
TODAY'S SUNBEAM

Redistricting plan hurts women lawmakers

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Statehouse Bureau

Republicans have insisted they were short-changed in the latest round of legislative redistricting. So were women, according to a report released Monday.

Women hold about a quarter of the 120 seats in the state Legislature, but also account for four of the seven lawmakers whose political careers ended because of the new political boundaries, a Rutgers University analysis concludes.

"We've expanded women's representation in the Garden State significantly in recent years, but that progress may now be slowed," said Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at the Eagleton Institute for New Jersey Politics.

Three weeks ago, Democrats prevailed in the once-in-a-decade legislative redistricting. The commission to redraw the boundaries - made up of five Republicans, five Democrats and a tiebreaker appointed by the chief justice of the state Supreme Court - included three women. The 11th member, Alan Rosenthal, is also an Eagleton professor.

Democratic State Chairman John Wisniewski, who led the Democrats redistricting team, said the possible decline of female lawmakers "is not a good thing" but speaks more to how political parties select their candidates than the way the map is drawn. "I would agree with their underlying argument that there should be more women in the Legislature," he said. "The map, however, is gender-neutral."

At public hearings leading up to the commission's vote, members of the Women's Political Caucus urged commissioners to take women into account when drawing the new map. "All the other minority groups had been out there - that whole minority coalition - talking about race, primarily," said Sharon L. Weiner, a past president of the group. "And we felt, certainly by the numbers, that women were a minority and should be given special consideration."

Weiner said recent gains in women's representation partly came about because male lawmakers had to resign in the wake of corruption probes or other ethics issues. "At least the party leaders were smart enough to replace them with women," she said.

The women who declined to seek re-election after they were thrown into different districts were Assembly members Denise Coyle (R-Somerset), Joan Quigley (D-Hudson), Joan Voss (D-Bergen) and Caridad Rodriguez (D-Hudson).

Rodriguez was replaced on the ballot by another woman, but the slots for Quigley, Voss and Coyle are likely to go to men.

Quigley said she may run for a political office in two years, though not necessarily in the Legislature. "I don't think it's unfair," she said. "I think it's unfortunate."

Two lawmakers - Assemblymen Ralph Caputo (D-Essex) and Reed Gusciora (D-Mercer) - were affected by the new maps but have leased apartments so they can move to districts that resembled the ones they currently represent.

Quigley said she thinks women are "more rooted than men are," and have a harder time moving. "I think it's tradition," she said. "We don't pack up and move that quickly. We stay in one place. We have family responsibilities - kids in school, husbands with jobs - so we can't just say, OK, we're moving two towns away."