

## In the Alabama Legislature, female legislators hit new high; still low in U.S.

Published: Friday, December 31, 2010, 6:30 AM Updated: Friday, December 31, 2010, 7:05 AM



By Kim Chandler -- The Birmingham News



(The Birmingham News)

MONTGOMERY -- Alabama has a record 19 women serving in the 140-member Alabama Legislature, but the group still is predominantly a men's club.

With five female senators and 14 female members of the House of Representatives, the state in the November election set a new high-water mark for female legislators.

But Alabama still ranks near the bottom of states in terms of female representation. Alabama, with 13.5 percent of legislators being female, will rank 47th or 48th in the nation for the percentage of female legislators when new rankings are completed, said Gilda Morales, project manager, information services, at the Center for

American Women and Politics.

Before the November election, Alabama ranked 48th with 18 female lawmakers accounting for 12.9 percent of legislators. Colorado ranked first with women making up 38 percent of legislators. South Carolina ranked last at 10 percent.

For the past four years, there have been five women serving in the Alabama Senate. Sen. Vivian Figures, D-Mobile, has watched the number grow from two when she first joined the Senate in 1997.

"I'm definitely happy with the progress," Figures said.

"Our government should be representative of all people from all walks of life, including both genders," she said.

Figures said that, when she was first elected, the dress code would not allow women to wear pantsuits on the Senate floor. That rule has since been changed.

Senators also were in the habit of saying, "Gentleman," at the microphone as they began to address their colleagues. Figures began to interject, "and ladies," to correct them.

"It was definitely a man's world," Figures said.

The women in the Alabama Legislature are a diverse group divided by race, political party and views.

Rep. Mary Sue McClurkin, R-Indian Springs, said that, when she was first elected in 1998, only 11 women served in the Legislature. The numbers have improved but McClurkin said, "We still have low numbers."

There have been times McClurkin thought State House debate lacked a female perspective.

One of those times was during debate on a bill she sponsored that required women to view an ultrasound before having an abortion. Another was a bill that required Medicaid to pay for reconstructive surgery following a mastectomy.

"It was pretty obvious to me that there were not the women in the body that had the experience or brought that perspective to that issue," McClurkin said.

She joked that she has noticed one advantage on the crowded floors of the State House to the Legislature remaining overwhelmingly male. "Usually the restrooms aren't as full," she said.

Morales said Southern states traditionally have lagged in female officeholders. "They are usually in the bottom 10," she said.

Rep. Merika Coleman, D-Birmingham, said she's thrilled there has been progress in the number of female legislators. Alabama ranked last in the nation for female lawmakers before Coleman's election in 2002.

"We're moving in the right direction," Coleman said.

McClurkin, Figures and Coleman said they would like to see more women run for political office in Alabama.

"We do need more women, because women bring so many different perspectives," Figures said.

And I find in dealing with women, we seem to be more in a mind-set to just get it done without playing political games," Figures said.

Coleman said she wants girls to grow up knowing politics isn't just for men. She said one of her most rewarding experiences was when her daughter, now 13, was in the fourth grade and told her classmates that, when she grew up, she wanted to be a state representative, "just like my mother."

"Just to think that little girl at that age was thinking about that and knew that one day she could accomplish whatever she wanted to accomplish," Coleman said.

"And there have been other little girls that may have never thought about politics or may have thought it was for old white men and now understand that women of all races, women of all ages have the ability to serve," Coleman said.

*Join the conversation by clicking to comment or e-mail Chandler at [kchandler@bhamnews.com](mailto:kchandler@bhamnews.com).*

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