

The 2012 Project seeks Boomer women

Lois Kazakoff

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Mary Hughes is looking for a few good women to bring a new perspective to Congress and statehouses - that of 51 percent of the population.

Hughes is the director of the 2012 Project, a nationwide effort to encourage more women of any party to run for elected office. She's looking for women 45 or older who have distinguished themselves in their careers, and especially as small business owners, and can bring their skills to elected office.

The dramatic shifts revealed by the 2000 census suggest that the remapping of legislative and congressional districts will create opportunities for newcomers not seen in two decades. There is hope that this especially will be true in California, where a panel of 14 citizens, not legislators, is drawing the lines.

This, Hughes says, is the moment for women to gain more of a voice.

Sadly, America, the beacon of democracy, proportionally has fewer women in elected office than other nations. For example, only 16 percent of the House is female.

The challenge is not getting women elected, Hughes said. It's getting them to run.

Women, when asked if they might seek office, inevitably will say they have family obligations or they are turned off by the negativity of politics. But mostly, she says, they don't self-nominate.

"The reason I thought we could be successful now is because the Baby Boomer women have succeeded in breaking barriers across industries," Hughes said. For them, politics is a lateral move. But because so few women have gone into politics, "there's no on-ramp." Women just don't know how to get there.

Thus the 2012 Project. The project has a national faculty of 60 female former officeholders, including Polly Baca-Barragán of Colorado and Connie Morella of Maryland.

"We're not trainers or fundraisers," Hughes said. "If a woman steps forward (120 so far), we learn about what they've done, connect them with fundraising networks and think tanks. Then we hand them off."

So what difference does a female viewpoint make? Debbie Walsh, a political scientist who runs the Center for Women and Politics at Rutgers University that hosts the 2012 Project, says, basically you want elected officials who look like the electorate.

But you want women who have different priorities and life experiences to influence agendas. "We talked to women who, when first elected, didn't want to be seen as the member who did the 'women's stuff,' but they quickly realized that if they didn't raise the issues, they wouldn't be raised at all," Walsh said.

Most important: Women's leadership style - inclusive and transparent - will reform the political process. "People have lost faith that government can do anything," Walsh said. "We can talk about how government is a place where you can create systemic change. It will make Americans feel better about government."

The 2012 project

Seeks to encourage women 45 or older looking for encores to their professional careers to run for public office. A campaign of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University, the project is a nationwide, nonpartisan effort. To learn more, go to sfg.ly/e0nrr3.

Are you a candidate?

Hughes says ask yourself this:

Who would stand up for me?

Whom have you helped?

What do you want to accomplish?

Mary hughes

The Palo Alto resident who directs the project is a political consultant who has worked to elect or advise Ellen Tauscher, Anna Eshoo, [Nancy Pelosi](#) and Gabrielle Giffords. She is focusing on identifying women who will seize this moment of opportunity.

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