

In the Running?

Women Candidates and the Politics of Gender

By Seth Chase

Women make up more than half the U.S. population. Not only are they more likely than men to be registered voters, they are also more likely to go to the polls on Election Day. So why hasn't this potential political influence translated into parity for women in public office?

The glass ceiling may have 18 million cracks—in Sen. Hillary Clinton's now-famous phrase—but the number of women who attain political office remains remarkably small. In the 110th Congress, only 16 of the 100 senators are women; in the House, only 71 of the 435 representatives are women. The situation isn't much better in state-houses across the country, where only eight of the 50 governors—who often become presidential candidates—and 23.7 percent of state legislators are women.¹

Looking Behind the Numbers

Why are women so woefully underrepresented as elected public officials? The easy answer is that not enough women run for office. Women are less likely than men to seek political office, and they are less likely to be encouraged to do so.² This situation is unfortunate, because research shows that women who do run are just as likely to win as men are.³

The more complicated question is, Why don't more women seek political office in the first place? This historic election year offers some answers. Women who do run have to contend with criticisms and personal questions from opponents and pundits that male candidates simply don't have to worry about. Indeed, many members of the

mainstream media seem to have missed the women's movement of the past 40 years and still view women candidates in traditional gender roles.

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During the Democratic primaries, for example, reporters frequently mentioned Sen. Hillary Clinton's clothing choices but made no comments about male candidates' attire. Since arriving on the national scene in 1992, Clinton has often been vilified in the press. When Gov. Sarah Palin became the Republican vice presidential nominee, many television commentators questioned her ability to raise a family while campaigning and, if elected, while serving as vice president. Although Sen. Barack Obama also has young children, few questions were raised about his ability to meet family responsibilities.

Discriminatory questions are nothing new, however. A political opponent of former Attorney General Janet Reno once asked her about her sexual orientation. (She responded, "I like virile men; that's why I'm not interested in you!") Likewise, when Sen. Maria Cantwell was running for the U.S. Senate, she was repeatedly asked why she wasn't married—a question unmarried men running for office seldom hear.

At Home in the House?

Women face other challenges when running for office. Since women are still the primary caregivers in most families—often responsible for both children and older family members—many delay entering politics until after their children are grown and other



We Ran and Won... and You Can, Too!

Wendy Pitts Reeves is a county commissioner in Blount County, Tennessee, and a member of the AAUW Maryville (TN) Branch.

Wendy's path toward elected office began when her branch president asked her to chair Tennessee's first Sister to Sister Summit. Contacts she made in the course of the event led to an invitation to serve on the Tennessee Economic Council for Women, a small state agency that works to improve the economic status of women across the state. Her work with state legislators, as well as the experience she received when she became branch president, served her well in her quest for political office. Says Wendy, "This series of events unfolding over the years led me toward the decision I ultimately made—to make my first run for office in 2006. At every juncture, there was someone in my branch who challenged me to take on new responsibilities, try new things, and learn how to lead. When the time came to put my own name on the ballot—something I could never have imagined just a few short years earlier—it was my sisters in the Maryville branch of AAUW who'd given me what I needed to be ready for that opportunity.

Diane Sands represents Montana's 95th legislative district and is a member of the AAUW Missoula (MT) Branch.

"When I first ran for the Montana House of Representatives in 1996 the issue wasn't that I was a woman but that I was an

out lesbian—in fact, the first out LGBT person in the state to run for and win elected office. I didn't run for office as a woman or a lesbian but as an interested and highly qualified citizen. For the previous 10 years I had been the executive director and chief lobbyist of the Montana Women's Lobby, a coalition of 52 women's organizations, including AAUW. My work on a range of issues from child care, reproductive rights, insurance reform, domestic violence, and pay equity gave me a base of support that resulted in my winning 93 percent of the vote in a progressive Missoula district. As a founder of Montana's LGBT rights organization, PRIDE, I had been saying that Missoula could and should elect the first out legislator; I just didn't know it would be me!"

The **AAUW Missoula (MT) Branch** counts four state legislators among its members, including the senate majority leader.

As Diane Sands reports, "The Missoula branch and AAUW of Montana have always had strong numbers of women legislators as members, partly because of the role AAUW has played in the legislature through the Montana Women's Lobby. Local branches are politically active, hosting candidate and issue forums, and women legislators know AAUW members personally. It is the women's organization to belong to!"

family responsibilities settled. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi took that route, and she credits her experience running a large household as the basis for her skills as a political organizer and consensus builder. Pelosi also claims to rely on her "mother-of-five voice" when she needs to get people's attention!

