction of the total number of candidates seeking positions of political power. Yet their famous faces tend to obscure, at least in part, women's severe numeric under-representation in U.S. politics, as well as their prospects for major political gains in November.

In the 111th Congress, 83 percent of the members of the House of Representatives and U.S. Senate are men, [according to](#) the Center for American Women and Politics. The numbers are not much better at the state level, where more than three-quarters of state legislators across the country are men. Currently, men also occupy the governor's mansion in 44 of the 50 states. And they run City Hall in 93 of the country's 100 largest cities. Although 2010 will likely see a lower-than-usual incumbency advantage, the overwhelming majority of incumbents -- most of whom are men -- will still win.

The successful candidacies of women such as Haley, [Whitman](#) and Fiorina also make it easy for us to forget that Democrats and Republicans do not shoulder an equal burden for the dearth of women in politics. Sixty-nine Democratic and 21 Republican women hold seats in the U.S. Congress. This means that 77 percent of the women in the U.S. House and Senate are Democrats.

Sixty-nine percent of female state legislators across the country are Democrats. Moreover, whereas Democrats have experienced steady increases in the number of women in most elective offices, Republicans have not. In fact, more Republican women served in state assemblies -- which are key launching pads to higher political office -- in 1989 than do today. Even in the 2010 election cycle, Roll Call reports that the National Republican Congressional Committee is running women in only three of its top 30 races.

Certainly, we should not minimize the fact that last night's female candidates fared quite well. Nor should we overlook the fact that [more women](#) are running as Republicans than we have seen in the last few election cycles. But we should also not overstate the prognosis for women's representation in the fall.

The few high-profile women who made it through last night's primaries are necessary, but insufficient to generate any semblance of gender parity in U.S. politics. It takes a candidate for any one woman to get elected to office. But it takes forward-thinking, vibrant, inclusive political parties to engage in the systematic recruitment that is necessary for women to make substantial gains.

The opinions expressed in this commentary are solely those of Jennifer L. Lawless.

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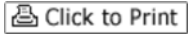
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