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2012 Project takes aim at recruiting female candidates

Washington Post

WASHINGTON — 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 work force. 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 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.

“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 New Jersey's Rutgers University, which is leading the project.

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 fund-raising networks in their states with the hopes of putting them on a path to running for office in 2012.

According to the center, the number of female elected officials rose steadily through the 1970s and 1980s. Then came 1992, when 24 freshman women were elected to Congress.

Since then, gains have been spotty. The problem, organizers say, is the lack of a deep candidate pool.

Mary Hughes, a Democratic consultant from the San Francisco Bay area and head of the nonprofit, nonpartisan project, 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 would usher in policy changes that benefit women and families, including issues such as health care and maternity leave.

Ms. Hughes 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 ... it makes it appear that our numbers are much greater than they are,” she said.