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Women to Watch: Rep. Kristi Thibaut, D-Houston

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Second in a series

After she lost her first campaign for a House seat from Houston in 2006, Kristi Thibaut showed up in Austin anyway. What she encountered, as she lobbied unsuccessfully for lower utility rates with fellow ACORN activists, was almost enough to make her wonder why she'd wanted that seat in the first place. "It was very contentious," Thibaut says. "I thought, 'Who in their right mind wants to work in this atmosphere?'"

But Thibaut, who grew up a farmer's daughter in Bay City, ultimately found her spine stiffened by the experience—and by the fact that her vanquisher in 2006, Rep. Jim Murphy, voted against what she calls an "easy" bill to cut runaway rates for the working folks back home. "You get away from the craziness a little bit," she says, "and start thinking differently. I could sit around and leave things the way they are and my life would be great, but would that make a difference?"

Kristi Thibaut

Photo by Chris Carson

Thibaut was no stranger to the Capitol. In the pre-Tom Craddick era, she'd been a legislative aide to Rep. Judy Hawley, who gave up her seat in 2002 after Republican redistricting made it unwinnable. She knew that a difference could be made. But she also knew that she didn't want to run and lose again. In the spring of 2007, she called two potential allies, Annie's List, the statewide PAC for progressive women, and Houston's Third Thursday PAC, and "told them, 'I need you—otherwise, I can't do it.' You can be the best candidate in the world, and if you don't have the resources to get your message out, forget it."

She got the resources. Despite the results in 2006, Thibaut's district—one of the state's most diverse, with healthy and growing Asian-American, African-American and Latino populations—was ripe for a red-to-blue shift. "I knew it was going to be a good year for Democrats," she says, thanks to the enthusiasm for Barack Obama and a renewed Democratic effort in Harris County. "I just didn't know how good."

Texans Together and ACORN helped Thibaut canvass the district. Annie's List contributed early money and an all-purpose, well-trained staffer. Third Thursday put more than \$50,000 into the race, helping make her competitive with the Republican incumbent.

Thibaut's uphill campaign was made a bit more complicated by an unexpected development. "My husband and I tried to have children," she says, "and gave up." As her campaign geared up in 2007, Thibaut, now 44, got surprising news. "It was quite a shock to find out I was pregnant," she says. Her son, Christopher Frank, was born "a couple of weeks before a big finance-report deadline" in mid-2008, she says, laughing at herself for remembering the date that way.

Thibaut won a narrow victory five months later. Her child-rearing duties didn't stop her from getting busy soon after the election, pre-filing a bill to freeze tuition for college students in Texas once they're enrolled. "I would love to lower tuition," she says, "but that's a different fight. This would at least give parents the ability to plan, so their bills don't jump 20 percent in one year."

The issue that frustrated Thibaut in 2007 will also be a priority. "Utility markets are deregulated in Houston; we pay twice the rates of Austin. It's a ripoff," she says. "I'm going to get our rates lowered."

That's strong talk. But it's characteristic of Thibaut. Her genial manner and Bay City drawl—not to mention her new motherhood—might not strike terror in the hearts of legislators and lobbyists who stand in her way. But they might want to pay heed to her blunt manner of speaking the truth. Or take a long gander at her resume, where they'll find that this progressive activist was also the founding executive director of the Texas Youth Hunting Association.

"My father used to take me hunting as a kid," she says. "I got to create this program from scratch, raising money and going out to the big ranches and getting people involved." She wasn't trying to bolster the gun industry, she says; the objective was

“getting urban kids in a rural setting and showing them another way of life. You could just sit in the blinds and watch the animals; you didn’t have to shoot.”

As she confronts the animals in Austin, Thibaut clearly plans to take dead aim at the cripple-the-government philosophy that marked the Craddick years. “We need to put re-regulating back on the table,” she says. “And we have to recognize that privatizing certain parts of our government has been a failure.”