



Democrats, Republicans, and the Prospects for Women Candidates in Election 2012

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How is 2012 shaping up in the long march of women, the U.S. majority, toward claiming their share of national public offices? We know that the Democrats and Republicans are running all-male slates for president and vice president, but what about Congress? This should be an especially promising year – the chance for another “Year of the Woman” comparable to 1992, when record numbers of women ran and unusually large numbers won. That year actually turned out to be more a “year of the *Democratic* woman” than an across-the-board change in both parties, and the same pattern in shaping up for 2012.

Why 2012 Should be Promising for Women

The 2012 election is the first following the 2010 Census. Many states have redrawn districts, so new openings have emerged for which would-be candidates often wait for up to a decade. Newcomers have the best chance to succeed in freshly drawn districts and in redrawn districts where re-situated incumbents must appeal to new voters. These are ideal situations for women candidates to run without having to face off against already ensconced male opponents.

But openings are only one part of the gender equation. The other part is the willingness of parties to encourage, support, and nominate female candidates. In 2012, we see a lopsided story for Democrats versus Republicans – the latest chapter in a saga unfolding over several elections.

Looking Back at 2008 and 2010

Neither the two major U.S. political parties recruits women candidates or nominates them for office in anything close to the presence of qualified women in the population. But Democrats have been doing markedly better in recent elections.

Let's start with 2008, admittedly a year in which Democrats were expected to thrive.

- Women were the candidates on the Democratic tickets for 97 House races that year – making women 22.3 percent of all the Democrats who ran for the House. That is a low percentage, but higher than on the other side of the aisle. Republicans nominated only 37 women – less than ten percent of the GOPers who competed for House seats in 2008.
- The overall party balance among elected Congressional representatives in 2008 gave Democratic women a three to one advantage over Republican women in both the Senate and the House. That year brought the highest disproportion between Democratic and Republican female members of the House since

1934, and the highest disproportion ever in the Senate.

- Looking deeper into the pipeline, the absolute number of Republican women elected to state legislatures in 2008 declined to the lowest point since 1988, reversing two decades of steady gains for Republican women. In 2008, Republican women constituted only a third of all female candidates for state legislative office, and just over half of them won their contests. More females ran on Democratic tickets, and two-thirds won. If state legislative offices are the stepping stones for higher elective office, Republican women lost ground in 2008, with the low number of female candidates and the relatively high rate of lost contests.

Did things turn around for Republican women in 2010, a very good year for Republicans overall?

Let's take a close look at the House of Representatives, where Republicans won big:

- In a historic "wave" election for their party, Republican women made few gains. Only 47 women won GOP nominations to run for House seats – for a 37% win rate in the primaries. And only 24 Republican women actually won House seats in this very promising year.
- Democrats got shellacked in 2010, but even as their party lost its House majority, 91 Democratic women won their party's nomination (with a 68 percent win rate in primaries). In the end, 49 Democratic women were elected to the House. Even in an "off" year, more Democratic women ran for the House, more were nominated, and more won than was the case for their Republican sisters.

Democrats Do Better – But Both Parties Have a Long Way to Go

Not surprisingly given recent history, twice as many Democratic female incumbents as GOP female incumbents are running for reelection to the House in 2012. Things could, in principle, be better for Republican women running for open seats, but it hasn't turned out that way.

- In an election year with once-a-decade electoral opportunities, fewer Republican women (108 in total) sought nomination by their party than did so two years ago (128). The only good news is that a higher proportion of the Republican women who tried actually won nomination.
- For the Democratic Party in 2012, 69 women are either running for "open" seats or are challenging an incumbent of the other party. Meanwhile, only 26 GOP women are running for open seats or as challengers.
- The partisan imbalance for elected women will increase in 2012. In the House, the presence of GOP women grew a bit in 2010, but there are still twice as many Democratic women in the House. In 2012, prospects are not good for Republican women to gain ground in the House.

Some may shrug their shoulders and say it is not surprising that Democratic women candidates do better. Women voters, after all, have preferred Democrats since the 1980s. But office-holding and voter preferences need not develop in parallel. Politically active Republican women, like Democratic women, are diverse, smart, well educated, and willing to run and to serve – if only their party recruits them and supports them.

In 2012, neither party really stands out for advancing reasonable and equitable numbers of women. Democrats are building on past gains. Yet despite extra open Congressional seats this year, both parties have nominated relatively small numbers of women. The Republican Party, especially, has repeatedly fallen short in encouraging and advancing talented women politicians. My advice to both parties is this: Man up. Nominate – and elect – a lot more women.