

VOICES RISING

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Voices

STATE POLITICS

The women's movement is strong in Tennessee, with more women serving in local and state offices

Georgiana Vines Special to USA TODAY NETWORK - TENNESSEE

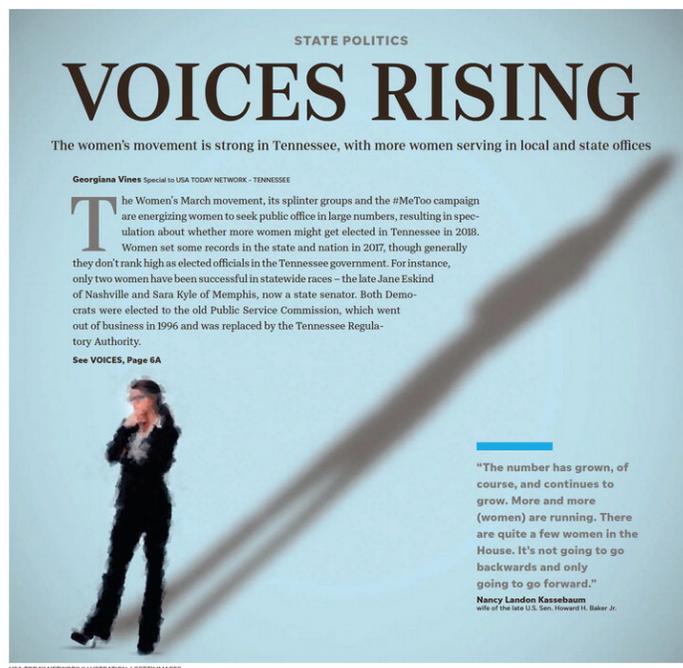
The Women's March movement, its splinter groups and the #MeToo campaign are energizing women to seek public office in large numbers, resulting in speculation about whether more women might get elected in Tennessee in 2018. Women set some records in the state and nation in 2017, though generally they don't rank high as elected officials in the Tennessee government. For instance, only two women have been successful in statewide races – the late Jane Eskin of Nashville and Sara Kyle of Memphis, now a state senator. Both Democrats were elected to the old Public Service Commission, which went out of business in 1996 and was replaced by the Tennessee Regulatory Authority.

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“The number has grown, of course, and continues to grow. More and more (women) are running. There are quite a few women in the House. It's not going to go backwards and only going to go forward.”

Nancy Landon Kassebaum

wife of the late U.S. Sen. Howard H. Baker Jr.



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Women, by the numbers

In the legislature, five of 33 members in the Senate are women and 16 of 99 House members are women, for a 15.9 percentage. The Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University ranks Tennessee 43rd out

in social media with Franken, but he's in the group of men in politics, entertainment and the news business who women are now identifying as having sexually assaulted and harassed them in the workplace.

Significance of #MeToo campaign?

So does that this mean sexual harassment could influence this year's elections in Tennessee? In talking with candidates, women elected officials, a political scientist and a campaign strategist, different answers are given. Party affiliation also is a factor.

“At this point, except as sexual harassment claims or charges might arise against a specific candidate going

of 50 states. Nationally, 25.3 percent of 7,383 state legislators in the U.S. are women, the center said.

Four women and one man were elected to Knoxville City Council in November, the most women ever on that body. The newly elected group is now the majority on the nine-member council.

Knoxville Mayor Madeline Rogero, the city's first woman mayor, gave a rousing speech at the Women's March rally in Krutch Park on Jan. 21 that included praise for the new women council members, who represent four different districts. She said that in every district where women ran, a woman was elected. She gave some credit to the #MeToo movement of the past six months.

"I hope it will come to represent what we did about it," she said.

Record number of women in Senate

When former Minnesota Lt. Gov. Tina Smith was sworn in Jan. 3 as a U.S. senator replacing Al Franken, who resigned over allegations of sexual misconduct, a new record of 22 women senators was set for the U.S. Senate. Twelve are up for re-election this year, including Smith, so it's not certain that record will be kept.

U.S. Rep. Marsha Blackburn of Brentwood could help with the numbers in that body since she seeks to replace U.S. Sen. Bob Corker, who is not seeking a third term. But first Blackburn has to win the Republican primary on Aug. 2, in which former U.S. Rep. Rep. Stephen Fincher, Dr. Rolando Toyos and perennial candidate Larry Crim also are candidates.

