

# Elections are likely to trim number of women in Congress

Updated 11h 49m ago

By [Susan Page](#), USA TODAY



By Russell Powell, for USA TODAY

Democratic Sen. Blanche Lincoln, first elected to Congress in 1992, is facing a tough election fight against Republican John Boozman.

GLENWOOD, Ark. — Blanche Lincoln was elected to Congress in 1992, a time when women gained so much ground in the House and Senate that it was dubbed the "Year of the Woman."

Now, the [Arkansas](#) senator, who faces [Republican John Boozman](#) in November, is fighting for her political life in what could wind up being called the Year of the Setback.

The prospects for female [congressional](#) candidates have been hurt by a combination of a tough political landscape for Democrats — women in Congress are disproportionately [Democratic](#)— and the nation's economic troubles. Hard times historically have made voters more risk-averse and less willing to consider voting for female candidates.

Bottom line: [Independent](#) analysts predict that the number of women in Congress — currently 56 [Democrats](#) and 17 Republicans in the House, and 13 Democrats and four Republicans in the Senate — will decline for the first time in three decades. The drop would come two years after a string of breakthroughs, when [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) was

the first woman to vie seriously for the Democratic presidential nod, [Sarah Palin](#) the first woman nominated for national office by the GOP and Democrat [Nancy Pelosi](#) the first woman elected speaker of the House.

Some voters are dismayed.

"I want women in office," frets [Betty Smith](#), 70, of Kirby, Ark., third vice president of the Arkansas Federation of Democratic Women and a Lincoln supporter.

**INTERACTIVE MAP:** [Track House, Senate and governor races](#)

The two-term senator starts one recent day making her pitch to a dozen folks in Mount Ida (population 936) before speeding to a lunch hosted by the Pike County Democratic Women's Committee in Glenwood. She drops by the Murfreesboro City Hall to honor the local high school Quiz Bowl team, stops at a chicken-processing plant to shake workers' hands and then — as twilight falls and the marching band tunes up — works the crowd at a tailgate party before the football game at Nashville High School.

At nearly every stop, her vote for the sweeping law that overhauled the health care system draws hostile questions, including from former supporters.

Smith and friends filled dozens of paper bags with homemade sandwiches and cookies, hoping to draw a noontime crowd to hear Lincoln speak in Glenwood. But the turnout is small, and most of the lunches go uneaten.



"When I go around the county, what I hear is, 'Oh, I did vote for Blanche Lincoln before, but I'm not this time because she voted for health care,'" Smith says during the question-and-answer session, her singsong mimic making her exasperation clear. Lincoln launches an 18-minute defense of the law that expands Medicaid, imposes new regulations on the insurance industry and mandates that in 2014 nearly every American must have health insurance coverage.

When she's finished, John Plyler, 53, remains unconvinced.

If Congress wanted to control health care costs, he says, the bill should have done more to curb medical lawsuits. He's worried about the legislation's effect on the lumber yard he owns, which has 37 employees.

The bill doesn't affect small businesses with fewer than 50 workers, Lincoln tells him. "I know what it's going to cost me from what the Chamber (of Commerce) and the NFIB (National Federation of Independent Business) told me," he replies. The groups criticize the law as an overreach of government power.

He voted for Lincoln six years ago, Plyler says, but this time he's casting his ballot for Boozman.

### Roar of the 'Mama grizzlies'

The campaigns of high-profile Republican women, some of them boosted by Palin's endorsement of candidates she calls "Mama Grizzlies," have grabbed attention this year.

In Nevada, former state legislator [Sharron Angle](#), a darling of the Tea Party movement, is challenging Senate Majority Leader [Harry Reid](#). In California, former [Hewlett-Packard](#) CEO [Carly Fiorina](#) is in a close race against Sen. [Barbara Boxer](#). Other competitive Republican Senate candidates include former state attorney general [Kelly Ayotte](#) in New Hampshire and former professional wrestling executive [Linda McMahon](#) in Connecticut.

Christine O'Donnell generated headlines and scrutiny of past controversial statements when she scored a major upset to win the Senate nomination over a moderate opponent in the Delaware primary, although the outspoken conservative is not given much of a chance to win in November for the seat formerly held by [Joe Biden](#).

### HOW O'DONNELL WON: [Rise in faith activism tips scales in Del.](#)

In fact, the National Republican Congressional Committee touts 2010 as the Year of the Republican Woman. A record 128 Republican women filed to run for the House, according to the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University, although fewer went on to win GOP primaries than in 2004.

Overall, 47 Republican and 91 Democratic women are on the ballot for the House, along with six Republicans and nine Democratic women for the Senate. Both totals set records.

Those statistics don't tell the whole story, however. A dozen incumbent women in the House are in tough races, as are four of the female senators on the ballot this year. Many of the women who aren't incumbents are running in districts so dominated by the other party that they are all but certain to lose.

David Wasserman, who tracks House races for the non-partisan *Cook Political Report*, predicts that the number of women in the House will decline after November's elections and the number of women in the Senate will dip or stay the same.

He expects a drop of five to 10 in the total number of women in Congress in the wake of the Nov. 2 election. A loss at some level now seems "assured," he says — something that hasn't happened since 1978.

