

Women out-vote men, but men still in charge

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SARITA CHOUREY

Michelle Fee did not waste time.

"I registered the moment I turned 18, as soon as possible," said the Berea College senior from St. Augustine.

Registering to vote was a given: Her friends were into politics, her sisters had set an example, and her mother had asked her if she planned to vote in the next election.

But not all young women are as eager to exercise their 19th Amendment rights as Fee, and some are unfamiliar with what it took to win those rights.

"So few have any idea," said Shauna Shames, who taught courses at Berea College in Kentucky and had Fee as a student.

"They're stunned when I show them 'Iron Jawed Angels,'" said Shames, referring to the 2004 film about the women's suffrage movement in the early 1900s. The title comes from the violent force-feeding of women who staged a hunger strike while incarcerated for their activism.

Maybe some young women don't fully appreciate the history. But they seem to appreciate the right itself. In fact, young women out-vote their male counterparts, contributing to a long-term trend of women across age groups surpassing men.

In 2008, a full 67 percent of voting-age women were registered, compared to 62.6 percent of men. As for casting ballots: 60.4 percent voted, compared to 55.7 percent of voting-age men, according to U.S. Census data.

It's not just the blue-haired set, either. It's Fee and her friends, too.

For voters 18-24 years old, the gender gap stretched wider: 47.7 percent of women versus 41 percent of men.

Looking back as far as 1964, data show that women topped men for the first time in 1980 by 0.3 percent and have been gradually increasing their lead since then.

So if more women voters hit the polls, then why aren't more women candidates winning?

Women make up 16.8 percent of the current Congress, 12 percent of governorships and of 24.5 percent of state legislators, according to the Center for American Women and Politics.

Bald-faced discrimination is probably not the culprit.

Scholars and campaign managers may have a single story to tell about their brush with the legendary voter who refuses to support a female candidate on the basis of gender alone.

By the same token, women voters, who have been carved into "soccer moms" and other blocs, do not vote for women for that reason only.

In the presidential election, 56 percent of women voted for Barack Obama, compared to 49 percent of men, despite the option of electing the nation's first female vice president by supporting Republican John McCain and running mate Sarah Palin.

Take Fee, who says gender "doesn't really matter" when it comes to her election-day decisions.

"I would like to see more women in office, but I would definitely like to see more feminists in office," she said.

"You can have a woman candidate who is not supportive of women's issues," she added, calling Palin an example.

Some female candidates, such as Republican gubernatorial nominee Nikki Haley of South Carolina, shun targeted efforts to increase women's leadership presence in government.

In May Haley had benefited from Palin's endorsement and "Mama Grizzly" campaign of promoting like-minded female candidates. But in July Haley declined to sign a pledge from a bipartisan women's group to "make an active effort to seek out and appoint qualified women" if elected governor in November. Her Democratic rival Vincent Sheheen signed the pledge.

Experts say one of the central reasons women are underrepresented in elected office is not so much a lack of ballot-box support.

"The real problem, the bottleneck, is not voters," said Shames, who is earning her Ph.D in American Government at Harvard University.

"It's that women aren't running. We have a stall in the pipeline."

Some say a key deterrent is the hype about how merciless the political process is on women candidates. The result: The voters, both men and women, have fewer to vote for on election day.

"The perception of gender bias is probably a very important impediment," said Jennifer Lawless, director of the Women & Politics Institute at American University.

"The rational response to that perception is not putting themselves in the race."

She said when high-profile women like Hillary Clinton lose an election, it sends an erroneous message that even a woman who seemed to have every advantage will be rejected by voters.

"What most people, even potential candidates don't realize is that when women run, they win," said Lawless.

Another force that higher female voter participation can't scratch is incumbency. The process itself favors the status quo: entrenched male candidates who already occupy the office.

Men have historically held elected offices, and the electoral system makes them tough to dislodge.

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