

Women's representation takes off in state politics

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On a recent plane ride, I sat next to a woman who, like me, graduated from journalism school. And like me, she hoped to get a job as a political reporter after graduation.

But unlike me, she graduated in 1964. She didn't get any calls back -- much less offers -- for political jobs. Instead, she was offered positions on what was known as the "women's pages." This woman went into public relations.

I didn't catch her name, but I managed to thank her for trying to break ground so that 45 years later, I can do what I love.

Women in all professions have been breaking ground for the past 45 years, but one of the most important is in the field of politics, where the decisions made affect everyone's lives.

Here's the good news: Women's representation in Missouri politics has taken off in the past 10 years. In 2000, the first female U.S. senator was appointed. Since then, every Senate election has contained a woman, and that trend looks to be continuing into the next decade.

And just six years after Jean Carnahan was appointed senator, her daughter, Robin Carnahan, won the secretary of state spot. When she was sworn in, half the statewide elected officials were women.

"That's a good number, better than a lot of states," Robin Carnahan said. "I don't think these races have been about gender."

It's especially good if you compare it to the number of women who have held a statewide office in the entire history of Missouri: 11. Six of those were elected in the 2000s, and only two were elected before 1990, according to the Center for American Women and Politics.

And indeed, both sides took shots in Carnahan's recent Senate race against Rep. Roy Blunt -- but none related to her gender. Compared even to other states, Missouri's lack of election sexism is kind of amazing.

Springfield's Democratic state representative, Sara Lampe, said she's seen little of it as well. She believes that's because Missouri breeds strong women who are able to take care of business, as well as themselves.

She said her mother gave her the attitude "Of course I can do that." So she did.

But not only does Missouri have strong women, it has men who are willing to step aside to let a qualified woman run for the office -- or even ask her to run. That's a great combination, and we should commend the men who do that.

And though I hope that trend will continue on to 2012, there have been disheartening signs -- a St. Louis radio host criticized former treasurer Sarah Steelman by saying, "We aren't electing the hottest senator."

Well, as far as I know, neither Republican Steelman nor Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-Mo., is asking Missourians to elect her because of her looks. It's especially disappointing and a bit ironic to see that kind of speech directed at Steelman, because she has called out sexism even in her own party.

It seems that Missouri is ready for strong women, but it's a bit leery about strong women who wear makeup and lots of jewelry. In the coming election cycle, let's worry less about how female politicians dress and instead critique their positions on the issues. You can make legitimate arguments without using femininity as an attack point.

There are better ways to express discontent.

And here's something you can do to help: Tell women to run for office. Research shows that women have to be asked to run for office, whereas men decide to run on their own.

For Lampe, a former teacher, it was the parent of a student. She had considered lobbying, but said she wouldn't have thought about a run for office without that push.

Rep. Steve Tilley, who organized the state House Republicans' 2010 election said he actively recruited strong candidates, and that often included women. And those women did just as well in the election as men, said Tilley, who is now the presumptive House speaker.

But many had to be asked.

So if you know a strong woman leader who would make a great politician, tell her so. It could make a difference for her and for the state.