

'Beyond gender, to agenda'

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In a few months, Oklahomans will know who their first woman governor is going to be.

The historic election between two female contenders represents just the fourth time in U.S. history that two women have faced each other in a gubernatorial contest.

Does that mean it's "the year of the woman" in Oklahoma? Not necessarily. While Oklahoma has come a long way in shattering that political glass ceiling, we still have a long way to go.

One good thing about two women being the top contenders in the governor's race, among many, is this: It could mean, ironically, that this election won't be about gender.

"In many ways gender is removed from this election. We won't be asking, can a woman lead, does she have the emotional fortitude to lead; those questions are removed," said Sheryl Lovelady, director of Women's Leadership Programs at the Carl Albert Congressional Research and Studies Center at the University of Oklahoma. In that role, she coordinates programs that aim to address the historical under-representation of women in politics and public service. She also serves as a political consultant.

With two women running against each other, "we won't have that discourse about the first woman running for governor, so we can actually have a discussion about their management styles, and they do have different management styles," she continued.

With Oklahoma in poor and even worsening shape on many fronts - the well-being of children, the flagging economy, educational challenges, among others - Lovelady believes the electorate may not be too tolerant of negative campaigning.

Since these two candidates haven't shown a propensity - at least yet - to be very negative, maybe voters will be treated to a campaign about the issues for once.

So far, so good.

When it comes to lesser offices, Oklahoma women also made a better-than-usual showing this election season. Two women will face each other for state superintendent of public instruction: Democrat Susan Paddock and Republican Janet Barresi. Dana Murphy already has been re-elected to the Corporation Commission. And, incumbent Insurance Commissioner Kim Holland will face the winner of the Republican run-off for that post in the November general election.

While that sounds like a good showing - and it is - the historical record puts it in perspective. In Oklahoma history, only 11 women have held statewide elective office - and four of them are in office now. Not so great considering the state is more than a century old - and that women have had the right to vote now for 90 years.

What's more, only two Oklahoma women, including Fallin, have served in Congress. None has served in the Senate.

Moving down to the legislative level, the field of candidates was again encouraging, but again, there's more to the numbers.

This year, 35 women filed for legislative office: four Democrats and four Republicans for Senate posts, and 14 Democrats and 13 Republicans for the House.

Lovelady believes the almost-equal showing of Democrats and Republicans is a healthy sign - a trend toward more of a "balance in the political landscape."

But Oklahoma is far from achieving gender balance in the state Legislature. In fact, compared to other states, we've lost ground in recent years.

According to the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University, Oklahoma ranks 49th out of the 50 states in terms of female legislative membership.

The 17 women in the 149-seat state Legislature account for only 11.4 percent of the total makeup.

That's far better than the 4 percent female membership of the 1970s, but not as good as the nearly 15 percent level a few years ago.

The fact women have historically fared so poorly in politics in Oklahoma might seem surprising in light of the fact most likely voters are women: an estimated 53 percent.

But several factors are at work. Women are less likely to run for office, for several reasons, so women voters usually don't have many of their own to vote for. And, women typically aren't heavily recruited to run for office, though that might be starting to change.

Would it make much difference to have more women officeholders? There's reason to think so.

Women are more inclined to push legislation promoting economic security, safety, health care and other issues important to families. Women also may be more likely to focus on building consensus and minimizing partisanship - although the partisanship problem seems just as prevalent among some women these days as it is among men. Let's hope catching up with men doesn't mean women have to behave like them.

With the ranks of female officeholders still so small, we can't know how different government could be with more women in leadership - and won't until those numbers reach significant levels. Then, and only then, will the voting public be forced to, as long-time women's rights activist Marie Wilson puts it, "look beyond our gender to our agenda, and that would take the focus off hair, hemlines and husbands."

Associate Images:



Oklahoma Lt. Gov. Jari Askins (left), the Democratic candidate for governor, and U.S. Rep. Mary Fallin, the Republican candidate for governor, wait to speak to a business forum in Oklahoma City. SUE OGROCKI/Associated Press file

