

Year of the woman? That remains 1992 November 13th, 2002

By Mary Lynn F. Jones

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Despite a large field of female candidates this year, women netted no House or Senate seats and picked up just one governor's mansion.

"This year is a flat year," said Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University. Unlike other years when women have seen small but steady gains on Capitol Hill, women broke even in the Nov. 5 elections. Part of the reason is that many of the candidates were Democrats whose party fared poorly overall. Additionally, 6 of the 11 women running for Senate challenged incumbents, who traditionally enjoy a high re-election rate; two of the six women ran against female senators.

Pre-election poll numbers created the impression that races appeared close when, in fact, they turned out not to be competitive. And while legislative redistricting a decade ago created a number of open House seats and competitive races that led to the so-called "Year of the Woman"--when women's numbers nearly doubled on Capitol Hill--redistricting this year yielded few such competitive campaigns.

"I hate to think of 1992 being a watershed year, but it's looking more and more like it," said Karen O'Connor, director of the Women & Politics Institute at American University.

Still, several women made history. Among the notable winners: Elizabeth Dole (R-N.C.), a former presidential candidate and two-time Cabinet secretary who becomes her state's first female senator; Republican Katherine Harris, Florida's controversial former secretary of state, who won a House seat; and Linda Sanchez and Loretta Sanchez, both California Democrats, will be the first pair of sisters in the House. In addition, Hawaii and Michigan elected their first female governors, leading to a record six women governors next year.

Ten women won their primaries for governor this year, but only four--Linda Lingle (R-Hawaii), Janet Napolitano (D-Ariz.), Jennifer Granholm (D-Mich.) and Kathleen Sebelius (D-Kan.)--prevailed on Election Day.

Lingle, who narrowly lost the governor's race in Hawaii four years ago, defeated Democrat Mazie Hirono in the nation's only female-versus-female governor's contest this year.

While political pundits predicted a "Year of the Woman Governor," women candidates failed to win races considered highly competitive, such as those in Massachusetts and Rhode Island. All of the women who lost governors' races were Democrats.

The most notable loss, however, came in Maryland, where Lt. Gov. Kathleen Kennedy

Townsend, a daughter of Robert F. Kennedy, lost a close race to Rep. Robert Ehrlich. Townsend enjoyed a sizable lead earlier this year but watched it evaporate because of the governor's unpopularity and a campaign in which she made questionable decisions, such as choosing a longtime Republican as her running mate, which cost her the support of many women voters, who helped Ehrlich become the state's first Republican governor in 36 years.

The four victorious women join sitting governors Ruth Ann Minner (D-Del.) and Judy Martz (R-Mont.). Three other governors--Jane Dee Hull (R-Ariz.), Jeanne Shaheen (D-N.H.), who lost her bid for the Senate, and Jane Swift (R-Mass.)--will step down at the end of this year.

On the Senate side, Dole's win was offset by the defeat of Sen. Jean Carnahan (D-Mo.), one of three female incumbents up for re-election. Carnahan lost to former Rep. Jim Talent. In Maine, one of three states with two female senators, Republican Sen. Susan Collins handily beat Democrat Chellie Pingree. Thirteen women now serve in the Senate.

But the Senate race in Louisiana remains undecided. Under the state's election laws, unless a candidate wins 50 percent of the vote, she must advance to a runoff. Democratic Sen. Mary Landrieu won 46 percent of the vote, and will face off Dec. 7 against Suzanne Haik Terrell, who got 27 percent.

Women also failed to make any gains in the House. Of the 124 women candidates, 59 won elections, the same number as in the current 107th Congress. Seven new women--five Republicans and two Democrats--will join Congress next year.

With two women losing primaries earlier this year and three retiring, "we had a lot of women to make up for going into the election," said Marie Wilson, president of the White House Project, a non-partisan group that promotes the idea of women as leaders. Two other women, Reps. Connie Morella (R-Md.) and Karen Thurman (D-Fla.), lost their seats last week. Voters also chose not to return former Reps. Helen Delich Bentley (R-Md.) and Jill Long Thompson (D-Ind.) to office.

Rep. Patsy Mink (D-Hawaii) won re-election even though she died Sept. 28. A special election to decide who will complete the rest of her term in the 107th Congress is set for Nov. 30. Another election will be held Jan. 4 to determine who will hold her seat in the 108th Congress.

The loss of Democratic seats on Capitol Hill marked a setback for Sen. Patty Murray (D-Wash.) and Rep. Nita Lowey (D-N.Y.), the first women to head their party's Senate and House campaign committees, respectively. The women were charged with helping Democrats to increase their numbers in the House and Senate.

Political experts agreed that gender did not play a prominent role in most campaigns. The loss of seats by Democratic women was countered by gains made by GOP women, whose party had a much more successful campaign.

With Republicans set to control both houses of Congress shortly, issues of importance to

women, such as abortion rights, prescription drugs and Social Security privatization, are likely to be affected, Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.) warned.

"Women have to be put on notice that we're going to have many, many battles on our hands," she said.

Now that the congressional elections are over, lawmakers are turning their attention to leadership contests on Capitol Hill. House Minority Whip Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and Rep. Harold Ford Jr. (D-Tenn.) will vie for the Democratic leader post Thursday.

Pelosi, who is expected to win, will be the highest-ranking female leader in congressional history.