

2012 Project hopes to recruit new generation of female candidates

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Despite a number of high-profile female candidates this year, women have yet to break through in politics the way they have in the rest of the workforce. Only 17 percent of members of Congress are women, and women make up just 24 percent of state lawmakers.

Now, a group of activists and academics hopes to train a new generation of female candidates in time for the 2012 elections. [The 2012 Project](#) aims to take advantage of next year's redrawing of state and [congressional districts](#).

Reapportionment, which occurs after the census, typically creates new and open seats to account for population shifts. They are easier for political newcomers to win than those held by [incumbents](#). Over the next two years, participants in the project will recruit women of diverse political views to run for office. They will place a particular emphasis on encouraging "Third Act" women -- baby boomers who might be looking for a new challenge after family and careers.

"Our hope is to get women who have made it in their fields, who have broken their own glass ceilings, who are at a point where they're asking, 'What's next for me?' " said Debbie Walsh, director of the [Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University](#), which is leading the project. "We want to say, 'Why not think about politics and public service?' "

The group hopes to raise millions of dollars in donations to pay for events at conferences of female engineers, health-care professionals and other career groups. The project will help the women tap into training programs and fundraising networks in their states with the hopes of putting them on a path to running for office in 2012.

Organizers envision the effort as a way to boost the sluggish progress of women in politics. According to the center, the number of female elected officials rose steadily through the 1970s and 1980s. Then came 1992, the widely promoted "Year of the Woman," which saw a burst of interest from female candidates and voters on the heels of the [confirmation hearings](#) for Clarence Thomas, the Supreme Court nominee accused of sexual harassment by Anita Hill, a former adviser. That year, 24 freshman women were elected to Congress.

Since then, however, the gains have been spotty. The problem, organizers say, is the lack of a deep candidate pool. According to Walsh's studies, voters are no more likely to elect a man running for a particular seat than a woman of equivalent standing. Women are less likely to run for office.

"In the 1970s, I fully expected by the time we were 25 or 30 years on we'd be close to parity," said Mary Hughes, a Democratic consultant from the San Francisco Bay area and head of the nonprofit, [nonpartisan](#) project. "We're nowhere near parity. That was the germ that got me thinking, 'What can we do?' "

Hughes said the paucity of women is of concern, but not only from an equity perspective. Advocates say that having more women in positions of power will usher in policy changes that benefit women and families, including issues such as health care and maternity leave. And they say too much talent is being left on the table when such a large segment of the population is reluctant to join the ranks of policymakers.

She said the large number of prominent female candidates this year -- including [GOP](#) gubernatorial nominee Nikki Haley in South Carolina and Republican Sharron Angle, who is running for the U.S. Senate in Nevada -- masks a troubling reality.

"When you have women who are marquee names, because we live in such a media-dominated culture, it makes it appear that our numbers are much greater than there are," Hughes said.

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