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Haley elected S.C.'s first female governor

Sheheen put up fight, but came up short

By [Katy Stech](#) , [Yvonne Wenger](#)

ywenger@postandcourier.com, kstech@postandcourier.com

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COLUMBIA -- In a state that has elected only white men to its highest office, Nikki Haley stood out as a woman and a minority.

Less than a year ago, she was a political unknown to most South Carolinians.

On Tuesday, voters made her governor. Haley, a state representative from Lexington and the daughter of Indian immigrants, will replace Gov. Mark Sanford in January, capping an improbable run to the Governor's Mansion.

Photo Gallery

Election Day 2010



Election Day 2010, Tuesday, Nov. 2, 2010 delivers historic results to South Carolina.

Propelled by an endorsement from Sarah Palin, she withstood accusations of illicit dalliances and abusing her political position for profit. Voters chose to overlook, or ignore, all those charges. And, in the end, her habit of not paying her taxes on time also didn't matter.

Haley, a 38-year-old married mother of two young children, beat Democratic state Sen. Vincent Sheheen, who is part of a Kershaw County political dynasty. She won with 52 percent of the vote to his 47 percent, according to unofficial results with 93 percent of the precincts reporting.

Green Party and United Citizens Party nominee Morgan Bruce Reeves placed a distant third with less than 2 percent of the votes.

"We're turning a page. We're turning a page on where we've been. But the history is going to be where we will go," Haley said to a ballroom full of supporters at the Columbia Metropolitan

Convention Center early this morning.

She stood with her husband, Michael, and their two young children.

"You've taken a chance on me. I will never stop trying to make you proud," Haley said.

Across town at Democratic Party gathering, Sheheen conceded his loss before a tired crowd that watched election results tango dramatically throughout the night. His final day surge drew the race closer than most people expected.

Nikki Haley thanks the voters.

"We're turning a page on where we've been," Haley said to a ballroom full of Republicans at the Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center. "But the history is going to be where we will go."

Haley was joined on stage by her husband, Michael, and their two young children.

Haley thanked the voters, and her staff, for their hard work and their listening along with her to her favorite '80s songs on the campaign trail.

"To every citizen in South Carolina, regardless of how you voted, I am going to get to work for you," Haley said. "... You've taken a chance on me. I will never stop trying to make you proud."

"I look out on this crowd, and I know that just like me, you wished with all your might that we could take this state in a new direction," he said. "It was a wonderful, wonderful experience and I have no regrets."

Sheheen will remain a senator from Camden, facing re-election in 2012.

With Haley's election, South Carolina became the 24th state to elect a woman governor, a milestone reached before most other Southeastern states. That is despite the state's dismal record for the number of women in elected office.

DuBose Kapeluck, an associate political science professor at The Citadel, said Haley's election as a woman and a minority is remarkable for such a traditional state. But her election is even more compelling considering the lack of women in state offices, he said.

"Haley really did it against the odds," Kapeluck said.

South Carolina ranks dead last for the percentage of women serving in the state Legislature, according to the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University.

And few women have held statewide office. They are former Lt. Gov. Nancy Stevenson and Barbara Nielsen and Inez Tenenbaum, who have served as superintendents of education.

Typically, women rise to high office as more become elected to lower offices and develop a pool of high-quality female challengers, Kapeluck said.

"It's almost like a farm team for gubernatorial aspirants," he said.

Haley's political career began in 2004 when she ran for the House as a complete unknown and beat the state's longest-serving legislator in the GOP primary for a seat representing Lexington County.

Blowing past expectations has been routine for Haley. She was considered a long-shot during the GOP primary this summer against better known and better financed competitors.



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Along the campaign trail, Haley stumbled -- though never too far -- amid accusations that she was unfaithful to her husband, scrutiny over her former high-paying fundraising position at Lexington Medical Center and questions about when she filed her taxes.

Finding a way to work with state lawmakers will perhaps be her biggest challenge. Haley pitched herself as the anti-politician who will "burn" lawmakers who "mess up."

Haley's work will begin on Thursday when she is expected to speak before the Senate Republican Caucus' retreat in Pinopolis.

Reach **Yvonne Wenger** at 803-926-7855. Reach **Katy Stech** at 937-5549.

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