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Midterms a mixed bag for women candidates

By **Susan J. Carroll**, Special to CNN

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Susan Carroll says midterms a mixed bag for women; number in Congress static
- She says when Dems lost; so did Dem women in leadership positions
- Carroll: Women of color gained in Congress and in gubernatorial races
- Carroll: Big winners may be Palin and Hillary Clinton

Editor's note: Susan J. Carroll is professor of political science and senior scholar at the [Center for American Women and Politics](#) of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University. She is co-editor of "Gender and Elections: Shaping the Future of American Politics, Second Edition" (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

(CNN) -- Call it the "mixed bag" year for women in the midterm elections.

A few high-profile women candidates got a lot of attention on the national stage, but with dramatic Democratic losses, the number of women in Congress will likely hold steady or decrease for the first time since 1987. The first female House Speaker, Nancy Pelosi, and three Democratic women committee chairs will lose their leadership positions in the majority, and consequently the overall political clout of women in the House will decrease.

But not all the news for women in this election was bad. There were winners as well as losers -- and some groups were both.

Republican women in Congress

Seven GOP newcomers in the House of Representatives match the previous record of seven in one election, and two more in still-undecided races could join them. In addition, a new Republican woman, Kelly Ayotte from New Hampshire, will join the Senate.

Unfortunately, Republican women will occupy only about 10 percent of all Republican seats in the House. Many of the GOP women will lack seniority, especially with almost one-third of them newly elected, and few are likely to win leadership positions or committee chairs.

The only Republican woman currently in leadership is Cathy McMorris Rodgers, vice chair of the Republican Conference. Unless Republicans take affirmative steps to promote women into leadership positions, the influence of Republican women in the 112th Congress will probably be very limited.

In addition, Republican women candidates have had great difficulty surviving primaries. While a record number of Republican women ran in House primaries in 2010, only 37 percent won, a much lower proportion than the 68 percent of Democratic women who won their primaries.

Women of color

Women of color made significant breakthroughs in this election. Two were elected governors: Nikki Haley of South Carolina is the first Indian-American woman and Susana Martinez of New Mexico the first Latina to head state governments.

While the number of white Democratic women serving in the next Congress will decline, the number of Democratic women of color will increase. All four female Democrats newly elected to the 112th Congress are women of color: three African-Americans and one Asian-American.

One new Republican woman of color, Jaime Herrera, a Latina, was elected to the House from Washington.

Women in the headlines

Many women who received considerable national press attention in 2010 lost their races. The fanfare was of little help to Meg Whitman and Carly Fiorina in California, Sharron Angle in Nevada, Christine O'Donnell in Delaware, and Linda McMahon in Connecticut.

Of the women candidates in the national limelight, only Nikki Haley prevailed, perhaps despite national media attention. Meanwhile, candidates who received far less attention, such as Martinez and Ayotte, emerged along with Haley as the real female stars of this election.

Mama grizzlies

Some of the so-called "mama grizzlies" endorsed by Sarah Palin won while others lost. Palin's support for candidates brought no guarantee of election. All three of her female gubernatorial candidates in the general election -- Haley, Fallin, and Martinez -- won, but two of her favored gubernatorial candidates lost primaries in Wyoming and Georgia.

Mama grizzlies running for the Senate fared less well, with three losing (O'Donnell, Angle, and Fiorina) and just one winning (Ayotte). Three of Palin's endorsed House candidates lost in primaries, but two-thirds of those who made it through to the general election won their races -- a strong showing.

Sarah Palin and Hillary Clinton

For different reasons, Sarah Palin and Hillary Clinton, two women not on ballots in 2010, may have been among the biggest beneficiaries of this year's elections, with future presidential prospects enhanced.

Although her mama grizzlies fared so-so in the elections, Palin, through her active involvement and candidate endorsements in 2010, increased her public visibility and perceived political clout. Perhaps even more important, governors in several states, including women in New Mexico, South Carolina and Oklahoma, will be beholden to her. They could be critical to a 2012 bid for the Republican nomination. Clearly, Palin's presidential prospects are stronger now than a year ago.

If Sarah Palin benefited from being in the limelight in 2010, Hillary Clinton benefited by being absent from it. As Secretary of State, Clinton had no direct involvement in the elections and consequently remained above the fray as Democrats suffered losses of historic proportion, President Obama's popularity plunged, and both Obama and Vice President Biden appeared ineffectual at best in rallying voters behind Democratic candidates.

Clinton remains popular, retaining her image as a strong and effective leader. Although it's unclear whether she will run for the presidency before 2016, if at all, Hillary Clinton in 2010 appears a stronger-than-ever potential contender.

The opinions expressed in this commentary are solely those of Susan J. Carroll.

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