

AAUW DIALOG

Midterm Elections: Good and Bad News for Women

November 5, 2010, by Rachel Wallace

It's been one heck of an election season for us ladies. We were told we were to blame for the Democratic apocalypse but simultaneously hailed for ushering in another "Year of the Woman," the reign of the mean girls, and the dawn of the mama grizzlies.

Media coverage implied that women were a large, if not dominant, part of this election season. But if yet-undecided races go to men, this could be the first time in 32 years that women's representation in Congress will not increase.

Pre-election, women made up 16.8 percent of Congress with 17 women in the Senate (out of 100) and 73 women in the House of Representatives (out of 435). Right now it seems like the Senate numbers will stay the same. Patty Murray's win in Washington and Lisa Murkowski's likely success in Alaska mean that women's representation in the Senate will probably stay at 17 percent. On the other hand, the House will have at least 70 women, but could gain up to 74, depending on uncalled races.

We need to keep these statistics in mind as we monitor our progress. But we also need to take a closer look at this election cycle and realize there are some great reasons to celebrate, too.

Reason number one: Nancy Pelosi



On January 4, 2007, Pelosi was elected to serve as Speaker, becoming the first woman, the first Californian, and the first Italian American to hold the position.

The noise level over Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi has been absolutely deafening and, at times, a little scary. But we need to remember that Pelosi was the first and so far only woman speaker of the House, making her the highest-ranking elected woman in our nation's history.

During her tenure, Pelosi faced incredible pressure for being outspoken and female. As she steps down, certain radio hosts

are blasting “ding, dong, the witch is dead” over the airwaves. But unlike the marble ceiling, Pelosi hasn’t cracked.

When the first woman speaker of the House bangs her gavel for the last time, it will be a reminder of the barriers that are no longer there and the doors that are open to future women.

Reason number two: Sarah Palin

I’ve got three cheers for Sarah Palin’s enthusiastic and influential mentoring of women politicians, unprecedented on such a large and public scale. She inspired many women to get up and run for office. Her support for Indian-American Nikki Haley (R-SC) and Latina Susana Martinez (R-NM) helped propel the first women of color to governors’ mansions.



As the Republican leadership moves into the House, it’s important that the boys’ club has a few women around, and I trust Palin and some of her friends will make sure that happens.

Reason number three: Record-breaking women

Despite the potential decrease in numbers, women continued to break records this election. According to the Center for American Women and Politics

- A record 262 women filed to run for the House, and a record 36 women filed to run for Senate.
- At least eight Republican women, including a woman of color, will take their seats in the House, besting the previous record of seven.
- Hawaii became the first state (other than states with only one district) to send only women to the House.
- Martinez, Haley, and Mary Fallin (R-OK) became the first women governors in their states.

The punditry ignored most of these shattered records on election night, perhaps an indication that women are slowly becoming an accepted norm in politics. It’s no longer strange to see women running against the establishment, their own party, and even other women. It’s also no longer strange to have two women—Palin and Pelosi—playing such critical roles in their parties and doing so in ways that advance women on some level or another. As Pelosi steps down from her highest hour and Palin continues to influence her own breed of pink elephants, we should celebrate these accomplishments while looking forward to breaking through new barriers.