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Women have come a long way, maybe?

A century after suffrage politics still a rough and tumble ol' boys' club

BY STEVE LAW

The Portland Tribune, Jun 14, 2012, Updated Jun 14, 2012 (1 Reader comment)

In 2012, the centennial of women's suffrage in Oregon, it's still a case of two steps forward, one step back for women seeking elective office.

Sometimes it's one step forward, two steps back.

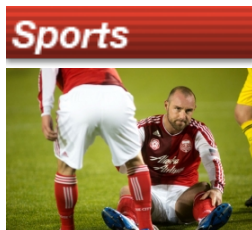
Portland judge Ellen Rosenblum makes history June 29 when she's sworn in as Oregon's first woman attorney general. In January, voters in Oregon's 1st Congressional District sent Suzanne Bonamici to Washington, D.C., where she joined the state's otherwise all-male delegation representing the state in Congress. In the May primary, Nena Cook was the top vote-getter for an open Oregon Supreme Court seat. If she wins a November



CHRISTOPHER ONSTOTT / PORTLAND TRIBUNE
Suzanne Bonamici became the sixth woman ever elected to represent Oregon in Congress in January, on the centennial of women's suffrage here. She joined six men in the state delegation in Washington, D.C.

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runoff, the state's highest court will feature three women out of seven justices, the most ever.

But women's electoral gains are still spotty here, leaving women far behind men in political power.

The same week that Rosenblum takes office, Susan Castillo -- the first Latina elected to statewide office in Oregon -- will step down as state school superintendent. Portland mayoral candidate Eileen Brady tanked in the May primary, after amassing the largest campaign treasury and a commanding lead in the polls.

In Salem, the state Senate is likely to lose two of its nine women after the general election in November. Sen. Joanne Verger, D-Coos Bay, is stepping down, and both candidates to succeed her are male. Sen. Chris Telfer, R-Bend, was defeated by Tim Knopp in last month's GOP primary.

That could leave the 30-member Senate with its fewest women since 2004.

The Oregon House of Representatives, where women hold 17 of 60 seats, may see modest gains for women in November, perhaps one or two seats, says House Democratic Leader Tina Kotek, D-Portland.

Never quite settled

A decade ago, a third of the Oregon Legislature was female, the fifth-highest share in the country. But the number of women lawmakers here has dropped since then. Now Oregon ranks 12th-highest.

"We are seen as a bellwether for progressive issues, but this is one area where we don't quite make it," says Laura Coyle, executive director of Emerge Oregon, a Portland group that trains and recruits Democratic women candidates.

Washington, the state we like to compare ourselves to, ranks sixth-highest in the share of women legislators, and it has two women U.S. senators and a woman governor. California also has two women senators.

Oregon has elected only one woman U.S. senator ever, and that was a half-century ago.

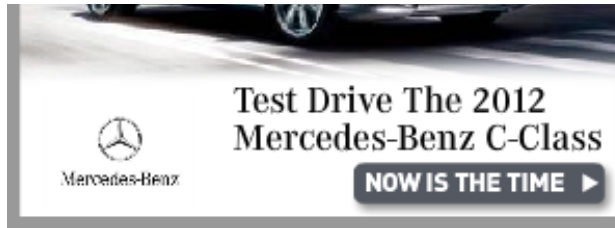
After a century of women voting, Oregon has elected only six women to Congress and five to statewide office.

"I don't know what explains it," says Kate Brown, Oregon secretary of state and a Portland Democrat. "We've come a long way baby, but we have a long way to go."

It's not just Oregon. Internationally, the U.S. ranks about 71st in the share of women office-holders, Brown says. "We're behind the Sudan and Bangladesh."

We've elected a black president and, maybe this November, a Mormon. But we've never elected a woman chief executive, something accomplished in India, Pakistan, Great Britain, Bangladesh, the Philippines, Nicaragua, Iceland, Ireland, Finland, Israel, Argentina, Costa Rica, Latvia, Haiti, Guinea Bissau and many other nations.

Some political pundits say women's issues will prove crucial in national



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elections this year, with high-profile fights on insurance coverage for birth control, equal pay for women, and abortion rights.

"Issues that we thought were settled are suddenly not settled," says former Oregon Gov. Barbara Roberts.

That may not bring out more women candidates, she says, adding, "It will definitely cause us to have more women voters."

Women need more coaxing

Women who run for office tend to do as well as men, Coyle says. "The issue is that women aren't running to begin with," she says.

In general, women tend to be less confident that they can win or that they are leadership material, Coyle says. "Women need to be asked more times," she says. "It takes a woman about six or seven times before she'll consider doing it."

The dearth of women running prompted the formation of Emerge Oregon four years ago. Relying on women leaders as mentors and trainers, Emerge offers an eight-month course that teaches how to raise money, public speaking, deal with the media, interact with voters and other nuts-and-bolts campaign skills. Some of the trainers are political consultants who then go on to work for the women when they decide to run.

So far, 54 women have graduated from the program, and 27 have gone on to run for office.

"Of those 27 races, they have won 19 of them," Coyle says.

Past members include relatively new House members Alissa Keny-Guyer, a Democrat from Southeast Portland, and Rep. Val Hoyle, D-Eugene, as well as Jessica Pederson, who won a May primary for the East Portland seat vacated by Jefferson Smith; Jennifer Williamson, who won a May primary for the Southwest Portland seat vacated by Mary Nolan; and Shemia Fagan, another East Portland Democrat trying to unseat Republican Patrick Sheehan, R-Clackamas.

Pivotal race

Fagan, 30, a business attorney for Ater Wynne law firm in Portland, started googling how to run for office before she discovered Emerge. The program linked her with a mentor, Pendleton City Councilor Jane Hill, and connected her with other politicians, including Smith.

Last year, she won a seat on the David Douglas School Board.

Then she decided to run for the Legislature when House District 51 boundaries saw the most reshuffling of any district in the redistricting process. The district lost much of its Clackamas County terrain and picked up large swaths of Multnomah County. The new boundaries gave Democrats a larger voter-registration advantage over Republicans, leaving Sheehan feeling he got the short end of the redistricting stick, and leaving Democrats optimistic they can capture the seat.



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About 70 percent of the voters are new, so Sheehan lost some of his name recognition and the power of incumbency. Fagan says she actually represents a larger number of district voters via her service on the David Douglas School Board.

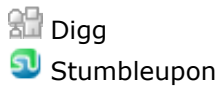
Kotek lists that seat first when asked where Democrats hope to make gains against Republicans in November. With the House knotted 30-30 between Democrats and Republicans, a shift in one seat will give that party the majority, and control of the chamber.

"We are actually kind of excited we could take back the House with an Emerge Oregon alumna," Coyle says.

Democratic women also are being supported by Emily's List, a national group that pumps money and support into targeted campaigns across the country, and came out early in support of Bonamici.

Oregon Republicans don't have groups like Emily's List and Emerge Oregon. They tend to recruit women candidates from among business owners, says Rep. Vicki Berger, R-Salem.

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