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Record numbers of GOP women campaigning for House seats

By Garance Franke-Ruta

Thursday, April 29, 2010; 3:35 PM

Nearly two years after [Sarah Palin](#) became the [Republican Party's](#) first female nominee for vice president, record numbers of Republican women are running for House seats, driving the overall count of women running for both the House and the Senate to a new high.

The surge in female candidates has taken place largely under the radar. The previous high came in 1992, the "Year of the Woman" that pushed the percentage of women in Congress into the double digits for the first time. That year, 222 women filed to run for the House and 29 for Senate contests.

So far this year, 239 women are candidates for the House and 31 for the Senate, according to data from the Rutgers Center for American Women and Politics. Among them, a record 107 Republican women have filed for a House seat, according to the National Republican Congressional Committee -- surpassing a previous [GOP](#) high of 91 in 1994, and a sharp increase from the 65 who ran in 2008. And those numbers could still grow. In each year Rutgers has been keeping track, the final tally has exceeded the late April figure by more than 20 candidates.

"It looks like it is going to be a record year," said Gilda Morales, who crunches the data for the Rutgers' women's center. "What's bringing these numbers up is Republican women."

The jump in female GOP candidates mirrors the enthusiasm of Republicans in general, said Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers (R-Wash.), who leads efforts to recruit female candidates for the NRCC. "I just think overall candidate recruitment is going well for the Republicans after two cycles where it's been more difficult for us."

The majority -- 67 percent -- of Republican female candidates for the House this year will be facing Democratic [incumbents](#) if they win their primaries, according to the Rutgers data. That will put them at a considerable disadvantage given House incumbent reelection rates that have not dipped below 90 percent [even in the GOP-friendly year of 1994](#). In 1992, for instance, 22 of the 24 women who won office for the first time did so in open districts.

At the same time, the picture is not entirely dissimilar to that faced by women in 1992, when a surge in female candidates across an expanded playing field lifted a new group of women into

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office. Only nine of the non-incumbent GOP women this year are challenging a House member from their own party, the Rutgers data show. In contests for open seats, there are 26 Democratic women running and 19 Republicans.

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"I think there could be some surprises this year," said McMorris Rodgers. Republican National Committee Co-Chairman Jan Larimer, who also heads its [women's program](#), attributed the increase to anger over Democratic domestic policy priorities: "The policies of the Obama administration and a Congress led by [Harry Reid](#) and [Nancy Pelosi](#) have energized women to fight back. First, they were afraid and now they are angry about health care, their jobs, how to pay for their children's education."

And the example of Palin certainly didn't hurt. Women "are giving the GOP a second look and realizing that our policies, principles and vision make sense and work for their families," she said.

The RNC women's program has held regional summits and [conference calls](#) to introduce female leaders and potential candidates to elected officials and policy experts. The RNC is "in the process" of publishing a series of training manuals for first-time candidates, as well, Larimer said.

City council member [Martha Roby](#), who is challenging [Rep. Bobby Bright](#) (D) for Alabama's 2nd District, cited a range of economic issues for her decision to run this year. "I am absolutely appalled at what's happening in Washington," she said. "They are spending money they don't have and putting an unbelievable debt on our children and our grandchildren."

So far, the surge in GOP female candidates has not been accompanied by a jump in high-level party support. Only eight women are among the 110 people in [the GOP Young Guns program](#), begun by the party during the 2007-08 cycle and now its leading open-seat and challenger training effort. And only Roby has made it to the top of its three tiers, becoming a Young Gun herself.

McMorris Rodgers and Larimer said they expect that situation to change as more women win their primaries. But Democratic critics say that many of the Republican women are not running in competitive districts and won't be a threat to the Democratic incumbents.

The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee declined to provide data on the full spectrum of female Democratic candidates it is tracking -- Rutgers puts the number at 132 for the House, including 55 incumbents from that chamber. The Democratic program for supporting battleground candidates, the Red to Blue program, includes three women among its 13 members.

"It's obviously a lot better than the Republicans but still not high enough," said DCCC spokesman Ryan Rudominer.

This month saw 73 women (56 Democrats, 17 Republicans) serving in the House and 17 (13 Democrats, four Republicans) in the Senate, according to Rutgers.

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