

IN MY OPINION**Caroline Porter****"We are women, hear us roar!"****— Helen Reddy**

Last week I visited my mother in Sarasota, Florida. She is 98 years old, but not so old that she couldn't weakly cheer the election of the first woman Speaker of the United States House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi. My mother and many other women paved the difficult way for my generation of female political leaders — such as it is. Mrs. Pelosi is 67 years old, a mother of five and grandmother of six. And during an afternoon when I could have been relaxing on the beach in 80 degree weather, I'm such a political junkie and women's rights advocate that I chose to sit in my hotel room to watch the voting for speaker and Mrs. Pelosi to accept the gavel.

It was a thrill to watch. I thought Mrs. Pelosi holding her infant grandchild while the voting was completed and received congratulations from her peers was a bit much, but I understand why she did it. She was saying, "Look, I am a woman, with children and grandchildren and 'feminine' by anyone's standards, and I'm also qualified to be third in line for the presidency." One does not preclude the other. One does not have to be a man to be "equal" or qualified. As the famous Helen Reddy song claimed, "I am woman, hear me roar."

Well, this is all lovely and exciting, but the total picture of women in Congress is pretty bleak. Frankly, our national government isn't democratic when women make up 51 percent of the population but only 15 percent of Congress. A 1995 United Nations Development report stated, "While it is true no definite relationship has been established between the extent of women's participation in political institutions and their contribution to the advancement of women, a 30 percent membership in political institutions is considered the critical mass that enables women to exert a meaningful influence on politics."

In 1968 Congresswoman Martha Griffith asked Congressional researchers how long it would take for women to become a majority if the same incremental pace continued. The answer? 432 years.

With more women becoming governors and elected to state legislatures, more are getting into a position where they might run for Congress. And the governors and Congresswomen are being prepared to run for president of the United States.

Numerous studies show that once women are candidates, they are just as likely to win elections as men. The problem is convincing a woman she can win and has the qualifications, financial and personal support necessary to win. Women haven't exactly been encouraged by political parties to be candidates, having to overcome the "good old boy" syndrome, and older women threatened by their ambitions. I faced considerable prejudice from both men and women in the Knox County Democratic organization when I first became a candidate for the county board, and some prejudice still exists 35 years later. The weekly newspaper, *The Paper*, and the Chamber of Commerce tout women who quietly volunteer with little recognition, which leaves out those of us who seek public office and make public policy decisions. No one can win public office and get into a policy-making position without shamelessly promoting herself, and if a woman doesn't have a healthy ego, she won't last long in the game. It's the usual double standard for expectations of men and women.

In the 1940s my mother was a charter member of the Kewanee League of Women Voters, an organization formed after women finally got the vote in 1920, to study and take action on government issues and prepare women to vote as informed



citizens. Mother served on the Illinois League of Women Voters board and was state president for two terms. She was a member of the Illinois Human Relations Commission and local commission when race relations were tough and controversial. She served on President John Kennedy's Commission on the Status of Women, on the subcommittee "Women as Citizens." Eleanor Roosevelt was chairman of the commission and mother met President Kennedy in the Rose Garden in 1962.

I don't think mother will live to see the first woman president, but thanks to women like her, progress continued during the 40s, 50s and 60s, and eventually led to the election of Nancy Pelosi as Speaker of the House.

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