

The New Face of Politics

The U.S. lags behind the world when electing women to office. Is that about to change?

by: Danelle Morton | from: [AARP The Magazine](#) | September 24, 2010



Wendy Rogers, campaigning by bike for Arizona State Senate. — Jodi Cobb

Republican state senate candidate Wendy Rogers strode confidently up the front walk of a suburban tract house in Tempe, Arizona, and rapped on the door. She scanned a printout of registered voters in her district, found the name of the homeowner, and repeated it under her breath. Hearing footsteps inside, Rogers, her brunette bob held in place by a strong blast of

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hairspray, adjusted her sky-blue polo shirt and smoothed her khaki shorts. Even before the door swung open, she started her spiel.

"Hi, Mr. Smith, I'm Wendy Rogers and I'm running for the state legislature. I'm a retired Air Force lieutenant colonel pilot, served 20 years in the military, and for the past 13 years have been a small business owner in our district. I'd be honored to have you sign my nominating petition."

It's a late June day in the Southwest, and at 9:30 in the morning it's already 100 degrees. But Rogers, 56, is as cool and focused as she was flying her C-141B Starlifter filled with Marines over Okinawa in 1985. With an incumbent as her opponent, she decided early that getting to know voters — and getting voters to know her — should be her first priority. Since July of 2009 she's been hitting the streets on her 20-year-old mountain bike, a handmade "Rogers For Senate" sign slung over the rear tire, searching for votes one door at a time. Her motive? "When I see people in the legislature who aren't balancing the budget and don't have a plan for doing so, I can't just sit on the sidelines," she says. To date, Rogers has visited 10,000 households.

And she's not alone. As the fall elections approach, women like Rogers, mentored by more than 50 different partisan and nonpartisan groups, are fanning out across the country, turning the passion for public service they've picked up as business leaders, stay-at-home moms, and members of the military into full-blown political activism. Ninety years after women won the right to vote, they're helping to correct a shocking inequity. High-profile female politicians such as House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and former vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin notwithstanding, the number of women in elected office in the United States is disproportionately low. When ranked among the world's democracies, the U.S. is 73rd out of 186 countries in electing females to public office, worse than Turkmenistan but slightly better than the tiny republic of San Marino.

One key force in the movement to get women into office is the nonpartisan 2012 Project, which specifically targets women age 45 and up. "Midlife women make strong candidates, and they're at a point in life when they can take on the task," says 2012 Project head Mary Hughes. "They are about to have fewer family responsibilities, are more likely to be financially stable, and have deep roots in the community."

For 25 years Hughes has worked on campaigns to elect women. Women currently hold about a quarter of all elected offices in this country and 17 percent of the seats in Congress, but that figure is less impressive, she says, when you consider that women make up about 51 percent of the American population. "We never say 83 percent of Congress is male. We say we're up to 17 percent," says Hughes. "We are penalized for our optimism."

To be sure, women are better represented in national politics now than they were 35 years ago. The 93rd Congress, which served from 1973 to 1975, had *no* women senators and just 16 women in the House of Representatives. Women made only incremental political gains until 1992, referred to by pundits as "The Year of the Woman." Angered by the way an all-white, all-male Senate Judiciary Committee treated Anita Hill during the 1991 confirmation hearings of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, women around the country stepped up as candidates. They secured 47 seats in the House (up from 28) and 7 in the Senate (up from 3) in the ensuing election. Currently there are 73 women in the House and 17 in the Senate. It's an improvement, but not as much as some would hope. Women pick up a Congressional seat or two in each election cycle but lose the same number of elected positions when an incumbent retires, or when a female governor like Kathleen Sibelius leaves office to join the President's cabinet. "We've been kind of stuck," says Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) at Rutgers University, which follows women's political participation.

Women can get elected just as easily as men, Walsh adds. The problem is that women usually run only if they're asked — and the parties are far more likely to ask men. "Both political parties are not

recruiting and grooming women as they do men," Walsh says.

Most of the groups that recruit or train women candidates focus on young women, believing that's the best way to build a political pipeline for the future. Hughes, however, decided in 2009 that women 45 and up were a talented, untapped pool of ready-to-serve candidates. "Almost a third of American women are 50 or older," she says. "Many are pioneers in their industries who chose to go into male-dominated fields or start small businesses." Her 2012 Project — so named to mark the upcoming election in which Congressional seats will be reapportioned based on the recent census, creating opportunities for women who generally fare well in contests for open seats — specifically targets accomplished women in fields ranging from health to the environment.

