

Operation Pipeline: Women in Politics

Even with Hillary, Condi, and Nancy, there aren't enough women in political office. Now there's a push to prime the pump. Are you game?

By Beth Hawkins

Politics School for Women

It's hard to tell whether Mala Thao really eats potato chips with such gusto or if it's just part of her act. The women gathered around her want to run for office, and Thao leads a role-playing exercise, teaching the group to coax campaign contributions from busy, distracted voters. A professional fundraiser, poker player, and actress, Thao is a natural to lead the toughest drill of this three-day training camp for women entering politics. In a small conference room at a suburban Minneapolis hotel, she opens an imaginary door to one would-be politician after another. Each woman makes eye contact, extends a hand, and launches into an earnest exposition of her views. As they drone on about education, health insurance, or criminal justice, Thao barely nods, just crunches more energetically on her chips.

After the first six women strike out, another prospect knocks. This one starts casually, with a question about Thao's family. Thao pushes aside the chips and looks up. A few chatty moments later, the candidate strikes pay dirt: She once taught at the same high school from which Thao graduated. A connection is made! Thao writes out a pretend check.

This is just the victory scene envisioned by the organizers behind the session, a national nonpartisan group called the White House Project, which devotes much of its energy to getting more women into the political pipeline. There are dozens of similar groups, some nonpartisan, some Democratic or Republican, some working with candidates who come from the business world, or candidates of a particular ethnicity or those running in a single state. One lesson: how to convert a wish to "change things" or "get involved" into campaign skills -- and money. The Minneapolis hotel scene is the kind that will play out across the country between now and November 4, 2008, when, organizers hope, the best and the brightest women will sweep to victory.

Aren't We There Yet?

You'd think that such concerted efforts would be obsolete by now. With Hillary Rodham Clinton and Nancy Pelosi flexing political muscle in Washington and governors such as Alaska Republican Sarah Palin and Kansas Democrat Kathleen Sebelius making national headlines, women seem to have arrived at their political moment. Many more, most notably Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, are in top policy and appointed positions.

Still, some 40 years after a new wave of feminism spurred women to stake their claim to office, only nine of the nation's 50 governors are women, and women occupy little more than 16 percent of Congressional seats: 16 of 100 in the Senate and 73 of 433 seats in the House (with two seats temporarily vacant). Clinton and Pelosi are making history, but their high profile throws into relief the small number of women who've actually made it. In 2001, the number of women elected to state and local offices (the best national launching pad) actually dropped.

Stanford law professor Deborah Rhode has dubbed it the no-problem problem: If everyone believes that women have power equal to men, no one will try to change the fact that they don't. "The minute you say we've arrived, you start going backward," says Arizona Governor Janet Napolitano, 49, a Democrat. "We're still traveling."

Certainly, some women find their way into office without intervention. Pelosi, 67, and

Sebelius, 59, grew up in political households. "I always thought that was what families did in the fall -- they went door-to-door and put up yard signs," Sebelius says. Some governors and senators entered politics as prosecutors, running for county or state attorney. Republican Martha Rainville, 49, who ran for Congress in Vermont in 2006, is a retired air force major general. She lost her race and took a high-level post at FEMA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Supporters hope she'll run again in 2008.

Still, the trickle-up approach -- waiting for women to show up, run, and win -- won't get us to critical mass. Marie C. Wilson, founder and president of the White House Project says, "We realized that we had to take action to get more women into the political pipeline. We needed to turn the drip into a stream." And that means attacking a reality that many strategists hadn't wanted to acknowledge: Even women with the talent, drive, and moxie to clear every hurdle in other fields aren't as likely as men to picture themselves as political candidates, let alone victors.

Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm, 48, now in her second term, hates the shrinking violet image. "I don't mean to be stereotypical," she says, "but it's not often our first instinct to say, 'I'm going to run for this office; I'm going to talk about myself; I'm going to put myself out there.' "

Even as a high-profile prosecutor, Granholm needed lots of encouragement to make her first run, for state attorney general on the Democratic ticket, in 1998. She laughs now, but she says she couldn't shake the sound of her mother's voice in her head, saying things like: " 'Don't talk about yourself, don't ask for money from strangers, don't wear good clothes every day' -- all of which you have to do on a daily basis as a political official."

Sebelius, too, needed coaxing, despite her childhood among politicians and a master's degree in public policy. And she sees women in their 20s and 30s today repeating the pattern. Ask for volunteers for an exciting new project, she says, and "guys who are as dumb as a desk will have their hands in the air, saying, 'Take me, I'm ready.' Women think, 'When I take the next three accounting courses, then I'll be ready.'"

Uncovering Political Candidates

So if not enough women nominate themselves, women's groups have to rout them out. They keep their eyes peeled for likely candidates at grassroots events and pore over lists of volunteers and donors. The WISH List, a group for pro-choice Republican women, recruits members through direct mail campaigns and fund-raising events and scouts for likely candidates at all levels of government.

