



## Time warp

Women are still waiting for an electoral breakthrough in Massachusetts

**I HAVE A CONFESSION:** I recently spent a week's vacation watching the entire second season of AMC's *Mad Men*. True, all sorts of wholesome outdoor activities occupied the daytime hours, but every evening, we'd dim the lights and turn a Vermont cottage into a 1960s New York advertising agency. Escapism was the goal, yet the more I watched the frustrations of rookie copywriter Peggy Olson, the less the show felt like an escape. Instead, Madison Avenue, circa 1962, began to remind me of Massachusetts politics, circa 2009—at least with respect to gender dynamics.

Peggy faces plenty of overt barriers to success, like lewd comments and lower pay, but the covert obstacles are equally insidious. It's assumed she won't want to join clients for drinks (when deals get made), so nobody invites her. She has to push for the office space and secretarial support her male colleagues receive without asking.

Fast-forward almost 50 years. When it comes to gender, fields like advertising—and academia, medicine, and law—look quite different than they did 49 years ago. But politically, we seem stuck in a time warp. In 1960, Massachusetts had one congresswoman: Edith Nourse Rogers, the widow of a popular local politician. In 2009, we have one congresswoman: Niki Tsongas, the widow of a popular local politician.

In 1960, we had zero female constitutional officers; today, we have one. There's currently one woman on the 13-member Boston City Council, and there was only one woman among the 15 primary-election contenders for the four at-large seats this year. We've never elected a female governor. And, of course, we've never had a female US Senator—although 2009 could be the year that changes.

**BEFORE I CONSIDER** the likelihood of a change, it's worth examining covert obstacles and why they may be particularly pernicious in our state. Most of our neighbor states have had female governors or senators or both, but not us. When women have succeeded here, they have done so largely by way of marriage; indeed, after Sen. Edward Kennedy's death, his widow, Victoria, was seen as an immediate front-runner, though she wasn't expressing interest in the job.

Other women have had trouble finding windows of opportunity. "To the extent that women are relative newcomers, they don't have the same networks," says Kira Sanbonmatsu, a scholar at the New Jersey-based Rutgers University Center on Women in Politics. "They may not be first in line when that congressional seat opens up."

Sheila Capone-Wulsin, executive director of the Massachusetts Women's Political Caucus, hopes that with a woman, Therese Murray, at the helm of the state Senate, female legislators will hear of higher-up opportunities earlier and have time to position themselves for a race. But she also notes that in recent years, her organization has begun

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focusing as much on getting women appointed to high-ranking government jobs as on getting them elected.

"We don't recognize electing women as the only way for women to hold power in politics," she says. "If you're a cabinet secretary like Suzanne Bump or Leslie Kirwan, you can have an awful lot of influence."

She's right, of course. Plus, getting appointed can be a precursor to running for office—just ask Charlie Baker, the former cabinet secretary now making a run for governor. But behind-the-scenes influence is still behind the scenes. It's still another way in which, as on *Mad Men*, men get the top jobs while women play supporting roles.

The experience of other New England states suggests that a single woman, like Peggy on *Mad Men*, can alter the political culture dramatically. Republican Margaret Chase Smith of Maine was elected to the US Senate in 1948; today, both of Maine's senators are Republican women. In 1983, Vesta Roy of New Hampshire became the first woman to be president of a state Senate; today, New Hampshire is the only state that doesn't have a male majority in its Senate.

We need a Peggy here—someone unflappable, who isn't afraid to create a tradition for herself. Attorney General Martha Coakley could be that person. So, in a different way, could Therese Murray. Maybe, by the time *Mad Men* returns for a fourth season, there will be more high heels in our highest offices—and the past won't look quite so much like the present. **CW**

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