

Whatever Happened to the “Year of the Woman”?

by Debra L. Dodson

The all-male Senate Judiciary Committee’s treatment of Anita Hill during the 1991 Thomas hearings inspired American women to political action.¹ The 1992 election cycle that followed the hearings was dubbed “The Year of the Woman” because women ran for office and supported women candidates as never before. There was a sense that fundamental political change was in the offing. With the number of women in Congress practically doubling, the 1992 results suggested that just maybe women had broken the glass ceiling in politics (see Table 1).² Although women remained a small minority of Congress (rising from about 6% of its members to 10%), the increase in the number of women serving was unparalleled. In addition to these gains at the national level, women continued their incremental progress toward gender parity within the state legislatures, rising from 18% to 21% (see Table 3).³ Moreover, women’s willingness to open their checkbooks made EMILY’s List, a women’s PAC that supports pro-choice Democratic women candidates, number one in contributions among not only women’s PACs but all PACs as well.⁴

Change was in the air, and many of these women who came to Washington intended to transform politics as usual. While they may not have transformed the Congress (half of these women in the House were freshmen as were more than half in the Senate), the Center for the American Woman and Politics found that women members elected in 1992 brought different perspectives and priorities to Washington. Women (particularly Republican women) opposed the majority of their male colleagues in their own party on some high-profile bills (e.g., Crime Bill, Assault Weapons Ban, Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances Bill) and succeeded in passing legislation that addressed issues of particular concern to women (funding for women’s

health research, policies that furthered reproductive rights, and the Violence Against Women Act).⁵

Sustaining the enthusiasm and commitment that led women to run, write checks and cross party lines to vote for women in 1992 was going to be difficult. When the Year of the Woman gave

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way to 1994’s focus on the Angry White Male, attention shifted from women back to men, and in some ways left the impression that women’s gains in the political arena had been short lived. Today as we look toward the 1996 elections, the number of women who hold public office remains small: Women are 53% of the electorate, but only 9% of the Senate, 11% of the House, 2% of governors and 21% of state legislators.⁶

While the under-representation of women continues to be a fact of today’s political landscape, the spotlight that focused on women candidates during 1992 has dimmed. This leads one to ask:

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Although 1992 is remembered as The Year of the Woman largely because of the record numbers of women who were elected to Congress, it was initially given its title because record numbers of women were candidates—particularly at the national level. Predicting the

number of women who will be nominated by the major parties to run in the November general election is a risky endeavor with only about half the states having thus far held primaries. However, the tallies from primaries for the Senate and House through July 12, 1996, show that women have neither gained nor lost ground since 1992.⁷ Granted, 1992’s dramatic increases in women candidates running in congressional races were not repeated in 1994 and seem unlikely to be repeated in 1996. However, if these early trends hold, about as many women will be candidates for the House and Senate in the 1996 general election as were candidates in 1992 and 1994.

Table 2 shows that as of July 12 the slight increase in women nominated to run in House races was offset by a decline in women running for the Senate. This has resulted in the total number of women running for Congress staying about the same as it was at this point in the last two campaign cycles, and substantially higher than it was in mid-July of 1990. From this perspective, 1996 looks much more like 1992 than 1990.

Campaign Contributions

A record number of candidates running, of course, is no guarantee that record numbers will be elected—but money helps. The record number of dollars that women’s PACs sent flowing into women’s campaigns in 1992 has only increased in subsequent years, giving candidates access to campaign funds they might not have otherwise. Indeed, comparisons of Federal Election Commission reports in the 1990s show that the \$6.2 million EMILY’s List disbursed in 1992 paled in comparison to its 1994 donations of \$8.2 million. Even EMILY’s 1995 off-year disbursements of \$5.5 million came close to matching its 1992 figures. While EMILY’s List has retained its title as the largest funder of candidates, their bipartisan counterparts (e.g., the Women’s Campaign Fund, the National Women’s Political Caucus, and the more recently formed Susan B. Anthony List, which only sup-

Table 1

Women Candidates for Congress

Year	Senate	House	Total
1968	1	19	20 (13 D/7R)
1970	1	25	26 (15 D/11 R)
1972	2	32	34 (24 D/10 R)
1974	3	44	47 (32 D/15 R)
1976	1	54	55 (35 D/20 R)
1978	2	46	48 (28 D/20 R)
1980	5	52	57 (29 D/28 R)
1982	3	55	58 (28 D/30 R)
1984	10	65	75 (36 D/39 R)
1986	6	64	70 (33 D/31 R)
1988	2	59	61 (33 D/28 R)
1990	8	69	77 (41 D/36 R)
1992	11	106	117 (44 D/24 R)
1994	9	112	121 (76 D/45 R)

