



Post-Register opinion

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Women seek statewide offices

Women seek statewide offices, but haven't done well in Idaho's gubernatorial and congressional campaigns. There are a few exceptions.

The defeat of Janet L. Reid in Tuesday's primary election for the Republican nomination in the 2nd District Congressional District is another example of a woman losing a race for a statewide office. However, Reid was supposed to be little more than token opposition to former State Sen. Dane Watkins because of she had little previous public exposure and meager financing. Instead of an expected 2-1 victory or more for Watkins, he got only about a 60 percent majority. It indicates he faces a tough uphill struggle in the November general election against the incumbent, Democrat Richard Stallings.

In the 1st Congressional District, a two-term woman Democratic state representative from Coeur d'Alene, Jeanne Givens, swamped two rivals and looks like a serious threat to the incumbent, Republican Larry Craig next November.

The only woman in Idaho history who has held one of those high posts was Democratic Rep. Gracie Pfost. She served 10 years, 1953-62, as the 1st Congressional District representative. She failed, however, to win the U.S. Senate seat, losing to Republican Len B. Jordan, a former Idaho governor, in 1962.

No woman from either major party has ever sought the governorship. In the early years women held a minor role in Idaho politics. Only since the 1950s have they become an increasing political force.

The National Association of State Legislators recently reported Idaho ranks eighth among states in electing women state legislators. That came about only in recent years, and it's a

feather in the cap for the distaff side.

The U.S. Constitution doesn't even mention women's rights, and it wasn't until the enactment of the 19th amendment in 1920 that women were given the right to vote.

In recent years, a number of wives of gubernatorial and congressional office holders have earned high respect and admiration.

The most notable have been Connie Hansen, wife of former Republican U.S. Rep. George Hansen; and Bethine Church, wife of the late Democrat U.S. Sen. Frank Church.

Both Mrs. Hansen and Mrs. Church held powerful political influence while their husbands held offices and during their campaigns. They often spoke at functions and political rallies when their husbands couldn't appear.

Mrs. Hansen sought the 2nd Congressional District seat in the 1986 Republican primary, but she finished a distant second to Idaho Falls radio announcer Melvin Richardson in a five-candidate race.

Mrs. Hansen also was an influential force in heading her husband's office staff in Washington for most of the 14 years he served in office. The Hansens claimed she served without pay.

Also running for Congress in the 2nd District in 1980 was Democrat Diane Bilyeu, Pocatello, wife of State Sen. Chick Bilyeu, Pocatello. She was easily defeated by George Hansen. Mrs. Bilyeu is now the Bannock County assessor.

Another woman who ran for Congress was Louise Shadduck in the 1st Congressional District in 1956. She lost to Pfost. Shadduck served on the staff of U.S. Sen. James McClure at Washington, D.C., for a time and more recently headed the Idaho Timber Association until her

retirement three years ago.

Mrs. Church announced her intentions to try for the U.S. Senate seat held by Republican Steve Symms in 1986, but changed her mind and did not challenge Gov. John V. Evans in the Democratic primary. She continues to live in Washington, D.C.

The first women to be nominated from two major parties to Congress were two Democrats, Neil K. Irion, in 1920, and Mary George Gray, in 1926, but both lost.

Other women from Idaho who sought high office were Rose Bowman, former director of the Department of Health and Welfare, who finished a poor fourth in the Democratic primary for Senate in 1972; and Nellie Cline Steenson, a Pocatello legislator, who lost the 2nd District Democratic nomination in 1956.

Women from minor party candidates have also sought high office, but none hardly made a dent in the total vote. They were Mary C. Johnson, Prohibition, in 1898, and Annie E. Triplow, Socialist, in 1916, both for governor; and Jean Stoddard, American Party, for U.S. senator in 1974.

Lola Evans played an important role with her cheerful outlook and avid support of her husband, Gov. John Evans. It was a trial and she expressed exuberance after her husband retired to private life early last year and became president of a Burley bank. When the governor broke his ankle, she stepped in and completed a statewide swing during the 1986 senatorial campaign. She had filled in for him on a number of other occasions.

Most politicians' wives play a subdued role, like smiling a lot and listening to their husbands making the same speeches over and over.

Wives whose bright and energetic efforts on behalf of their husbands has been outstanding include Ranae Stallings, wife of Democratic U.S. Rep. Richard Stallings; Ruby Samuelson, wife of former Republican Gov. Don Samuelson; June Hansen, wife of former Republican U.S. Rep. Orval Hansen. Also remembered from earlier years is Grace Jordan, wife of Senator Jordan, who was authoress with distinction of several books centering on their ranch life at Hells Canyon; and Dora Taylor, who accompanied her husband, the flamboyant Democrat U.S. Sen. Glen H. Taylor, known as the "singing cowboy," as part of a singing and guitar-playing singing duo.

Jordan was senator in 1962-71 and governor in 1951-54. Taylor served as senator in 1946-51.

The announced separation last year of Steve and Fran Symms is viewed as part of the pressures of the political job. Fran tried bravely to keep pace with her vigorous husband, but was weakened by scleroderma, a devastating chronic skin disease. Symms is by far the most outgoing and social person ever from Idaho to serve in Congress.

On the other hand, Carol Andrus, the youthful-looking and attractive wife of Gov. Cecil D. Andrus, stays in the background. She is frank in saying she doesn't like public life and only appears as necessary with her husband at the more formal public functions. She is seldom seen on the campaign trail.

Political campaigns and public life is difficult for politicians' wives. A few thrive on the public life, but many only endure. In the wake, there have often been left tattered divorces or strained marital relationships.

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