



Women in politics are scarce in South

Greenville News, The (SC) - October 5, 2003

Author: The Greenville News= Final, Freelance OK

The Richard Riley Institute's conference this week on "Women in Politics: Transforming Public Leadership" will address the issue.

By David Shi

Eighty-three years ago American women gained the right to vote after years of debate and struggle. Women have since become one of the most powerful factors influencing the political process. More women vote than men. More women than ever before now hold local, state and national political offices. According to the Rutgers University Center for the American Woman and Politics, the number of women serving in state legislatures has increased more than five-fold over the past three decades.

Yet women remain underrepresented among political officeholders, particularly in the highest offices. Women compose approximately 53 percent of the population. If they were proportionately represented in Congress, they would hold 226 seats in the House (as opposed to the 59 seats they hold now) and 53 seats in the Senate (compared to the 14 seats they hold now).

Women in the South are especially underrepresented in political offices. South Carolina leads the Southeastern states in female voter registration and voter turnout, but the state ranks last among the 50 states in terms of the number of women serving in the state legislature (down from 48th prior to the 2002 elections). Of the 124 people in the South Carolina House of Representatives, 14 are women. South Carolina has no women in the state's congressional delegation and only one woman in South Carolina's history has ever been elected in her own right to Congress -- Liz Patterson, who served in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1987-1993. Superintendent of Education Inez Tenenbaum is one of only three women who have ever held a statewide elective executive position in South Carolina.

Money remains a crucial factor in the American political process. Over 90 percent of the victors in local, state and national elections are the ones who spent the most money. Campaign financing is an especially difficult challenge for female candidates.

Deb Sofield, a member of the Greenville City Council, notes that female candidates do not raise as much money as male candidates. To help address this shortfall, she has organized a seminar across the state to encourage more women to run for elective offices. It is called WAVE: Women Achieving Victory Every Time.

The paucity of women in state political offices, however, represents more than a money issue. There are many other factors at work. Why so few women run for office and why South Carolina voters have been so resistant to women as elected officials are the focal issues of the Richard Riley Institute's Conference on "Women in Politics: Transforming Public Leadership."

On the evening of Oct. 6 at the Peace Center and all day on Oct. 7 at the Furman campus, some of the nation and state's most influential female political leaders and commentators will discuss the achievements of women in the political arena and the considerable barriers still facing them. They will share their own experiences as women in politics and will speak about some of the most pressing social issues facing women, men and children.

The conference will begin on Monday evening at 8 p.m. with a dialogue between Hillary Clinton and Leslie Stahl at the Peace Center. On Tuesday morning at 10 a.m., the first of four roundtable discussions will be held in the Daniel Recital Hall on the Furman campus. It will deal with "Women, Politics, and the Media," and will feature four female political columnists from newspapers in Atlanta, Charlotte, Columbia and Greenville. At 1:30 p.m., there will be a panel discussion on "South Carolina: Opening Doors" featuring four women who were among the first to hold public offices across the state. At 2:45 p.m. the emphasis will shift to current issues. The panel discussing "South Carolina Today" will include South Carolina First Lady Jenny Sanford and Gilda Cobb-

Hunter, a member of the state House of Representatives.

The final roundtable discussion, at 4 p.m., will take a national view of women in politics. Its participants will include Deedee Corradini, former mayor of Salt Lake City and past chair of the national conference of mayors, two female officials in the federal government, and Inez Tenenbaum, the State Superintendent of Education. The conference will conclude with an 8 p.m. address in McAlister Auditorium by Marian Wright Edelman, the founder and president of the Children's Defense Fund.

All of the events on Tuesday are free and open to the public, but seating is limited, so please come early. The presentations and discussions will be informative, sobering and inspiring.

Section: *Opinion*

Page: 19A

Column: *David Shi*

Record Number: *grv2003100616050597*

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