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***Commentary by J.L. Schmidt***

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**Most Women Ever Set to Serve in Nebraska Legislature**

There will be 18 women sworn in as state senators in January, the most ever in the Nebraska Unicameral Legislature. Half declare as Republicans and half as Democrats in the officially nonpartisan body.

We’ve come a long way from back in 1946 when Nell Krause of Albion was sworn in to fill a vacancy and served seven days during a special session. Then, in 1954, 27-year-old Kathleen Foote of Axtell was elected to a four-year term. The numbers were sporadic after that and didn't really start to gel until eight years ago when a double-digit group served.

It looks like the "Good Old Boys" club is dead. There's a refreshing optimism that the same old issues will be seen in a new light. I, for one, am excited. With a few exceptions, Nebraska women lawmakers tend to be less partisan and more inclined to compromise. Let's hope I'm right.

"There weren't any men who could leave their businesses, so people in the county asked me to run," Foote reportedly said in a 1970 interview. "And I did."

Men in the Unicameral tend to be retired, business owners, attorneys or farmers.

Former Sen. Fern Hubbard Orme of Lincoln said in 1956, “women have a keen interest in community welfare and much first-hand experience in dealing with community problems. It is the woman who does know...budgeting and spending and knows the importance of proper conservative legislation." The Lincoln homemaker was first elected to the Legislature in 1958 and served 14 years representing the southeast district in Lincoln, losing in 1972 to former Sen. Shirley Marsh.

Marsh, a pro-choice Republican, was sworn in as the only female state senator in 1973, serving with legislative heavyweights Jerome Warner, Richard Marvel, Ernie

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Chambers, Eugene Mahoney, John DeCamp and Terry Carpenter. Marsh served District 29 in south Lincoln from 1973 to 1989.

Omaha’s first female state senator, Florence Reynolds was a teacher and elementary school principal for 45 years. She served from 1967-71 and said she strongly believed in giving to her community.

"After your country and its communities have given you the opportunity to develop your talents, there comes a time when you must return what you can," she said. "... I should give every moment of time I can for the benefit of others."

Lincoln’s JoAnn Maxey is remembered as always asking what she could do to make a better life for all Nebraskans, especially young people. Maxey, the first female African American to serve as a state senator (1977-1979) was appointed by then Gov. James Exon after Sen. Harold Simpson resigned.

Current Senator Julie Slama of Dunbar was appointed to the Legislature at age 22 in 2018 as the youngest woman to serve. She was elected to the seat two years later. In 1972, at age 22, Steve Fowler of Lincoln claimed the youngest elected senator title. He served for 11 years.

In 1980, 23-year-old Karen Kilgarin of Omaha was elected as the youngest woman to serve as a Nebraska State Senator. She represented south Omaha’s District 7 in the Legislature and served until 1984 when she went into broadcast news.

Women in 2023 will hold more than a third of Nebraska’s 49 seats for the first time — at 37% — with nine Republicans and nine Democrats serving in the officially nonpartisan body. Republicans added three women: Christy Armendariz of Omaha; Jana Hughes of Seward and Teresa Ibach of Sumner. Democrats added two: Jane Raybould and Danielle Conrad, both of Lincoln. Raybould is a former Lincoln City Council member and Conrad a former state senator.

Raybould, who will replace term-limited State Sen. Patty Pansing Brooks, told the Nebraska Examiner she spent years trying to help more Democratic women run for office, because they’re under-represented. She said she is proud to be among them.

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“It’s incredibly exciting to be serving with all these strong, amazing, smart, savvy women,” Raybould said. “It’s a little bit different perspective that we bring.”

Nebraska’s 2023 legislative makeup certainly will be different from Conrad’s first go-round. She served from 2007 to 2015, and then was term-limited out of office.

“As you see more and more women candidates from across the state and across the political spectrum step forward to make a positive difference, you are seeing positive results,” she told the Examiner.

The 18 Nebraska women are part of a national trend that claims a record 32% of state lawmakers in 2023 as women, according to the Center for American Women and Politics. States will have at least 2,376 female lawmakers in 2023, including both women elected in 2022 and holdovers. That is an increase in the number of women writing state laws from the record set in 2022 of 2,307 women.

After years of observing the Nebraska Legislature, I welcome the change and think we should celebrate it.

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*J.L. Schmidt has been covering Nebraska government and politics since 1979. He has been a registered Independent for more than 20 years.*