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Women in Congress Lose Ground in 2010 Elections

By SUSAN MILLIGAN

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It could have been another Year of the Woman in American politics, with an added twist: it was [Republican](#) women—in particular, conservative Republican women—who accounted for increases in the number of females running for the House, Senate or statewide office. Whether traditional feminists see the likes of California gubernatorial candidate Meg Whitman or Delaware Senate candidate Christine O'Donnell as torch-bearers for so-called women's issues, it's an advancement for women when the field of females is more ideologically diverse.

[[See editorial cartoons about the 2010 elections.](#)]

There were some big-name wins: three female GOP candidates won their state's governorships, including Nikki Haley, who won despite a nasty campaign accusing her of having affairs with two different men. New Mexico Gov.-elect Susanna Martinez and Oklahoma Gov.-elect [Mary Fallin](#) joined Haley in becoming the first women to hold the chief executive office in their respective states.

But in [Congress](#), women are poised to either barely hold their numbers, or to even lose ground. With one race still undecided, the incoming Senate will have 16 women—one fewer than the current 17. If Alaska Sen. [Lisa Murkowski](#) succeeds in her write-in campaign (as she appears positioned to do), the number of Senate women will remain stagnant.

[[See top winners and losers from the 2010 elections.](#)]

In the House, females are at risk of seeing their numbers actually drop. With a handful of races still undecided, women now will get at least 70 seats (not including the non-voting delegates), according to tallies by the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University. The current number is 73; if women in still-disputed races all win, the number will go up by just one.

The number of women in the House has not dropped since 1979, and has not stayed merely level since 1987. Either outcome, center Director Debbie Walsh reports, is possible this year.

[[See editorial cartoons about the GOP.](#)]

The GOP takeover in the House doesn't immediately offer women much power. There are now three female full committee chairs. And while committee chairmanships are not automatically awarded to the highest-ranking member in the majority party, only Rep. [Ileana Ros-Lehtinen](#) of Florida is in line to take over a committee, [Foreign Affairs](#). That's not a sign of exclusion by the GOP; it's a function of the fact that Republicans have fewer women among their ranks than [Democrats](#), and those women are newer to the House. Losing [Nancy Pelosi](#) as House Speaker—along with the example Pelosi set for girls and young women dreaming of high government office—is tough enough. But even losing a female powerhouse such as New York Democrat [Louise Slaughter](#) as chair of the powerful [Rules Committee](#) is a blow for female advancement.

Meanwhile, the GOP leadership team is shaping up as all-male. Rep. [Michele Bachmann](#) of Minnesota was gunning for a spot, but yesterday withdrew her bid. Again, this is due more to the fact that women do not have the same seniority in the GOP as they do in the Democratic Party.

The new Congress will surely offer some new trends and traditions. It's too bad that one of them will be a retrenchment in female power.