

Stagnating Gains for Women in Politics

How can we get more women in public office? For starters, get more to run.

By Nicholas Kusnetz

As an early start to the 2010 election cycle, January's special election in Massachusetts briefly brought gender into mainstream political discussion. Yes, Scott Brown ran a strong campaign, capitalized on the ire of independent voters and generally outmaneuvered Martha Coakley to secure a comfortable upset victory in the U.S. Senate race, all in ways that had little to do with their genders.

But it was hard to ignore the fact that Coakley is a woman and that Massachusetts has a sad history of electing women to public office. That contest doesn't necessarily forecast anything in races across the country in various primaries this spring or in November, but it was a reminder of how far we still have to go to approach parity for men and women in American politics. While women candidates may take advantage of voters' desire for change, it's unlikely the balance of congresswomen to men — women make up 17 percent of Congress, with that number having risen only three points over the last decade — will change dramatically this November.

In California, for example, where voters vote Tuesday in party primaries, the Republicans have strong women candidates seeking the GOP nomination for governor and U.S. Senate. But should former Hewlett-Packard CEO Carly Fiorina win her party's nod, she'll almost certainly face incumbent Barbara Boxer in the final vote.

An early count by the [Center for American Women and Politics](#) lists 216 potential women running in the House and 23 in the Senate. Those levels are largely consistent with numbers throughout the last 20 years. The best year for women candidates in both chambers of Congress was 1992 when 251 ran.

Not surprisingly, it is this number — how many women run for office — that is most important, as women and men win races at the same rate. In 1992, women candidates saw opportunity to run as outsiders after the savings and loan crisis, the hearings for Clarence Thomas' nomination to the Supreme Court, and other scandals, said Jennifer Lawless, director of the [Women & Politics Institute](#) at American University. But despite both 2008 and the upcoming elections seeming to offer similar chances, we're not seeing the same result.

"The problem is that women are not running at the rates we'd expect them to given the credentials they have," Lawless said.

So the question some advocates are asking is, how do we get more women to run?

To try to answer that, Sheila Capone-Wulsin and Swanee Hunt are starting the Political Parity Project, which seeks to have more women running in gubernatorial and Congressional races. "It comes out of the 2008 elections, which were incredibly energizing," said Capone-Wulsin, who used to run the [Massachusetts Women's Political Caucus](#). "And yet women really made no gains."

The central obstacle to getting more women in elected office is the fact that they are less likely to even want to run for office. The difference in media treatment of the two candidates in Massachusetts showed exactly why that's the case, said Hunt, who has been advocating to get more women in politics for decades.

"During the campaign, Martha Coakley was condescendingly referred to as an 'ice queen' and a 'babe,'" Hunt wrote in an e-mail, "yet Scott Brown's nude photo in *Cosmopolitan* was barely mentioned. This media bias needs to be addressed."

Research has shown that women are less likely to think of themselves as qualified to run and less willing to go through the campaign process, and the researchers attributed this partly to media coverage. Furthermore, these attitudes and differences have changed little in recent years.

Despite the stagnating gains of women in elected office, both Hunt and Capone-Wulsin remain optimistic about November and are looking to a number of open seats where women are running, including seven in the Senate and 20 in the House. Though it is difficult to link gender stereotypes to voting patterns, people who study women in politics say voters tend to see women as agents of change, a fact that could help candidates in an election when approval of Congress is at record lows. Hunt thinks women candidates may have their best shot by pointing out that it is predominantly men who have been running the show.

"Many attribute the economic downturn to the crisis in our financial industry and resent the multimillion-dollar bonuses given to bank employees even after the government bailout," Hunt said.

"When Congress held hearings with the heads of those large financial institutions, all were represented by men. Women candidates can succeed with a message of change, accountability and transparency."

Another prominent advocate of women in American politics paints a less rosy picture. Celinda Lake, a pollster and expert on women voters who worked with the Coakley campaign in Massachusetts, was surprised by her findings on voter sentiment there.

"We were pretty startled in the electorate in Massachusetts how little appetite there was in electing a woman," she said.

Lake is hesitant to apply what she found in Massachusetts to other races, but she's not optimistic. Her work suggests that women candidates often do not run well on economic issues and she worries that will hurt candidates in November.

The United States ranks 86th in the world in terms of representation of women in the national legislature, according to the [Center for American Women and Politics](#), putting it behind Uganda, Spain and Cuba, to name a few. Politically turbulent years like this one offer an opportunity to improve, Lawless said, but only if more women start to run for office.

"If we don't have candidates that are going to jump at the opportunity," she said, "there won't be a change."



It's all in the numbers. In order for more women to be a part of the political scene, more women have to run for office. (flickr.com)