With Fincher as an opponent, "that will be a good race," said state Sen. Becky Duncan Massey, R-Knoxville, in response to a question about what she thought the chances are of Blackburn winning the nomination. Early polls show Blackburn, a strong supporter of President Donald Trump, ahead.

If she wins the primary, Blackburn would face a former popular governor, Phil Bredesen, the only Democrat now running, on Nov. 6.

"That race will be a battle," Massey said.

After Smith was appointed by Minnesota Gov. Mark Dayton to succeed Franken, Jean Sinzdek, associate director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University in New Jersey, told

into the primaries or general election, 'sexual harassment' issues are unlikely significantly to affect elections in Tennessee in 2018," Michael Fitzgerald, political science professor at the University of Tennessee, said in an email.

"It may well be that in the statewide races for governor and the U.S. Senate, the ongoing controversy over sexual harassment and late-breaking allegations against high profile individuals nationally will continue to shock and titillate the electorate. But their impact on voter decisions will only be one part of the excessively partisan, divisive, and inflammatory atmosphere in which today's election campaigns operate," he said.

Women running for governor

Besides Blackburn running for the U.S. Senate, two women are running for governor on the Republican side.

Blackburn would add issues to the litany of reasons people vote, particularly women, she said in a Jan. 23 interview. On the campaign trail, women cite as the No. 1 issue having a strong and healthy economy, and they also want to make communities safe, end sex trafficking, have safe borders and get health care, she said.

"I've heard so many women say they are pleased with the tax bill. They work two jobs, and changes in the tax law is something they talk about," she said. Some have gotten bonuses or salary increases since the new tax legislation was passed in December, she said.

"Women are very independentminded. They want to see how candidates relate to issues that are important to them. Women are very focused on these issues that are important. I like the fact that they are," Blackburn said.

In November, Blackburn joined U.S. Rep. Jim Cooper, D-Nashville, in introducing a bill to dismantle a secret fund, paid for by taxpayers, which was meant to keep victims of sexual assault quiet. Congress also has passed a resolution requiring sexual harassment training for members and staff.

"My constituents could not believe what they were hearing when they heard about the hush money fund. They were right to be appalled. I was disgusted," Blackburn said at the time.

Cooper said: "No more cover-ups. We need transparency, safety and appropriate behavior. Sexual misconduct has no place here or anywhere."

Fortune magazine that the issue of sexual assault made Smith's selection "stand out even more. To see a woman step up and take the place of a man that's been accused and is resigning because of his own history with sexual harassment."

In this same article, Sinzdak said she'd like to see 50-50 representation in the Senate but said progress has been made over the past decade. It's a long ways from when the late U.S. Sen. Howard H. Baker Jr.'s wife, Nancy Landon Kassebaum, was elected to the Senate from Kansas.

She was the only woman among the 100 members when she took office on Dec. 23, 1978, filling a vacancy created when her predecessor resigned early to give her an edge in seniority.

"The number has grown, of course, and continues to grow. More and more (women) are running," Kassebaum-Baker said in an interview from her Kansas home, where she returned after Howard Baker's death in 2014. "There are quite a few women in the House. It's not going to go backwards and only going to go forward."

The importance of women in local politics

Kassebaum-Baker also said she believes it's important for women to serve on local governing bodies.

"I believe women can add a very important role whether it's on a school board or county commission. It (governing) involves our schools, our health, our ability to reach across division and party. Sometimes women have the ability to listen and learn. That's an important component," she said.

Other than these comments, Kassebaum- Baker declined to discuss what she thought might be issues in this year's campaigns. She is keeping up with Tennessee politics and was aware Blackburn is running for the U.S. Senate, she said.

The mantra of the #MeToo campaign didn't start

Former state Rep. Gloria Johnson, a Knoxville Democrat, disagrees with Fitzgerald that sexual harassment will not itself be an issue.

"Because of Jeremy Durham, it is important," Johnson said, referring to the Republican lawmaker expelled from the Tennessee legislature for alleged sexual misconduct in 2016. "We need to keep it (the issue) in the forefront, especially in the legislature, where we had problems very recently. If we don't continue to talk about it, we're not going to change the culture. The best way to change is to get women elected."

Rep. Mark Lovell, a Cordova Republican, also resigned in 2017 over allegations.

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A sign reading "Grab 'em by the midterms" is held by an attendee at the the Knoxville Women's March at Krutch park on Jan. 21. PHOTOS BY CAITIE MCMEKIN/NEWS SENTINEL



Knoxville Mayor Madeline Rogero speaks at the Knoxville Women's March on Jan. 21. The crowd grew to more than 10,000 and spanned 10 blocks.



