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## A Slowed Climb Past the Glass Ceiling

By Bob Benenson, CQ Weekly Senior Political Analyst

When [Lisa Murkowski](#) conceded defeat at the end of August, she gave political analysts plenty to talk about: The breadth of a populist backlash that has now denied seven incumbent members of Congress renomination; the depth of the tea party movement's clout; and the influence of [Sarah Palin](#), who backed Joe Miller's long-shot bid for the Senate Republican nomination in Alaska.

Murkowski's loss also has an important impact on the world of gender politics. It provides the latest and most damaging rebuttal to expectations that 2010 would be remembered politically as the Year of the Woman II — or at least as the Republican Year of the Woman, a counterpart to the historic and mostly Democratic surge of women winners in 1992.

That was the way it appeared just three months ago when, on just one day in June, women took first place in four especially bruising Republican primaries: former Hewlett-Packard executive Carly Fiorina for the Senate nomination in California, former e-Bay CEO Meg Whitman for that state's gubernatorial nomination, former state Rep. Sharron Angle for the Senate nod in Nevada and state Rep. Nikki Haley in the South Carolina governor's race. A woman also won a marquee Democratic primary that day: [Blanche Lincoln](#) triumphed in what had become her underdog campaign for the Democratic nomination to seek a third Senate term in Arkansas.

Those results gave rise to the conventional wisdom that this year's roiled political atmosphere would produce the next big step toward the political parity long awaited by women in politics. It was a great storyline. It also turned out to be premature, so much so — as the Murkowski defeat underscores — that it didn't even last until the November elections.

"It's a little bit better, but we're not seeing some major resetting of women running. We're not really seeing a tidal wave," said Nancy Bocskor, a former Republican congressional aide who trains women in the United States and other nations on how to run for office and is a longtime leader of the annual Women's Campaign School at Yale University.

Murkowski's unexpected ouster capped a series of setbacks for promising women congressional candidates, most of them Republicans who would have had solid prospects in the fall. Most prominent was Jane Norton, a former lieutenant governor who lost Colorado's GOP Senate primary to county prosecutor Ken Buck, a conservative insurgent who quipped that voters should choose him because he wears cowboy boots and not high heels. Another was Robin Smith, a former state party chairwoman who narrowly lost the primary in her strongly Republican congressional district in eastern Tennessee.

The prospects that this could be a strong year for women candidates for governor also took a pounding last month. Karen Handel, a former Georgia secretary of state, lost the Republican primary runoff there to former Rep. [Nathan Deal](#). State House Speaker Margaret Anderson Kelliher lost the Democratic gubernatorial nomination in Minnesota to former Sen. Mark Dayton. Vermont's secretary of state, Deb Markowitz, lost a crowded and close Democratic primary for that state's open governorship. And State Auditor Rita Meyer narrowly lost the GOP primary for the open governorship in Wyoming — a state so reliably Republican that the Democratic nominee, former state party chairwoman Leslie Peterson, has almost no chance of becoming another woman occupying a governor's mansion.

As a result, this year looms as another disappointment for women political activists, who once anticipated that the momentum from the congressional elections of 18 years ago would bring women much closer to office-holding parity with men.

True, the number of women in Congress is at an all-time high. But women, who account for slightly more than half the nation's population, nonetheless hold only 17 percent of the seats in both the Senate and the House — as well as 12 percent, or six, of the governorships, which is not a record. (There were nine women governors as recently as 2007.)

The Year of the Woman produced a net gain of 19 House seats in 1992, for a total of 47 at the start of the next Congress — a 69 percent increase in that one election. But it has taken the next eight elections for women to get to 73 seats, for an overall increase of 55 percent in the past two decades. Women senators went from four to seven in 1992, a one-year bounce of 75 percent; although the roster has more than doubled since, to 17, women remain a distinct minority in the 100-seat body.

"I don't think anyone disagrees, in this day and age, that 17 percent of Congress is completely unacceptable," said Stephanie Schriock, president of the feminist political action committee EMILY's List. The organization provides financial and logistical backing to Democratic women candidates who favor abortion rights, and has supported most of the 13 Democratic senators and

56 Democratic House members who make up the vast majority of the women now in Congress. (There are now three women governors from each party.)

With their prospects looking unspectacular this year, prominent advocates for advancing women in politics have turned their attention to the next election, when they hope the uncertainties created by the post-census redistricting — and perhaps the continued rapid swinging of voters' moods — will provide numerous opportunities for women to run for open seats in the House and state legislatures. This summer, the nonpartisan Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University launched The 2012 Project, which aims to get an early start on recruiting women for the next campaign — with an emphasis on finding candidates with established careers in finance, science, technology, energy, health, environment, small business and international affairs.

