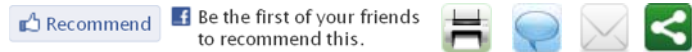


Numbers game shows women at risk of losing seats in legislature

By Kyle Cheney/Statehouse News Service

GateHouse News Service

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Boston — The 2010 election is shaping up to be a mixed bag for women, with female candidates running for three of six statewide offices but with women at risk of losing seats in the Legislature, where they are already underrepresented, a News Service ballot analysis found.

Women hold 51 seats in the 200-member Legislature, but nine are giving up their seats to retire or run for higher office, and a tenth, Rep. Pam Richardson (D-Framingham), was defeated in the September primary by Chris Walsh.

In addition, 30 of 41 incumbent women lawmakers on the ballot next week are facing reelection challenges, while more than half of incumbent men — 63 of 120 — are coasting to reelection unopposed.

Female Democratic lawmakers also face an acutely high challenge rate from a mostly male field of Republican challengers. Of the 30 female incumbents running this year, 29 are Democrats. Of those, 26 face GOP challengers and three face third-party opponents.

Assistant House Majority Leader Patricia Haddad (D-Somerset), the highest ranking woman in the House and an active campaigner for Democratic women, predicted that women would lose seats in next year's Legislature, based on the number seeking office.

"It's certainly discouraging after a height of 26 percent across the two chambers," she said.

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, women constitute 24.5 percent of the 7,382 state lawmakers nationwide. Colorado, Vermont and New Hampshire are at the top of the list, with 38 percent, 37.2 percent and 37 percent female lawmakers, respectively. At the bottom of the list: South Carolina (10 percent), Oklahoma (11.4 percent) and Alabama (12.9 percent).

Both major parties cited the difficulty of convincing women to run for office as an obstacle to greater representation.

"There have been studies that show that in order to get a woman to run she has to be asked five times," Haddad said. One of those studies is a 2009 report by the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University that found women are "more likely than men to run for office because they were recruited rather than deciding to run on their own." The report also concluded that women who receive assurances of support by their political parties and women's organizations are more likely to run.

"Women tend to have this really interesting notion that you have to be qualified to run," said Democratic Party Chairman John Walsh said with a chuckle. "Guys are not constrained by that. Women need to be recruited more. They need to be encouraged, asked to run. I think the atmosphere for women is getting better every year."

Republican Party Chairwoman Jennifer Nassour said many women are dissuaded from running because of family obligations.

"As women ... we pretty much drive the bus when it comes to what's going on in our homes," she said.

But Nassour also pointed to Republican women running for office this year show she said "are able to be moms and able to be wives and are able to be career professionals."

Sixty-eight women — 41 incumbents and 27 newcomers — will be on next week's ballot, vying for 62 legislative seats. Many face veteran incumbents who have won in one election cycle after another.

Asked about the number of women running for the Legislature, Democrats and Republicans highlighted prospects in this year's crop of candidates: Patricia Lawton of Bridgewater, Gail Cariddi of North Adams, Patricia Commene of Andover and Denise Andrews of Orange on the Democratic side; Kimberly Ferguson of Holden, Kimberly Roy of Sutton, and Kara Fratto of Reading on the Republican side.

"I think we'd be better off if there were more women," said Walsh, the Democratic Party chair. "Of course, not Republican women. It would be better off if there were more Democratic women."

"Clearly, women are not proportionally represented either in Washington or Boston," Walsh continued. "Women win at the same rate as men. It's just that they don't run."

The parties also pointed to the state auditor's race, in which Democrat Suzanne Bump is battling Republican Mary Connaughton, guaranteeing that a woman will take the office for the first time. Democratic Attorney General Martha Coakley is up for reelection against Republican challenger James McKenna. A recent Boston Globe poll showed Coakley up by 21 points with less than two weeks to go.

