



# Despite new female faces in Congress, numbers in decline

From **Dana Bash**, CNN Senior Congressional Correspondent

## STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Record number of new GOP faces in Congress in 2011 will be women
- Overall number of women in Congress will not increase, however
- Women make up 17 percent of Congress
- U.S. ranks 90th in the world when it comes to number of women in national legislatures.

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*Editor's note: In "The Sweep," CNN dives deep into issues that are making news and explores why they're in the headlines.*

**Washington (CNN)** -- Ask Republican Rep.-elect Nan Hayworth how important it is to have women in congressional leadership roles, and she answers that gender shouldn't matter much.

"The overwhelming consideration to someone like me is merit," Hayworth insisted.

Yet, as she continued to talk about her own campaign experience, Hayworth practically stopped herself.

"I did make it part of my theme, thinking about it now," Hayworth said, referring to the fact that she is a woman and mother of two grown children.

"It is one of those things that does strike a note and provides a bond with some folks in ways that did help me to reach good relationship with the voters here in New York's 19th District."

Vicky Hartzler is a Republican woman from Missouri who toppled one of the Democrats' old bulls, House Armed Services Committee Chairman Ike Skelton, a 34-year House veteran.

She said the fact that she is a woman was beside the point.

"It is a conservative district, and Skelton spent the last four years voting with Nancy Pelosi and squandering our vote by supporting her liberal agenda," Hartzler said.

That's an argument many a Republican man gave this election year.

Yet, Hartzler did concede that as a woman, she will bring something different to Congress.

"Women can have more first-hand experience with family issues, and so it makes sense that's something they want to help address," said Hartzler, who has a young daughter.

For Hartzler and Hayworth, their instinct was to downplay gender politics, but the more they spoke in telephone conversations from their newly won districts, the more they acknowledged they do believe, as women, they will give Republicans in the new House majority a unique perspective.

They are two of a record eight new Republican women elected to the House. A ninth, Ann Marie Buerkle from New York's 25th District, is in a race yet to be decided.

In the Senate, one new Republican woman was elected: Kelly Ayotte of New Hampshire.

GOP leaders are trumpeting strides in electing Republican women.

"I'm excited about the Republican freshman class. We went up in women, and we went up in minorities," said Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-California, who helped recruit GOP candidates this year.

McCarthy said he and other Republican leaders went out of their way to help female candidates organize and raise money.

"It's just the first step, not the last," McCarthy said.

Republican Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, who has been in office for two decades, said she did see a stepped-up effort by her party leaders to field female candidates, which she made clear was a long time coming.

"They put muscle and might behind it. I'm really happy that our conference woke up from our slumber," Ros-Lehtinen said.

### **No increase in female lawmakers**

Still, for all the talk of new female GOP faces in the next Congress, the reality is that overall, the 2010 election will not usher more female lawmakers into the Capitol.

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In fact, this election year will mark the first time in nearly three decades that women have not increased their ranks in Congress.

"It fits into a pattern of almost no significant growth since 1992," said Debbie Walsh at Rutgers University's Center for American Women and Politics, which tracks women in elective office.

"We tend to go up a few every cycle, three or four, maybe five seats, but women don't seem to be making any serious strides in terms of numbers," Walsh said.

There are currently 73 women in the House and 17 women in the Senate.

It is even possible that this year women in Congress could go down slightly, depending on the outcome of the two unresolved House races and Lisa Murkowski's yet to be decided Senate race in Alaska.

If that happens, it would be the first time the number of female lawmakers has dropped since 1979.

Walsh said because Hillary Clinton got so close to the presidency, Sarah Palin was the first female Republican on a presidential ticket and Nancy Pelosi was the first female House speaker, relatively slow progress for women in politics overall has been overlooked.

"If you ask the general public, 'Are women well represented in government?' I'm sure they would say 'absolutely.' They have no sense that women are literally only 17 percent of all of Congress," Walsh said.

It's not that women didn't try this year. Walsh's research shows a record-breaking 262 women ran in primaries for the House, well more than the high-water mark of 222 in 1992, the so-called "Year of the Woman."

But many female candidates didn't make it to the general election.

A significant number of Republican women competed in GOP primaries, yet of 113 women who challenged congressional incumbents, only 32 survived. That's a 28 percent success rate.

Of the 80 Democratic women who challenged incumbents, 37 won their primary battles -- a 46 percent success rate.

Like their male counterparts, many Democratic women got swept away in the GOP wave in the general election.

Even though Democratic women will still far outnumber their Republican counterparts in the next Congress, fewer female Democrats ran for Congress this year than in the recent past.

"It can't be taken for granted," said Democratic Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz of Florida. "It's really important to groom women down the ladder. We've got to reach down all the way to young girls and make it accessible and a matter of natural progression that young girls would consider themselves future candidates. Now, I don't think any of those things are automatic or natural," she said.

Walsh said she will be doing more research to try to figure out why so many women ran for office this year, yet so many lost. Whether it was simply a matter of how competitive their races were or where they sat on the political spectrum or perhaps if any gender bias was a factor are all questions being explored.

Whatever the reason, Jennifer Lawless with the Women and Politics Institute at American University said the United States ranks 90th in the world when it comes to the number of women in national legislatures.

Part of the reason is because many other countries have quotas to ensure a significant number of women are serving.

"Rwanda is close to the top of the list," Lawless said, noting that most Americans would be surprised to learn a country considered so far behind the United States in so many ways would be that far ahead when it comes to female lawmakers.

