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ISLAND VOICES

Changing times better for women, but voice via vote is crucial



Betty White is head of school at Sacred Hearts Academy, director of the Hawaii Association of Independent Schools and former trustee of the National Coalition of Girls Schools.

By Betty White

As a grandmother excited about the choices in Election Year 2012, I have recently been thinking about my own grandmother Martha, who was born in 1903. What an amazing journey we grandmothers have been on for the last century!

When my grandmother was born, American women would not have the right to vote for another 17 years. Forty-two years after her birth, I was born into a world where the embryonic tide of change for women in America was beginning to rise to heights and paths of leadership never seriously considered or contemplated for nearly two millennia.

Sixty years after the birth of my grandmother, I would be able to apply for my own credit card, go to a professional school of my choice, and make decisions about my own body and well-being. And,

some 100 years after her birth, I was a participant in a primary election in which a woman had a real chance of becoming a nominee for president of the United States.

Glancing at television, perusing the daily newspaper or scanning the Internet — especially during this election year — might well suggest that today's women are flourishing. Younger women now outnumber men in earning college and graduate degrees in education, business, law and medicine. In many metropolitan areas, single women in their 20s are able to earn more than their male peers. In New York City, women in their 20s earn on average 14 percent more than their male peers.

In fact, women are having success not imaginable during my grandmother's generation. However, statistics generally show that men continue to run most major institutions and

make most of the important political, executive and policy decisions in our nation. In general, women working full-time earn 81 percent of what men earn for the same job. In the financial services industry, 57 percent of the workers are women, but only 1.5 percent of the chief executive officers are female.

In management, while women account for about a third of the enrollment in masters of business degree programs, only 2 percent of the Fortune 500 CEOs are female. In law, women constitute about half of the new entrants to the profession. Yet, less than one-fifth of law firm partners, federal judges and law school deans are female.

While the gender views of equality and female competence in my grandmother's day are radically different today, Election Year 2012 reminds us that, on the political

front, there remains much to accomplish: Females hold only 16.8 percent of congressional seats and only six of 50 governor seats; only 9 percent of mayors are women in the nation's 100 largest cities; and our U.S. Supreme Court has just three women justices out of nine.

During the last several years, the women of our nation have witnessed Congress rejecting equal-pay legislation, groups rallying to restrict access to birth control, and lawmakers blocking the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act. As we go to the polls on Nov. 6, our country continues to cope with a fragile economy that remains disproportionately hard on women because of the persistent pay gap with men, disparities in promotion and seniority, family care responsibilities and a greater reliance on Medicare, Medicaid and So-

cial Security programs.

Definitely, 2012's political candidates in Hawaii and our nation are emphasizing that the challenges for women continue. The good news is that this year's elections provide a unique opportunity to address gender disparity. The majority of voters in 2012 will be women, and they need to go to the polls in full force.

As political officeholders, women will still lag dramatically behind men. Nevertheless, the voting power and political participation of women give them a strong hand to play and exert collective influence. It's time to unleash the full energy and talents of more than half the population of the nation to the advantage of the entire state of Hawaii and our country.

ON VACATION: *Richard Borreca is off today; his "On Politics" column will return on Friday.*