## Gender Differences by Party

Although this isn't likely to go down as a banner year for women overall, any increase in the number of Republican women in Congress would have to be regarded as significant, if only because of how far the party has slipped in gender balance relative to Democrats. Twenty years ago, when there were far fewer females with votes at the Capitol, there were nearly as many Republican women lawmakers as Democrats. But 1992 skewed the balance in a lasting way; today less than a quarter of the women in Congress are Republicans — four of the 17 senators and 17 of the 73 House members.

Republican officials say they recognize they need to improve these numbers and are moving to address them. One step was the appointment of four-term Rep. [Cathy McMorris Rodgers](#) of Washington as the lead recruiter of women candidates for the National Republican Congressional Committee.

The problem is that a minority of the Republican woman who ran for the House this year won the party nomination, and far fewer still are genuinely competitive candidates for the fall elections. An analysis by the Center for American Women and Politics shows that 101 non-incumbent Republican women ran for the House in the 42 states that have already held primaries, with 74 losing in the primaries and 20 nominated in districts where the Democratic candidates are reliably safe bets to win.

Only one of them appears a shoo-in to win a seat currently held by a man: state Sen. Diane Black, who is running to succeed a retiring Democrat, [Bart Gordon](#), in a central Tennessee district that has swung strongly Republican. Six other nominees have a viable shot at becoming House GOP freshmen next year, as do three more if they win party primaries next week: philanthropist Michele Rollins in Delaware, former state Rep. Terri McCormick in Wisconsin and conservative radio host Jennifer Horn in New Hampshire.

"I don't want to dismiss that," said the Rutgers center's director, Debbie Walsh, referring to the jump in the number of Republican women candidates. "If we don't get more women running, we're not going to get more women winning. But they did not make it through their primaries. We had a record number of women running on the Republican side, but we also had record numbers of them losing."

Democrats, meanwhile, drew a smaller number of newcomer women — 71 — to run for the House in those same 42 states. Yet three of them are already safe bets to come to Washington in January because they won their primaries in reliably Democratic territory: lawyer Terri Sewell, who will take the Alabama seat [Artur Davis](#) left to run for governor; Karen Bass, a former state House Speaker who will succeed retiring Rep. [Diane Watson](#) in California; and state Sen. Frederica Wilson, who has laid claim to the Florida seat that [Kendrick B. Meek](#) relinquished to run for the Senate. Six others — three of them true underdogs — are running competitive bids to take seats from the GOP even in a year when the Democrats are mostly on defense. Another 25 have been nominated in districts that are rock-ribbed Republican, and 37 lost primaries.

Since any gains that Republican women make will almost certainly be in the single digits, this year could best be seen as laying the groundwork for future advances, especially if the attention surrounding such top-tier Republican candidates as Whitman, Fiorina, Angle and Haley prompts even more women to enter competitive races in the future.

"Because of these high-profile women, it is sending a message that Republican women can win," said Kathryn Pearson, a political scientist at University of Minnesota.

However, the field of GOP women nominees this year is dominated by strong conservatives — who might be felicitous for the party in a year when a worried electorate has shifted sharply to the right, but could prove problematic in the long term if more moderate women see little reason to enter Republican primaries dominated by conservative voters.

"All of a sudden you have this crop of conservative women, and part of that is [Sarah Palin](#) has made it cool," said Bocskor, who was an aide to former House Speaker Newt Gingrich early in his congressional career. "More conservative women are running, and run in a primary, because those hard-core conservatives are the ones who usually turn out in a primary. I think if we'd seen a bunch of moderate Republican women running, we might not have seen the gains and the results that we're seeing now."

## Democratic Incumbents at Risk

Jennifer Lawless, who heads the Women and Politics Institute at American University, is among those who say the potential for another Year of the Woman this year was always overstated. "After the June primaries, where we saw this alleged upsurge in women candidates," she said, "we were not talking about 20 or 30 or 40 high-profile candidates. We were talking about four."

The likeliest outcome in November is small gains for women in the Senate and the House. That's because when the primary season concludes next week, there will be at least a handful of women Senate candidates and more than a dozen women House

candidates who will be staging competitive bids for seats held by men.

Most, although not all, of the most competitive women contenders are Republicans, hardly surprising in an electoral environment that's undeniably benefiting their party.

The problem for those hoping for a substantial growth in the roster of female lawmakers is that there also are a couple of women senators and a dozen women House members in tossup races against men. Also not surprisingly, both of these vulnerable senators and all but one of the vulnerable House members are Democrats.

That puts the potential for women's gains on something of a sliding scale. If it is a strong enough Republican year to send a significant number of the party's women challengers and open-seat nominees to Congress, it will almost certainly be a bad enough Democratic year to send some of that party's women incumbents packing. If the Democrats nationally are able to regain enough footing to carry most of their women incumbents across the finish line, then it probably won't be a good enough Republican year to elect many of its non-incumbent women candidates.

The only way there will be a big net gain for women this year is if most of the Democratic and Republican women running competitive races win, something that can't be completely ruled out but seems highly unlikely.