Women in Congress

Year	Senate	House	Total	Percent of Total Congress
1969-70	1	10	11 (6 D/5 R)	2%
1971-72	2	13	15 (11 D/4 R)	3
1973-74	0	16	16 (14 D/2 R)	3
1975-76	0	19	19 (14 D/5 R)	4
1977-78	2	18	20 (15 D/5 R)	4
1979-80	1	16	17 (11 D/6 R)	3
1981-82	2	21	23 (11 D/12 R)	4
1983-84	2	22	24 (13 D/11 R)	4
1985-86	2	23	25 (12 D/13 R)	5
1987-88	2	23	25 (13 D/12 R)	5
1989-90	2	29	31 (17 D/14 R)	5
1991-92	4	28	32 (22 D/10 R)	6
1993-94	7	47	54 (40 D/14 R)	10
1995-96	9	48	57 (36 D/21 R)	10

Source: Data provided by the Center for the American Woman and Politics, National Information Bank on Women in Public Office, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University.

ports pro-life women candidates), and pro-choice Republican women's WISH List have experienced growth as well. It's too early to speculate what the final tally will be in contributions from women's PACs in 1996. However, it seems that even though the spotlight on women candidates in 1992 has faded, the dollars have not dissipated.

In some ways, it is a victory that women have simply held their ground since 1992. The Thomas hearings are fast fading into political history, the rise of domestic issues on the political agenda, which aided women candidates in 1992, has taken on a somewhat harder edge—crime and punishment, limiting

welfare, cracking down on illegal immigrants—that may be less comfortable than when issues like health-care reform and jobs for American workers prevailed.

But in a representative democracy is it enough for women to just be holding their ground, particularly when women remain a small minority of officeholders at each level of government? Many women in politics answer this question with a resounding “No,” pointing to gender gaps among voters as well as evidence that once elected to office, women pursue different priorities and take more liberal and feminist stands than their male colleagues.⁸ Why haven't the record increases in women candi-

dates between 1990 and 1992 continued? Or more importantly, why haven't record increases in the number of women elected to Congress continued?

Open Seats

One reason is that there have been fewer races for open seats, largely because reapportionment occurs only once every ten years (last occurring prior to the 1992 election). There were 91 open-seat races in 1992 compared with a mere 29 in 1990, 52 in 1994, and 49 thus far in 1996. Reapportionment prior to the 1992 elections encouraged large numbers of (largely male) incumbents to retire. Retirement combined with the

Table 2: Women Primary Winners in House and Senate Races

(As of July 12 in each election cycle)

Race	1990	1992	1994	1996
Senate	2 (0D, 2R)	7 (6D, 1R)	4 (1D, 3R)	2 (0D, 2R)
House	38 (18D, 20R)	61 (38D, 23R)	61 (41D, 20R)	64 (45D, 19R)
Total	40 (18D, 22R)	68 (44D, 24R)	65 (45D, 23R)	66 (45D, 21R)

Source: Data provided by the Center for the American Woman and Politics, National Information Bank on Women in Public Office, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University.

Table 3: Women in State Legislatures, 1929-1996

Year	Total	Percent of All Legislators	Year	Total	Percent of All Legislators	Year	Total	Percent of All Legislators
1929	150 (42 D/100 R)	2%	1953	299 (90 D/206 R)	4%	1977	703 (433 D/265 R)	9%
1931	152 (54 D/92 R)	2	1955	312 (118 D/190 R)	4	1979	776 (446 D/326 R)	10
1933	136 (68 D/62 R)	2	1957	317 (109 D/206 R)	4	1981	912 (508 D/397 R)	12
1935	139 (80 D/56 R)	2	1959	341 (167 D/172 R)	4	1983	992 (589 D/397 R)	13
1937	147 (81 D/64R)	2	1961	325 (138 D/183 R)	4	1985	1,101 (600 D/492 R)	15
1939	150 (65 D/81 R)	2	1963	344 (139 D/201 R)	4	1987	1,171 (680 D/481 R)	16
1941	154 (75 D/78 R)	2	1965	377 (183 D/169 R)	5	1989	1,268 (743 D/516 R)	17
1943	200 (82 D/115 R)	3	1967	320 (160 D/154 R)	4	1991	1,359 (817 D/533 R)	18
1945	236 (94 D/142 R)	3	1969	315 (145 D/165 R)	4	1993	1,527 (930 D/585 R)	21
1947	216 (58 D/158R)	3	1971	346 (169 D/174 R)	5	1995	1,535 (845 D/674 R)	21
1949	220 (94 D/126 R)	3	1973	444 (222 D/219 R)	6	1996	1,542 (851 D/674 R)	21
1951	242 (84 D/156 R)	3	1975	609 (385 D/221 R)	8			

