

It Takes a Candidate

Women make up 51 percent of the U.S. population, but hold only 17 percent of seats in the U.S. Congress and 24 percent of seats in state legislatures. The United States ranks 73rd among 186 nations in percentage of women in the legislature. Fortunately, we have the 2012 Project, a nonpartisan organization on a mission to close the American government gender gap by the next national election.

By Meredith Holmes, SWE Contributor

The nonpartisan 2012 Project was launched in July 2010 by Mary Hughes and Debbie Walsh, two women who know a lot about politics and gender. They had noticed a troubling trend: The number of women running for public office flatlined between 2000 and 2010.

Mary Hughes is co-founder and president of Staton Hughes, a strategic communications and political consulting firm in San Francisco. She has directed campaigns for many women who broke new ground in U.S. politics, including Nancy Pelosi, the first woman speaker of the House; Delaine Eastin, the first woman superintendent of schools in California; and Superior Court Judge Donna Hitchens, the first openly lesbian judge elected in the United States.

Debbie Walsh is director of the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) at Rutgers University's Eagleton Institute of Politics. CAWP has conducted research on women in politics for 40 years and addresses women's underrepresentation in political office through public education

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and outreach. Walsh joined CAWP in 1981, and now oversees all programs, including forums, leadership and training programs, and research.

Casting a wide net

The mission of the 2012 Project is to significantly increase the number of women in U.S. Congress and state legislatures by inspiring women to run in the 2012 elections. The 2012 Project neither endorses nor funds candidates; it is completely non-partisan and connects

women with the resources they need to make a successful bid for election. This approach — casting a wide net and then connecting as many potential candidates as possible to existing organizations — is a novel one. Other groups have approached the issue of women's representation in politics, but the 2012 project ties it to a specific election, level of experience, and addresses the matter with a high degree of energy and urgency. Hughes thinks the media's tendency to focus on high-profile women, such as Hillary Clinton or Condoleezza Rice, Ph.D., is a "dangerous happy pill." She said, "The numbers tell a different story than the media images. To focus on a solution, we need to see the situation clearly."

After attending a retreat at CAWP,

and looking at research data on women in public office, Hughes realized she was living in a bit of a bubble. "There's a big contrast between San Francisco and the rest of the country," she said. "Women have held elected office here since the 1970s, but elsewhere, even in liberal states like Massachusetts, the

promise of the women's movement has not been fulfilled." Hughes and Walsh put their heads together and saw that, although an infrastructure for getting women elected (fundraising networks, think tanks, and campaign boot camps) had been in place for 30 years, not enough women were being recruited to run.

CAWP studies show that while voters are no more likely to elect a male than a female with equal qualifications running for the same seat, women are much more likely to run if they are invited. "Fifty-three percent of women elected

to state legislatures had not thought seriously about running until they were asked, compared with 28 percent of men," Walsh said. "Women don't get asked as much by party leaders."

At the heart of the 2012 Project are experienced women politicians inviting women to run. Among the more than 50 recruiters who have agreed to do this for the 2012 Project are: Polly Baca, the first Latina elected to the Colorado State Senate and former vice chair of the Democratic National Committee; Jo Ann Davidson, the first female speaker of the Ohio State House and former co-chair of the Republican National Committee; and Madeleine Kunin, the first woman governor of Vermont.

The year 2012 represents a once-



Mary Hughes has directed political campaigns for many women. Concerns over the declining number of women candidates spurred her to launch the 2012 Project along with Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University.

in-a-decade opportunity. Elections that year will be the first after reapportionment and redistricting based on the 2010 U.S. Census data. Population changes will result in new and open seats in the U.S. Congress and in state legislatures. In the 1992 post-apportionment elections, women won 47 seats in the House (up from 28) and seven in the Senate (up from three), boosting women's overall congressional representation from 5.8 to 10 percent. However, growth after 1992 stagnated. It took 18 years for the number of women in Congress to increase to the current 17 percent. The 2010 midterm elections, in which the number of women in the U.S. Congress fell for the first time in 30 years, intensified the urgency of 2012's mission.

In the coming year, 2012 Project recruiters will visit 200 conferences and conventions to talk to women over 45 with expertise in science, technology, health, energy, and the environment, small business, and international affairs. After each presentation, audience members who have an interest in learning more about running for office will be connected to party and caucus leaders and to programs in their states that focus on electing women.

Calling all of the country's talents

Asserting that the 2012 Project intends to get the first woman doctor elected to Congress, Walsh said, "We need all of America's talent at the table. What we have now in Congress is an institution that is largely attorneys and men." The legislature needs engineers and scientists who can respond rationally to technological advances and who can write workable laws for emerging and rapidly changing industries.

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Hughes points out that women business owners have on-the-ground experience with economic issues, such as job creation, health care, government regulation, and international competition. "We need people with their expertise making policy."

Why women over 45? Baby-boomers are more likely to have raised their children and have time to pursue their own interests. They have achieved career success and have been active in schools, churches, and professional organizations. Women over 45 are poised for the third act of their lives, wondering what to tackle next. Said Hughes, "We are putting public service front and center for these women. We are urging them to use their wisdom and experience to benefit their communities."

Women bring to politics a different policy agenda and a different way of working. As early as 1991, CAWP researchers found that women legislators held different positions than their male counterparts on a range of issues, including the death penalty and reliance on the free market to solve economic problems. Female legislators more often support legislation that improves the lives of women and children, and they are more likely to reach across the aisle and work with members of the other party.

"What stands out about the women we have talked to so far," said Hughes, "is their strong desire to get things done. They have no use for posturing

because they know the problems facing this country are serious. They just want to get down to work." ■



Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University's Eagleton Institute of Politics, said research supports the notion that women legislators have different policy agendas and ways of working.

Want to Get Involved?

The 2012 Project recruiters are traveling the country speaking to a wide range of women's groups, inspiring women to run for office, educating them about the process, and linking them with resources in their home states. If you missed the 2012 Project's presentation at WE10 but want to learn more or become involved, visit the 2012 web site — www.the2012project.us. The site offers tips on simple ways to support more women in the 2012 election.

Suggestions include:

- Tell your friends and colleagues about the 2012 Project.
- Encourage your women's political organization to make the 2012 election a priority.
- If you are part of another professional organization that might want to hear more about these efforts, contact the 2012 Project.
- Take a look at CAWP's political resource map on the CAWP home page (www.cawp.rutgers.edu). It lists local and national resources available to women interested in running for office.
- Let the 2012 Project know if you are considering a run for office.
- Tell 2012 about foundations or philanthropists who share their desire to "speed history."