

Article: “Whatever Happened to the Year of the Woman: Lessons from the 1992 and 2002 Elections”

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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,
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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

—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