



## On Leadership



### PostLeadership

Real-time ideas from Jena McGregor for leading in a changing world

#### Oklahoma's governor race: Cracks in the glass ceiling

In a week filled with a massive leak of classified documents and a change at the helm of the company that's been disastrously spilling barrels of oil into the Gulf of Mexico, the race for governor of Oklahoma might not seem like big news.

But it is, for the simple fact that for only the fourth time in U.S. history, according to the Center for American Women and Politics, two women are running against each other for the highest elected post in their state.

The first occurred in 1986, when Republican Kay Orr defeated Democrat Helen Boosalis in Nebraska. In 2002, Republican Linda Lingle defeated Democrat Mazie Hirono in Hawaii. And in New Mexico, Democrat Diane Denish and Republican Susana Martinez will also face off this November.

Compare that to CAWP's list of woman-versus-woman U.S. House races, and the difference is striking. In 2008 alone there were 10 races in which a woman was assured a seat in the House of Representatives. And since 1944, there have been a total of 114 such contests, not including the four woman-versus-woman 2010 House races at last count. Clearly, women are more likely to run for, and win, House and Senate seats than find themselves in their state's executive office. There are currently six female governors, or 12% of the total; meanwhile, 17% of both the U.S. House and Senate are women. (Of course, there were eight female governors until Kathleen Sebelius of Kansas left for the Obama administration and Sarah Palin decided to quit her job.)

One might conclude that it's simply a numbers game--of course, there are far more Congressional and Senatorial contests than Gubernatorial ones, which makes it more likely there would be more women in the race. But our traditional beliefs about leadership style, and about the types of leaders that women are, surely play a role too. As Jill Lawrence reports on Politics Daily's Woman Up, Representative jobs--which include lots of collaboration, teamwork and negotiation--are considered a better fit for women than the buck-stops-here chief executive role, which voters have more traditionally reserved for men.

Such stereotypes are an unfortunate reality, one that will only evolve as more women reach not only the Governor's mansion, but the corporate C-suite and director's chair in nonprofit organizations. There may be a grain of truth to the idea that women, on the whole, are more collaborative leaders than men. But perhaps what needs to change isn't women's leadership styles, or even our biases about them, but our stereotypes about the executive role. Who says governors can't be good collaborators, too?

While we're talking stereotypes, let's hope the Oklahoma race, along with the other six woman-versus-woman 2010 races, doesn't devolve into a catty caricature. Unsolicited advice to Fallin and Askins: Be sure and check your mics before you comment on your opponent's hair.

By Jena McGregor

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