

C O M M E N T A R Y

Why Margaret Still Matters

by Martha Sterling-Golden

My sisters and I grew up in Bingham, Maine, just north of Skowhegan. Our mother worked for Margaret Chase Smith early in the senator's political career. She was always "Margaret" at our house, a strong, smart, determined woman toiling from afar for the people of Maine. It seemed so normal that a woman would be an elected official that I only gradually became aware that it was unusual and began to wonder why. As the wake of the last presidential election settles out behind us, I am still wondering. Why does the life and story of Margaret Chase Smith still resonate with so many American women from across the political landscape?

Many in Maine believe that the elections of Olympia Snowe, Susan Collins, and now Chellie Pingree, prove that we have gone beyond the barriers to women and political leadership. Our representation in Washington reflects the strength of Maine women on the national stage, and certainly our federal officials have enormous impact on the architecture of American policy. However, what kind of progress has been made in districts around the state? Maine women have done well, earning positions of leadership in Augusta, with long-standing representation by women in the state house. Unfortunately, we are far from parity in representation; indeed, women have lost ground in the legislature, with Maine dropping to 13th place in the percentage of female legislators, even as New Hampshire became the first state in the nation with a majority of women in a state senate. This decline matters, for it is in our local politics where the difference is most keenly felt: at the state house and on

the county commissions and municipal boards from which many of our gubernatorial candidates, as well as those for the U.S. House and Senate, emerge.

Maine's political culture does not exist in a vacuum. It is a reflection of attitudes across the country, with implications for women's leadership in every field. For example, the 2005 landmark survey of the Project for Excellence in Journalism revealed that more than three-fourths of all news stories contained male sources, only one-third contained a female source, and the great majority of the latter appeared in so-called lifestyle articles. In 2002 the Association of American Medical Colleges released a survey that found that only 11 medical school deans were women, out of 126 teaching institutions. Similar numbers appear in major law firms, which are breeding grounds for politicians. Women chair only two percent of these firms, and only 19 percent of partners are women. Progress in politics cannot happen without broader success for women's advancement.

Globally, the United States places 84th in the number of women elected to public office. We lag behind Mexico, China, and Pakistan. According to the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University, since 1789, only two percent of our congressional representation has been women. This in spite of the fact that women sponsor more bills and secure more co-sponsors than their male counterparts, delivering on average nine percent more discretionary spending for their home districts.

The root of this problem is deep within our culture and our well-intentioned selves. In my former role as president of the

Women's Campaign School at Yale University, I heard tremendously accomplished women from around the United States and the world question whether they "knew enough" to be good representatives of their people. These women were presidents of companies, judges, activist mothers, and even foreign royals. What they shared was a desire to prepare themselves, as fully as possible, for the opportunity to lead their communities, provinces, states, or countries.

It is notable that in all my decades working in politics, I've never heard such questions expressed by a male candidate for anything. Women are still too ready to doubt, and it's no wonder. The recent presidential campaigns displayed, with disheartening clarity, the superficial perils women face in media coverage. It happens to women in every field, whether television news, sports, business, or politics. Any woman who has ever sought tenure at a university or college understands the perils of "collegiality." We are judged by a harsher, mercurial standard, and we are guilty of making those judgments of one another. *Who takes care of the children? Why didn't she divorce him? That color washes her out. How did she get that job? She's too shrill.*

The complexities of women's public lives are daunting. At Women's Campaign School, we were often criticized for instructing women about the importance of their appearance at public events. Our participants arrived proudly arrayed in their red suits, having been told by one misguided consultant after another that "red is the power color" as though it might impart some magical properties to the wearer. We believed, and still teach, that traditional power finds difference distracting, noting the obvious lack of red jackets among public men. This is recognition of fact, not endorsement. We are not

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yet accustomed to accepting the authoritative voices of women without assigning negative connotations. We want to believe that we are beyond such superficial markers, but the amount of ink devoted to Hillary Clinton's "traveling pantsuits" and Sarah Palin's hair indicates otherwise.

The question we face is that if we cannot let go of our own outdated and gender-biased feelings about what power should look like, how can women transcend this bias and become full partners in governance? The problem remains that virtually every professional hierarchy has developed to suit the lives and ambitions of men, making leadership inherently hostile to women. We do not want to ask ourselves whether our fathers, husbands, brothers, friends, sons, or even we ourselves are capable of such prejudice because once recognized, one must either confront it, or give up the idea of leadership within one's field. But we must ask.

Women are the majority of the population of the United States. We vote more, even as we receive less health care and lower wages and retirement benefits. With enormous increases in credentialed and experienced women ready to lead, we should begin to demand the necessary changes in leadership structures that will enable women to contribute all we can and be recognized accordingly. We have rejoiced too much in the success of too few, and the recent spate of new books on the topic of women's progress, or rather, lack thereof, reinforces that there is a renewed awareness of the need for continuing vigilance and action.

Let's take a long, cold look at the basics and prepare women to fully engage in political life. We must train a generation of women and men who think about power in a different way, one that doesn't expect women to downplay strength while playing up charm. While it is true that women have access to political science, law, and social

sciences taught through the lens of women's experience, we should provide more in-depth opportunity within women's studies programs or elsewhere in the curriculum for applied politics. The progress of our country demands full opportunity for women in leadership, and our educational system must help.

Margaret Chase Smith did not consider herself a feminist. However, she was acutely aware of her own marginalization every time she stepped out of the Senate chamber to use the bathroom. For the first 23 years of Senator Smith's congressional life, she was forced to stand in line, between votes, with women visiting the Capitol. Male senators had private bathrooms, of course. Finally, in 1963 as Senator Mike Mansfield, D-Montana, prepared to step down from the Rules Committee, he arranged for Senator Smith and Democratic Senator Maurine Neuberger of Oregon to have offices adjoining a space that would become their shared private bathroom. (It should be said that Senator Smith considered this shared arrangement "separate, but not equal" to accommodations provided for her male colleagues.)

We should challenge stereotypes wherever we may find them, especially within ourselves, and resist all efforts to diminish or trivialize our participation in any field of our choosing. Margaret Chase Smith will always matter, but one day she may be recognized as the mother of a fully integrated representative government, not as a brave anomaly. Maybe then red will really be a power color. 🐉



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