

Women pounding on governor mansions' glass ceilings

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By Mary Ann Chastain, AP

South Carolina Republican candidates for Governor, Rep. Nikki Haley, R-Lexington, left, and U.S. Rep. Gresham Barrett look at a monitor as they are asked questions during a televised debate in Columbia, S.C. Thursday, June 17.

governor, including [California](#), [New Mexico](#) and [Minnesota](#). Currently, six women — three Democrats and three Republicans — serve as governors.

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In South Carolina, Haley beat four-term Rep. J. Gresham Barrett in a runoff election for the GOP nomination Tuesday. Haley will face Democratic state lawmaker Vincent Sheheen in November in the race to succeed Republican Gov. [Mark Sanford](#), who is term-limited.

"South Carolina just showed the rest of the country what we're made of," Haley said after her victory. "It's a new day in our state, and I am very blessed to be a part of it."

The prevalence of female candidates for statewide office has been a defining narrative of the 2010 election season, particularly for Republicans. There are 13 GOP and 10 Democratic women running for Senate, according to the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) at Rutgers.

"Part of it is timing and history," said [Meg Whitman](#), a Republican who is running to be California's first female governor. "You've got a generation of women coming of age (who) are now engaging in the political process."

Women in charge

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WASHINGTON — As she begins her general election race for [South Carolina's](#) top statehouse job, Republican [Nikki Haley](#) is part of a group of candidates this year who are simultaneously pursuing another goal: to be their state's first female governor.

Women are running to break the political glass ceiling in eight states that have never had a female

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Thirty-one women have served as governor in 23 states, according to CAWP. If at least three of them win in the November elections, a majority of states would either have a woman in the governor's mansion or have had one in the past.

Debbie Walsh, the center's director, cautioned against putting too much stock in such benchmarks, though. New female governors may be elected this year, but three are retiring or face term limits, including [Jodi Rell](#), R-Conn.; [Linda Lingle](#), R-Hawaii; and [Jennifer Granholm](#), D-Mich.

The percentage of women holding statewide executive offices has declined from 28.5% in 2000 to 22.9% in 2009, according to the center's statistics.

"Having so few at any one time is part of the challenge," Walsh said, noting that statewide elected positions can serve as launching pads for presidential campaigns. Case in point: [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) ran for president in 2008 as a Democratic senator from [New York](#).

What's significant about 2010, Walsh said, is that "we are seeing more Republican women stepping up and taking the risk." In the past, she said, female GOP candidates have been more moderate than their male counterparts. This year, a fresh brand of female conservatives is having more success in primaries.

Several of those candidates, including Haley, have been endorsed by former Alaska governor [Sarah Palin](#).

"Most of these women are not just Republicans, they are conservative Republicans," said Marjorie Dannenfelser, president of the [Susan B. Anthony List](#), which supports female politicians who oppose abortion rights. "This is the moment to seize because the environment is right," she said.

Plenty of Democratic women also are taking a stab at being their state's first female governor, including Florida's chief financial officer, [Alex Sink](#), and state lawmaker Elizabeth "Libby" Mitchell, who is running in Maine.

[Diane Denish](#), who was elected New Mexico's first female lieutenant governor in 2002, is now seeking the state's top job. She said the number of women running nationwide "sends a great message to

women and girls that anything is possible."

Because her Republican opponent, Susana Martinez, is also a woman, the state is guaranteed to make history. In a statement, Martinez said she appreciates the "historic significance of this election, as well as the elections taking place in other states."

Many of the female candidates, including Whitman and Martinez, have downplayed the gender issue in their own campaigns — arguing that it doesn't matter whether a man or woman is victorious, as long as whoever takes the job gets results.

"That, to me, doesn't matter as much," said Sarah Franks, a 34-year-old teacher who voted for Haley, but not because she's a woman. "I mean I think it's neat, but that doesn't matter as much as just getting some new blood in the system."

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