Note: The 19th Amendment to the US Constitution, which extended the right to vote to women in every state, was ratified in 1920. Some states, however, had previously granted women the vote-and the right to run for elective office. As early as 1895, 3 women served in state legislatures; the total was 25 in 1919, the year the Amendment was approved by the Congress. It wasn't until 1929 that the law duly authorized women's candidacies in all 48 states—which is why this table picks up with that year. Totals include independents and non-partisans; thus Democratic/Republican splits do not add to the total.

Source: Elizabeth M. Cox, *Women State and Territorial Legislators, 1895-1995* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., Inc., 1996), p. 327; and data provided by the Center for the American Women and Politics.

(Dodson continued, please see page 32)

Men, Women and the Course of American Politics: A Roper Center Review and Analysis of the Data

Since the 1980 presidential campaign between Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan, differences between women and men in party preference and issue stands have been an important dimension of contemporary politics. They have also been the subject of much hyperbole and general misstatement. In the next 22 pages, my colleagues and I bring together what we believe are the best available survey data on gender differences in political outlook—to provide a precise empirical guide to the subject.

—ECL—

(Dodson continued from page 7)

Women's Races to Watch in '96

Louisiana Senate Race—Mary Landrieu (D), former State Treasurer and representing a new generation of an old Louisiana political family, squares off against multiple opponents in Louisiana's non-partisan primary for the Senate seat being vacated by Senator Bennett Johnston (D). Supported by EMILY's List, NOW, the National Women's Political Caucus, and the Women's Campaign Fund, Landrieu is currently favored to win the primary in this conservative state. Some pundits think she will garner the necessary majority of the vote in the primary to avoid a runoff.

Maine Senate Race—Businesswoman Susan Collins (R) is vying against Joe Brennan (D) to replace retiring Senator William Cohen (R). Both Collins and Brennan were their parties' nominee for governor in 1994, but lost to an independent. Moderate Republican Collins who is supported by WISH List, the Women's Campaign Fund, and the National Women's Political Caucus, received the nomination for the Senate by defeating a cultural conservative who was implicated in a sex scandal in the closing days of the primary campaign. If she wins, Maine will become the third state that has been represented by two women Senators serving simultaneously.

Iowa 2nd CD (Northeast Iowa)—Former news anchor Connie McBurney (D) is challenging freshman Congressman Greg Ganske (R). Supported by women's PACs as well as unions, the race is a toss-up, with some polls showing her ahead of the incumbent. McBurney is hoping to overcome the odds challengers traditionally face and do what her opponent did last time—defeat the incumbent.

California 22nd CD (Santa Barbara County)—Congresswoman Andrea Seastrand (R) faces a rematch with her 1994 opponent, religion professor Walter Capps (D), who lost by less than 2,000 votes in 1994. Seastrand was one of the six ultra-conservative women elected to Congress in 1994 with support of the Susan B. Anthony List. She retains that support today as she runs as one of the vulnerable freshmen targeted by unions and the National Abortion Rights Action League. The two candidates are currently in a dead heat in this swing district.

California 42nd CD (City of San Bernardino)—Superior Court Judge Linda Wilde (R) is challenging Congressman George Brown (D) in a marginal district marked by perennial credible challenges to the incumbent. In another race that shows the diversity among women candidates, Wilde is an abortion rights opponent as well as an opponent of gun control and has been endorsed by the Susan B. Anthony List in her effort to unseat her liberal opponent.

Indiana 10th CD (City of Indianapolis)—The Julia Carson (D) vs. Virginia Blankenbaker (R) race to replace retiring Congressman Andrew Jacobs (D) is one of those still rare races where two women are opposing one another. Both candidates for this open seat are businesswomen and former state senators. They not only worked together on many issues during their state legislative days, but they are friends who some report have decided to rule out negative campaigning and stick to the issues.

Source: Profiles are based on information provided by Gilda Morales, Information Services Assistant at the Center for the American Woman and Politics and by *Roll Call Election '96*.

creation of new districts gave women more opportunities to run in districts where the playing field was more even, rather than engaging in an uphill battle against an incumbent. Indeed, these open-seat races were the route used by the majority of women who won election to Congress for the first time in 1992.⁹ Later primaries could change current patterns, but thus far with only 11% of women party nominees running

for open seats in November's Senate and House races (compared with about 43% of women who had been nominated at this point in 1992 and about 33% by the conclusion of the 1992 primary season), the prospects for large numbers of new women members are dim. The relative balance of women running as incumbents, for open seats, and as challengers could change after the August and September primaries.

