

February 19, 2011

Sewell's election a reminder of black women's progress, struggle

By Deborah Barfield Berry
dberry@gannett.com

WASHINGTON -- Terri Sewell stood out last month among the newly elected congressional lawmakers waiting to be sworn in inside the House chamber.

Almost everyone in the crowd was white and male. Not Sewell, who made history that day as the first black woman from Alabama to take the congressional oath of office.

Fifteen black women are serving in the House this Congress, which ties the record set by the 110th Congress that convened in January 2007. There are no black women in the Senate.

Black women are increasingly winning at the state level as well. After last year's elections, the number serving in state legislatures also reached a record -- 238, an increase of 12 from the year before.

Sewell's win underscores the gains made by black women seeking elected office, but it's also a reminder of how long it's taken to achieve those gains, black lawmakers and political experts say.

"We've come a long way, (but) we're obviously not where we need to be," Sewell said. "We need more women. We need more minorities. We need more diversity in electoral politics."

Among black elected officials of both genders, the proportion of women has increased. They now account for nearly 40 percent of black elected officials, according to the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, a nonpartisan research group that focuses on issues affecting African-Americans. Among white elected officials, women make up a smaller proportion -- about 20 percent, the center found.

"Black women are becoming a dominant force in black politics," said David Bositis, a senior analyst at the center.

Bositis also noted that Sewell wasn't elected by a representative cross-section of Alabama residents, but by voters in a district that's mostly black.

"If Alabama had its way, it would cut up that district so no black member from Alabama would be elected," he said. "But it doesn't have its way ... there are laws."

The 15 women who belong to the Congressional Black Caucus today represent a stark contrast with 1990, when there was only one, according to the center.

Fifteen black women also served in the 110th Congress, but not all at the same time, according to the "Black Americans in Congress" website maintained by the House clerk's office. Two black women members died during that Congress.

Sewell, a public finance attorney and a native of Selma, graduated with honors from Princeton University and obtained a masters degree from Oxford University. She graduated from Harvard Law School in 1992.

After graduation, she clerked for U.S. District Chief Judge U.W. Clemon, Alabama's first black federal judge.

She defeated Republican Don Chamberlain in last year's election, taking more than 70 percent of the vote to win the seat left vacant by former Democratic Rep. Artur Davis, who lost a bid to become Alabama's first black governor.

Sewell attributes her political successes to sacrifices made by black Americans over generations.

"I know it's not about me," Sewell said. "But it's about me standing on the shoulders of so many wonderful folks who came before me -- some who are known like Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, and many unknown who just helped move the discussion, the dialogue to the point where an African-American woman thought she could run."

Black women have a long history of involvement in their communities, whether that meant serving on a school board, participating in church activities or spearheading protests during the civil rights movement.

Sewell's mother was the first black woman elected to the City Council in Selma, and many black women in Congress, including Democratic Rep. Maxine Waters of California are former state legislators.

"We bring something unique to the table as women of color, as women generally," said Sewell, whose district is mostly poor and black, with high unemployment. "Our perspective has been missing in elected politics."

That message has been lost on the younger generation, said Gloria Travis Tanner, executive director of the National Organization of Black Elected Legislative Women.

"They don't understand that it's really significant to have somebody at the table," said Tanner, the first black woman elected to the Colorado Senate. "Our ancestors were bitten by dogs to make sure we could sit at the table ... whether in Congress or the state or at the city council. A lot of things don't happen if we're not there, and we could stop a lot of bad things if we are there."

Sewell, 46, is the only black and the only Democrat among Alabama's nine House members and senators.

"She speaks for the Democratic party, as far as Congress is concerned, from Alabama," said Bill Stewart, professor emeritus of political science at the University of Alabama. "That's a big responsibility that she inherits."

But political concerns are a low priority for Sewell's constituents, said Sheila Tyson, president of the Alabama chapter of the National Coalition on Black Civil Participation.

She said those constituents want one thing -- jobs.

"Her being a woman doesn't mean anything to me if she doesn't bring any jobs to Birmingham," said Tyson, whose group works to boost black voting participation. "We don't care if Donald Duck went (to Congress). We want some jobs."

Money can be a major obstacle to blacks seeking elected office, experts say. White candidates can often tap into an old-boy network and political action committees, but that wasn't readily available to Sewell, who had never run for elected office before.

She received financial and technical support early on from national women's groups, including Emily's List, which supports Democratic women candidates.

"That was critically important," Sewell said.

Sewell raised \$1.8 million during the 2009-2010 election cycle, according to reports filed with the Federal Election Commission.

Several national women's groups, including the National Organization of Black Elected Legislative Women and the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University, hold leadership classes to train and encourage women of color to run for office.

Tanner said running for office is particularly tough for women in the South, where she said the male-dominated culture of "keeping them in the kitchen" has been slow to change.

"They feel women have a place, and it's not sitting in the House or Senate," she said. "But we have to change that thinking."

Additional Facts

BLACK WOMEN SERVING IN THE 112TH CONGRESS

Karen Bass, D-Calif.
Corrine Brown, D- Fla.
Donna M. Christensen, D- Va.
Yvette Diane Clarke, D- N.Y.
Donna F. Edwards, D- Md.
Marcia L. Fudge, D- Ohio
Sheila Jackson Lee, D- Texas
Eddie Bernice Johnson, D-Texas

Barbara Lee, D- Calif.
Gwen S. Moore, D- Wis.
Eleanor Holmes Norton, D-D.C.
Laura Richardson, D- Calif.
Terri Sewell, D-Birmingham
Maxine Waters, D- Calif.
Frederica Wilson, D- Fla.
Source: House Office of the Clerk, Black Americans in Congress