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Number of women in state legislatures will drop, but Missouri bucked trend

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For the first time in 40 years, the number of women in state legislatures will drop as a result of Tuesday's elections.

Missouri bucked the trend, holding steady, while the ranks thinned in Kansas.

Nationwide, after an increase in every election since 1971, the number of women legislators has declined, according to recent studies by Rutgers University and the National Conference of State Legislatures.

"Preliminarily, what we're seeing is that there could be a big drop," said Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University.

In all, 23.3 percent of the nation's 7,382 state legislators in 2011 will be women, down from 24.5 percent now, researchers said.

That's frustrating, said Missouri Sen. Jolie Justus, a Kansas City Democrat. More women are needed in the statehouse, not fewer, for more effective government, she said.

"I'm just a firm believer if you don't have a seat at the table you're probably on the menu. That goes for any group," she said. "You need to have a statehouse that reflects the population of the state."

Kansas Rep. Pat Colloton, a Leawood Republican, emphasized the collegiality among women legislators in Kansas. She said women from both sides of the aisle frequently come together to push selected issues.

But the national decline of women in state legislatures had her stumped.

"There certainly does seem to be an increased number of women coming forward nationally," she said. "But I just can't explain why it's dropped in the statehouse."

Kansas now has 46 women among 165 lawmakers, or 28 percent, down from 50 before Tuesday's elections.

Colorado's legislature has the largest proportion of women — 38 percent, according to the study by the National Conference of State Legislatures. The smallest is in South Carolina, where only 9.4 percent of state lawmakers are women.

In Missouri, there are now 46 women out of 197 lawmakers, or 23 percent, up from 44 before Tuesday.

Six women — four of them Democrats — will serve in the Missouri Senate in 2011. But Sen. Yvonne Wilson, a Kansas City Democrat, has announced her resignation, which will bring the total number of women to five — the lowest the state will have seen since 1999 — unless a woman wins the special election to fill her seat.

Justus said it was too soon to analyze why Missouri held steady, but noted that women candidates in the state might have been hurt by repealed contribution limits.

"Women just don't have the same access to unlimited campaign funds the same way that men do," Justus said.

The makeup of the women who will serve in state capitols in 2011 will also be a bit different with more Republicans elected this year. Across the nation, 61 percent of the women serving in state legislatures in 2011 will be Democrats, a decline from previous years.

"The gap between the women who are Republicans and who are Democrats has closed," said Katie Ziegler, spokeswoman for the National Conference of State Legislatures.

The reddening of statehouses nationwide — and the women who serve in them — comes alongside what has been heralded as a banner year for Republican women in politics.

While some Republican women won governorships — New Mexico's Susana Martinez, South Carolina's Nikki Haley and Oklahoma's Mary Fallin — many fell short in their bids for state and federal offices.

After all the results are tallied there will likely be a drop in the number of women in Congress for the first time since the 1970s.

"There just weren't enough Republican women running to take advantage of the tidal wave of Republican wins," Walsh said.

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