

Why Did So Many Women Run in 2010?

By Rachel Horn

Gone are the days when women were forced to don boxy pantsuits and mask their femininity to make it onto the political main stage. In the 2010 election cycle we've been treated to an exceptionally wide range of candidates - from Mama Grizzlies like Sharon Angle, to CEO powerhouses like Carly Fiorina, to [Facebook-vixen-turned-businesswoman](#) Krystal Ball. More women than ever are putting themselves out there for public office. In the 2010 election cycle, a record [298 women](#) filed to run for Congress - including 223 non-incumbents. More than half of these female candidates won their primaries. On Tuesday, the names of 153 women will appear on ballots nationwide in the general election for U.S. congressional races.

We asked five gender and politics experts what they think accounts for this surge in women running for office. Here's what they had to say.

What prompted more women than ever to run for Congress in this cycle?

Jennifer L. Lawless, Director of the Women & Politics Institute at American University:

What prompted a lot of Republican women to run was this anti-Democratic, anti-incumbent and anti-establishment year. Given that male Democrats represent the bulk of elected officials in Washington right now, female Republicans were able to position themselves as outsiders.

Linda Tarr-Whelan, author of *Women Lead the Way: Your Guide to Stepping Up to Leadership and Changing the World*:

[T]here's also the Hillary/Sarah factor. The 2008 election set up a whole new cast of role models for women running for office. They're totally different. It's their politics. It's their background. It's the way they look. It's everything. All of the sudden women could see themselves running in a way they hadn't been able to see before.

Dianne Bystrom, Director, Iowa State University's Carrie Chapman Catt Center for

Women and Politics: I will say as a caveat, if you look at the number of women who filed...going

into the primaries we had a 51/49 split of Democratic women to Republican women [on the ballots]. Coming out of the primaries we have a split of 65/35 in favor of Democratic women, which, looking back at history, is typical when it comes to women candidates in the general election.

Liz Mair, political consultant and blogger, Vice President of Hynes Communications: No matter what side of the aisle women candidates come down on, I think a lot of them are sick of seeing the country going downhill and feel it's time to roll up their sleeves and take charge. As the old saying goes, if you want something done right, do it yourself. That's not a knock on men, who currently represent a bigger slice of the pie, in terms of federal elected officials. But it is a knock on political leaders, as a group, the political establishment, the "powers that be" and what might casually be referred to as the old boys' club, notwithstanding its partial female membership to-date.

Susan MacManus, Distinguished University Professor of Public Administration and Political Science, Department of Government and International Affairs, University of South Florida: Any time that you have a period of corruption or economic downturn, women see an opportunity to step into the fray because voters somewhat regard women as more honest and more trustworthy than men.

Rep. Lynn Woolsey (D-CA): With increasing numbers of women running for office recently, I wonder if this question is a bit out-dated. Women are now running for the same reasons men are running. It's not that unusual anymore.

Debbie Walsh, Director of the Center for American Women and Politics: Overall number of women in Congress is likely to go down after the election, and it's the first time we'll see that kind of drop in 30 years. And the loss will really be felt on the Democratic side. What we have is seven or eight seats where Democratic women are running in districts that are marginally Democratic at best, and quite a few of these women were elected in '08.

In 1992, when 222 women filed to run for the House and 29 filed for the Senate, pundits called it the "Year of the Woman." Was this title premature or did it lay the groundwork for where the U.S. is today politically?

Walsh: I hate the label. I'll tell you why. It sounds as though it just sort of happened - that there was this magic year and that the problem of women's representation was solved. The reality is that 1992 was an opportunistic year - a year of redistricting. There were record numbers of open seats and there were women that were ready and positioned to run when those open seats came along. It didn't just happen. After the 'Year of the Woman', women managed to get to 10% of all the congressional seats. Now we're at 17%, so you can see the glacial pace at which we're moving.

Lawless: That title was appropriate then and we are not seeing a comparable 'Year of the Woman' now and the reasons are two-fold. First, the number of women running in 1992 represented a huge

proportional increase in the number of women who had run previous to 1992. The numbers of women running now might be higher than we've seen in the last few election cycles, but they're only marginally higher.... But also, 1992 was an election cycle where women's issues and women's ability to lead was at the forefront of these campaigns. The Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill hearings and the Family Medical Leave Act are just two of the issues that were prioritized by a lot of the women running. And in this election cycle, the female candidates that we have, especially on the Republican side, are not running on traditional women's issues.

Mair: Labels like "Year of the Woman" are fun for the media to throw around, but the fact that they used that one so much in 1992 makes it hard for them to know what to call this year. I really wonder what they will do if we happen to reach a point where half our governors, half the Senate and half the House are women. "Year of the Woman Part III: The Return of the Year of the Woman Part II?"

We've seen a number of women transitioning into politics in this election cycle from the business world. What does this trend say about the skill set and preparation that make for a strong political candidate?

Woolsey: As a business owner myself, I can say that the skills that helped me start and run Woolsey Personnel Service prepared me for a career in politics - decision making, managing a staff, setting and meeting deadlines, knowing how to determine what is important and what is not.

Mair: [S]erving in a leadership role in business prior to entering the political arena...toughens you up, a lot. If you have to go out and lead an organization that has to compete to survive every day, that can be a lot like a political campaign. Scrutiny from shareholders, the financial press, and colleagues who may have competing agendas to your own and see boardroom politics as a zero-sum game is pretty intense, and good.

MacManus: Wealthy men rise to the top in business and say, 'I made it to the top in business, let's try something different.' So now you have Meg Whitman and others trying their hand at something else. Corporate women are able to gain the confidence of the business community because they tend to talk the same language [as men], but they're not as threatening.

Walsh: One thing women in the private sector will watch is how [the election] works this year for Meg Whitman and Carly Fiorina and Linda McMahon. Right now it looks like it's not working. The most recent poll shows all three of them behind. But the women who follow may learn something from this.... I think there will be women who say, after looking at these races, 'why would I do this?' but I also think there are others who will say, 'I'm gonna learn from this experience. I'd like to run for office and I'd like to think about how to do it differently.'

This article available online at:

<http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2010/10/why-did-so-many-women-run-in-2010/65456/>

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