

Article: “Women Running for Congress: An Overview of the 2002 Elections”

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Issue: Jan. 2004

Journal: *PS: Political Science & Politics*



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“proxy of the citizens”; thus, each seat belongs to the citizens, not to individual office holders. This results in each political position being transferred to another member after eight or 12 years. Netto also requires assembly members to share their salaries with the organization, which means that representatives do not have to fund their own re-elections, because Netto uses the pooled salary money to pay its members’ campaign expenses.

Most Netto members were initially wives and mothers concerned with quality of life issues such as garbage recycling. Participation in COOP activities and community-based volunteer work raised these housewives’ political consciousness. As women began winning elections to public office, they found themselves responsible for both domestic work and their new political roles. This experience shifted their concerns from matters of daily community life to women’s issues.

When a woman wants to see more women in political office, she either needs to run herself or identify another woman candidate to support. The “Back-up Schools,” established in the 1990s to train women in the election process, help women develop knowledge, skills, and political networks that support their ability to get elected. One of the most outstanding Back-up Schools in Japan is the one sponsored by the Fusae Ichikawa Memorial Association (FIMA) in Tokyo. Over 300 women from all over Japan attended FIMA programs from 1994 to 2002, including incumbent assemblywomen, would-be candidates, and campaign managers. Because more than 80% of candidates trained there have won elections, most on modest budgets, FIMA has attracted considerable public attention. When these candidates won their elections, most became the first woman to serve on the local assembly, or at least the first woman running as Independent. As feminists or alternative candidates who oppose the status quo, these representatives are often isolated in the assembly. Although they work hard making speeches, distributing political information to their communities, and performing their other duties, it is difficult for these “lone sheep” to maintain their seats in the local assemblies.

The goal of the Simulation Women’s Assemblies (SWA) held by local governments is to promote women’s participation in the political decision-making process. On the day the SWA is held, participants meet in the formal

assembly hall, select a chairperson, and conduct a mock session. In the 2003 election, participation in SWA gave women who had been working as volunteers in their communities the opportunity to secure the approval of local bosses, who have considerable influence over the nomination process in small towns and villages. The women candidates’ competence was publicly confirmed in the widely distributed government newsletters that provided coverage of the SWA sessions, which revealed that women possess the interest, dedication, and skills to serve as elected officials.

This paper identifies the primary factors supporting women’s recent political advancement. More women are demanding that they be represented in government, and more women who are interested in politics now have the opportunity to receive the training they need to run for office. As it becomes less exceptional for women to run for office, and women develop more extensive networks, it becomes easier for women candidates to receive the support they need to win elections. A second condition supporting women’s political advancement is the public’s growing distrust of established political parties during this period of economic stagnation. With the demographic composition of Japan shifting due to a low birth rate and an aging population, there has been an increase in diverse lifestyles. More people are choosing to vote for candidates who represent alternatives to the status quo, namely women, young men, and non-partisan candidates. Furthermore, men are increasingly retreating from the political arena because the profitability of holding office has declined. This is a golden opportunity for women to challenge the old boys’ political network.

Women Running for Congress: An Overview of the 2002 Elections

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Media commentators and political scientists alike referred to the 1992 elections as ‘The Year of the Woman’ because of the unprecedented numbers of women running in and winning congressional elections. Women’s remarkable successes in that year have been attributed to a variety of factors:

the large number of open seats due to redistricting and congressional retirements, strong anti-incumbency sentiments among voters combined with public perceptions of female candidates as honest outsiders, and women’s perceived strengths in dealing with issues on the national agenda such as sexual harassment and health care (Palley 1993).

In 2002, redistricting once again created a healthy number of open seats, but voters seemed less bothered by ‘politics as usual’ than in 1992 and stereotypically masculine issues such as terrorism and the impending war with Iraq topped the national agenda. Not surprisingly, female candidates did less well in 2002 than in 1992. Why is this the case?

This paper provides an overview of the 2002 congressional elections, examining three questions in particular. First, did women run disproportionately as sacrificial lambs, or in districts where they had no realistic chance of winning? Second, how successful were female candidates in raising campaign funds in 2002? Finally, did women’s campaign slogans convey an image of tough, aggressive women ready to tackle the nation’s problems or did they stick to touting more stereotypically feminine traits and areas of policy expertise in their campaign communications?

In almost all respects, female congressional candidates fared as well as similarly situated male candidates in 2002. They faced similar competition in their primary election bids, won their primary races at rates comparable to their male colleagues, raised more money than male candidates, on average, and had similar success rates in November. The only area where female candidates did less well than male candidates was in competing for open seats, and here their success rates were significantly lower than men’s and noticeably lower than women’s success rates in the 1992 congressional elections. While women won 56.4% of their open seat contests in 1992, they were successful in only 31.3% of these elections in 2002 (CAWP 2002).

