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Contact: CAWP (732/932-9384)
Debbie Walsh, Director, Ext. 227
Gilda Morales, Information Services Manager, Ext. 264

After Legislative Elections in Four States, Number of Women Remains Stuck Women Edge Upward in Statewide Offices; Women of Color Gain in NJ

Women failed to gain ground in the 2011 state legislative elections, according to the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP), a unit of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey.

“With legislative contests in four states, even if every outstanding race is decided in favor of a woman, the national total will drop from the current number of 1740,” observed CAWP director Debbie Walsh. “The national total of women elected statewide will increase by just one -- to 72 -- as a result of elections in three states. It’s discouraging that we’re nowhere near the peak statewide number of 92 women, achieved in 2000.”

In addition, 18 of the nation’s 100 largest cities had mayoral races, with women candidates involved in eight. Three women emerged as winners: incumbents in Baltimore, MD and Houston, TX and an open-seat victor in Raleigh, NC. One race, in Spokane, WA, has not yet been called.

New Jersey

As a result of the 2011 elections, New Jersey’s legislature will have 33 women among its 120 members (27.5 %). With a total of 11 women in the Senate (8D, 3R) and 22 women in the Assembly (15 D, 7 R), New Jersey will rank 15th among the states for its proportion of women in the state legislature. The previous numbers were 10 women in the Senate and 24 in the Assembly.

“As recently as 2004, New Jersey was ranked in the bottom ten,” commented Walsh. “We’ve climbed steadily, but it takes sustained effort to encourage women to run and remind the parties to draw candidates from beyond their inner circles.” Walsh noted that CAWP’s own bipartisan Ready to Run™ campaign training has played a significant role in recruiting and preparing women to become candidates. About a quarter of the women who will serve in Trenton in 2012 have attended the program.

Those elected include 27 returning incumbents (18 D, 9 R), 10 in the Senate (7 D, 3 R) and 17 in the Assembly (11 D, 6 R). The only new woman Senator, Nellie Pou (D-35) will move up from the Assembly, filling an open seat. Five newcomers will fill open Assembly seats, including one Republican, Holly Schepisi, and four Democrats, all women of color: Marlene Caride, Angelica Jimenez, Gabriela Mosquera and Shavonda Sumter.

The legislators include a record 15 women of color, all Democrats, including 5 in the Senate (3 African American women and 2 Latinas) and 10 in the Assembly (6 African American women and 4 Latinas.) The previous record number of women of color was 12 in 2011.

The elections also created New Jersey's first all-female legislative delegation; in the reshaped 11th district, incumbent Republican women were re-elected to the Senate (Jennifer Beck) and Assembly (Mary Pat Angelini and Carolyn Casagrande).

Running for the NJ legislature in the 2011 general election were 20 Senate candidates (12 D, 8 R) and 48 Assembly candidates (27 D, 21 R). The 68 women running for the legislature matched the previous record number of women candidates in 2007, the last time all seats in both houses were on the ballot.

Six incumbent women legislators were not on the ballot this year – two who chose to retire, and four who were forced out as a result of redistricting. “Losing so many women meant we had already fallen behind even before the race began,” said Walsh. “Despite the number of women running, their prospects were dimmed because fewer were incumbents, the candidates most likely to win.”

Kentucky

Kentucky held elections for statewide elected executive offices, but there were no legislative races. Two women were nominated for statewide offices. Democrat Alison Lundergan won her race for secretary of state, while Republican K.C. Crosbie lost the race for state treasurer. Two women held statewide offices in 2011.

Louisiana

In Louisiana, election results will not be complete until runoff elections on November 19. In races where no candidate wins more than 50 percent of the votes in the October open primary, a runoff is held between the two top finishers.

No women will serve in statewide elected executive office in Louisiana as a result of this year’s elections. None was elected in the primary, and none won sufficient votes to run in November.

Fourteen incumbent women have already won Louisiana state legislative seats (11 D, 3 R) and seven more women are on the November ballot, including two incumbents and five seeking open seats.

“Louisiana is the only state with races this year where term limits are in effect, and that cut sharply into the number of women,” Walsh said. “Five women were ‘termed out’ and couldn’t run again. Three more were forced out by redistricting, and one lost her primary when she was placed in a district with another incumbent.”

Prior to the 2011 elections, Louisiana ranked 44th in the nation for representation of women in the legislature. After all results are in, it will likely continue to rank among the bottom ten states.

Mississippi

In Mississippi, three women were running statewide. Republican Lynn Fitch defeated Democrat Connie Moran for the open state treasurer position; Republican Cindy Hyde-Smith won her race for agriculture commissioner. This will be the first time that two women have served simultaneously in statewide office in Mississippi.

There will be a total of at least 28 women legislators in Mississippi (16.1 %), a net increase of at least two women over the 2011 count of 26 women. At least 7 women will serve in the Senate (2D, 5R), with one race still too close to call and likely to have a recount. In the House, 21 women will serve (15 D, 6 R.) When all races in all states are settled, Mississippi will probably continue to rank among the bottom ten states.

Virginia

In Virginia, there will be 25 women in the 140-member legislature (17.9%), including 7 women senators (6D, 1R), and 18 women delegates (11 D, 7 R). With a net loss of two women from its legislature, Virginia will share 40th place in the nation with Wyoming. There were no races for statewide offices.

Mayors

Eighteen of the nation's 100 largest cities held mayoral races, and women were candidates in eight of those contests. Women mayors were elected or re-elected in three of those cities and will join six holdover women mayors who were not up for re-election this year. One more woman is in a race that remains too close to call.

In **Raleigh, NC**, two women went head-to-head in the race on October 11. Nancy McFarlane defeated Billie Redmond for the open seat. In **Baltimore, MD**, incumbent Stephanie Rawlings-Blake defeated Catherine Pugh. In **Houston, TX**, incumbent Annise Parker won.

In **Spokane, WA**, a city which has only recently joined the top 100, results were not conclusive, but incumbent Mary Verner was trailing her opponent at press time.

In **San Francisco, CA**, Michela Alioto Pier ran as a challenger and lost. In **Aurora, CO**, all three women (Sheila Thomas Davis, Debbie Stafford, Barbara Yamrick) who ran for the open seat lost. In **Fort Wayne, IN**, Paula Hughes was a challenger who lost. In **Indianapolis, IN**, challenger Melina Kennedy lost.

About CAWP

The Center for American Women and Politics, a unit of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, is a university-based research, education and public service center. Its mission is to promote greater knowledge and understanding about women's changing relationship to politics and government and to enhance women's influence and leadership in public life. CAWP is a leading authority in its field and a respected bridge between the academic and political worlds.

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