

Women post few gains in election

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By Mackenzie Carpenter, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Whether they were Blue Dog Democrats, Sarah Palin-endorsed "Mama Grizzlies," tea partiers, self-funded Republican businesswomen -- or just plain-vanilla, party-endorsed candidates running under the radar -- women nationally and in Pennsylvania received good news and bad news in Tuesday's midterm election.

And for Dana Brown, new executive director of Chatham University's Center for Women, Politics and Public Policy, that means she has more work to do for 2012 trying to encourage women, regardless of party, to run for office.

Tuesday's election results "are a mixed bag, with some bright spots here and there," said Ms. Brown.

With the defeat of U.S. Rep. Kathy Dahlkamper, D-Erie, just one woman now serves in Pennsylvania's congressional delegation -- U.S. Rep. Allyson Schwartz, D-Philadelphia -- while in the state Senate, the number of women (10) stayed the same even as the state House added six women to its ranks.

"It's a slight improvement but, as they say, lasting change happens slowly," said Ms. Brown, 32, who, since her hiring earlier this year from American Center for Women and Politics at Rutgers University, has been moving quickly to expand the Chatham center's own profile statewide as a resource and training center for women leaders.

According to the center, the number of women in the state House went from 29 to 35 -- and of those six winning candidates, three were Republican and three were Democrats. A total of 59 women ran for state representative, up from 47 in 2008, but down one from 60 in 2006.

This year was supposed to be yet another "year of the woman," according to political analysts, much as in 1992, when Democratic candidates made big inroads in public office. But in 2010 there was a twist: It was to be the year of the Republican woman, as in Linda McMahon in Connecticut, Meg Whitman and Carly Fiorina in California, Christine O'Donnell in Delaware and Sharron Angle in Nevada.

Except all of them lost.

"In my mind I just cannot understand it, especially with Meg Whitman, who had all the qualifications to be a great governor," lamented Patti Weaver, a key organizer of the tea party's efforts in southwestern Pennsylvania.

"I am kind of reluctant to see gender bias out there, because I don't really think women are discriminated against, at least not in my experience as a businesswoman," Ms. Weaver said.

Certainly, Republican women did win. At least eight new female GOP candidates won U.S. House seats, up from a previous record of seven Republican newcomers in a single election, according to data released Thursday by the Rutgers center.

While only one new woman, Republican Kelly Ayotte of New Hampshire, won a Senate seat, three women were elected governor -- all Republicans, two of them women of color -- and those two are the first minority women ever to lead a state government: Indian-American Nikki Haley of South Carolina and Susana Martinez, a Hispanic, of New Mexico.

But then there's this: Male Senate Republican candidates backed by the tea party (Marco Rubio, Rand Paul) won their races; female tea partiers (Ms. O'Donnell and Ms. Angle) did not.

Not because of sexism, argues Debbie Walsh, director of the Rutgers Center.

Ms. O'Donnell and Mr. Paul each made plenty of gaffes (Ms. O'Donnell with her "position" on witchcraft; Mr. Paul calling for the abolition of the Civil Rights Act). But Ms. O'Donnell ran in Delaware, a moderate state, while Mr. Paul ran in Kentucky, which is conservative, Ms. Walsh said. Ms. Angle may have been painted as an extremist, but she was also running against the powerful, if controversial, incumbent Sen. Harry Reid; Marco Rubio was running for an open seat in Florida.

Still, all the female GOP candidates who lost big statewide races for senator or governor -- and some who won -- shared another trait: a significant gender gap among those who voted for them.

"More men are still likely to vote for Republican candidates, and women are less likely," said Ms. Walsh, who noted that ideology, not gender, is at play here. "In general, women tend to support Democrats because they see themselves as more economically vulnerable, and needing the social safety net."

In California, 5 percent fewer women voters supported Meg Whitman for governor than men did. In that state's Senate race, 14 percent fewer women than men supported Ms. Fiorina. In Connecticut, the gender gap was eight points between male and female voters supporting Linda McMahon, former CEO of World Wrestling Entertainment.

Even in South Carolina, where Ms. Haley eked out a win, there was a six point gender gap -- not enough to defeat her, but nonetheless a factor in the closeness of the race.

All of this surprises Bernadette Comfort, director of the Pennsylvania Republican party's Ann Anstine Series for Public Excellence, which trains Republican women candidates.

"We are going to have to take stock," she said of the gender gap numbers. "How do we look at this as a party? How do we reach out to them? I'm perplexed. This is obviously going to have to be a topic at our training sessions next year."

Ms. Brown also plans to ramp up her Chatham center's training program -- which is nonpartisan -- in 2010.

Chatham's seminars also will offer media and fund-raising training and differs from other models, she said, in that it requires only a one-day commitment, which works well for those with busy schedules and child care difficulties.

The center also hopes to bring nationally known women political leaders to campus as part of the endowed Hillman Chair in Women and Politics, and will be increasing data collection efforts in order to become a "one-stop-shop," academic-based research center for women in state politics. To stimulate that research, by April it will begin offering the Elsie Hillman Prize for Research on Women & Politics, for the best paper done on state politics on the graduate and undergraduate level.

Will any of this do any good?

"We don't know yet fully the impact of these programs," Ms. Brown said. "And you have to understand -- we're not changing the game; we're trying to teach women how to play in it."