Once the 2012 Project identifies potential women candidates, it directs them to any number of training programs across the country. One of them, the Yale Women's Campaign School, offers candidates five days of "street smarts, not book smarts" training, says its president, Deb Sofield. Participants role-play giving fund-raising speeches and handling the media. For example, how should a candidate respond when her son gets arrested for a DUI? "Well, you need a contrite son," says Sofield. "Then you say, 'We expected better of our child, and it's a family issue and we're dealing with it.'" It's no surprise that family issues make their way into the training. History has shown — remember Sarah Palin and her teenage, pregnant daughter Bristol — that female candidates more often than male candidates are asked to explain the actions of wayward offspring.

THE MOTIVATION TO RUN

In 2007, Democrat Rosie Gonzalez, a 45-year-old family law attorney from San Antonio, Texas, enrolled in the Yale Women's Campaign School. In classrooms at the prestigious New Canaan, Connecticut, campus, she soaked up lectures and participated in one-on-one counseling sessions. This year, Carol Vernon, an executive coach, videotaped participants and used the film to fine-tune their communication skills — both verbal and nonverbal. "It's not about creating an image," says Vernon. "It's about leveraging the parts that are already there." For instance, Vernon believes that women have a huge advantage over men when it comes to listening to others and hearing voters' concerns.

Gonzalez's own well-honed listening skills led her to run for a Bexar County judgeship in San Antonio. The unmarried career woman spent nearly two decades working with adolescents in the juvenile justice system, first as an admissions desk clerk at the local juvenile lockup, then as a social worker, and later as a lawyer specializing in troubled youth. Based on her experiences, Gonzales believes the majority of kids in the system have suffered some profound childhood trauma or brain disorder. "These kids didn't have the emotional skills to deal with their behaviors," she says. Gonzalez thinks she can improve life for troubled teens given her years on the front line.

"My message is that I have a passion for justice," she adds. "If we don't have passionate people dealing with our youth, they will become as complacent as the judges on the bench now."

"Rosie's been working with kids in crisis for years," says Sofield, of the Yale Women's Campaign School. "She understands what works and what doesn't work in the system."

While women, like Gonzalez, are often propelled into politics because of specific issues, men are more likely to cite personal ambition as their reason for running for office. Jennifer Lawless, director of American University's Women & Politics Institute, believes part of the difference lies in societal mores. "We are still living in a time when women are not thought well of when they speak candidly of ambition," she says. Her research shows that the issues that women focus on once elected are issues closely linked to them, especially families, children, childcare, and education.

"America could be a much stronger country if we made our judgments with our values connected to a realistic idea of family life," says House Speaker Pelosi. "Women are very close to the choices they

had to make while raising their children."

"Women are responsible for more of the nurturing, which makes them more sensitive to individual and family needs," notes former Secretary of Transportation Elizabeth Dole. When Dole served in office, her main focus was on safety rather than building more roads. She succeeded in passing nationwide compulsory seatbelt legislation, and pushed hard for manufacturers to include airbags in their designs. "It's a joy to make things happen that will help people," she says, "especially those who do not have a voice."

Chiquita Coggs, 62, a Republican running for Kansas State Senate from the economically disadvantaged northeastern section of Kansas City, is promoting stronger economic development in her district. But the real reason she entered a long-shot race — she's taking on an eight-term incumbent who has never had an opponent, in a district with 9,000 registered Democrats and only 1,119 Republicans — is to make changes in the way charter schools operate in the state.

In 2008 Coggs helped found a charter school, but it folded after two years: Its community-based charter board couldn't raise a \$250,000 operating fee imposed by the Board of Education. Coggs believes the program was set up to fail — the charter board lacked resources to raise such an unrealistic amount of cash — and maintains that district administrators and school unions are threatened by charter schools, viewing them as direct competition.

"I promised [the charter school] I would not stop until the laws were changed," says Coggs, who would like to see colleges and universities be allowed to sponsor charter schools in Kansas. If elected, she plans to insist that Kansas adopt portions of model legislation recently developed by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. To address her economic concerns for her district, she also plans to draft "sales tax-free zones" in the main commercial area. "Best I can get anyone to recall, my opponent has been to the microphone one time in 16 years in the legislature, and he's never offered a single piece of legislation," Coggs says. "As a result I think my chances of winning this election are really, really good, even with the long odds."

In preparation for her run, Coggs trained at the Dwight D. Eisenhower Excellence in Public Service Series in Kansas, a program that targets Republican women exclusively. Lisa Ritchie, administrator of Coggs's 2006 class, says that while she can't predict Coggs's chances of success, she will say, "Chiquita is a go-getter and is extremely organized. She has a very magnetic personality. She's very outgoing and friendly." She also has every intention of remaining in politics for the long haul. Coggs, a single mother of two grown daughters, has an 11-year-old grandson who plans to run for President one day and has asked her to manage his campaign.

TOUGH ENOUGH

One big fear for first-time female candidates is that they won't survive the rough-and-tumble of politics. In 2006, while she was an assistant professor of political science at Brown University, Jennifer Lawless of the Women & Politics Institute ran for Congress in Rhode Island and experienced some of the same insecurities that traditionally prevent other women from running. "We know that women think they don't have thick-enough skin for the insane level of scrutiny and criticism," Lawless says. "I would have put myself in that category as well. But after I launched my campaign, it took about two weeks to develop that skin."

