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## When it's time to run for office, fewer women stand up

**In Los Angeles as elsewhere, fewer women seek election. More may be looking at careers in business, and they may dislike the coarseness of campaigning.**

By Kate Linthicum, Los Angeles Times

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Fifteen people sit on the Los Angeles City Council. It's possible that in a few months, only one will be a woman. In a few years, there could be none.

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If City Councilwoman Janice Hahn wins a July runoff election for a South Bay congressional seat, Jan Perry will be the council's lone female. And Perry must surrender her seat in 2013 because of term limits.

Eleven years ago, a third of the desks lining the council chamber's ornate horseshoe were filled by women. The steady decline reflects a broader trend across the nation, where the proportion of women officeholders has been flat-lining or slipping.

The number of women sworn in to Congress this year fell for the first time in 30 years, leaving women with just 16% of congressional seats.

And the number of female lawmakers in state capitals decreased by 81 this year, the largest percentage drop in decades.

The prominence of women like Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin on the national stage may give a false impression of the political influence women wield and ease pressure on women to run for office. That could be especially true in California, where both United States senators, several members of Congress, the attorney general and secretary of state are women.

"I think that the average person could get fooled into thinking we have more representation than we actually do," said Katherine Spillar, vice president of Feminist Majority, an organization that promotes equality for women.

Spillar said that even in this era of post-identity politics, women's representation in politics at the national and local level is critical.

"Women are often more acutely aware of needs in the education system, and they have a different understanding on needs in healthcare, transportation," she said. "Having those perspectives represented when tens of millions of dollars of a city budget are being allocated, that matters."

So what changed since 1992's "Year of the Woman," when females gained 22 seats in Congress?

For one, the once-rapid growth in women tossing their hats into the ring has stalled.

"When women run, women win at the same rate as men in comparable elections," said Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University. "But they haven't been running."

No one can say for sure why, but political scientists suspect one cause is the ever-increasing opportunities for well-educated women in business. Others may be the coarseness permeating many campaigns, and the reputation of politics as a man's world.

In the past, some women saw the Los Angeles City Council as an inhospitable place.

In 1995, then-City Councilwoman Laura Chick made headlines when she called the council the "most sexist, good-old-boys work environment that I've ever been in."

Chick, who in 2001 became city controller and thus the first woman elected to a citywide office, told reporters that some of her council colleagues made off-color jokes and sexually suggestive comments during meetings.

For whatever reasons, the decline of female candidates appears especially acute in Los Angeles, according to Bettina Duval, founder of California List, which identifies potential women candidates for statewide office and helps them get elected.

So far, no female candidates have emerged as potential contenders for Hahn's City Council seat, a prospect Duval called "stunning."

Three men, former Councilman Rudy Svorinich, Assemblyman Warren Furutani (D-Gardena) and Pat McOsker, president of the United Firefighters of Los Angeles City, have signaled interest in representing Hahn's Watts-to-San Pedro district.

The tenor of modern campaigning, with its frequent intrusions into family and personal life, may discourage women, Perry said. "I can only imagine that some women don't go into politics because they see that it's such a nasty process."

She said she was so disturbed by the possibility of a City Council with no women that she has been looking for a woman to replace herself and begun grooming a possible successor.

"Women bring different perspectives," she said, noting that it was councilwomen who fought for equal pay for female city workers in the 1990s.

Perry, who worked as a council aide to former Councilwoman Rita Walters during that time, said the gender dynamics of the panel have changed for the better in recent years, in part because term limits ushered in a new crop of lawmakers.

The "culture of sexism from the 1990s and before is long gone," said City Council President Eric Garcetti.

"But it's more than getting rid of the culture of sexism," he said. "It's making sure there is representation. We need a council that looks like Los Angeles."

Other groups also are underrepresented on the council. For example, only one Asian American has ever served: Michael Woo, who represented Garcetti's 13th District.

There are many women in key City Hall roles: department managers, legislative analysts, the top ranks of council staff. But the leap to a political career can pose different challenges for women.

Wendy Greuel was single when she successfully ran for City Council at age 40. Her mother was supportive but warned she would never find a husband or have children if she won.

Greuel, now city controller, met her future husband at a campaign stop and had a son, Thomas, not long after entering office. A nanny would take him to City Hall each day, and Greuel would run to her office to nurse him during meeting breaks.

She said she sometimes felt more scrutinized than her male colleagues who were parents. At one community event, she said, she was heckled and told to go home and "be a real mom to your child."

Greuel, a possible mayoral candidate, said that being a mother gave her a unique perspective on some issues, such as education. But she rejected the idea that she should focus on "women's issues." She chaired the transportation committee and was the vice chairwoman of the powerful budget and finance committee.

Former City Councilwoman Jackie Goldberg said every issue is a women's issue.

"Women bring a different perspective even to the things that everybody agrees we should be talking about," she said.

She recalled council discussions of the merits of publically funded after-school programs. The councilmen, she said, thought about them in terms of gang prevention. But the councilwomen considered the broader effects on families.

Goldberg, who started her political career at age 38, when she ran for the Los Angeles Unified School District's Board of Education, noted that women who run for office often do so at a later age than men. Part of the reason, she said, is that they're often busy raising families.

"Most men in office who have kids are not the primary caregivers," she said. "Guys don't need to be recruited. Women usually do."

About once a month, Goldberg says, someone calls seeking her advice about running for office.

"I've yet to have a woman call," she said.

[kate.linthicum@latimes.com](mailto:kate.linthicum@latimes.com)

*On Twitter @KateLinthicum*

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