On the other side of the coin, there are scenarios in which women could actually lose ground in either the Senate or the House or both, which would happen if several Democratic women incumbents lose but few of the women seeking membership in the House freshman class of 2010 win. Although this appears unlikely, it would be the first time in the Senate since women lost one of the two seats they held going into the 1978 elections, and the first time in the House since women lost one of the 29 seats they held going into the 1990 elections.

## Women Favored in Statehouse Races

If there is any positive message for those seeking progress for women in politics this year, it could be in those races for governor in Oklahoma, where either Fallin or Askins will break yet another "glass ceiling," and in South Carolina, where Haley is the strong front-runner in a state with a solid GOP lean.

Fallin currently is the only woman in Oklahoma's seven-member congressional delegation, and the state ranks 49th in the share of state legislative seats held by women (11 percent). South Carolina has no women in its eight-member congressional delegation and it ranks behind Oklahoma, in last place, with women holding just 10 percent of the state legislative seats. So if states such as these, with no strong history of electing women to office, both elect women governors, it will strengthen the case that there are virtually no places anymore where a woman cannot win.

"If a woman candidate sort of shares the values and positions and has relevant experience, it is possible, despite the more systematic evidence that suggests the likelihood is going to be less," said Pearson of the University of Minnesota. "It does suggest that the right candidate can win in any kind of state or district."

Lawless, of American University, has measured the status of women in politics both as a political scientist and a candidate: In 2006, when she was at Brown University, she took 38 percent as the Democratic primary challenger to Democratic Rep. [Jim Langevin](#) of Rhode Island. "Generally speaking for the last 25 years, it's been almost impossible to uncover any evidence of actual voter bias anywhere," she said.

But there still are political, social and personal obstacles holding back women from running for and winning political office.

Advocates of women in public life hail the breakthroughs achieved just in the last half-decade by political superstars such as Palin, who was plucked from relative obscurity as Alaska's governor to become the first woman GOP vice-presidential nominee in 2008 and remains one of the nation's most prominent conservative voices; [Nancy Pelosi](#), who in 2007 became the first woman elected as Speaker of the House; [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#), who in 2008 waged by far the most serious presidential campaign of any woman and is now secretary of State; and the two newest justices on the Supreme Court, Sonia Sotomayor and Elena Kagan. Yet some activists lament that these high-profile success stories create a false impression that women, overall, enjoy more parity in politics that they actually do.

"It is an enormous step forward for a women to be Speaker of the House. That is a major glass ceiling breaker," said Rutgers' Walsh. "The fact that in each of the past three administrations there's been a woman secretary of State, that's a big one. The fact that we're at a third of the Supreme Court. These are enormous steps forward. It's kind of a veneer at the top. But what we see below that veneer is not panning out. . . . The progress is glacial."

Schriock, who succeeded longtime leader Ellen Malcolm as EMILY's List president in February, said she has faced the same perception problem. "As I travel around the country and talk to women of all ages, they need to be awakened a little bit," Schriock said. "Do you realize that we are 17 percent of Congress? Seventeen percent. And you don't when you see Speaker Pelosi all the time. What she is managing is an institution that is only 17 percent women."

There are studies that show men are more likely to jump into the political arena unbidden, while women are more likely to run for office if they're recruited, and there's both research and empirical evidence that women are more likely to pursue careers — including in politics — if they have female role models who already blazed the trail. "I find women do better when women see other successful women. We model behavior," Bocskor said, adding, "Men wake up and say, 'You know, I want to be in Congress.' Women wake up and go, 'Am I smart enough and good enough?' We really question ourselves a lot more because we don't have a lot of role models."

And there is the family factor. Despite the huge shift toward women working outside the home and other demographic changes affecting households over the past couple of generations, most women with children still are the primary caregivers in their families, and thus face challenges in pursuing a time-consuming career in political office.

McMorris Rodgers is among those who have dealt with just this situation. Married 18 months after she first took her House seat in 2005, she gave birth to a son the next year — and since then has been asked countless times, and almost always by women she's recruiting to run for Congress, how she juggles her lawmaking and homemaking responsibilities.

"My response is, it's not unlike millions of other families across this country that are figuring out how to pursue — parents who are trying to figure out how to pursue — careers and still meet the needs of their families," said McMorris Rodgers, who announced last month that she's expecting another child. "It's up to the individual family to decide how to make it work."

But Walsh says this is a question rarely faced by male candidates with children. "When a woman is running for office and she has young children, she still gets asked, 'What's going to happen to your kids if you get elected?'" she said. "Whereas for a man who's running for office, those young kids are priceless. This young man has a stake in the future of our society. That and the golden retriever, and they're on their way. Women have to keep explaining."

Still, many advocates contend that the major responsibility for women's still-small share of representation stems from one overriding factor: a political establishment, still dominated by men, that has not gone out of its way to recruit women to run in winnable races.

"If the parties wanted to have parity for elective office, we would be there. The reality is unless there is some kind of concerted effort to do something to get more women to run for office, we are going to continue to see this slow pace," Walsh said.

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