

PEOPLE

Galvanizing Women Candidates

by **Naureen Khan**

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There were 77 women in the House and 17 in the Senate in the 111th Congress, plus a handful of female governors in the 50 states, helping the United States rank 72nd in the world in gender parity for elected officials.



Democratic political consultant Mary Hughes has dedicate her life to seeing more women elected to office.

To Democratic political consultant **Mary Hughes**, those numbers seemed dismal.

The 2010 midterm elections made matters worse for those hoping to see more girl power in governance: the number of women in the House dropped to 75—then to 74 when Rep. Jane Harman, D-Calif., resigned—and nearly 100 women in state legislatures around the country lost their seats.

Though Hughes has spent much of her career getting individual women elected to public office, it seemed like a larger piece of the puzzle was missing.

“Over the course of a generation—my own 25 years in this work—I was very aware that one by one by one was not really a pace that was making progress,” she said. “I thought, ‘This is taking forever!’”

It was particularly disheartening for Hughes’s generation, who had witnessed a record 24 new women ushered into Congress during the 1992 elections. The so-called “Year of the Woman” followed on the heels of several high-profile incidents particularly relevant to women: the treatment of Anita Hill by the Senate Judiciary Committee during the confirmation hearings for Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas; the revelation that the National Institutes of Health was by and large only conducting clinical trials on white men; and a number of constitutional challenges to *Roe v. Wade*.

The success of female candidates at the time was a signal to many that more and more women ascending to public office would become the new standard. Instead, the numbers have flatlined in the last two decades.

Luckily, it was not a phenomenon that went unnoticed among political practitioners and scholars. After attending a conference put on by Rutgers University’s Center for American Women and Politics that was devoted to uncovering the causes of the stagnation, Hughes decided it was time to stop lamenting and start acting.

With Debbie Walsh, director of the Rutgers center, Hughes created the 2012 Project, a national, nonpartisan campaign that hopes to replicate the successes of the 1992 elections. The mission: to get 24 or more women elected to Congress in the next election and to regain the seats lost by women in state legislatures in 2010.

It's a tall order, to be sure. There's no telling if there will be the confluence of factors necessary to break records again, as there was in 1992.

"Whether we get that shot of adrenaline, I don't know," Hughes conceded.

But she still holds fast to the idea that the 2012 elections present a unique opportunity for women, with redistricting and reapportionment creating new open seats, where women have traditionally had more success.

The key is getting more women to run, Hughes said. The reasons they don't include the toxicity of the political environment today, the gridlock in Congress and state legislatures, and the invasion of privacy that inevitably accompanies a campaign. But many women never run, Hughes said, simply because they have never been asked.

That's where the 2012 Project comes in.

Hughes has assembled a "faculty" of 70 former female lawmakers, officers of women's political organizations, and operatives who have hit the conference circuit to talk to women around the country about the rewards of holding public office and allaying any concerns they might have.

The 2012 Project has partnered with nearly 1,300 professional associations and industry groups and has been dispatching its faculty members to conferences to talk with women who might need that little nudge.

Former Rep. Connie Morella, R-Md., who served from 1987 to 2003, is one of the women relating her experiences in public service at these conferences. Women are just as capable of waging successful campaigns as men, Morella tells attendees. They just lack confidence.

"I had nine children—the six children of my late sister and three of my own," Morella said. "I would knock on doors and my kids would say, 'Elect my mother and get her off the streets.' That was 30 years ago. And you know women are good that way—the dogs didn't even bark at me. They barked at the guys!"

When women show interest in running, as 120 already have, Project 2012 organizers connect them with the resources they need regardless of their party affiliation; women's training programs, think tanks, and leadership institutes are all on standby to lend their expertise. While the project doesn't provide funding or do the nuts and bolts of campaign work, it shows women a roadmap of how to do that the right way.

"We have that intersection of opportunity and possibility for a whole generation of women who have watched this snail's pace, this incrementally slow climb," Hughes said. "We want to remind them that they came of age in a time when the women's movement promised open doors and great opportunity. And the promise of that baby boomer generation remains unfulfilled in government."