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SOUTHERN POLITICAL REPORT

AN INSIDER ADVANTAGE PUBLICATION

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2010's women winners – and losers

By Hastings Wyman
 Southern Political Report

December 9, 2010 —

Women made some significant electoral gains in the South this year. Two women were elected governors, a first for their states, Mary Fallin (R) in Oklahoma and Nikki Haley (R) in South Carolina. In Florida, Jennifer Carroll, an African-American woman, was elected lieutenant governor as the running mate of Rick Scott, the GOP's successful gubernatorial nominee. Carroll had previously served as a Republican member of the Florida legislature. And the number of women elected to Congress from the South rose from 13 to 17.

But women elected to seats in Southern legislatures decreased from 376 to 357,* mainly as the result of Republican men replacing Democratic women in the legislatures. The share of women in state legislatures nationwide is 25 percent, but in the South, 14 percent.

Gains for Southern women took place primarily in the Republican Party, due mainly to the GOP sweep of the South this year. Republican women in the South made significant gains at the top of the ballot. In addition to electing two governors, the number of Southern Republican women elected to Congress increased from seven to ten. The Democratic increase in Southern women in Congress rose from six to seven, albeit from a smaller base of Democratic members.

But in Dixie's state legislatures, the GOP gain of 11 seats Southwide was not enough to offset the loss of 30 Democratic women legislators. The losses appear to be primarily among white Democratic women. Black legislators are mostly in districts with large African-American populations, districts that rarely elect Republicans.

Moreover, black voters appear to be more open to electing women to public office. While racial data are not yet available for state legislative results, in congressional races, of the 17 districts with large black populations that elected black members of Congress, five elected women; that's nearly 30 percent. By contrast, in the 101 mostly white Republican districts, ten elected women; that's 10 percent. This suggests that black voters are three times more likely to elect women candidates than white voters.

Women in Southern legislatures, post-2010 election

		Dems	Reps
NC	26%	25	13
GA	23%	40	14
FL	21%	15	19
AR	19%	13	12
TX	19%	14	21
VA**	19%	20	7
KY	17%	12	11
TN	16%	14	7
LA**	16%	17	6
MS**	14%	20	5
AL	14%	15	5
OK	9%	5	11
SC	9%	9	7
		162	120

National average 25%; Southern average 14%.

*The state legislative numbers in this article were compiled from the Center for American Women and Politics, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University. ** These states held no state legislative elections this year.

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