

Tracy Flicks

Defending the new generation of driven, sharp-elbowed female politicians.

Alexandra Starr, The New Republic Published: Tuesday, February 17, 2009

New York's new senator, Kirsten Gillibrand, is a very ambitious politician. Just months after deposing a four-term GOP incumbent in 2006, she raised nearly \$700,000--more than any other freshman legislator. As a sophomore in the House, she attempted to bypass more senior members for a seat on the coveted Ways and Means Committee. And she lobbied intently for the Senate appointment. "[H]er eye has been on that prize for a long, long time," Jonathan Schiller, a founding partner of Boies, Schiller & Flexner LLP, where Gillibrand worked as a partner, told the *New York Observer*. "She is no hayseed, she is no newcomer, she's no shy, reclusive country girl." Indeed, her sharp elbows earned her the moniker "Tracy Flick" from some of her New York House colleagues.

The reference to the striving character in *Election* is not, of course, meant to be flattering. But Gillibrand's political trajectory highlights a positive shift in how politics has opened up for women. It wasn't so long ago that the vast majority of female politicians entered public service either through a familial connection or community involvement. As Patty Murray's website bio proclaims, the 58-year-old senior senator from Washington "never planned to enter politics"--rather, her stint working on behalf of education programs eventually pulled her into the public sphere. Gillibrand and many of her political female contemporaries, in contrast, consciously laid the groundwork for their own bids. In other words, their paths are finally starting to look like those of their male counterparts--and will hopefully help women match men's level of representation in politics as well.

Many of the first women to serve in Congress established a toehold in public life because of their husbands or fathers. Hattie Wyatt Caraway of Arkansas and Margaret Chase Smith of Maine, for example, entered the U.S. Senate by serving out the terms of their deceased husbands before winning reelection in their own right. Senator Olympia Snowe of Maine commenced her political career at the age of 26 when she won the House seat formerly occupied by her husband, who had died in a car accident.

Men, of course, have profited from familial connections as well: Witness the 2000 presidential showdown, where the scion of a former president squared off against the son of a long-serving senator. Or consider the Senate, where Evan Bayh and Christopher Dodd both hold seats once occupied by their fathers. Nonetheless, the group of male pols who first made inroads because Daddy greased the way is minimal compared to those who independently decided to enter the political arena; the opposite is true for the first generation of female politicians.

Many of the women who scaled their way to gubernatorial mansions and Senate offices without family connections spent years as civic volunteers, generally without any inkling they would one day be candidates. As Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers, describes it, "Women often run because they want to *fix* something." Former Vermont governor Madeleine Kunin, who is now 75, confides in her memoir, *Living a Political Life*, that if someone had told her at the age of 30 she would be governor, she never would have believed it.

Kunin and female politicians of her generation often became politically active as an extension of efforts to improve opportunities for their children. The Vermont governor first started attending town hall meetings to advocate for the construction of sidewalks--she was worried about her children's safety as they walked to school. Former Oregon governor Barbara Roberts became a citizen activist because she wanted her autistic son to be able to attend public school. Senator Murray credits the condescending reception she received when she advocated on behalf of preschool funding--a male state legislator sneered, "You can't make a difference, you're just a mom in tennis shoes"--as firing her ambition to run. She marshaled 13,000 parents on behalf of her cause, creating a political network that eventually helped catapult her into the state legislature and later the U.S. Senate.

For the most part, the political women of Gillibrand's generation--those in their 30s and 40s--skipped the long hours at the PTA and League of Women Voters meetings. The newest senator from New York broadened her political connections by raising money for candidates and organizing in her home district as she toiled as a corporate attorney. Congresswoman Debbie Wasserman-Schultz of Florida served as

president of the student senate at the University of Florida at Gainesville and earned her master's degree in political science while simultaneously working for a state representative. Arkansas Senator Blanche Lincoln and Colorado Congresswoman Betsy Markey also served on the staffs of elected officials before throwing their own hats in the ring. And when opportunities arose to stand for office themselves, they didn't hesitate to capitalize: Lincoln first won election to Congress by challenging her former boss in a primary when he was ensnared in the House bank overdraft scandal of 1992. Thirty-eight-year-old Arizona Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords ran primarily on her experience as the president and CEO of a \$10 million business. "It could be the fact that my resume was more similar to my male counterparts was an advantage," Giffords says.

To be sure, many of these younger female politicians still point to their families when they are attempting to establish "I'm just like you" connections with voters. Lincoln ran ads in her first senate race featuring her twin boys and the phrase: "Daughter, wife, mother, congresswoman ... Living our rock-solid Arkansas values." Still, unlike many members of the older generation of female governors and senators, these women's introduction to politics did not come through civic work to improve their local neighborhoods or children's schools.

The previous generation of female politicians was, of course, also hard driving. Harping on their "moms in tennis shoes" origins was no doubt partially tactical, helping mitigate the negative stereotypes that frequently get attached to ambitious women. But the fact that women like Gillibrand don't feel obligated to speak about how they entered politics because of their work on behalf of kids, not to mention having to toil for years as local volunteers, shows that the landscape has changed. Gillibrand's aggressiveness may have engendered Tracy Flick snickers, but her rapid political rise used to be the exclusive province of men. These increased opportunities mean fewer inspiring examples of female volunteers breaking into public life. But now that women are starting earlier, and with fewer constraints, there's a better chance they will eventually gain equal representation in the nation's top leadership posts.

Alexandra Starr has written about politics and immigration for The New York Times Magazine and Slate.

CLOSE WINDOW