



Experts: Clinton win could boost women candidates in Mass.

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By Julie Sobel

Special to The Sun

The last time a woman and an African-American squared off in a Massachusetts election, Deval Patrick was elected governor. But that election wasn't a Democratic primary. And the woman wasn't Hillary Clinton.

Clinton's victory in Massachusetts is not an experience many other women have had.

The list of Massachusetts' female political casualties is long: Evelyn Murphy, Lois Pines, Jane Swift, Shannon O'Brien and Kerry Healey, to name a few.

Only four women have ever represented Massachusetts in Congress. Only five have been elected to a statewide executive office. None has been elected governor.

Betty Taymor, author of *Running Against the Wind: The Struggle of Women in Massachusetts Politics*, sees a double standard at work.

"It's not an equal playing field, and it never has been. What woman could be 46 with (three) years in the Senate and be running for president?" Taymor asked, referring to Barack Obama's short tenure in national political office.

Yet with Clinton's win in the presidential primary, Niki Tsongas in the U.S. House of Representatives and Martha Coakley in the attorney general's office, things are looking better for women in Massachusetts politics than at most previous times in the state's history.

Clinton benefited from strong establishment support in Massachusetts, particularly among women. Although Gov. Patrick and Sens. Edward Kennedy and John Kerry are supporting Obama, Clinton enjoyed a lead in endorsements by the state's congressional delegation. Clinton also benefited from a vocal network of established female supporters, including Sens. Sue Tucker, Pam Resor and Susan Fargo.

Whether the gender gap -- or gender chasm, in this case -- will materialize for the next woman on a Massachusetts ballot is a different question.

Women running on the state level in Massachusetts next time will not have the benefits of being a well-known quantity with a built-in base of support and a massive warchest.

The next generation of women candidates will face the challenges of raising money, building a record, organizing from the bottom up.

Moreover, Clinton's massive support among women, particularly older women, may be an enthusiasm unique to the high-stakes, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to elect the first woman president.

Taymor expects the double standard of the past to continue.

"We still have this terrible culture bias about women aggressively going for power," she said. "It's been so hard."

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Carol Hardy-Fanta, director of the Center for Women in Politics and Public Policy at UMass Boston, is equally concerned.

"Massachusetts doesn't make great progress in terms of women at the top," she said. "We keep trading out one for another one."

Hardy-Fanta, however, sees a Clinton victory as a possible catalyst for future progress by women candidates.

"I think it'll break the barrier," she said.

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