A successful run for office is a team effort requiring an extensive social network, but building that network takes years. A woman who considers a run for office only after family goals and obligations have been met is getting a late start at the networking that is critical to winning an election. And women who do run later in life have less time to serve and build the seniority needed to get into posi-

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tions of power. Pelosi is the exception, not the rule. Further, the team effort requires that women candidates who are in relationships have supportive spouses or partners willing not only to let the candidate take center stage but also to play the role of campaign spouse. Given the lingering cultural attitudes about women's roles, this challenge can be difficult for some candidates to overcome.

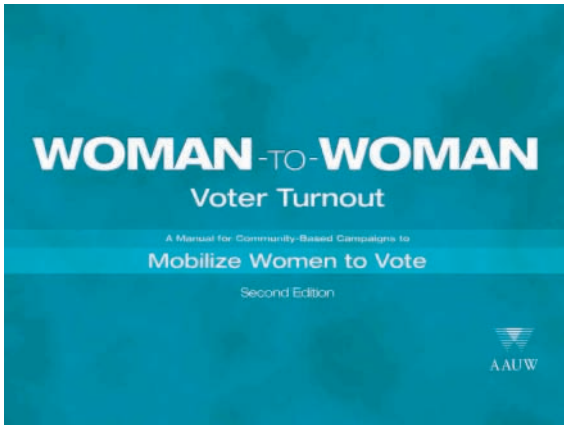
Some states seem to have a better record of electing women candidates than others do. The United States has only had 29

women governors, but many of those governors came from the same states. Maine, the state that elected Margaret Chase Smith (R), the first American woman senator, now has two women senators. So do California

and Washington, and Washington also has a woman governor. Indeed, it seems that once voters have seen women in positions of power, they are more likely to vote for additional women to follow in their footsteps.

Calling All Candidates

Unlike men, women often seek training before they run for office to prepare them for the realities of a campaign. Fortunately, assistance and support are available for women candidates. Taking a cue from research showing that more women would




it as well. In fact, AAUW of Alabama received an AAUW Community Action Grant to do just that, and it has partnered with CAWP to carry out the project. Finally, AAUW's well-received *Woman-to-Woman Voter Turnout* manual (www.aauw.org/onevote) can be adapted to running for office. It covers every step of planning a voter turnout campaign, an effective tool for getting elected.

run if they were simply asked, the non-partisan White House Project (www.thewhitehouseproject.org) encourages women's candidacy with its Invite a Woman to Run campaign. The White House Project also sponsors the Vote, Run, Lead initiative (www.VoteRunLead.org), which hosts "Go Run" training weekends for potential women candidates.

The Women's Campaign School at Yale University (www.wcsyale.org) runs a five-day training every year, and Rutgers University's Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) offers a Ready to Run program and trains partner organizations (like AAUW) to offer

Some training programs have been formed through political action committees. The Women's Campaign Forum (www.wcfonline.org) recruits pro-choice women to run for office, trains and supports them, and also helps them raise money. The WISH List (www.TheWishList.org) trains and supports Republican pro-choice women candidates. Finally, there's EMILY's List (www.EmilysList.org), one of the largest PACs and the largest one exclusively supporting Democratic pro-choice women candidates.

Your membership in AAUW gives you many of the tools you need to be a

successful candidate for public office. AAUW members form a powerful network that spans communities and states. They are well informed on policies that affect women and girls. Organizing and advocating for AAUW public policy priorities has given many members the skills to run a successful campaign for public office. Ask one of your AAUW colleagues to run for public office. Better yet, how about running yourself? 

Notes

- 1 Center for American Women and Politics. "Facts on Women in State Legislatures," www.cawp.rutgers.edu/fast_facts/levels_of_office/StateLegislature_CurrentFacts.php
- 2 Lawless, Jennifer L., and Richard L. Fox. (2004). "Why Don't Women Run for Office?" Taubman Center for Public Policy.
- 3 Seltzer, R.A., J. Newman, and M. Voorhees Leighton. (1997). *Sex as a Political Variable*. Boulder: Lynne Reiner. Cited in "Why Don't Women Run for Office?" by Jennifer L. Lawless and Richard L. Fox. (2004). Taubman Center for Public Policy.

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