

Women advancing in politics

Emily Wagster Pettus • July 20, 2010

American women have exercised the right to vote for nearly 90 years, but politics is still mostly a man's game in Mississippi.

Chalk it up to the culture, and to family considerations. Women still run for office here in smaller numbers, and some have a tough time raising money to be competitive.

The most successful female politicians in Mississippi have been single or divorced. Many others have had no children or very young ones - or their kids have grown up and moved on to college or careers.

"I was of the generation that we had to wait until our children were raised," said Democratic state Rep. Diane Peranich of Pass Christian, who was first elected in 1987, when the youngest of her four sons was in his late teens.

Mississippi, Delaware, Iowa and Vermont are the only states that have never sent a woman to the U.S. House or Senate, according to the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University.

Mississippi has never had a female governor, and it has elected only two women as lieutenant governor.

The state now ranks 47th for the proportion of females in the legislature. Alabama is 48th, Oklahoma is 49th and South Carolina is 50th - but South Carolina has a woman running for governor this year.

During the four-year term that started in January 2008, four women are in the 52-member Mississippi Senate and 21 are in the 122-member House. That's 14.4 percent in a state where females comprise 51.5 percent of the population. This is the highest percentage of women in the Mississippi Legislature to date.

One of the nine Mississippi Supreme Court justices is a woman. Two women serve on the 10-member Court of Appeals.

Five supervisors are elected in each of Mississippi's 82 counties. Only seven of the 410 supervisors are

women, with one each in George, Hancock, Harrison, Hinds, Jefferson Davis, Pike and Tallahatchie counties

Women have a somewhat stronger showing in municipal government. Republican Mary Hawkins Butler is a longtime mayor of Madison. Democrat Heather McTeer Hudson is in her second term as mayor of Greenville, and Democrat Connie Moran is in her second term as mayor of Ocean Springs.

The 19th Amendment, giving women the right to vote, was added to the U.S. Constitution on Aug. 26, 1920. Nine days later, on Sept. 4, Mississippi's most successful female politician was born.

Evelyn Gandy grew up in Hattiesburg, earned a law degree and, as a Democrat, was elected to the state House, as state treasurer and as insurance commissioner. She won the lieutenant governorship in 1975 and served one term before running unsuccessfully for governor in 1979 and 1983. She died Dec. 23, 2007.

Amy Tuck, a Maben native, was born in 1963, elected lieutenant governor as a Democrat in 1999, switched to the Republican Party in December 2002 and won a second term in 2003. Tuck was limited to two terms, and while she didn't run for office in 2007, supporters say she hasn't ruled out another run for office - possibly governor - in the future. Now 47, Tuck is special assistant to the president of MSU.

Mississippi didn't bother to ratify the 19th Amendment until March 22, 1984. By then, of course, the ratification was only symbolic because the amendment had been the law of the nation since 1920, when it was ratified by three-fourths of the states.

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