

Mandel, Walsh: 'The woman factor'

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BY RUTH B. MANDEL AND DEBBIE WALSH

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DESPITE DATELINES in Denver, Dayton and St. Paul, the news stories and editorial analyses have an especially familiar ring in New Brunswick. Who is today's American political woman? How are women scaling political walls and breaking into the highest levels of government? How do women leaders think, act and speak? How do they mesh and manage the obligations of complex public and private lives? And how will voters – particularly women voters – respond?

In 1971, when Rutgers University established the Center for American Women and Politics at the Eagleton Institute of Politics with the goal of studying women's political participation, skeptics insisted this was no subject matter worthy of examination.

At the time, that argument might have seemed plausible, with women holding fewer than five percent of positions at any level of elective office. Where and who were these political women deserving of attention? For all intents and purposes, they were invisible.

For years, we pursued the media, hungering for the press to notice women taking small steps and occasional longer strides toward political power.

Fast forward to 2008.

Political women are headline news. The average American has become familiar with images ranging from House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, presidential candidate Sen. Hillary Clinton and now vice presidential nominee Gov. Sarah Palin – four very different individuals, each comfortable exercising power in public life. Neither they nor any woman in political leadership today can overlook her debt to predecessors.

Their success rests on a foundation laid by those who came before – pioneers such as Sens. Margaret Chase Smith and Nancy Landon Kassebaum; Reps. Bella Abzug, Shirley Chisholm and Millicent Fenwick; vice presidential nominee Geraldine Ferraro; Gov. Ella Grasso and New Jersey's own first woman governor, Christine Todd Whitman.

Oiling the creaky hinges

The women's political movement of the last three decades, part of the re-emergence of feminism in the late 20th century, oiled the creaky hinges of the door to public leadership and cracked it open. It stepped those early pioneers, each pushing the door a bit wider.

Behind them, others filed in, many as "firsts," and later in pairs and trios and dozens.

Because of them, today's political women defy simple definition – not because there are so few examples, but because as their numbers have grown, so has the range of their images and their contributions.

They come from big cities and small towns across the country. They are Democrats and Republicans, conservatives, moderates and progressives. They arrive in office by multiple routes, bringing with them different educations, bases of knowledge and professional experiences.

Their family portraits reflect the richness and variety displayed in the gallery of contemporary American life. Some are more, some less, successful. They are not one person, not a single, flat stereotype.

For sure the door has opened wider, but women in 2008 are still far from entering at the same pace as men. More than half of the population and more than half of the voters, women hold barely one-sixth of congressional seats, and Palin shares her title of state chief executive with just seven other women governing their states.

Sixteen women sit in the U.S. Senate with 84 men. No woman has yet won a presidential nomination or been elected vice president.


Eleanor Roosevelt

Still, no longer must today's woman leader feel the way Eleanor Roosevelt did in 1945, when President Harry Truman asked her to attend the organizing meeting of the U.N. General Assembly as a member of the U.S. delegation. Feeling inadequate to the task and aware of her unwelcome status as the only woman in the delegation, she recalls in her autobiography that during the Assembly session in London she "walked on eggs" because she knew that if she "failed to be a useful member, it would not be considered merely that I as an individual had failed, but that all women had failed, and there would be little chance for others to serve in the near future."

The procession of women toward political power continues, a direct line connecting them all. From Eleanor Roosevelt, a unique leader in her time, to feminist pioneers who built the women's political movement in more recent decades – these women have made it possible for the extraordinary and extraordinarily complex political moment the nation is witnessing in 2008.

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