

Fisher: Looking for a few good female candidates

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Mary Hughes has a hard time convincing folks in the Bay Area that there is a shortage of women in politics.

Meg and Carly are all over TV. Both of our U.S. senators are women. Nancy Pelosi, one of our own, is speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, with five other Bay Area women among her colleagues.

Beyond California, we see Hillary Clinton jetting around on diplomatic missions and Sarah Palin energizing the tea party movement.

But Hughes, a campaign consultant who has been helping to elect women for more than 20 years, knows that the big picture is not all that rosy. "Unfortunately," she notes, "the marquee successes obscure the real numbers."

The real numbers? Today Congress is just 17 percent female. Only 24 percent of state legislators are women, and a mere six governors. The number of elected women has barely budged since 1992, when an organized campaign helped elect 29 new women to Congress.

"We celebrate each individual victory, every percentage point," Hughes said. "But since 1992, we

have flat-lined. Nearly 30 years after the Year of the Woman, I'm not sure that we've been very successful."

The hunt for candidates

That's why Hughes, whose Palo Alto company Staton Hughes has advised Pelosi, Anna Eshoo, Delaine Easton — and a lot of male candidates — launched the 2012 Project, a nationwide campaign supported by the Center for American Women and Politics

at Rutgers University.

Hughes says 2012 is a crucial year for women. After the 2010 census, states will be redistricting, creating a lot of open seats. "It will be an election where you will have a level playing field," she said, "and we want women to flood that field."

For months, Hughes has been crisscrossing the country seeking out successful women 45 and older who have what it takes to run. She speaks to women's trade organizations, civic groups, neighborhood gatherings — anywhere there are women with connections.

What women want

Wednesday night she spoke to 25 women at Bernis Kretchmar's home in Los Altos. It was an eclectic group: friends and family, a member of Kretchmar's mah-jongg club, a Los Altos Hills Town Council candidate, a woman who ran for city council in New York, a consultant who networks with small-business owners.

Lorene Huddleston, an accountant, drove from Los Gatos to the meeting because she thinks women

could cut down on the kinds of negativity that have rendered national politics so toxic.

"Women are less partisan by nature," she said. "We see things that need to be done and we do them. I care about men, too, but they've been in power a long time."

One woman was there because her congressional representative, Mike Honda, has ignored her requests for help. She thinks a woman would be more effective.

"Women are always more responsive than men," she said.

As the women munched on brownies and watermelon, Hughes shared the secret to getting qualified women to run: You have to ask them.

"Men will nominate themselves," she said, "but women need to be asked. It's our nature."

So, all you potential senators, governors and Assembly persons, Hughes is asking. And she's hoping a few great women will answer the call.

To learn more, go to www.cawp.rutgers.edu and click on "2012 Project."

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