

The women's vote: The first 90 years

Published: Thursday, August 26, 2010, 6:24 AM



Star-Ledger Editorial Board



Library of Congress

Suffragists march for women's right to vote on Pennsylvania Ave. in Washington, D.C., March 3, 1913.

On this date in 1920, American women were granted the right to vote when the 19th Amendment was certified as part of the U.S. Constitution. But a little-known fact is that women in New Jersey were able to vote if they met certain criteria (like owning property) in 1790. It was a brief moment of civic glory. Voting rights were yanked from them in 1807 and women didn't enter the voting booth again until 1920.

Once women got the vote, getting them elected to public office became the new goal for many women's organizations. Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University for almost 30 years, oversees the center's 2012 Project, a national nonpartisan campaign to encourage women 45 and older to run for office. Walsh spoke with Star-Ledger editorial writer Linda Ocasio.

Q: What's important for young women today to know about the suffragists — the women who were on the front lines to get voting rights?

A: What's forgotten now, 90 years later, is that a long and hard-fought struggle was necessary to gain the vote. Suffragists marched, chained themselves to the White House gates, went to prison, fasted and were force-fed to get the right to vote.

Q: How do women vote, compared to men?

A: Since 1980 women have been voting at consistently higher rates than men, and more likely to prefer Democratic candidates. When Christie Whitman ran for governor, there was a gender gap, but it benefited Jim McGreevey.

Q: Why do women generally prefer Democratic candidates?

A: Women overall feel more economically vulnerable than men — they're paid less and have less money saved for retirement, and are more likely to feel they will need the safety net government can provide, whether it's Social Security, Medicaid or family leave. The philosophy of the Democratic Party is more aligned with the preservation of that social safety net.

Q: You are particularly encouraging older women to run for office. Why is this group so important?

A: Women over 45 are the most ready talent pool of potential female candidates. They're typically at the top of their professions, have fewer family responsibilities, are more likely to be financially stable, and have deeper roots in their communities.

Q: Why 2012?

A: Following the 2010 Census, every congressional and state legislative district in the country will be redrawn, and new and open seats will be created. Reapportionment creates opportunity, and we know women have more success winning open seats.

Q: Has New Jersey made progress in electing more women to office?

A: We have made progress at the state legislative level, moving from being in the bottom 10 in the nation for the percentage of women serving in our state Legislature, to 14th in the nation. We now have eight women among the 40 state senators, and 26 women among 80 members of the Assembly.

Q: What has happened to improve those numbers?

A: There have been many efforts by many organizations and individuals around the state to increase the number of women in elective office. I am proud that one of the major efforts that has made a difference is the center's own "Ready to Run" bipartisan campaign training for women candidates. It has raised the visibility of women's candidacies and has launched many successful political careers at the local and state legislative level.

Q: New Jersey has had Christie Whitman as governor and now Kim Guadagno as lieutenant governor. What are the other significant milestones for women in the state?

A: It's significant that for the first time we have a woman serving as Senate majority leader (Barbara Buono) and the first African-American woman speaker of the Assembly, Sheila Oliver. Oliver is only the second African-American woman in the history of the United States to serve as a speaker.

However, we have no women in our congressional delegation and women make up only 14 percent of New Jersey's 566

mayors.

© 2010 NJ.com. All rights reserved.