

August 3, 2010



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Posted: July 22, 2010 11:14 AM

Women Should Set Their Sights on 2012

The race to declare 2010 "another year of the woman" has been on for months as one cover story after another sifts evidence and nominates stars. A closer look suggests that "same old, same old" might be a more accurate title for 2010.

There is no data to suggest that more women are running for state legislative seats this year, which is consistent with the trend in many legislatures where the number of women serving has flat-lined over the past decade. And despite an up tick in the number of Republican women filing for Congressional seats in 2010, they are not winning nominations at a greater rate than they have in the past several election cycles.

Much of the hype seems to be generated by the relatively large number of women running for Governor. There's consensus among election trackers that between ten and twelve women will win nominations. In 1998, ten women were nominated for Governor and only two won, so it's too soon to predict November's results.

There is only one election each decade that is likely to produce a significant increase in the numbers of women serving in office -- another "year of the woman" -- and it is the post-reapportionment election when state legislative seats are redrawn and Congressional seats move. That exercise often levels the electoral playing field giving incumbents and challengers alike new voters to woo. The tired and true example is 1992, "The (last) Year of the Woman," when 24 new women were elected to Congress, including 22 in open seats, an historic high.

We haven't had a similar surge since -- women are stuck at 17 percent of Congress and 24 percent of state legislatures. That appallingly low number puts the US 74th in the world compared to other countries on gender parity in national legislatures.

The 2012 Project, a campaign of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University, is designed to take advantage of post-reapportionment opportunities and significantly increase the number of women in Congress and the state legislatures.

By targeting women over 45 years of age from fields currently under-represented in many legislatures (science, technology, energy, environment, finance, health, international relations and small business owners), the campaign aims to advance gender equity and legislative expertise. To find strong prospects, the campaign is joining forces with industry associations, professional networks and women's initiatives within each field to identify talented, public-spirited women.

The campaign has enlisted former elected women to share their own paths to public service to highlight the difference women's participation makes in legislating and to explain why it's critical to have more women in office. This 2012 faculty will offer panel presentations, speeches and workshops over the next two years at industry and association conventions, seminars and regional meetings across the country.

Interested prospects will be connected to existing resources - leadership programs, think tanks, campaign skills boot camps, fundraising networks, Party caucus leaders and political directors - to fast track their candidacies.

The 2012 Project offers one new strategy for catapulting U.S. women closer to their fair share of responsibility for the policies of the country. Women can seize this opportunity or not, but 2022 is a long way off.

Learn more at the2012project.us.

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