But, unless this trend is altered dramatically or unless the incumbency advantage drops substantially, we are unlikely to see significant increases in women members of Congress. In fact, a legitimate concern now with so few women candidates running in open-seat races is whether enough women will be elected to replace the seven women who are retiring from the House and Senate.

There is also another impediment to progress toward gender parity in Congress: The dramatic increase in women candidates in the general election has been confined largely to Democrats. Since 1992 Republican women nominees have been outnumbered two-to-one by Democratic women candidates and there is no evidence that this trend is abating in 1996.¹⁰ While there are many reasons for this, one reason may be that Republican women candidates don't have the resources available that Democratic women have through EMILY's List. Until Republican women can come close to the resources available to Democratic women, the party gap among women candidates may not close. This will make progress toward gender parity more difficult to achieve within our two-party system.

One final point we must address is the fact that even when money seems to be available, and when there are open seats, there is no guarantee that women will be the ones who fill half of the spots on the ballot. Today, women and men running in general elections seem to do equally well in raising money and garnering votes, once we compare those in similar situations (e.g., male vs. female challengers; male vs. female incumbents; and men vs. women running for open seats).¹¹ However, anecdotal evidence from women candidates suggests that women have more hurdles to overcome to gain party support. Many of the women who ran in high-profile Senate races in 1992 have told stories of intra-party battles they waged and obstacles they faced as they sought the nomination.¹²

We know very little about whether and how sex discrimination among party leaders (or other political elites) discourages women from running in primaries. Nor do we know the extent to which gender differences in access to power may affect the relative likelihood that women and men will even *consider* filing to run in primary races. Moreover, given that child rearing responsibilities continue to delay women's but not men's entry into political office,¹³ it's clear that term limits may not be all that is needed to make our representative institutions look more like the constituencies they ostensibly represent. The last quarter-century of the women's movement has brought many women into the political pipeline. The challenges proponents of gender parity may face in the next quarter-century are not only to ensure that more resources are available so women can take advantage of political opportunities, but also to make established political institutions more open to women and to create new support networks that inspire, motivate, and cultivate women candidates. This will be necessary if our representative institutions are going to reflect the constituencies they represent.

Endnotes:

¹ Elizabeth Adell Cook, Sue Thomas, and Clyde Wilcox (eds.), *The Year of the Woman: Myths and Realities*. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994).

² "Women Candidates in 1992: A Summary," *News and Notes*, (Winter 1993), p.24.

³ Ruth B. Mandel. "Success for Women in 1992," *News and Notes*, (Winter 1993), p. 1.

⁴ Lucy Baruch and Katheryne McCormick,

"Women's PACs Dramatically Increase Their Support in 1992: An Overview," *News and Notes*, (Winter 1993), p. 10.

⁵ Debra L. Dodson et al., *Voices, Views, Votes: The Impact of Women in the 103rd Congress* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, Center for the American Woman and Politics, 1995).

⁶ "Women in Elective Office, 1996," Fact Sheet, Center for the American Women and Politics.

⁷ "Women Candidates for US Senate and US House: Comparison of Primary Winners as of July 12, 1996," Fact Sheet, Center for the American Woman and Politics, July 12, 1996.

⁸ Debra L. Dodson and Susan J. Carroll, *Reshaping the Agenda: Women in State Legislatures* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, Center for the American Woman and Politics, 1991); Debra L. Dodson et al., *Voices, Views, Votes: Women in the 103rd Congress*.

⁹ Twenty-two of the twenty-four women non-incumbents who won election to the House in 1992 as well as three of the four women non-incumbents who won election to the Senate were running in open-seat races.

¹⁰ Party and gender breakdowns of 1996 state legislative candidates are not yet available. However, numbers for 1994, the most recent year available revealed similar patterns with Democratic women outnumbering Republican women by about a 3:2 margin.

¹¹ Barbara Burrell, *A Woman's Place is in the House: Campaigning for Congress in the Feminist Era* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994); Jody Newman, *Perception and Reality: A Study Comparing the Success of Men and Women Candidates* (Washington, DC: National Women's Political Caucus, 1994).

¹² Elizabeth Adell Cook, Sue Thomas, and Clyde Wilcox (eds.), *The Year of the Woman: Myths and Realities*.

¹³ Debra L. Dodson, "Continuity and Change in the Relationship Between Public Officeholding and Private Responsibilities," paper presented at the 1994 Southern Political Science Association Meeting.



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