

## The 2012 Project Seeks Encore Women for Political Office

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When their main careers begin to wind down and their children are grown, some women begin to ponder public service as an encore career. From the amount of attention paid to female “stars” in politics, such as Sarah Palin, Nancy Pelosi and Olympia Snowe, you might think there are lots of American women in public office.

The reality is quite different. Today women hold just 16 percent of seats in Congress, 22 percent of statewide elective executive offices (such as governor) and 23 percent of seats in state legislatures. And 17 percent of mayors of U.S. cities with populations over 30,000 are females.

Internationally, the United States ranks 71st in terms of women’s representation, according to The Inter-Parliamentary Union of Women in National Office.



*In her encore career, Mary Hughes is trying to persuade more women 45 and older to run for Congressional and state office during the 2012 elections.*

That’s a problem, according to Mary Hughes, founder and director of [The 2012 Project](#), a campaign of the [Center for American Women and Politics](#) (CAWP) at Rutgers University. “The under-representation of women in public office has a profound impact on U.S. policymaking,” she said.

It could be the reason why so many American women still struggle to patch together childcare for their children and why the United States is the only Western country that doesn’t mandate family leave.

Hughes is trying to do something about the lack of female representation in our government. After working for 25 years as a political strategist, Hughes, age 58, is leading a national nonpartisan campaign to identify and engage women 45 and older to run for Congressional and state legislative office in the 2012 elections. With support from 70 organizations and more than 50 former elected officials, The 2012 Project will also educate potential candidates about the resources, networks and mentors available to help them in their own states.

Why 2012? Now that the 2010 census has been completed, every Congressional and state legislative seat in the U.S. will be redrawn, and new open seats will be created, prompting retirements. Women have been successful in winning open seats in past elections – think back to 1992, the “Year of the Woman” – and increasing the number in the election pipeline should result in more elected women leaders.

Hughes and others see a tremendous need. The number of women seeking office has flat-lined since 1992, when the number of women in Congress jumped from 28 to 47. Since 1999, the percentage of women state legislators has only risen from 22 to 23 percent, while the percentage of those in the House has increased from 13 to 16 percent.

Fewer women than men choose to run for a variety of reasons, said Hughes. “They’re less likely to be recruited, and they’re less likely to envision themselves as elected leaders without encouragement from others,” she noted. Other factors that deter them from pursuing office include family obligations, worries about privacy and negativity campaigning and the lack of role models.

Addressing a group of accomplished women recently in Palo Alto, Calif., Hughes said, “I look around the room and see people who have formed a nonprofit, worked on a ballot measure and raised funds for a new library. Yet most of you have never thought of running for office because nobody asked you to.”

Some of the most effective public officials are those who have worked in their local communities solving local problems, she noted. Encouraging the women to run for public office, Hughes said, “When you solve a problem outside of government, you’ve solved it for one day for one community. When you solve a problem inside government, you have solved it for many communities for all time.”

Some examples of women leaders who have made a difference are:

\* New York Congresswoman Carolyn McCarthy, 67, author of the National Instant Criminal Background Check Database Improvement Amendment Act of 2008, which is the most significant gun legislation passed in 14 years, and a lead author in the House of the Serve America Act of 2009, which created a national infrastructure for service volunteerism programs.

\* Wyoming state Representative Elaine Harvey, 56, who championed a quality child care program while serving in the state legislature and also chaired the House Select Committee for Developmental Disabilities, which increased funding for children with disabilities and tightened child endangerment laws.

\* Ellen Tauscher, 59, who was a tireless advocate for universal health care and coverage of uninsured children while serving as a California Congresswoman and worked against the spread of nuclear weapons. In 2009 she became Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security in order to continue her work to eliminate nuclear weapons.

\* Nan Orrock, 67, of Georgia, who was the first woman to hold the position of majority whip during her tenure in the Georgia Assembly. Well respected for her expertise in health policy, women's issues, civil rights and civil liberties, she currently serves in Georgia's state Senate. She also serves as president of the Women Legislators' Lobby, a national network of progressive women legislators who work to reduce wasteful military spending and improve underfunded services to families, children, the disabled and the elderly.

Hughes said The 2012 Project's strategy is simple: The more women who offer themselves as candidates, the greater the probability that the number of women elected will increase. She urges women to consider running "not because it's about you, but because it's about the policies that you think are important."

To learn more about The 2012 Project, [click here](#).

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