

Female candidates win in Concord election, but women still in the minority of elected representatives

By SUSAN DOUCET / Monitor staff

All five women running for Concord's city council and school board – four on the ballot and one write-in – were elected Tuesday.

In all, about one-third of Concord's top elected positions are held by women, and that's the good news.

Concord is one of the leaders in the state in equal representation between male and female elected leaders. A look across the region shows most local boards are dominated by men, a sharp contrast from New Hampshire's highest elected positions, which made the state the first in the country with an all-female congressional delegation and governor two years ago.

"It's a really complicated problem, and it's not just women on the local level," said Ann Bookman, director of the University of Massachusetts Boston's Center for Women in Politics. "I think that there are still kind of gender-based stereotypes (for what) are appropriate roles for women and being an elected official is not one of them yet."

The Monitor looked at the 41 municipalities in its coverage area and found that of 168 elected officials – selectmen, city councilors and mayors – only 31 are women. In other words, 82 percent of local officials in the greater Concord area are men.

A statewide Monitor analysis in 2012 found similar results. Of all the boards of selectmen, city and town councils and boards of aldermen in New Hampshire's 234 towns and cities, women occupied just 20 percent of the seats.

More recent data from the Center for Women in Politics and Public Policy at UMass Boston showed slight gains for women in New Hampshire – with them holding 21 percent of seats on municipal governing bodies in 2014. Things looked a little brighter in the state Legislature that year, when about 33 percent of elected officials were women.

"I don't think New Hampshire is significantly an outlier," said Faina Bukher, a professor in the University of New Hampshire women's studies program. "I think it's a problem everywhere."

Many of the small, three-member boards of selectmen in the Concord area are composed of all men, including those in Boscawen, Chichester, Dunbarton, Epsom, Hill, Sutton, Warner and Webster. Only a few boards in the area – Bristol, Concord, Danbury, Hopkinton, Laconia, New London and Tilton – have more than one woman serving on them.

Hopkinton has two women, Sara Persechino and Sue Strickford, on its five-member board of selectmen. This is only the second time the board has had two selectwomen, Persechino said.

“Beyond having female representatives on the Select Board one of my goals as a Selectwoman has been to get women involved with the other committees we have in town. I’m proud to say that after a lot of recruitment we have just one all-male town committee – the Road Committee,” Persechino wrote in an email.

In Franklin last month, one woman, Olivia Zink, was elected to the city council, which has nine councilors and one mayor. All of those other positions are filled by men. Six candidates ran for the council in the October elections. Zink was the only woman on the ballot.

Having more women elected starts with having more women running for elected positions. While women won handily in Concord, voters had a choice of gender in only one-quarter of races.

This week, UNH is hosting a feminist leadership summit, targeting the election of more women.

“One thing that folks can do to try to close the gender gap is not see the fight for increasing the number of women in politics as a women’s issue,” Bukher said. “While we’re going to be talking about the future of women in politics and in closing the gender gap (at the summit), we’re also looking at the future of politics in ways of all identities.”

Seeing more women elected also helps to encourage other women, she said.

“I think it’s sort of a cycle, but if girls see more women succeeding and working in the political arena, then they have a role model to then look up to,” Bukher said.

In 2013, New Hampshire became the first state with an all-female congressional delegation and governor. The state was represented by Gov. Maggie Hassan, Sens. Kelly Ayotte and Jeanne Shaheen, and U.S. Reps. Ann Kuster and Carol Shea-Porter. Last year, Frank Guinta replaced Shea-Porter in Congress, but the other four still hold their seats.

“The women of the first all-female Congressional delegation in U.S. history won their races in November not only for themselves, but for all women and all of us who aspire to excellence and making the world a better place,” Marla Brettschneider, professor of political science and women’s studies at UNH and coordinator of the Women’s Studies Program, wrote in a statement in 2013.

And it’s beneficial to see women in both major parties, Democrat Hillary Clinton and Republican Carly Fiorina, seeking the presidency this year, Bookman said.

But despite these successes, challenges remain at all levels.

“It’s still a really uphill battle,” Bookman said. “Campaigns are expensive and the research shows it’s hard for women candidates to raise money.”

Further obstacles exist for women of color who run for office. According to the Center for Women in Politics and Public Policy, fewer than 120 women of color have run for office in Massachusetts at the municipal, county, or state level since 1972.

“Basically the story is . . . in its 200 year history, Massachusetts has only had 94 women of color elected to any kind of office,” Bookman said.

“I think everyone’s responsibility to create an environment in which we give equal, equitable opportunities for everyone, and you know, if we’re seeing these gaps by gender or other identities, we need to start asking ourselves the tough questions,” Bukher said. “There are many voices missing.”

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