In June, the Women's Campaign Forum, a nonpartisan pro-choice group, launched a Web-based recruiting drive inspired by the idea that every woman has at some point said of a friend or acquaintance, "That woman should be running this town" -- or state or country. Anyone who wants to nominate a woman she knows -- or herself -- can go to the WCF Web site, sheshouldrun.org, and post the name. The WCF contacts nominees, vets them, and tries to get the best prospects started on a political career. In the campaign's first six weeks, the WCF got 500 nominations.

sheshouldrun.org >>

"There's no one resume" for a first-time political candidate, says Ilana Goldman, president of the WCF. Historically, most Americans elected to high office have started young and won a first race by 35. But midlife women turn out to be great candidates: They have rich skills and experience, comfort in their own skin and good stories to tell. Still, women "do need someone to say to them, 'Hey, I really see you as a leader,'" Goldman says. "The third-party validation means so much."

Judy Solano, a member of the Colorado legislature and acting chair of its education committee, was a particularly hard sell. When Solano retired from teaching four years ago at 54, her friends and family knew her as someone with strong opinions about education

and years of experience volunteering in the Adams County Democratic Party.

Her husband, Manuel Solano, planted the idea that she should run for state office, but she demurred. He even brought it up at a Halloween party in front of three women already in the state legislature. "I could have killed him," she says.

But a few days later, one of the women, then-Representative (and now Senator) Lois Tochtrop, called Solano to push the issue. "I'm really not the one," Solano recalls protesting. "I'm just not." Tochtrop wouldn't relent. "Just let me have breakfast with you." After that meal, Solano says, she realized that ordinary people have to step forward, because they bring ordinary life experience into politics. Three months later, she launched her winning campaign.

Getting Ready to Run

Solano was reelected in 2006 and is now a regular at White House Project sessions, where she tells her story and coaches newbies. Many workshops use freshly minted politicians to help break down what seems a daunting process into doable chunks. "Meeting other women who have done it really demystifies it," says Ellen Moran, executive director of EMILY's List, a pioneering women's political group founded in 1985.

Turning raw recruits into campaign-ready pros starts with the basics. There's "the pivot," for instance. Caught off guard or faced with a hostile question, a candidate learns to steer conversation quickly back to the theme she wants to talk about. Some of the tricks come from what was once called assertiveness training: At a WISH List session in Arizona, trainers pushed participants to project authority by not letting the inflection in their voices go up or trail off at the end of a sentence.

Some techniques are particularly relevant for women. Strategists say that voters still need help seeing women as authorities. So they recommend that women wear tailored suits -- even if a male politician can campaign in khakis -- and use settings such as state capitol buildings for press conferences and campaign ads.

At the same time, experienced politicians urge new candidates or officeholders to get comfortable with the idea that they are seeking power, or actually have it and can use it. "Be ambitious, think big," says Kamala Harris, 42, the first woman to be San Francisco DA. She learned to speak out, she has said, from her feminist mother and from her grandmother, who, in the 1940s, drove through villages in her homeland, India, with a bullhorn, urging women to use birth control. Harris, a Democrat, has just announced her run for reelection, and some supporters hope her next run will be for state attorney general.

Family also remains an issue for women on the campaign trail. In trainings, women rehearse how to handle questions about whether they're neglecting husbands or children. But Republican Congresswoman Shelley Moore Capito, 54, reelected in her West Virginia district four times, tells women to use their "natural advantage" over men in this area. "We can make a more instant connection with the heart and soul issues of a family."

Candidates' Challenges

Concerned that women are more likely than men to drop out of politics after a loss, strategists and trainers make a point of supporting women who've lost races and helping them retool.

In 2004, Dianne Primavera lost her first race for the Colorado statehouse. Looking back at the campaign, she says, she was just making it up as she went along, relying mostly on her resume. She had worked her way up in state government, survived breast cancer and divorce, and was raising two children on her own.

But last year, during a three-day White House Project training course, Primavera was struck by just how much her campaign had been missing: a clear strategy, eye-catching

campaign literature, and the right way to frame her personal experience.

In the first race, she had talked about breast cancer but wasn't sure how to handle it. This time, Primavera, 57, brought the topic front and center, pushing her own strength in battling the disease and spelling out how her professional experience -- she had managed state medical programs -- made her an ideal healthcare candidate. A Democrat in a Republican district, she won her second race by 858 votes, about 51 to 49 percent.

The network of money, people, and support that helped her win reminds Primavera of how her father used to talk about the Democratic "machine" that kept the party in power in Chicago. "I could never picture that machine," she says. "Now I know. It's a machine that got me elected."