Gloria Johnson of Knoxville, an organizer of a demonstration protesting the American Health Care Act, speaks to demonstrators in Market Square in Knoxville on June 21, 2017. Demonstrators staged a 'die-in' holding fake tombstones and laying on the ground.

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Women's role in health care

Johnson represented the 13th District House seat in Knoxville in 2013-15. She was defeated by Republican Rep. Eddie Smith for re-election and again two years ago. She announced Friday that she will run again for the 13th District seat in this year's election. She has been very active the past few years with efforts to make sure the national Affordable Care Act, better known as "Obamacare" after the former president, is maintained.

"This is going to be a health-care voter year. Our legislature has done nothing to help Tennesseans get access to afford care, made insurance more expensive, when it could have done the opposite," Johnson said.

Johnson is the last woman to have represented Knox County in the state House, with the first having been Annie May Davis, called the "Mother of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park." She introduced a

election (in 2019) could be all women. Poor Andrew," Veum said, laughing.

Singh-Perez, who represents the city's 3rd District, attended the Knoxville March this year, but in 2017 she was in New Delhi, India, with her daughter, Sitara Singh-Perez, then in seventh grade. She said nothing was organized for a March but she and her daughter made signs and took them to a busy part of the city.

"We stood for 20 minutes and then she told me, 'My mother is crazy,'" Singh-Perez recalled. So they went back to where they were staying at the time. When she returned to Knoxville, where she lives with husband Eddie Perez, she already had decided to seek public office.

"I did not feel represented in our government," she said.

Legislature and sexual harassment

The sexual harassment issue is one at which House Speaker Beth Harwell, a Nashville Republican running for governor, has been at the center with the expulsion of Durham. His inappropriate late-night text messages to three women were uncovered by The Tennessean. The Franklin Republican was removed by a 70-2 vote, with Harwell having to plea for support to prevent anyone from publicly identifying the women accusing

bill in 1925 that allowed for the first purchase of the park by Tennessee.

Massey, in the middle of her term, is the fourth woman to represent Knox County in the Senate although two of them were care-takers. Martha Ashe was elected in 1974 as a surrogate for her son, Victor, who didn't meet the qualifying age of 30 at the time of the election. She resigned as soon as she took the oath since Victor Ashe by then met the age requirement and he was appointed by the old Knox County Court. Sue Atchley, wife of the former Senate minority leader Ben Atchley, held the position by appointment of County Commission in 2011 after Sen. Jamie Woodson resigned and until Massey was later elected. Massey has been re-elected twice.

The Center for American Women and Politics earlier had Massey on its website as a candidate for the 2nd Congressional District seat that her brother, John J. Duncan Jr., is vacating this year, but her name has since been removed.

Massey said she never intended to run for Congress.

"I get more done in Nashville than I could ever get done in Washington. I'm about trying to get things done. I'm content where I am. This is where I'm supposed to be," she said.

Women's Marches

The Women's Marches began nationally in 2017 with the first being held the day after Trump was inaugurated. The participants from the beginning have represented a coalition in support of women's rights; immigration, particularly for children who came here with their parents without legal documentation; wage equality; climate change; and gay/lesbian/transgender rights. In other words, issues and programs in which they differed with President Trump or what he seemed to be espousing.

This year, organizers of the Women's Marches said they were celebrating successes they've had, including more women getting elected, and wanting to keep pressure on Trump and the Republican-dominated Congress on their positions. They're clearly not conservative Republicans, but they are more than Democrats. A number say they have never been part of the political process before. Offshoots of the march organizers include the Blue Dots, a left-leaning group active in social media.

Durham of sexual misconduct, after he threatened to reveal details about the women.

The legislature in 2016 established a new sexual harassment policy that requires the first-ever-in-person training. Prior to a session earlier this month, a couple of House lawmakers made jokes about being harassed.

"They know the Speaker takes it seriously," Harwell said in an interview about the training. "I believe I have shown leadership (on the sexual harassment policy). We completely updated the policy with input from the media, public and private (sector)."

Harwell discussed the policy when asked about it in the interview about her qualifications as a gubernatorial candidate. On her list was the low debt of the state, "which hasn't been by accident" but because of a well-managed state, and improvements in education, including a 30 percent increase in those taking programs for technical and vocational training. Her website also talks about supporting public safety and eliminating or phasing out certain taxes.

