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### Kay Bailey Hutchison on women in politics: 'It stopped being an issue.'

By Melinda Henneberger,

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DALLAS — Kay Bailey Hutchison was more than ready to leave Washington this month, after 20 years in the U.S. Senate, and saw a lot of progress for women in politics during that time. So much, in fact, that she feels gender is no longer an issue in her line of work.

When she finished law school at the University of Texas 45 years ago, that certainly was not the case. "I couldn't get a job as a lawyer — and I was *not* at the bottom of my class," she said in a long interview over a cup of coffee at the Westin, where she was attending the 10th annual conference of a group she helped form, the Academy of Medicine, Engineering & Science of Texas.

"On a lark," said Hutchison, who's 69 now, she applied for a reporting job at a Houston TV station, and became the first on-camera newswoman in the state. And after building a local following — "I became very well known *because* I was the only woman" — she won a seat in the state legislature, and was the first Republican woman to manage that, too, she says.

Texas was bluer then than it is red now, and as a young, single female, "the theme was that I couldn't possibly be conservative. I was a woman, and women are always flakes" — and thus liberal, I think she means.

Even after she won that race, she noticed that male colleagues in her party "could say things a little different way than I could" and still be taken seriously on the public stage. Her fellow House member, now-husband Ray Hutchison, for instance, "could fluff things off in a way I never could have done." Like George W. Bush and Rick Perry, too, she'd been a college cheerleader, but she had to live that down in a way they never did, and behave decorously at all moments.

When she ran for state treasurer in 1990 and for the Senate in '93, her gender was "still an obstacle" to electoral success, in her view, but somewhere around 2000 "it started becoming an asset. I stopped feeling like I had to prove myself all the time, and in Texas, people stopped thinking of me as 'the woman Senator.' They stopped mentioning it in introductions, anyway — wasn't it obvious? — and reporters stopped using phrases like "priming and fretting" — one that still sticks in her craw — to describe the sight of her combing her hair en route to an event.

If other women want to keep focusing on the challenges we're up against, she does not: "I don't think we ought to be nitpicking about it any more."

Not all changes in the last two decades have been so positive, though, and she agrees with those who feel that more got done in the Senate before campaigns became permanent: "When I was first elected, we worked for our candidates but once the elections were held we didn't think of every issue — nor did the

Democrats; they're worse about it, actually — as something to be turned for political advantage. Once the people had spoken, you worked with everybody."

The Senate itself isn't what it once was, in her view: "The traditional role of the Senate has been to be the adult in the room." And that's no longer the case? "Less so," she says, laughing and letting loose with what for the famously careful Kay Bailey is the equivalent of invective: "Because you're getting more House members in the Senate."

Politically, Texas is a different place now than when she packed for Washington; Dallas County is Democratic, and some in that party are optimistic that the whole state could go back to blue — if not by '16, than by '20. "We've got to handle our minorities in Texas right or it *will* become Democratic," she says. (By "handle," she clarifies, what she means is invite Hispanics in.) But "I've always done well," with Hispanic voters, "and so has George Bush — and Rick Perry, probably," she adds, though I'm not sure if that extra beat before she included her former rival for the governorship was humorous or reflexive. "And Asians are a natural base for us; they're hard-working and entrepreneurial."

Asked about gun control post-Newtown, she first says there has to be something done on the mental health side, but then acknowledges that that's no easy thing, either: A unstable man stalked her, she said, for some 20 years, starting in the early 70s, and ending only with his death. "He hinted at crazy things," and once got himself committed temporarily by threatening George H.W. Bush, "but I never wanted to pursue anything" legally. "He was a veteran."

Her two adopted children, 11-year-old Bailey and Houston, only came with her to Washington one year before returning here, where she joined them and her husband on the weekends. "I look back on that and wonder if I made the right decision," she says, second-guessing just like most of us.

In this next chapter, she'll be juggling several jobs — consulting for a law firm, giving speeches, and serving on corporate boards. But for now, she's working out of her dining room, with only one aide, and so far misses not a lot about the life she's just left behind. "It was the right time," she says, looking more relaxed than you might ever have seen her.



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