A look at the landscape:



•In the House, where Democrats are fighting to keep their majority, nine female incumbents are on the *CookPolitical Report* list of the 43 most endangered Democratic House seats. Another three face tough races. Only four female challengers are seeking those 43 seats.

•In the Senate, just two of the six female incumbents whose terms are up are clearly favored to win re-election: the longest-serving female senator, [Barbara Mikulski](#) of Maryland, and the newest one, [Kirsten Gillibrand](#) of New York.

Sen. [Lisa Murkowski](#), who lost the Republican primary in Alaska, is waging an uphill campaign as a write-in. [Patty Murray](#) of Washington state and [Boxer](#) are in close contests.

And Lincoln, who at 38 was the youngest woman elected to the Senate when she first won in 1998, is struggling.

In a Boozman TV ad, two graying men chat as they fish, defending the GOP congressman against Lincoln's attacks that he has supported a national sales tax and the privatization of Social Security. "Blanche is the one voting for all of [Obama's](#) spending," one protests, then pulls from the lake a Lincoln campaign sign that has gotten snagged on his line.

"Oh, throw that back," the other man says.

Lincoln is airing a response that shows clips from Boozman's ad as a narrator dismisses their arguments as "a mythical fish tale." It shows the boat sinking into the lake until all that's left is a fisherman's hat, floating on the surface.

### Bruises from the primary

Statewide polls show Lincoln trailing Boozman by double digits. The website [pollster.com](#) now puts the Republican advantage at 54%-33%. The gap is so wide that it has made it difficult for her to raise money and command other party resources, although former president [Bill Clinton](#) has visited his home state on her behalf already and is scheduled to be back this month.

"I just think they are counting me out for the wrong reasons," Lincoln says in an interview in a van plastered with campaign stickers that promote her as "One Tough Lady." Arkansans are "willing to listen, and I feel like I've got a story to tell them. I feel like they know by and large that I've worked

hard in a very bipartisan way to create greater common ground in Washington and greater common solutions to the problems we face."

Even so, standing in the middle has given her nothing but trouble this year.

In the Democratic primary, she faced a bruising challenge from Lt. Gov. [Bill Halter](#), who criticized her for wavering on support of the Democratic health care bill and opposing proposals for a government-run public option in it. "They spent \$14 million in negative advertising" in the primary, she says, referring to labor unions and liberal groups. "You have to overcome that."

While her opponent in the primary criticized her from the left for questioning Obama's health care plan, her opponent in the general election is hammering her from the right for voting in favor of it at the end.

The "huge" issues on voters' minds are Lincoln's support of the stimulus bill and the health care law, says Boozman, 59, an optometrist and a House member since 2001. (Lincoln defeated his brother, [Fay](#), in her first Senate campaign.)

"The health care bill is very, very unpopular in Arkansas," Boozman said in an interview. "She was the deciding vote. I would very much like to be the deciding vote to repeal it."

Sexism isn't her problem, he adds: "Sen. Lincoln was the youngest female senator elected, and so that certainly wasn't an issue then and isn't now." Lincoln did have to address voter concerns in her



first Senate race about her ability to serve in office while caring for her 2-year-old twin boys, who are now 14.

Democratic pollster [Celinda Lake](#) says the beleaguered economy has made it harder for women in both parties to win.

"It's always been tougher for women to get elected in a tough economy because voters tend to think women aren't as good on the economy," she says. "They don't want to take risks in a bad economy, and they perceive women as being riskier."

Women's gains in Congress have been slow since [Jeanette Rankin](#) of Montana became the first woman in the House in 1917, three years before women won the right to vote. Even now, just 17% of Congress is female.

Beyond bragging rights, does having women in Congress make a difference?

Academic studies conclude the answer is yes, says [Debbie Walsh](#), director of the Rutgers center.

"They bring different issues to the forefront and they have different life experiences that shape the kinds of policies that they make a priority when they get into office," she says. In 1993, for instance, a bipartisan group of congresswomen pushed through a law requiring the [National Institutes of Health](#) to include women in medical trials.

"All the protocols were based on men — just thinking of women as smaller versions of men, which is not the case," Walsh says. "It doesn't seem like that's rocket science, but it took women being in the institution to notice that, to come forward and articulate a change in policy."

"I don't think women are better than men; I just think they have a different perspective," Lincoln says. "I know that [Olympia Snowe](#) and I have fought tooth-and-nail for a child tax credit that's refundable, that goes to families that are working and that have children," referring to the Republican senator from Maine.

At the tailgate party at Nashville High School, Lincoln leans down to tease 5-year-old Olivia Tedford and admires her 6-month-old sister, Julia. The baby is in the arms of her mother, Beverly Tedford, 33, a special-education teacher at the elementary school down the road. Nearby is her father, Clinton Tedford, also 33, a local police

officer.

The talk is friendly, but only Olivia takes a campaign sticker.

"People aren't happy with the way things are going right now," Beverly Tedford says later. "We got a change (in 2008) and now we want a new change. We don't like the change we got." Both adults voted for Lincoln last time. They're undecided now.

