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FEMALE CANDIDATES KEY TO DEMOCRATIC SENATE

A record 11 women seek seats as party tries to retain its hold

By Bobby Caina Calvan
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WASHINGTON — Democrats, as they aggressively seek to turn women's concerns into a rallying call of the presidential election, are leaning heavily on female candidates to retain control of the Senate.

From Massachusetts to Hawaii, a record number of Democratic women — six incumbents and at least five challengers — are running for seats this year. That eclipses 1992's vaunted "Year of the Woman," when 10 women sought entry into the country's most exclusive political chamber.

The race in Massachusetts pitting Senator Scott Brown, a Republican, against his presumed Democratic opponent, Elizabeth Warren, has captured the most headlines nationwide, but others could be just as crucial for Democrats.

►New York is Brown's best city for fund-raising. B1.

Women "are the ones who have to win in a lot of the toss-up states," said Debbie Walsh, the director of the Center for American Women and Politics, housed at Rutgers University. Of the eight such contests, half are expected to feature Democratic women.

Democrats have the most to lose this fall — because they must defend 23 of the 33 Senate seats up for election. Democrats now rule the Senate by a razor-thin margin, 51-47, with two independents caucusing with the party.

Just months ago, even some Democrats openly worried about holding on to the Senate. But

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PABLO MARTINEZ MONSIVAIS/ASSOCIATED PRESS/FILE

DEMOCRATIC WOMEN RUNNING FOR US SENATE ▲ Claire McCaskill Missouri (incumbent)

Incumbents



Maria Cantwell
Washington



Dianne Feinstein
California



Kirsten Gillibrand
New York



Amy Klobuchar
Minnesota



Debbie Stabenow
Michigan

Nonincumbents



Tammy Baldwin
Wisconsin



Shelley Berkley
Nevada



Heidi Heitkamp
North Dakota



Mazie Hirono
Hawaii



Elizabeth Warren
Massachusetts

Women key to Democrats' hold in Senate

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their chances have brightened because of unforeseen challenges within the GOP, including the retirement of Olympia Snowe of Maine. Another potential blow to Republicans could come Tuesday in Indiana if Richard Lugar, a Republican stalwart, loses the GOP primary to a Tea Party movement candidate, providing an unexpected opening for a Democratic challenge. Even Arizona, once considered a solidly Republican state, could now be in play, according to polls showing Richard Carmona, former surgeon general and the presumed Democratic candidate, within strike of his potential GOP opponents for a seat of retiring Republican Senator Jon Kyl.

Whether Democrats keep control of the Senate will depend on more than just how well the party's women do, Walsh said. "It's not about the gender of the candidate" but more about how well the party can position itself to appear more responsive to interests of women voters across the country.

Democratic leaders in the Senate agree. They have been populating the chamber's calendar with highly choreographed votes on women's issues, seeking to take advantage of a perceived gender gap and depict Republicans as out of touch.

Later this month, another partisan Senate debate is expected to erupt, this time over a bill that seeks to address wage gaps between men and women. The chamber's women will be front and center in that discussion — as they have been during recent flare-ups over birth control, domestic violence, and health care.

"It's a very cynical and manufactured narrative by national Democrats," said Brian Walsh, communications director for the Republican Senatorial Campaign Committee, a fund-raising arm. "They have made the political calculation that scaring women is the path to victory in November, rather than running on their record. . . .

"It's notable that they're trying to inject contraception into the national discussion, but they're not talking about \$4 gas prices, 8 percent unemploy-

ment," Walsh said.

In the presidential race, presumptive GOP candidate Mitt Romney has his own plan to attract female voters: portray President Obama's handling of the economy as particularly damaging to women.

All sides agree the economy is the core issue of the election. Yet, in the toss-up races for the Senate, social issues could be pivotal for female candidates.