### **Women lacking in leadership roles**

It's not just stagnant numbers that worry many who track progress of female lawmakers, it's that women overall are expected to have a diminished leadership role in the 112th Congress.

The most prominent example will be Nancy Pelosi, the first female speaker, handing over her gavel. She will likely be staying in her position as top House Democrat, however.

Three female committee chairwomen will also be losing their powerful perches: Rep. Louise Slaughter at the House Rules Committee, Rep. Nydia Velazquez at the Small Business Committee and Rep. Zoe Lofgren at the House Ethics Committee.

The only woman expected to take over a House committee is Ros-Lehtinen, who is likely to become chairwoman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. Lawless of American University says it reflects a lack of female GOP seniority.

"The problem with Republicans is that not only do they have very few women, most of them are relatively new entrants into the chamber," she said.

When it comes to the elected leadership of the new House Republican majority, as it stands the only woman is Cathy McMorris Rodgers of Washington. She is expected to keep her position as vice chair of the House GOP Conference, the fifth-ranking position if you count the speaker at the top.

McMorris Rodgers, eight months pregnant with her second child, said she decided not to go for a more prominent leadership spot because it "came down to a timing issue for me both professionally and personally."

She said she helped bring along female GOP candidates this year.

"We Republican women have needed some gains," she said.

She has been encouraging her male counterparts to bring other female Republican lawmakers into the leadership.

"I'm hopeful that we will see other Republican women in leadership positions in our conference. It is an important voice that is heard at the table and it's a little different perspective than the men bring. It's important that we are reflecting America," said McMorris Rodgers.

Minnesota Republican Michele Bachmann is running for the number four slot in the GOP leadership, but she is up against Jeb Hensarling of Texas, who appears to be gathering votes to win the position. Hensarling also has the support of most of the current GOP leadership.

Still, House GOP leaders are making moves that could pave the way for another woman in their ranks.

They are adding an elected leadership position for an incoming freshman lawmaker and several senior GOP sources say they hope South Dakota's Kristi Noem, who is interested, wins the slot.

Ros-Lehtinen, the one GOP woman in line to be a committee chairwoman, said she thinks the reason she and her female colleagues have not been in significant elected leadership positions is because they tend to be more vulnerable back home, where they need to keep focused.

"A lot of these guys come from totally safe districts. I'd love to get one of those one time," she joked, noting that her South Florida district voted for President Obama.

"That makes a big difference for people to decide whether they will run for a leadership post, and a lot of our women come from challenging areas," said Ros-Lehtinen.

On the Senate side of the Capitol, where Democrats still hold the majority, Sen. Patty Murray is the only female member of the leadership. She is Democratic Conference secretary, which is fourth down the line.

Democratic Sen. Blanche Lincoln of Arkansas, chairwoman of the Agriculture Committee, lost her re-election bid, but there are still three female committee chairwomen: Sen. Dianne Feinstein on the Intelligence Committee, Sen. Barbara Boxer on the Environment and Public Works Committee and Sen. Mary Landrieu on the Small Business Committee.

When it comes to the Senate Republican leadership, there are currently no women.

Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, had been the only one, but was forced to resign her post when she decided to run as a write-in candidate after losing her GOP primary.

That race is still unresolved, but if she is re-elected, she is not expected to return to the leadership.

Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, said the lack of female representation in her party's leadership is a big problem.

"It does concern me that there are not more women in leadership positions," Collins said, "that I do think is disappointing."

She suggested that Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell should at least consider informally including a woman in his leadership deliberations.

"It's important not just because of men and women's views on issues, it's important that our party show it's inclusive and it reflects America," said Collins, who was quick to make clear she is not volunteering for the position.

A spokesman for McConnell said the elected leadership will not include a woman, but it is possible he may in fact bring a female senator in informally.

Despite the mixed bag for GOP women in Congress, Collins, along with several other Republican lawmakers, were eager to point out the gains GOP women made in governors' races.

Three Republican women were elected: Susana Martinez in New Mexico, who is the first Latina governor in history; Nikki Haley in South Carolina, an Indian-American; and Mary Fallin in Oklahoma.

"It traditionally has been more difficult for women to break the executive glass ceiling than the legislative glass ceiling," Collins said. "It is highly significant."

### **Does the number of congressional women really matter?**

Not surprisingly, academics who track and promote women in elected office like Walsh of Rutgers University and Lawless of American University are disheartened that the overall number of women serving in the next Congress will either stay the same or drop slightly.

"In terms of female leadership, it's a real loss," Walsh said.

"There is something fundamentally wrong with a political system that elects such a small number of women, when women constitute a majority of the actual population," said Lawless.

But what do the women actually serving in Congress think? Does their presence make a difference in how the country is governed?

The bipartisan answer is yes.

Democrat Wasserman Schultz gave an example of legislation she successfully pushed for: the first federal swimming pool safety law in the country.

"It's been a huge problem for years with young children drowning. It's not that men didn't think it was important. We easily passed it. It's just that women in my community brought it to my attention because I am a woman with young children," she said.

Republican McMorris Rodgers said she helped give her male counterparts a powerful argument against the Democrats' health care bill last year: Two out of three businesses in America are started by women, and Republicans believe those businesses could be hurt by the legislation.

"We started highlighting that fact," McMorris Rodgers said.

"When you bring those kinds of numbers forward, the men around the table take note and understand they need to listen to women," she said.

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