

Long way to go for women in politics

By **TOM BALDWIN** • STAFF WRITER • June 20, 2010

In 1776, New Jersey gave women the vote. In 1807, New Jersey took it away.

Too many women, it seemed, had been voting. At least that was the thinking in the Legislature, which was all male.

Such a reversal underscores the state of women in New Jersey politics today. Women have made decided gains. But they say they have miles to travel, and their gains may be imperiled.

They are in leadership positions in the state Legislature, a presence they have never had, and the state has had a female governor, Republican Christie Whitman. Control of the powerful party organizations is shifting, albeit haltingly, more toward women. Plus, the newly created lieutenant governor's post is filled by a woman.

But there are no women in the state's 15-member congressional delegation to Washington, though there have been in the past. And on the municipal level, only 14 percent of the state's 566 municipalities have female mayors.

To take a snapshot of where women are today in New Jersey politics is to see them ascending, in some cases dramatically, especially since New Jersey ranked so poorly in electing women just a few years ago.

"We are doing better today than we have in a long time. The trajectory is going in the right direction," said Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University. "Only a few short years ago, New Jersey's Legislature was one of the worst in the nation (43rd in 2004) for women's representation," said Walsh. "Today, we're one of the top 15 states. This is a stunning improvement."

New Jersey now ranks 11th in the nation in the proportion of women in the Legislature — 10 women in the Senate and 27 in the Assembly, or 30.8 percent of the 120 legislators. Nationally, 24.3

percent of all state lawmakers are women, said Walsh.

Sheila Oliver, D-Essex, this year became the second woman to serve as the Legislature's Assembly speaker. Kim Guadagno, running on the ticket with Gov. Chris Christie, was elected the state's first lieutenant governor. State Sen. Barbara Buono, a Democrat from Metuchen, is currently the first woman to serve as Senate majority leader and chair of her party's caucus.

The caucus is a time-honored, secret meeting in which a party's lawmakers go into a room, shut the doors and then argue among themselves in ways they would never want voters to know about.

Because Buono, a lawyer and mother of four, runs the caucus, she has a major say in the real legislative process, where party members decide in private what measures they will even allow to be discussed on the open floor.

"I run the meeting," said Buono, who added it sometimes helps in her caucus gatherings that she has experience as a mother instructing her children, among other things, "not to talk over one another."

"We've really made some advances. But it's hard to get too excited when there are no women among the congressional delegation and we have had no (female) U.S. senator. Obviously, we have a lot more work to do."

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It is hard work, politicians and analysts agree, because many women make families their top priority. Some have jobs on top of their elected offices. To top those obligations off with a run at politics is like adding a third or a fourth job, they say.

"It definitely takes a toll on your family," said Buono.

"A lot of women who are in office tell us what they really wished they had was a wife," joked Walsh — someone to pick up the dry cleaning, taxi the kids around and make the appointments at the dentist and doctor.

"It is complicated for women," she said of females in elective office, "It can take full time to do it."

Assemblywoman Linda Greenstein, a Democrat from Plainsboro, works full time in a Legislature where the positions are officially termed part time.

Greenstein, like many women in politics, quit her law career to make time for politics, serving on the Plainsboro Township Committee and the West Windsor-Plainsboro Board of Education.

"Women continue to be the primary caregivers in the family," said Republican state Sen. Jennifer Beck of Red Bank, who won her seat by defeating a woman, Democrat Ellen Karcher, who had defeated former Senate President John Bennett in 2003.

"In New Jersey, we see more and more women running for elected office. I see more women taking on the challenge," said Beck, who asks school-agers if they might expect to one day run for elected office. "Just as many young women raise their hands as men. They almost think you are silly for asking."

But while women are making inroads for elective office, the ranks of the political kingmakers remain dominated by men. "It's been tough getting the party bosses, who are usually males, to see that women can be strategic," said Ingrid Reed, a political scientist at Eagleton.

"We are rare," stressed Peg Schaffer, party chair of the Democratic organization in Somerset County, which is staunch GOP country.

Women head up county Democratic committees in

Burlington, Union, Hunterdon and Somerset counties, and the Republican county committee in Sussex — five of 42 in all.

Peter Barnes, a retired FBI agent, state legislator and state Parole Board chairman, recalled his first venture into state politics in 1996. He ran with Buono, who had already served in the state Assembly and had municipal experience on the Metuchen Borough Council.

"I was impressed with her ability, and I saw it in other women. They have a lot of empathy," said Barnes. "Some of us men might take a harder approach, where some of the women might take a more sympathetic view."

Unlike some states, New Jersey allows the governor to appoint the entire cabinet. This means no aspirant, aside now from the lieutenant governor, has a chance to gain any name recognition by running for statewide office.

What does the future hold?

Buono and Beck are mentoring women to go into elected politics. Walsh has a program at Rutgers that does the same. In a first for Trenton, there is now a formal women's group of lawmakers from both parties — the Women's Legislative Caucus.

"It's about women in the pipeline," said Walsh, lamenting the small percentage of towns represented by female mayors, which she calls particularly poor for such a progressive, well-

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educated state.

"It's a very closed club," Walsh said of the county chairpersons, who select positions on the ballots and often pick the candidates themselves.

Diane Allen, R-Burlington, the state Senate minority leader, takes the long view. "Until our legislative leaders are reflective of the people we represent," she said, "we won't have the kind of democracy we are promising. We are still not where we need to be."

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