A year from now, women's groups will be able to gauge their success by counting how many women are on ballots throughout the country. But if terrorism and war remain high on the national agenda, candidates will face what may be their biggest challenge: a persistent voter confidence gap.

Research by the Barbara Lee Family Foundation, a nonpartisan group that supports women in politics, showed that both men and women find male candidates more credible on topics like terrorism or war. But women can't simply match what men do. For example, voters might recoil if women use hawkish language. They'll be more receptive, strategists say, if women translate security concerns into messages about public health and infrastructure.

The White House Project's Real Security Initiative is trying to help women candidates find their voice on this issue. It teaches basic security topics such as the defense budget and helps women tailor their national security message to their own constituency. Republican Susan Collins, 54, is an outspoken member of the Senate's Armed Services and Homeland Security committees. She urges women to seek out such assignments.

As governors, Arizona's Janet Napolitano and Kansas's Kathleen Sebelius are commanders in chief of their states' National Guard. That has given the women, both Democrats, unusual opportunities to literally show the flag. Sebelius won reelection in 2006 with the help of media footage showing her in a Black Hawk helicopter, on the ground in Iraq and at a welcome-home ceremony, kissing a baby held up to the camera by the child's father, a soldier in uniform.

Visibility on hard-core issues other than the military also helps candidates counter stereotypes and build authority. Arizona's Napolitano has been aggressive on border security, for example. Education may be her top priority as governor, she says, "but if all I did was talk about education, I would be superintendent of public education."

Republican Sarah Palin, the youngest person (at 42) and first woman to be elected governor of Alaska, has long been building a battle-tough image. She ran against "the old boys' network" in the 1996 contest for mayor of Wasilla, Alaska, and later served as the chair of Alaska's powerful Oil and Gas Conservation Commission. The press picked up on her nickname from her high school basketball days, "Sarah Barracuda." Palin is a favorite with some conservative bloggers who would like to see her on the 2008 presidential ticket.

The Maine Effect

How will we know when women reach critical mass? The obvious answer: when they hold 50 percent of political offices. But big change can happen short of that. The more women there are in office, the more mentors there are available to coach and inspire newcomers, and the more voters can get comfortable with the image of a woman in charge. It's no coincidence that states like Maine and Kansas have women in prominent positions now -- they were among the first to elect women.

When she was 18, Maine's Collins, on a youth trip to Washington, D.C., met Senator Margaret Chase Smith. Like many pioneering women in Congress, Smith succeeded her late husband, filling his seat in 1940. But the former schoolteacher went on to serve four

terms in the House and become the first woman elected to the Senate in her own right.

The day young Collins visited, Smith invited the student into her private office for a two-hour chat. Collins remembers that Smith talked about standing tall for your beliefs and gave her a copy of her famous "Declaration of Conscience" speech against McCarthyism. When Collins emerged, she remembered thinking, women can do anything.

One on one, women in politics inspire other women every day. The activist and support groups just want to accelerate and build on that natural process. Primavera, one of the White House Project's success stories, recently brought to work with her a dozen Colorado women who were curious to see her in action. They sat in on a policy meeting and watched Primavera present a bill on the floor.

In her first year in office, she sponsored 13 measures, not the usual three bills recommended for freshmen. Eleven passed, including one that requires health insurance companies to pay for the vaccine that helps prevent cervical cancer.

"When I'm in my house with the kids, walking around in my fuzzy slippers," Primavera says, "I just feel like me, Joe-Ann Citizen." But these women saw Primavera in her new element: striding through the marble halls of the gold-domed statehouse. That's the kind of image that should inspire dreams, ambitions -- and candidacies.

Resources for Women in Politics

Ready to run or know someone who should? Start here.

The Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University

Nonpartisan. Sponsors Ready to Run workshops and sessions tailored for Latina, African-American, and Asian women. (732-932-9384)

www.cawp.rutgers.edu >>

Emily's List

Democratic, pro-choice. Runs Political Opportunity Program for aspiring women candidates or campaign operatives. Offers financial and tactical support for endorsed candidates. (202-326-1400)

emilyslist.org >>

The White House Project

Nonpartisan. Promotes women in politics and other fields. Trains candidates; offers national security workshops. (212-261-4400)

thewhitehouseproject.org >>

The WISH List

Republican, pro-choice. Offers financial support to endorsed candidates. Recruits and trains women at all levels of government. (800-756-9474)

thewishlist.org >>

Women's Campaign Forum

Nonpartisan, pro-choice. Sponsors sheshouldrun.org recruiting drive. Offers conference-call and one-on-one briefings with experienced politicians. Funds endorsed candidates early in their careers. (202-393-8164)

wcfonline.org >>

sheshouldrun.org >>

Susan B. Anthony List

Nonpartisan, anti-abortion. Supports female anti-abortion candidates for Congress. (703-875-3370)

sba-list.org >>

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