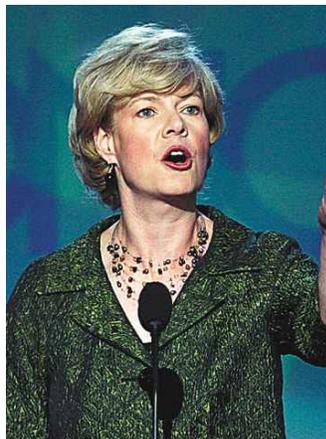
"All these women are being handed a gift — the overreach of the far right," said Siobhan "Sam" Bennett, chief executive of the Women's Campaign Fund, a benefactor for women favoring abortion rights running for office. "In a few of these cases, it could be very well the deciding factor."

Both sides — aided by deep-pocketed super PACS — are expected to spend heavily in the most competitive races, including the four involving Democratic women.

■ Wisconsin: US Representative Tammy Baldwin is vying to become her state's first female senator by retaining Democratic control of the seat being vacated by Senator Herb Kohl. If she wins, Baldwin would also be the only openly gay member of the Senate. The political dynamics of the Badger State are particularly unpredictable, given the immense amounts of money and energy involved in the upcoming recall election of Governor Scott Walker over his aggressive bid to limit the power of labor unions in state government. Baldwin will probably face Tommy Thompson, former governor, or Mark Neumann, former US representative, the two leading GOP contenders.

■ Nevada: Representative Shelley Berkley is seeking to oust freshman GOP Senator Dean Heller, who replaced disgraced Republican John Ensign. Berkley, a former cocktail waitress who touts her working-class background and who would become her state's first female US senator, has been aggressively depicting Heller as being out of touch with women voters.

"Dean Heller just took the war against women to the next level," Berkley said in a video released by her campaign, after he voted



ASSOCIATED PRESS/FILE 2008

Tammy Baldwin is vying to become Wisconsin's first female senator.

for a failed Republican-backed proposal, known as the Blunt Amendment, that sought to allow employers to opt out from providing insurance coverage for contraceptives because of religious or moral objections.

■ Massachusetts: Warren is trying to recapture the seat long held by Democratic lion Edward M. Kennedy from Brown, the lone Republican in the Bay State's congressional delegation. The race is expected to be one of the most expensive in Senate history. Brown has attempted to perform a balancing act on women's issues, cosponsoring the Blunt Amendment, but supporting the Violence Against Women Act.

■ Missouri: Senator Claire McCaskill, a Democrat, faces perhaps the toughest odds because of the high concentration of social conservatives in her state.

"She sure wouldn't want to come out with ads that would be aired across the state that try to exploit the perception that Republicans are antiwomen," said Ken Warren, a professor of political science at Saint Louis University.

Still, McCaskill, a former prosecutor, has not shied from campaigning on some women's issues, particularly the anti-violence measure. "It's one

thing for Republicans to play political games to try and win elections. But to block this life-saving legislation is going too far," she said in an e-mail to supporters in advance of last month's vote on the bill, which passed 68-31.

McCaskill's probable Republican opponent, former state treasurer Sarah Steelman, ran into criticism from women's groups when she admitted being unfamiliar with the legislation. In addition to Steelman, Republicans could field at least three female candidates: Linda Lingle in Hawaii, Heather Wilson in New Mexico, and Linda McMahon, who faces a primary battle with Christopher Shays in Connecticut.

Of the 11 Democratic women running for Senate, four incumbents are considered shoo-ins: Dianne Feinstein of California, Kirsten Gillibrand of New York, Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota, and Maria Cantwell of Washington.

In Michigan, Senator Debbie Stabenow, an incumbent and Democrat, was once considered at risk of losing her seat, but political handicappers say she could be in safer territory because of a weakened GOP field. In Hawaii, US Representative Mazie Hirono will have to contend with Lingle, but analysts say the state is leaning Democratic. In North Dakota, the fate of Heidi Heitkamp, a former state attorney general, is far less certain, with some analysts expecting Republicans to capture the seat of retiring Democratic Senator Kent Conrad.

Last fall, Senator Patty Murray of Washington, who chairs the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, celebrated its roster of women running for Senate seats by using the headquarters of the historic National Woman's Party as a backdrop. Murray was a member of 1992's Year of the Woman.

"Recruiting and electing more women to the Senate is not only the right thing for our party, but more importantly I think it is critical for the direction of our country," Murray said.

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