

THE WIDENING PARTISAN GENDER GAP IN THE U.S. CONGRESS

by Karen Beckwith, Case Western Reserve University

In many ways, America's 2012 elections brought government as usual. As an incumbent president was reelected, his party gained nine House seats and two Senate seats – and women continued to be greatly under-represented in Congress.

Only twenty women are found among the 100 U.S. Senators, and 13 of these are the first women to represent their state. Women hold only 77 seats in the House, fewer than 18%. Four U.S. states have never sent a woman to Congress: Delaware, Iowa, Mississippi and Vermont. The U.S. ranks 77th among the world's nations in women's representation in the lower legislative chamber – right behind Sao Tome and Principe and just ahead of Madagascar. Not counting ties, the U.S. actually ranks 92nd.

Before the 2012 elections, *USA Today* had predicted another “Year of the Woman” given an “upward trend of female candidates for Congress.” What actually happened is better characterized as a relatively good year for Democratic women amidst continuing female under-representation. Although neither major U.S. party has nominated sufficient numbers of women for Congress, Republicans nominate fewer and when GOP women are nominated, they very often lose. The difference between the percentage of women in Democratic Congressional delegations and the percentage of women in GOP Congressional delegations hovered between 7% and 11% from 1993 to 2002, but now it has grown to a remarkable 19.5 %.

A Closer Look at the 2012 House Elections

The details of nominations and victories in contests for the House of Representatives in 2012 tell a lot about what has been happening to spur the partisan gender gap.

- For the House, 118 Democratic women stood as candidates, a 30% increase from the 91 women who ran in 2010. But only 48 Republican women ran in 2012, just one more than stood for election in 2010. Democrats ended up accounting for almost three-quarters of the women running for election to the House in 2012, compared to two-thirds in 2010.
- Electoral successes followed from the contrasting party nomination rates. In 2012, 58 Democratic women were elected to the House (ten more than in 2010). But only 19 Republican women won House seats in 2012 (down by five from 2010).

Lagging nominations and victories for Republican women were especially surprising, because the 2012 elections involved many districts reapportioned following the 2010 Census. New contenders for Congress have their best opportunities in newly drawn districts with no incumbents. In 2012, reapportionment produced eleven new House districts: two in Florida; four in Texas; and one each in Arizona, Georgia, South Carolina, Utah, and Washington.

On the face of it, these new seats presented excellent opportunities for women to run without having to deal with a male incumbent – and the opportunities ought to have been especially good for Republican women, because their party dominates the Congressional delegations of every state with newly created districts except for Washington state.

But the results for female Republicans fell short. Even as Democratic women did well in states that lost or did not gain seats, and also won three seats in newly created House districts in Arizona, Florida and Washington, Republican women did not make gains. No Republican women were nominated for open House seats in Georgia and South Carolina. One Republican woman ran for a House seat in Utah, but she lost. In Texas, where four new seats were added, three non-incumbent Republican women ran for election, but all were defeated.

What Would It Take to Achieve Gender Parity in Congress?

When 1992 was dubbed the “Year of the Woman,” the female Congressional presence doubled. But even if that suddenly happened again, women would still constitute only 35% of the House. American voters would still need to elect 64 more women to the House to achieve gender parity.

Could quotas for women help? Formal or informal quotas have boosted the presence of female delegates to both the Democratic and Republican national conventions. But quotas cannot do much to ensure nominations. Unlike parliamentary parties in many other nations, U.S. political parties do not have sufficient control over nominations nationwide to ensure rough gender equity. Even legal quotas of the kind used in some nations in Latin America, Europe, and Africa could not work to control nominations by state parties in the United States.

The bottom line is that progress for women in the U.S. Congress rests on enhanced recruitment, plus extra material support for female candidates in each major party.

- Democrats have recently launched projects to build on earlier gains. The junior Senator from New York, Kristin Gillibrand, has established the “Off the Sidelines” initiative to publicize women’s under-representation in Congress, encourage more women to run, and improve funding for them. The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee is sponsoring the “Women LEAD” project, chaired by House members Lois Frankel of Florida and Chellie Pingree of Maine “to build a network of people around the country dedicated to electing more women to the House of Representatives.” On the Senate side, Washington’s senior Senator Patty Murray started years ago to organize networks to encourage women candidates and now, as chair of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, she is making special efforts to encourage and support female contenders for the Senate.
- In 1982, the Republican Senatorial Campaign Committee pledged the maximum campaign contribution to any Republican woman who won nomination or considered running for Congress. But in more recent years, the efforts of the Republican National Committee and women’s groups in the party have been largely exhortatory, leaving potential women candidates, like men, largely to their own devices in launching and funding campaigns.

The United States, in sum, continues to have an uphill climb toward ensuring equal representation for women in Congress; and much depends on faster progress by Republicans. To avoid falling still further behind, Republicans may have to revive earlier efforts at formal support, and launch new multi-pronged projects of the sort Democrats have recently created to expand their female contingents in the House and Senate.