

**Article: “Women Running Locally: How Gender Affects School Board Elections”**

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**Issue: Jan. 2004**

**Journal: *PS: Political Science & Politics***



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drawn to benefit candidates of one party, and that party may have been less likely to support the nomination and election of women to the state legislatures.

## **Whatever Happened to the Year of the Woman: Lessons from the 1992 and 2002 Elections**

—Michele Swers,  
*Georgetown University*

The labeling of the 1992 elections as the “Year of the Woman” created the expectation that women had finally breached the political glass ceiling and were on the path to making the electoral gains that would lead to representation of women in the nation’s governing bodies that approaches parity with men. Since that banner year, the progress of women in elections has continued at a slow pace. By examining the political and structural contexts of the 1992 and 2002 elections, I evaluate the major barriers to the advancement of women in office and provide a window on the future for women in electoral politics.

The scholarship on women and electoral politics has highlighted both structural and political factors as inhibiting women’s advancement in electoral office. At the structural level, researchers find that women raise as much money and win legislative seats at the state and national level as often as men in similar, challenger v. incumbent, and open-seat races (Burrell 1994). Therefore, the incumbency advantage is viewed as the major structural barrier to the advancement of women in American politics. Suggestions for structural reform range from the adoption of proportional representation to increased recruitment of women for open-seat races and the expansion of term limits at the state level.

With regard to the political context, research on voter attitudes and stereotypes demonstrates that voters view female candidates as more compassionate and willing to compromise and they favor women on issues such as education and health care while they rate male candidates as more capable of handling the economy, foreign affairs, and military crises (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993a, 1993b; Burrell 1994; Sanbonmatsu 2002). However, the mechanisms by which these stereotypes impact actual votes are unclear.

A closer look at the 1992 and 2002 elections reveals the strong interconnection between political and structural factors. In 1992, the political context strongly favored women as both the national campaigns focused on the domestic issues, particularly health care, on which voters prefer female candidates. Additionally, the Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill hearings highlighted the issue of sexual harassment and the paucity of women in Congress, allowing many women candidates to explicitly raise the need for more women in Congress as an issue in their campaign. In 1992, women were able to capitalize on a favorable political environment created through census-year redistricting combined with an increased number of strategic retirements in response to scandal, leading to an unusually large number, 93, of open-seat congressional races (Palmer and Simon 2001, Swers 2002).

In contrast, the 2002 elections offered women candidates neither a favorable political context nor an advantageous structural environment. The focus on the war on terrorism and the impending war with Iraq focused voters’ attention on stereotypically male issues, requiring female candidates to work harder to establish credibility in these areas. Despite the status of 2002 as a redistricting year, few open seats, 49, were created as most states drew incumbent protection plans (Giroux 2002). Although an increasing number of state legislators were term limited out of office, the number of women in state legislatures declined slightly from 22.7% in 2002 to 22.3% in 2003 (Center for the American Woman and Politics 2003). A predicted “Year of the Woman Governor” did not materialize as the number of female governors advanced from only five to six.

The investigation of the political and structural elements of the 1992 and 2002 elections highlights several important areas for future research in order to discern the nature of the barriers to women’s advancement in political office and the actions needed to increase women’s representation. First, research is needed to clarify the conditions in which voter stereotypes impact votes, the decisions of political elites to recruit women, and the political calculus of individuals concerning whether to run. Additionally, to take advantage of the structural opportunities that result from open seats and the expansion of term limits in the state legislatures, scholars need to gain a better understanding of the process of

political recruitment. In their study of state term limits, Carroll and Jenkins (2001) note that women have made some gains at the state senate level because there exists a pool of term-limited or other sitting female state house members ready to run for senate. However, there is no clear pipeline of candidates for state house seats

In addition to the individual level factors that influence political recruitment, scholarship must devote more attention to the differing fortunes of women candidates within the Republican and Democratic parties. Many have noted that 1992 was really the “Year of the Democratic Woman.” Palmer and Simon (2001) maintain that the number of women candidates in Democratic and Republican primary and general election races began to diverge in the late 1980s. Additionally, Carroll (2002) finds that while the Republican Party has made great gains across state legislatures, the proportion of female legislators who are Republicans has actually declined over time. Research is needed to clarify whether women are disadvantaged in the Republican Party because of a bias among a more socially conservative primary voting base, bias among party elites who recruit candidates, or a lack of quality candidates willing to emerge from the pipeline. The concentration of women in one party can have detrimental effects on women’s influence on the political agenda when the opposing party controls the majority in the legislative body.