Without public opinion data, it is premature to conclude that the political climate and influence of voter stereotypes sunk women’s candidacies in 2002. The bulk of existing research on voter stereotypes hints that such a factor may have mattered, though (Alexander and Andersen 1993; Mueller 1986; Rosenwasser and Seale 1988; Sanbonmatsu 2002; Sapiro

1981–1982). And it does not appear that female candidates in 2002 congressional races went to any special lengths to assuage voter stereotypes by touting their own masculine traits and capabilities. A cursory look at the campaign slogans used by women and men in the 2002 congressional elections demonstrate that both sexes used sex-role appropriate slogans most of the time.¹ Neither sex emphasized their leadership over military issues or defense policy, but women more often included the words families or values in their campaign slogan while men more often stressed their leadership and strength. Thus, female candidates did not fashion campaign slogans to counter voter stereotypes, but instead stuck to emphasizing stereotypically feminine policy issues and personality traits on the campaign trail.

Women's Political Participation at the State and Local Level in the United States

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In the United States, approximately 550,000 offices are filled through the electoral process, with only 537 of those being at the federal level. However, research focuses primarily on forms of participation related to federal level politics. At the state level, research has emphasized electoral contests for state executive offices and legislatures. Given the policy making, implementation, and enforcement responsibilities of state, local, and special district units of government, more attention to patterns of participation at state and local levels is warranted. The paper summarized here examines rates of women candidates' electoral success in 2002 and trends in women's success in winning elections as well as the mass public's participation in non-electoral political activities.

Participation in Non-Electoral Forms of Political Activity

Are women more or less likely than men to engage in non-electoral political activities? In both 2000 and 2002 women were less likely than men to work with others on local community issues, to express their views on a public issue to public officials, and to attend a meeting about a school or community issue. Only a very small por-

tion of either men or women report participating in a protest or demonstration.¹

Holding Elective and Appointive Offices and Trends in Office Holding

To what extent do women seek elective office at the state and local level? How successful are they in winning office? What are the trends in holding state or local elective office? Women's representation in state legislatures has increased substantially since 1973. In that year, women held 5.6% of state legislative seats. Prior to the 2002 election women held 22.7% of state legislative seats, while in 2003 they held 22.3% (CAWP 2003a). In 2002, 501 women were candidates in state senate races and 58.3% were elected. In that same year, 1,843 women were candidates for state house seats and 61.7% were elected. Women's electoral success in state legislative contests varied substantially from state to state (CAWP 2003d; 2003e; 2003f), with incumbency playing a very important role in electoral success. In the 2002 elections to the lower chamber of state legislatures, 94% of the women incumbents seeking re-election won and 75% of the women elected were incumbents. In state senate elections, 95% of the women running for re-election won and 77% of the women elected were incumbents (CAWP 2003d; 2003e; 2003f). Other explanations for patterns of women's representation in state legislatures focus on differences in the states' political cultures, the use of multi-member legislative districts (Rule 1999), and the candidate pool, with increased proportions of women in the workforce and in professional occupations being related to increased representation of women in state legislatures (Ford and Dolan 1999).

Women have less frequently held executive offices at the state and local level. Six women served as state governors in 2003. Only 24 women have ever held the post of governor, with 16 elected in their own right, three replacing their husbands, and five succeeding to the governorship under constitutional provisions. Women have been more successful in obtaining election to other state-wide offices. Of the 273 state-wide elected offices other than governors, women held 27.3% in 2003 (CAWP 2003b; 2003c).

Women are more likely to seek and to be elected to local offices at the city and county levels. Of the 243 cities with a population over 100,000, women served as mayors in 37 and as mayors

in 14 of the 100 largest (CAWP 2003b). In 2002, women served as mayors in 206 cities with a population greater than 30,000, or 17% of the cities of that size. In comparison, in 1977, 6.2% of cities of that size had women mayors, and by 1997, 20.6% of cities of that size had women mayors (Costello, Miles, and Stone 1998, 361, Table 8.3).

One hypothesis explaining patterns of state and local office holding is the desirability thesis: "The higher the level of office and the more power the office has, the less likely a woman is to be elected" (Darcy, Welch, and Clark 1994, 44). Support for that explanation is provided by research on the types of cities in which women serve as mayors or city council members. Women are more likely to serve as mayors in cities in which the post is part-time and more likely to be city council members in cities with large councils, those which do not pay council members, or those with term limits for city council members (MacManus and Bullock 1996).

The proportion of county level and school board offices held by women has increased substantially, with the proportion of county commissioner posts growing from 3% in 1975 to 24% in 1998. The proportion of school board positions held by women rose from 25.7% in 1978 to 44% in 1997 (MacManus et al. 1999).

Discussion

In both 2000 and 2002 women were less likely than men to engage in several forms of non-electoral political activity. Why might women participate less? The social context of women's lives may limit their opportunities to participate, with family and work responsibilities restricting the time available for political activities.

Turning to serving in elective office, the proportion of offices, such as state-wide elected officials, state legislators, and mayors, held by women increased from the 1960s to the late 1990s or 2000. By 2002, however, the proportion of state legislators who were women decreased, as did the proportion of mayoral offices held by women. Why? In the case of state legislators, two factors appear to be at work. One is the effect of term limits. Research indicates that women legislators forced from office by term limits are not being replaced by other women (Carroll and Jenkins 2002). Obviously, term limits remove the effect of incumbency. A second factor may be the required redistricting of state legislative districts. Those districts may have been