

Women still lag in holding office

By MICHAEL SYMONS • STATEHOUSE BUREAU
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TRENTON — Swearing-in ceremonies today at the Statehouse welcoming Dawn Marie Addiego and Linda Greenstein to the state Senate will boost the number of women in the Legislature's upper house to 10, the highest on record.

"Unbelievable. Absolutely unbelievable," said Sen. Diane Allen, R-Burlington, who was one of four women in the Senate when she arrived in 1998. "It's a huge change. Twenty-five percent, oh my goodness. Only 25 percent short."

Such sentiments about today's milestone were common among advocates for women in politics, who say women make up a little more than half of the population and therefore should be better reflected in governing bodies from the municipal level on up.

Allen next year will be a regional director for the National Order of Women Legislators, a nonpartisan group made of up women who are currently or formerly lawmakers that encourages women to run for office or take part in public policy. But she said the same goals should apply for other demographic groups.

"There just are many other groups that need to be better represented," Allen said. "Nothing against the white men who serve in our Legislature. We have some amazing members. But as we move forward, we need to have an eye towards looking everywhere for folks to run for office, and not just the old usual places. That will ultimately give us a Legislature that's better balanced."

Addiego was selected by Republican Party committee members to replace Philip Haines, who resigned in October to become a state Superior Court judge. Greenstein was elected last month to complete the term vacated when Bill Baroni Jr. resigned for a job at the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey. Her move will give Democrats 24 seats in the 40-seat Senate for the first time since 1989.

The elevation of the two assemblywomen probably won't increase women's overall representation in the Legislature, with Lumberton Committeeman Patrick

Delaney the Republicans' selection to replace Addiego in the Assembly and a half-dozen men making up the most-discussed Democratic options to replace Greenstein.

"Our percentage doesn't change any. We're just rearranging them," said Debbie Walsh, director of Rutgers University's Center for American Women and Politics. "But it's definitely terrific to see those women moving up to the Senate."

"Because there's been this historic under-representation of women in our state Legislature, whenever there's an opportunity for a party leader to make an appointment, we think of it as a missed opportunity if a woman doesn't get that appointment," Walsh said. "However, that doesn't take away from the significance and the importance of both of these women moving into the Legislature."

As recently as the middle of the last decade, New Jersey ranked 43rd in the nation in the percentage of women in its Legislature. There were 19 women in the Legislature in 2005, essentially stagnant for nearly 10 years.

That turned around in part because of a variety of programs and organizations developed in the last decade to encourage women to run and teach them how, such as the Ready to Run series at Rutgers, which enrolls more than 200 women a year, and efforts such as the Christine Todd Whitman Series for Excellence in Public Service, New Jersey Women's Political Caucus and Women Advocating Good Government.



It also turned around because of the rash of indictments and ethics problems saddling the Legislature in recent years. That had the practical impact of creating openings and the political impact of compelling parties to present a new image.

"At that moment, party leaders saw that voters wanted to see some change and that women were there and ready and positioned and felt like, looked like change to both voters and to party leaders," Walsh said.

New Jersey has 34 women in the Legislature, down a bit from its peak of 36 and accounting for 28.3 percent of the seats. Come January, it will move up to be tied for the 10th highest percentage in the country — due, actually, to losses by women candidates in other states.

"That is something that was inconceivable to think of maybe five or six years ago," Walsh said.

"That's amazing for us," Allen said. "There was a time when we just thanked God every day for Mississippi and Alabama, or we would have been 50th."

The ranks of state lawmakers are made up predominantly of Democrats, and 2010 was a bad year for the party, Walsh said. Gains in the number of Republican women nationally were far exceeded by Democratic losses.

Nearly 100 female state lawmakers lost around the country this year, the largest decline since the Center for American Women in Politics started tracking in 1971. In Congress, the number of women is dropping for the first time since 1979.

New Jersey's state legislative elections next fall will have new districts, redrawn to balance out populations after new census figures arrive. Uncertainties about the political mood and the map itself are wild cards that make it impossible to project whether female candidates will retain or expand on those gains.

"I do think that 2011 is a year that has the potential for having some real opportunities for women, because when redistricting happens, and the lines shift and change, it is a moment when often you will see people saying, 'You know what, I'm not going to do this again. My district is so different, I'm not ready to learn a new constituency.' So there may be some openings," Walsh said.

The Center for American Women and Politics is running a nonpartisan program encouraging women 45 and older to run for Congress and state legislatures in the upcoming post-redistricting cycle.

New Jersey has never elected a woman to the U.S. Senate and has elected five women to the House of Representatives, though none since re-electing Marge Roukema in 2002.

One woman, Whitman, has been elected governor. Advocates for creating the position of lieutenant governor said it would increase opportunities for women to seek statewide office, and both major-party nominees last year were women, including Republican Lt. Gov. Kim Guadagno.

Voters don't get to select their preference for lieutenant governor, however, but elect them as part of a ticket. The candidates are chosen as running mates by the candidates for governor.

The Assembly currently has a female speaker, Sheila Oliver, for the first time since the 1960s. And a woman, Barbara Buono, is the Senate majority leader for the first time.

"We have reached this point for women in the state Legislature. We're not close to parity yet, but we're certainly better than we were," Walsh said. "But we still have no women in our congressional delegation and we have very few women who serve as mayors. So there is still a long way to go for women and women's voices."

The state Senate, show in session at the Statehouse, will add its ninth and 10th female members today, the most in history. (ASBURY PARK PRESS 2005)

