

MAINE'S MAIN WOMEN

The success of the state's two top leaders may have more to do with voters' independent streak than it does with gender politics.

BY GARRY BOULARD

When Hannah Pingree was sworn in as the new speaker of the Maine House of Representatives last December, she regarded it as a natural progression in a state that prides itself on its gender-neutral politics.

"This is a place where women have been politically embraced for a long time," says Pingree, 32, reflecting on the fact that she and Senate President Elizabeth "Libby" Mitchell had made history in Maine by being the first two women to lead their chambers simultaneously.

She pointed to the career of the legendary Margaret Chase Smith of Maine, who served in the U.S. House for nine years before winning election to the U.S. Senate where she was the only woman in that chamber for nearly a quarter of a century.

"Maine has for years elected women to the Legislature," says Pingree. "What is different is that we are now also open to having

women in leadership in the Legislature. The faith that people here have in their women leaders has actually increased."

Maine is not No. 1 in elected women. With only 29 percent of elective offices occupied by women, it ranks 14th. That includes, however, both U.S. senators and one of its two members of Congress—Chellie Pingree, the mother of Speaker Pingree and former Maine Senate majority leader. Women also make up eight of the 35-member Senate and 46 of the 151-member House.

Some observers think the success of women in leadership roles owes a lot to how people in Maine look at politics.

"Maine is a fiercely egalitarian state," says Mark Brewer, a professor of political science at the University of Maine. "People just go their own way here, and as a result, they are much more likely to think about what a woman candidate stands for than the fact that she is a woman, which may not always be the case in other parts of the country."

HISTORY-MAKING PAIR

Maine voters in November returned Pingree to the House and Mitchell to the Senate.

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Left, Hannah Pingree, left, is escorted into the House of Representatives at the State House in Augusta, Maine, in December prior to her swearing in as speaker of the House.

Below, Senate President Elizabeth Libby Mitchell: "No political party or single elected official has a monopoly on good ideas."

MAINE SENATE



SENATOR
MARGARET CRAVEN
MAINE

Just weeks after that election, Pingree was named speaker and Mitchell, a former House speaker, was named Senate president. They won their posts by unanimous votes.

Mitchell, 69, has described her leadership style as one of not talking *to* people but *with* them. “No political party or single elected official has a monopoly on good ideas,” she said when elected to lead the Senate. She’s won praise from her colleagues for trying to understand the perspective and needs of each senator.

“I have known both Libby and Hannah for a long time and also have previously served under male leaders,” says Senator Margaret Craven. “I think the management style is different. We have not been requested nearly as much to stay within party lines or to be influenced by the leader’s point of view.”

As Maine’s legislators this spring have struggled with a bill making same-sex marriage legal, Mitchell tried to hear as many points of view as possible before she announced where she stood. “She stepped down from the podium and spoke publicly of her own feelings late into the debate,” says Craven. “She had not even spoken to us in caucus about that.

“This is typical of her leadership style. She puts an issue out there and lets people come to the conclusion that they feel most comfortable with.”

PUSHING HER AGENDA

Pingree also has adopted an inclusive leadership approach. But she admits that she has strong feelings about what the House’s agenda should be and that her priorities may be influenced by her gender.

“I have seen women members step up and take prominent roles on issues such as insurance regulation and business and economic development,” says Pingree, “while some of my male colleagues have been more interested in things like children’s issues.

“But being a woman does bring unique and different perspectives to legislation,”

she says. She pointed to her successful 2008 legislation to eliminate toxic chemicals that children are exposed to in household products, and said it was more than likely inspired by the fact that she is a woman.

“I want to have children some day, so the issue of children being exposed to toxic chemicals was obviously something that I regarded as being significant, something I just naturally felt strongly about,” says Pingree.

Such perspectives show that the increasing number of women both as members and lead-

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ers in state legislatures is not only good for the women in question, but also for the legislatures, says Debbie Walsh, the director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University.

“There may be instances when a woman legislator will look at things differently than a male legislator,” says Walsh, “and to the extent that legislatures are enhanced by having different points of view, that’s a good thing.”

Walsh also thinks the advent of women in legislative leadership positions is likely to increase. “We have seen that women have a

capacity for working their way up the legislative ladder into leadership positions, and that once they are in those positions they display the same staying power as male incumbents.”

OBSTACLES REMAIN

Despite what has happened in Colorado, Maine, New Hampshire, and other states where women have increased their leadership presence, formidable obstacles remain, says Elizabeth Ossoff, research director at the Center for the Study of American Democracy and Citizenship at Saint Anselm College.

“I don’t think the rise of women leaders at the legislative level is a surprise, given the number of women going to college and pursuing careers that are open to them moving into leadership positions,” says Ossoff.

“The more accommodating we as a culture become of women moving into positions of leadership outside the legislatures, the more accommodating we will be of women moving into leadership positions inside the legislatures,” she says.

But Ossoff also thinks the number of women legislative leaders may be low because of the overall lack of women legislative members.

Craven agrees: “You do have to get out there and try. And that is true both for running for office and for trying to become a leader.”

Unlike many female state legislative candidates across the country, Craven was helped by Maine’s campaign laws that make it easy for more people to contribute small amounts of money to a candidate. “I could not have competed otherwise,” says Craven, “and I think the money factor is something that many women candidates have to weigh.”

But once in the Maine Senate, Craven says she has seen no obvious obstacles to women moving up the leadership ladder. “I think here we are judged by the job we do—and that applies to both male and female members.”

Pingree recalls the 1992 race when her mother initially ran for the Legislature and was derisively characterized by a male opponent as “Little Alice in Wonderland.”

“The faith in women leaders has actually grown, at least in Maine, over the years,” she says. “I am certain that we are going to be seeing many more woman leaders in the future.”