She faces U.S. Rep. Diane Black of Hendersonville, Randy Boyd of Knoxville and Bill Lee of Franklin in the GOP primary. Former state Sen. Mae Beavers of Mount Juliet announced on Tuesday that she was ending her gubernatorial bid.

Conservative women in Tennessee politics

Asked what she thought about the impact of the Women's Marches that took place across the country on Jan. 20-21, the first anniversary of Trump's inauguration, Blackburn said she was involved with a pro-life event instead.

She addressed the Pro-LifeCon Digital Action Summit in Washington, D.C., on Jan. 19. She has led efforts to defund Planned Parenthood and chaired the House Select Panel on Infant Lives, which examined whether abortion providers broke the law governing fetal tissue donations. The findings have been disputed by Democrats and Planned Parenthood. Blackburn said in an interview that four referrals have been sent to the Justice Department and criminal referrals in 11 states to the FBI are being investigated.

She wasn't the only candidate to choose a pro-life event over a Women's March. Gubernatorial candidates Black, Boyd and Lee spoke at a March for Life event sponsored by the Knox County Chapter of the Tennessee Right to Life Committee on Jan. 21, the day of the Women's March, in Knoxville. Beavers also

At Knoxville's March, the organizing group recognized a number of women as "ReSisters" for working toward equities in society. Johnson, all new women City Council members, and Renee Hoyos, a Democrat running for the 2nd Congressional District, were among the winners.

Hoyos said she received recognition for stepping up to run in a Republican-dominated area. She has taken a leave of absence from her position as executive director of the Tennessee Clean Water Network to campaign against Josh Williams for the Democratic nomination in the Aug. 2 primary. Republicans seeking the position are Knox County Mayor Tim Burchett, state Rep. Jimmy Matlock of Lenoir City, Jason Emert of Blount County and Vito Sagliano of Knoxville.

Hoyos said in house parties that she's been having, the Women's March and #MeToo issues have not come up as issues but rather health care, the recent government shutdown and education are topics of concern. In private conversations with friends, Trump in general is discussed.

"He has done so many things that are egregious. The standard for acceptable behavior has gotten so low ... There is outrage for his unacceptable behavior toward women (and) minorities. Women and men are saying, 'We're done (not participating for change).' They're getting engaged," Hoyos said.

She also said she believes the reason 14,000 people, as estimated by the Knoxville Police Department, showed up for the Jan. 21 Knoxville March was "they're pissed" at Trump.

Women on Knoxville City Council

Doug Veum, active Democrat who's an adviser to Hoyos, said the larger-than-normal turnout for City Council races that lacked a mayoral contest in November 2017 made a difference in the election of Stephanie Welch, Seema Singh-Perez, Lauren Rider and Gwen McKenzie. Andrew Roberto also was elected.

He said he feels the #MeToo movement helped. Singh-Perez, a naturalized Indian-American, also was assisted by a Knoxville 2017 City Council Movement grassroots group that plans to continue being active.

"The next City Council

was scheduled to attend but was unable to when her mother died.

The location was moved shortly before the program began, from the amphitheater in World's Fair Park to the Knoxville Convention Center, for safety reasons after protesters showed up for the Women's March. Some of the 700 persons in attendance had signs like "Pray for an End to Abortion" and "Every Life Is Precious," among others. At a registration desk, people could get a "Vote Yes on 1" campaign button, a reference to a referendum approved in November 2014 that gave lawmakers more power to regulate and restrict abortions. The state's vote-counting method on Amendment 1 was affirmed by the U.S. 6th Circuit Court of Appeals on Jan. 9.

Kara Owen, a spokeswoman for Harwell, said the Speaker did not attend any of the political events that weekend because of a conflict.



Les Bortner of South Knoxville was stopped at the intersection of Walnut and Clinch by Knoxville police who told him he had to remove the stake from the sign to take it to the Women's March at Krutch Park on Jan. 21. GEORGIANA VINES



Senator Becky Duncan Massey answers a question at the Knoxville News Sentinel during a public discussion hosted by the League of Women Voters on Jan. 6. CAITIE MCMEKIN/NEWS SENTINEL



People attend during the annual March for Life event in Knoxville on Jan. 21. The event was held at the Knoxville Convention Center this year due to heightened tensions with the Women's March downtown which attracted white supremacist protestors and Antifa. CALVIN MATTHEIS/NEWS SENTINEL