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Reversing the Ebbing Tide of Elected Women

After seeing female participation as candidates stagnate over 30 years, a new initiative from Rutgers University tries to draw more women into politics.

By Emily Badger

Women scored some significant “firsts” in the election last week. Three female candidates — all Republicans, two of them women of color — were elected for the first time to the governor’s offices in South Carolina, New Mexico and Oklahoma. In Alaska, meanwhile, Lisa Murkowski appears poised to become the first write-in candidate to win a Senate seat in more than 50 years.

But beyond those outliers, 2010 was a big disappointment for women, and one that stings all the more given the trends of the last two decades.

“2010 has proven to be really anything but a banner year for women in politics, despite a lot of media hype at the beginning of the election season,” said Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University.

Walsh expects that when the last of the close races are tallied, the number of women in Congress is likely to decrease for the first time in 30 years. In state legislatures across the country, we’re also likely to see the largest single drop in the percentage of women serving since CAWP began collecting data in 1971.

(This election cycle — the Year of the White Man? — was unkind to a number of groups: The Senate will once again have no African Americans, and the House will have considerably fewer veterans).

Women waded steadily into politics from 1971 until 1991, culminating with the famous Year of the Woman in the 1992 election. That fall, 24 new women were elected to U.S. House of Representatives, and five to the Senate. But in retrospect, that election was more a high-water mark than harbinger of things to come. Women’s political participation has largely been flat-lining ever since.

“That flat-lining holds true for candidates as well as office-holders, reinforcing the notion that if women run, women win,” Walsh said. “The problem we have is not that women are running in huge numbers, they’re increasing every year, and they don’t get elected. The problem is they’re not running in first place. That’s the real challenge here.”

Walsh was speaking on a conference call Monday afternoon to detail an ambitious new CAWP initiative to draw women into politics, at just the moment when they may feel most discouraged. The national, nonpartisan 2012 Project hopes to exploit what researchers have learned over the last several years about why so many women don’t run.

Frequently, women cite predictable roadblocks: family, privacy, the negativity of campaigns, the daunting task of fundraising (women like to raise money for *other* people and causes, Walsh notes, but they are often uncomfortable doing so for themselves).

The most common explanation, though, is a bit more surprising: “Nobody ever asked me,” many women say.

“Men are much more likely to wake up one morning and say, ‘I’d be the best state legislator my state has ever seen!’” Walsh said. “We think women need more encouragement, they need to be asked.”

The 2012 Project is planning to do that — to put the idea to women who have never considered it before. The initiative will target women over 45 (of any party), the baby boomers who were the first generation of women to have extensive career options, and who are now past the responsibility of raising children. The project wants to find women in finance, science and technology, energy, the environment, health, small business and international affairs.

“We not only want to diversify in terms of gender, we want to add value in terms of expertise,” said Mary Hughes, the director of the project. “These women are typically at the top of their profession, have raised their families and have fewer family responsibilities, are more likely to be financially stable, and they have put down roots in their communities. As they look toward their third act, many are considering how they will give back, what will their contribution to the community be?”

In the last few weeks, the project has already road-tested its strategy before the Society of Women Engineers and groups of Realtors and women executives in solar energy.

Its architects have also specifically been eyeing 2012 for several years. That election will be the first after the next round of redistricting, an opportunity that comes along only once a decade. New districts and seats will be created in the process, leveling the playing field for women entering the political process for the first time.

Pot coincidentally, Hughes says, the Year of the Woman was another such election cycle.

““This is an opportunity we took advantage of in 1992, but not again in 2002,” she said. “We can’t miss that opportunity this time.”



Nikki Haley, right, was elected governor of South Carolina, but, overall, 2010 was a disappointment for women in politics. (nikkihaley.com)