

**Article: “Women's Political Participation at the State and Local Level in the United States”**

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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.<sup>1</sup> 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

—M. Margaret Conway,  
*University of Florida*

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.<sup>1</sup>

### 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

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,  
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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**

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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