Nancy Pelosi says she too toughened up quickly when she ran for Congress in San Francisco at the age of 47. "You have to believe in yourself if you are going to ask others to believe in you," Pelosi says. "The first thing you have to know about power is that it's not something that anyone gives away. There is going to be a battle. If your opponent were as capable and confident as he claims, he wouldn't need to undermine you. Be yourself and understand your strength."

Mary Hughes of the 2012 Project thinks that older women are stronger women — and better able to shrug off nasty campaigns. "They have a willingness to challenge the status quo," she says.

Rebecca Flaherty, 59, of Meade County, Kentucky, is one of them. The stay-at-home mother of three grown sons had been active for years as a youth minister in her church. A longtime Democrat, she began writing to Democratic representatives and to journalists including Dan Rather and Helen Thomas in the months leading up to the invasion of Iraq. "I had always looked to the media to hold politicians' feet to the fire," she explains. "It wasn't a protest letter as much as a call to action. I thought they weren't listening to other voices."

The few who responded to Flaherty's letters urged her to run for office on the local level. Instead, in 2003, Flaherty volunteered at the Meade County Democratic Women's Club and, in 2006, she became chair of the county's Democratic Club. She resigned when she was diagnosed with breast cancer in May 2008. Two years later, after undergoing a mastectomy and successful chemotherapy, she felt less intimidated about running for elected office. She decided to challenge Judge Executive Harry Craycroft, a fellow Democrat whom Flaherty had helped elect in 2006. "If I hadn't had cancer, I would still be sitting on the sidelines and saying, 'Oh God, no one has stepped up,'" she says today.

In Meade County, north of Fort Knox, judge executive is the top supervisor position. Flaherty's friends noted that no woman had ever held that high an office in the county, and asked what she knew about supervising the county government. "I raised three sons on [my husband's] pipe fitter's salary," Flaherty says. "I know how to run a budget."

In this year's May 18 primary, Flaherty bested Craycroft by more than a thousand votes in a surprise upset. "I think I outworked him," she says of her opponent.

SACRIFICES AND SATISFACTION

For the general election campaign, Flaherty has knocked on doors (some 2,500 to date), held fundraising bean-soup-and-cornbread suppers, and staffed an eight-by-eight-foot yellow-and-green booth strung with paper lanterns at the county fair. Her husband, Allen, is one of her biggest supporters and accompanies her at least half the time when she's on the trail. "There are things we've given up this year," he admits. "We would have liked to take a vacation, but we're spending all our money on yard signs, bumper stickers, meals out. My wife is a great cook, and I miss that." He pauses, then adds with a smile, "If Becky wins, we'll just make some more sacrifices. You get paid back at another point when she makes Meade County a better place. And if she loses, well, we've worked hard and kept ourselves honest."

Back in Tempe, Wendy Rogers does her bicycle campaigning solo, while her husband, retired Air Force major Hal Kunnen, keeps things running at the home-inspection and termite-eradication company the couple started in 1995. (Their 23-year-old son just completed a tour of duty in the Marines and has moved back to Tempe to get his Ph.D. in electrical engineering; their daughter is a junior at the Honors Barrett College at Arizona State University and is living in a house her parents helped her buy using the first-time homebuyer's tax credit.) "I miss my partner," says Kunnen. "She's the outgoing type and has a skill set that she's able to use in our business. But I believe we need people like her to do what needs to be done at the state level."

When the voter in the Tempe tract house finally opened his door, Rogers stepped back as she appraised her potential constituent. A registered Independent, he was a burly man wearing gym shorts and a T-shirt, with multiple facial piercings and tattoos on every limb. Rogers quickly listed the issues she's most interested in: tax problems facing small business owners, Arizona's education budget, and increasing the effectiveness of the state's mental health services. The voter's eyes grew wide. He told Rogers that he worked at a group home for mentally ill adolescents and the state had slashed its funding. All the employees voluntarily took a 15 percent pay cut to keep the home open.

As he spoke, Rogers's eyes grew moist. "That's an issue that means a lot to me," she said. "I got my master's in social work, focusing on the mentally ill, and I started out in the Air Force as a social worker. I think Arizona can do a lot better with the resources it has."

The voter's eyes also welled up, and Rogers asked for his cell phone number and e-mail address. "If I get elected, I want you to be on my advisory committee for mental health," she said. "We need people with your real-world experience advising on policy." She reached out to shake his hand. "You're a great American."

As she headed to the next doorstep, the voter called after her, "Good luck!"

Rogers turned back, grinning broadly at her newfound ally. "I'm gonna win!" she said.