



TN ranks low in female officeholders

Only 2 women have ever won statewide election

By Chas Sisk • THE TENNESSEAN • January 11, 2011

Lawmakers are expected today to name the first woman ever as speaker of the Tennessee House of Representatives, but the state still lags behind much of the nation in the number of women in higher office.

Nashville Rep. Beth Harwell is widely expected to make state history shortly after noon, when lawmakers gather at the state Capitol for the 107th General Assembly. The vote will make Harwell the highest-ranking woman ever in Tennessee government.

But Harwell will preside over one of the most male-dominated state legislatures in the country, a body in which fewer than 1 in 5 members is a woman. Ninety years after Tennessee lawmakers ratified the 19th Amendment, guaranteeing women the right to vote nationwide, the state ranks 40th in the nation in the share of women lawmakers, and only two women have ever won election statewide.

"I think it (the Harwell vote) quite frankly indicates that women are ready to play a role in leadership," said Clarksville Mayor Kim McMillan, a former state lawmaker and candidate for governor. "But I don't think it shatters the glass ceiling. I think that's something you're always chipping away at."

Harwell has downplayed the role of gender in her run to the speakership, and it has not been raised as an issue against her. One of the state House's two longest-serving Republican members, Harwell stressed her experience in defeating a male candidate, Franklin Rep. Glen Casada, to win her party's nomination for the office. She faces no declared opposition today.

"It's certainly historic, and I'm proud to be a part of that," Harwell said. "I don't think I'm speaker because I'm a woman, but that is a nice historical touch to this."

Today's vote will cap a year of gains for women in Tennessee politics. This month, Tennessee saw two women sworn into its delegation to the U.S. Congress for the first time, and the state has seen the first woman, McMillan, elected mayor of a major city.

But the vote also highlights the fact that Tennesseans, unlike voters in more than half of the states, have never elected a woman to be senator or governor. In fact only two women have ever been elected to statewide office in Tennessee, in both cases to the now-defunct Public Service Commission.

The lack of women in high positions in Tennessee does not necessarily reflect an unwillingness by voters to elect women candidates, say political scientists and other observers. But it does indicate that women still face barriers that keep them from running for office in the first place.

"I think that it really is a good thing for women that the new speaker is going to be a woman," said Yvonne Wood, a member of the executive committee of the Tennessee Economic Council on Women. "But we have statistics that prove that there is much to be done."

Women face bias

Observers say several factors have kept women from making greater strides in Tennessee politics.

Women still face cultural barriers to running for office. Their appearance is more likely to be featured in media coverage of their campaigns, undermining their credibility as serious candidates, say political scientists. Women are also less likely to be recruited by political operatives.

"If somebody suggests that you run for office, that is one of the best predictors of whether you will run," said Jennifer Lawless, professor of government at American University who studies women in politics.

The time commitment needed to win election and serve in public office also may be a factor, especially for women with children or other family commitments.

"If I had not been able to commute, I don't know that I would have been able to run," said McMillan, who worked as a senior adviser to Gov. Phil Bredesen and served six terms in the state legislature, rising to House majority leader.

A lack of statewide offices in Tennessee government also may play a part, said John Geer, a political scientist at Vanderbilt University. Many posts, such as attorney general or secretary of state, are elected in other states, but Tennessee voters select only two — governors and U.S. senators.

"Tennessee has a problem with anybody getting to be a well-known candidate," Geer said. "That's a problem for men and women."

Having few statewide offices magnifies the importance of legislative positions. And in the Tennessee legislature, women trail far behind.

Last year, only 25 of the legislature's 132 members were women, slightly less than 19 percent. That proportion lagged behind even some other Southern states, such as North Carolina, Georgia and Arkansas, according to the Center for American Women and Politics, which tracks representation nationwide.

Not many candidates

When state lawmakers meet to vote today, they actually will have one fewer female member than a year ago.

The significance of holding legislative office was apparent in November when voters in the 6th Congressional District elected Diane Black, a veteran Republican lawmaker from Gallatin. Black joins U.S. Rep. Marsha Blackburn of the 7th Congressional District, who made her name as a state senator and similarly vaulted from the state legislature to Congress.

Meanwhile, voters in Clarksville selected McMillan from a field of 11 candidates to lead the state's fifth-biggest city. With a population of approximately 125,000, Clarksville is the largest Tennessee city ever to elect a woman as its top executive.

"Part of the problem is we haven't had as many women that have sought elected office," McMillan said. "You sense there are women that are qualified who are not running. ... I think it's a question of not having women who have run."