But the 2010 election is also just the second since 1982 that features no women running as Democrats or Republicans for governor or lieutenant governor. In 1986, Democrat Evelyn Murphy was elected lieutenant governor as Gov. Michael Dukakis's running mate. In 1990, Democrat Marjorie Claprod ran on an unsuccessful ticket with then-Boston University president John

Silber. In 1998, Republican Jane Swift was elected lieutenant governor on the ticket with Gov. Paul Cellucci. In 2002, Democrat Shannon O'Brien ran unsuccessfully for governor against Republican Mitt Romney, who tapped Kerry Healey as his running mate. Gov. Deval Patrick defeated Healey in the 2006 race for governor. No women ran on a major party ticket in 1994, when Republicans Bill Weld and Cellucci defeated Democrats Mark Roosevelt and Robert Massie.

Nassour, the Republican Party chair, said she has sought women who would be "viable candidates" to break up "the Beacon Hill boys' club."

Only three incumbent Republican lawmakers are women – Rep. Karyn Polito of Shrewsbury, who is running for state treasurer, Rep. Elizabeth Poirier of North Attleborough, who is running unopposed for reelection, and Rep. Sue Gifford of Wareham who is facing a Democratic challenger.

Nassour said the fact that Republicans set their sights disproportionately on female incumbents wasn't part of a concerted strategy.

"It's just the way it shakes out," Nassour said. "There would be no reason why I would go after a woman. I am going after Democratic held seats that I think should be Republican held seats."

Nassour said women often face questions when running for office that men don't, citing her own quest to lead the state Republican Party as an example.

"At first when I was running, quite honestly there were a lot of people who said 'why would you do this, and don't you want to be with your kids?'" she said. "I'm able to balance everything. The crazier that my life is and the schedule is, the more I'm able to handle and put in perspective ... and spend the important moments with my family. It's been wonderful for my daughters. I think it's so good for them to have a role model."

Advocates for Massachusetts women in politics suggested another reason for the long odds for legislative gains this year: an increased willingness by candidates, campaign officials and commentators across the country to level gender-based attacks on women running for office.

"One of the trends that we're seeing that's concerning to us is the type of political discourse that's happening on the campaigns," said Priti Rao, executive director of the Massachusetts Women's Political Caucus, pointing to "the number of inappropriate comments being made about women candidates."

Rao cited an exchange in the California gubernatorial race in which an aide to Democrat Jerry Brown called Republican candidate and eBay founder Meg Whitman a "whore." Rao also pointed to a similar incident in the Melrose Senate race in which a comedian, speaking at a fundraiser for Republican Craig Spadafora, called his Democratic opponent Katherine Clark a "whore."

A third example, Rao said, came last month when WRKO producer Bill Cooksey described Rep. Polito as having a "tight little butt," leading to an on-air rebuke from Polito herself.

"When these sort of sexist comments are being made ... it not only affects the woman running for that position, it affects all women," she said.

Rao said the caucus hopes to encourage more women to run because when women run, they win.

"When women overall decide to run, they're winning at equal rates as men," she said. "There are fewer women who are choosing to run."

Although the loss of seats is still up in the air, the loss of experienced, veteran women lawmakers is a foregone conclusion. Among those leaving or who have already left: Sen. Joan Menard (D-Fall River), a lawmaker since 1979; Rep. Lida Harkins (D-Needham), who has served since 1989; Sen. Marian Walsh, who has served in the House or Senate since 1989; Sen. Susan Tucker (D-Andover), in the Senate since 1999; and Rep. Marie St. Fleur (D-Boston), who left to join the Menino administration earlier this year after 11 years in the Legislature.

Several veteran women departed two years ago as well: Mary Rogeness, a Longmeadow Republican; Rep. Patricia Walrath, a Stow Democrat and Pamela Resor, an Acton Democrat, who compiled a combined 57 years of legislative experience.

Only one female newcomer is guaranteed a win on Election Day: Democrat Gailanne Cariddi, who is running unopposed to fill the North Adams seat vacated by Rep. Dan Bosley.

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