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Women candidates play major role in 2010

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Female candidates may be poised for a better-than-average general election season this year after women walked away with some of the top wins in this week's primaries, experts who study women in politics say.

Women candidates won in key states Tuesday, including in South Carolina, where Republican state lawmaker Nikki Haley advanced to a runoff for governor despite allegations of infidelity, and in California, where two wealthy businesswomen won GOP nominations for governor and Senate.

Females typically run as outsiders because there are fewer women officials, says Marie Wilson of [The White House Project](#), a non-partisan group dedicated to advancing female leadership. In a year when voters are clamoring for anti-establishment candidates, that could mean "a great season ahead for women," she said.

"These women may be the change [voters are] looking for," says Debbie Walsh, director of the [Center for American Women and Politics](#) at Rutgers University.

Of course, all of the women candidates who won this week face a long road to November. Haley must fend off Republican Rep. Gresham Barrett in South Carolina's June 22 runoff. In California, Republican Meg Whitman faces Democrat Jerry Brown in a gubernatorial race the Cook Political Report calls a toss-up.

Wilson said one significance difference this year has been the rise of the self-funded female candidate. Whitman and Carly Fiorina, who won the GOP Senate nomination in California, spent millions of their own money on the race. That "hasn't been a model for women" in the past, Wilson says.

[Women currently hold 90 seats in Congress](#) – 17 in the Senate and 73 in the House -- or just under 17% of 535 seats, according to Walsh's group. Seventy-two women hold statewide office, including six governors, four attorneys general and 12 secretaries of state.

With so many women running strong campaigns, it may inspire more women to get involved in politics, Walsh says. "If women don't see women in politics," she said, "they can't imagine themselves doing it."

(Reported by Naomi Jagoda)

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