## **Women Running Locally: How Gender Affects School Board Elections**

—Melissa Deckman,  
*Washington College*

Political scientists who study women and politics have long recognized that the number of women serving in higher political office will increase only if there are more qualified women to run for these positions. Substantial gains by women candidates at the local level, it is argued, will pump the political pipeline, providing more women with political experience to run for higher offices. Yet, is school board office in reality part of the political pipeline for most citizens who seek it? Or, is school board service viewed more

along the lines of community service? This question has important gender implications. As women are more likely to serve at the school board level than in any other level of government, whether or not they see school board service as the first step in a longer political career has serious consequences for the political pipeline argument. Is service on the school board more likely to be viewed as a stepping stone by women, perhaps because it is more accessible to them than other offices, than by men? Or do women view school board service as a separate track altogether? At the heart of this issue is political ambition and whether men and women run for political office for different reasons.

The data for this study come from a cross-sectional, national survey of school board candidates drawn from a random sample of school districts that I conducted in 1998 (N=671; 55% response rate). I find that among the respondents to the national survey, 38% were women, which is close to the national average of women currently serving on school boards. In many ways, women and men candidates are similar in terms of their socioeconomic backgrounds. Women school board candidates (23%), however, are almost twice as likely as men candidates (12%) to come from a professional education background, which is consistent with previous studies on the background of school board members. Of all survey respondents, 62% won their races. When broken down by gender, women candidates won 65% of their races, compared with 61% of men—a difference that is not statistically significant. Moreover, when additional controls are introduced in a logistic regression analysis, gender remains insignificant (instead, incumbency is the major explanatory variable in predicting the success of school board candidates). However, women candidates do fare better in at-large elections than men, which is not surprising given that previous research indicates that there is a tendency for women to be elected in “at-large” or multi-member district elections at both the municipal and state legislative level.

Although women are just as likely as men to win when they decide to become school board candidates, men and women appear to weigh different factors in their decision to run for school board. Women are more likely than men to rely on the encouragement of family and friends before they seek out a

school board position, which suggests that family obligations weigh heavier on the minds of women candidates. Indeed, women are more likely than men to say that having children in the schools is what prompted their decision to run for school board in the first place.

This study finds that other important gender dimensions exist when it comes to political ambition. Men are significantly more likely than women to say that they run for school board with the hope of both gaining political experience as well as affecting local education policy. Women, meanwhile, are more likely to indicate that the social reasons, such as working with like-minded individuals on a school board, are what propelled their decision to become school board candidates. In some ways, these findings run counter to other work on political ambition and higher political office, in which the “ambition gap” appears to be closing between men and women and that women are even more likely than men to say that issues are what matter in their decisions to become engaged in politics.

Of course, the findings from this study might demonstrate that school board elections are a unique case when compared to other sorts of elections. While men are more likely than women to say that gaining political experience for a run for higher office was important in their decision to become a school board candidate, the fact remains that relatively few men or women feel that this reason was important. Both men and women are more likely to indicate that social and community reasons are what prompted their candidacies. Although men may be more ready than women to use school boards as the first step in their political pipeline, the chances of candidates of either sex doing so are slim. Those individuals who wish to recruit well qualified women (or men) to run for higher political office may wish to do so from other arenas besides school boards.

### **The Governor's Race in Hokkaido: The Election of a Female Governor and its Impact**

—Masako Aiuchi,  
*Hokkaido Asaigakuen University*

In April 2003, Hokkaido voters elected their first female governor,

Harumi Takahashi, during the 15<sup>th</sup> General Local Election. She became the fourth female governor in Japan, following those governors elected in Osaka, Kumamoto, and Chiba. The election of a female governor is quite a recent phenomenon in Japan, and there are both similarities and differences in the political conditions that supported this development in each prefecture. Recent efforts to devolve power from the national government have increased the power and responsibility of the prefectural governments in general, and of governors specifically. Both constituencies and political scientists are concerned with whether women will make a difference as governors during this critical period. This paper examines Harumi Takahashi's election as Hokkaido governor, focusing on the political party's recruiting process as well as the campaign strategies used by her followers. This campaign, like many others, raised the question of whether a candidate's gender should be emphasized to appeal to voters.

Nine people, two of them women, campaigned for the office of governor of Hokkaido. In the beginning of the campaign, Takahashi and her followers were reluctant to emphasize her gender. The other female candidate, Takako Itoh, was a former Diet member and third-time challenger in the governor's race who chose to target the general public and not take up feminist issues. When several opinion polls showed voters were dissatisfied with the candidates' vague policy perspectives, Takahashi's camp swiftly changed its strategy, specifically taking up women's issues to target female voters. In her manifest, Takahashi tried to distinguish herself from other candidates by declaring she would develop legislation to support child rearing and give financial aid to women entrepreneurs.

The exit poll showed that the majority of women voted for male candidates; thus, the candidate's gender did not have a strong impact on voter choice in the Hokkaido governor's race. Takahashi failed to mobilize women partly because her career as an elite bureaucrat and her affiliation with a conservative party gave many feminists the impression that she was simply “a man with a skirt on.” Ultimately, Takahashi's victory was brought about by the Clean Party's decision to endorse her at virtually the last moment of the race.