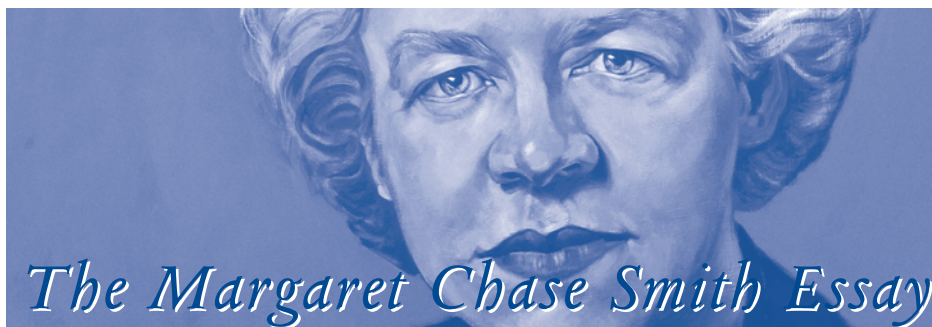




“These Very Impelling Reasons Against My Running”: *Maine Women and Politics*

by Mary Cathcart

Forty-four years ago, Margaret Chase Smith made history, by launching her campaign for the Republican presidential nomination. Despite losing the primary, Senator Smith put a crack in the “glass ceiling,” and her story continues to inspire girls and women to follow in her footsteps. This year, Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton came close to being the Democratic nominee for president, and Sarah Palin, serving her first term as Alaska’s governor, became the first Republican woman nominee for vice-president and only the second woman vice-presidential nominee in our history. (Democrat Geraldine Ferraro was the first, in 1984.)

Maine has been above average in electing women to office. In addition

to Senator Smith, we have elected two Republican women, Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins, to the office of U.S. Senator. This year Maine Democrats hope to send a woman, Chellie Pingree, to Congress from the first district. Our state legislature ranks high in the percentage of elected women, but we are still far from equal numbers. According to the Center for American Women and Politics’ Web site (www.CAWP.Rutgers.edu), in Maine’s legislature only 12 of 35 senators (34.3 percent) and 46 of 151 representatives (30.5 percent) are women.

Women filled a higher percentage of Maine house seats when I was first elected in 1988 and of senate seats in 1996, when I was elected to that body. We have had one woman speaker of the Maine House of Representatives, two women senate presidents, and a handful of women elected to leadership positions in both parties. But Maine has never even come close to electing a woman governor.

Nationally, the statistics on women in political office are more discouraging. In the 110th Congress in 2007–2009, only 76 women (17.5 percent) hold seats in the House of Representatives while 16 women (16 percent) serve in the Senate. On the judicial level, only two women have ever been appointed to serve on the United States Supreme Court.

Some research has found that when women run for office, at least on the local level, their odds of winning are high; however, it is true that most girls do not

grow up imagining that one day they will become governor or president. Indeed, studies have shown that most women need to be encouraged to run, and that was certainly true in my own case. I grew up with a Democratic mother and a Republican father who cancelled each other’s votes for half a century. Political discussions were common at our dinner table; my parents often disagreed, but were able to laugh about it. But it would never have occurred to my mother that she might run for political office. In high school I ran for student council president and lost to a boy. My mother explained that “boys always win,” and encouraged me to try for the office of vice president. That was the end of my political ambition until many years later, when I had brought up my children and was working at Spruce Run, the Bangor-area domestic violence program.

While working at Spruce Run, I was asked to represent the Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence on a committee to organize a statewide conference, working with representatives of the Maine Women’s Lobby and Maine Commission for Women. Getting to know these intelligent, assertive women led me to seek appointment to the Maine Commission for Women, and that experience gave me a sense of how one person in elective office can make a difference. I enjoyed testifying at legislative hearings in Augusta on behalf of the commission, and during this time, several people—both women and men—suggested that I should run for

office. I demurred, assuming I'd never make it, but in 1988, my state representative, who was running for state senate, asked me to run for his seat. So I became a politician, and found I enjoyed it! Maine people still expect local candidates to knock on their doors. My rural district included the towns of Eddington and Clifton, and I would start at the end of a road and knock on every door, working my way back to Route 9. I was doubtful whether a woman with a "from away" accent would be accepted, but I found that most people welcomed me into their homes, and many men and women replied to my greeting, "Hello. I am Mary Cathcart, and I am running for the legislature," with "I am glad to meet you because we need more women in office." One advantage I had as a woman candidate was a large network of friends from Spruce Run, my church, and other community activities. I won that first election, but I am sure I would never have dared to run if I hadn't been asked. To keep the process going, in 2004, when I was forced to leave the Maine Senate because of term limits, my husband suggested that Emily Ann Cain would be a great legislator. So, we asked Emily to run, and now she is serving as Orono's state representative, and helping to recruit other women candidates.

As a state legislator, I learned of the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP), in the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University. CAWP conducted research on women in politics and sponsored a national forum for women state legislators where we heard from prominent women and learned about research on women running for office. In 1991, CAWP established a leadership education program for college women, National Education for Women (NEW) Leadership, with the goal of creating opportunities for young women to become engaged and involved in public life. NEW Leadership aims to give young women the skills and knowledge they need to become the next generation of

women leaders and encourages them to consider public service.

The University of Maine's Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center was accepted this year as a development partner by Rutgers, and Policy Fellow Rebekah Smith and I were invited to participate in and observe the NEW Leadership program there, to prepare us to launch Maine NEW Leadership in 2009.

NEW Leadership is open to female college students of all ages and backgrounds, and the women in the Rutgers program were a diverse group. On the first night of the program, participants were divided into small discussion groups. The topic was the 2008 presidential election, and the students were told not to get into which candidate they support, but rather to talk about this election in a historical context. Regardless of which candidate or party they had favored, the young women talked about Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton having broken down barriers. Whether or not they thought Senator Clinton was the best qualified, they talked about how her candidacy would make it easier for other women to run for the highest office in the land. They also spoke about racism and sexism, and how offended they felt that a woman of achievement such as Senator Clinton was subjected to vulgar slurs. Some said the media had been unfair to the woman candidate, criticizing her clothing, her laugh, and some commentators even accusing her of "faking" tears in New Hampshire. The students commented that sexist comments are still acceptable, while most people nowadays would condemn a racist slur. It would be interesting to hear what this diverse group of young women would say about press coverage of vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin.

I am honored to have been chosen to bring the NEW Leadership program to Maine college women in June 2009. With involvement from Maine women leaders in many professions, we will address the problem of low rates of

political participation among women in Maine. Participants will gain a greater awareness of their own leadership potential, their skills, and opportunities in civic life and public office. NEW Leadership will honor Margaret Chase Smith's extraordinary courage by ensuring that new generations of Maine's female leaders will understand the importance of running for office, taking part in campaigns, and engaging in public policy development.

Margaret Chase Smith knew the odds were against her being elected president, and even against her becoming a candidate, but she had the courage to stand up and serve as a role model for countless other women; when nominated for president in 1964, she stated, "...because of these very impelling reasons against my running, I have decided that I shall." 🐟



Mary Cathcart is a senior policy associate in the Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center, University of Maine. She served three terms in the Maine House of Representatives, followed by four terms in the Maine Senate. While in the legislature, she chaired the Joint Select Committee on Research and Development, the Children's Mental Health Oversight Committee, and several study commissions. She is the recent past president of the New England Board of Higher Education.