

Women's Election to Congress

The first woman elected to the U.S. Congress, Jeannette Rankin, a Republican, took her seat in 1917. Much has changed for women in the United States in the nearly 100 years since. Recent years have seen the highest levels of women's representation in Congress in U.S. history. Change in women's status is embodied by Nancy Pelosi, who made history as the nation's first female Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, serving from 2007 to 2011. But increases in the number of women elected to office are not inevitable; the 2010 elections, in fact, led to a small decline in the number of women in Congress. Today 90 women hold congressional seats, including 61 Democrats and 29 Republicans; women make up only 16.8% of the U.S. House of Representatives and 17.0% of the U.S. Senate.¹

The Performance of Women Candidates

Research shows that women are competitive congressional candidates. For example, Barbara Burrell's study of women's candidates from 1968 to 1992 led her to conclude that women fare as well as men when they seek office.² Her extensive analysis of open-seat primary contests and general election contests for the U.S. House of Representatives focused on the share of votes obtained by female candidates and their success rates. Burrell concluded that it was the scarcity of female candidates, rather than their poor performance, that explained the low representation of women in Congress. The scarcity of women congressional candidates—even at the primary stage—was confirmed in a recent study; between 1958 and 2004, just 8% of primary candidates for the House were women.³

Burrell, among other scholars, also emphasized the problem posed by the incumbency advantage.⁴ Due to name recognition, experience, and resources, incumbent members of Congress have tremendous advantages when they seek reelection, making it difficult for challengers to defeat them. Women and politics scholars view incumbency as an institutional constraint on increasing women's presence in Congress: because most incumbents are male, the incumbency advantage makes it more difficult for relative newcomers, such as women, to win office. Incumbency is not the full story, however. After all, Burrell found that even in open-seat contests--the easiest races for newcomers to win-- women were running at low rates. Open-seat opportunities appear to be a necessary but insufficient condition for increasing the presence of women in Congress.⁵

The importance of open seats is illustrated by the banner year of 1992. The media seem to regard every election year as a potential "Year of the Woman," but most researchers regard 1992 as "The Year of the Woman." A perfect storm of factors in 1992 led to an unusual number of open seat contests, creating a favorable political context for women.⁶ A record number of women sought congressional office in 1992: 11 women won major party nominations for Senate seats and 106 for House seats.⁷ And a record number—53 women—served in Congress following the election, increasing women's presence from 6% of members of Congress to 10%.⁸

The year 1992 was a redistricting year. Every ten years, states must revisit the boundaries of their legislative districts to account for changes in population and ensure that districts are composed of equal numbers of residents. As a result, some legislators retire rather than run for reelection in newly configured districts. In addition to openings created by redistricting, a scandal in Congress related to use of the House bank led to a high number of retirements. Moreover, the Senate confirmation hearings of Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas and

the sexual harassment allegations of his former colleague Anita Hill riveted the nation, calling attention to the issue of sexual harassment; Thomas' confirmation hearings before an all-male Judiciary Committee spotlighted the dearth of women in the Senate. The year 1992 marked a turning point for women's congressional candidacies, but almost all of the newly elected women were Democrats.⁹

Women's PACs have helped recruit, train, and fund women candidates since the 1970s, and in 1992 they played a key role and helped women candidates take advantage of the available opportunities.¹⁰ The 1992 election also put a spotlight on the rise and success of the political action committee (PAC) called EMILY's List. Founded in 1985, EMILY's List bundles contributions on behalf of pro-choice Democratic women candidates. In 1992, it claimed to contribute \$6 million to women candidates.¹¹

Despite the competitiveness of women candidates, the watershed year of 1992, and the help of women's PACs, we have not seen a comparable rise in the number of women in Congress since 1992.¹² On the bright side, studies continue to show that women and men's success rates are similar once incumbency is taken into account.¹³ But other research findings show that women are not yet on an equal footing with men.

Women-Friendly Districts

Research by Barbara Palmer and Dennis Simon shows that women are more likely to be elected from what they call "women-friendly districts."¹⁴ They analyze the demographics of House districts over time to determine the types of districts that have been more likely to send a woman to Congress, finding that the types of districts that favor Democrats (or Republicans) in House contests differ for women and men. Interestingly, the stories are different for the two

parties, and the Democratic women's story differs by race. White Democratic women are elected from districts that are more liberal, urban, educated, diverse, and higher-income than Democratic men. Republican women are more likely to represent districts that are less conservative and more urban and diverse than Republican men. Meanwhile, the districts that elect African American women to Congress—all of whom are Democrats—resemble the districts that elect African American men. These districts tend to be majority minority districts. What these patterns mean is that not all congressional districts are equally likely to elect a woman and that women's opportunities for office depends on place. The states have also developed different reputations for the climate facing women; some states have never had a woman U.S. Senator, and many states' congressional delegations today do not include any women.¹⁵

Heather Ondercin and Susan Welch propose that electing women to Congress can be conceptualized as a political innovation: the idea or practice of electing a woman can be thought to spread or diffuse to other locations. They explain: "Districts that have innovated by electing women are more likely to later have women candidates and representatives. In these districts, women are encouraged to run, and voters, witnessing the past success of women candidates, appear more ready to vote for them again."¹⁶

New Research Areas

Most research about the success of women candidates has focused on the general election stage. But new research about congressional primaries has identified important gender differences.¹⁷ Incumbent women candidates appear to be at a disadvantage in primary races. For example, in an analysis spanning from 1956 to 2006, Palmer and Simon find that a women incumbent is more likely than a man to face a primary opponent, suggesting that potential

opponents may view female incumbents as more vulnerable than male incumbents. Interestingly, Palmer and Simon also find that women are more likely to compete against female incumbents than male incumbents, and that women are more likely to enter a primary if the opposing party's incumbent is female. Because of these patterns of candidate entry and the concentration of female candidates in districts already represented by women, Palmer and Simon conclude that increasing the number of women candidates will not necessarily increase the overall level of women's representation in Congress.

Early studies of women's congressional candidacies did not take candidate quality into account, meaning that we have not known if women must be more qualified in order to yield success rates similar to those of men. Using a new measure of candidate quality, Sarah Fulton finds that being a woman negatively affected the vote share of incumbent congressional candidates in 1998 once candidate quality is taken into account.¹⁸ She concludes that "relative to men, women have to work harder at developing greater political quality to be equally competitive." Her measure of candidate quality is based on surveys of "informants" (party activists and potential challengers) that assess each incumbent's character, accomplishments, and skills.

In a similar vein, other scholars are arguing that the barriers women candidates face in their bids for office make for more strategic decision-making compared with men. Kathryn Pearson and Eric McGhee, in a study extending from 1982 to 2002, demonstrate that women congressional candidates are more likely than men to have previous electoral experience and to enter winnable races.¹⁹ Likewise, in a provocative new study, Sarah Anzia and Christopher Berry contend that because of either gender bias or women's anticipation of bias, women outperform men to win congressional office; as a consequence, "better" women candidates make for "better"

legislators.²⁰ Anzia and Berry find that women members between 1984 and 2004 were more likely than men to bring home federal dollars and were more likely to sponsor and co-sponsor legislation. In another new study that extends from 1973 to 2008, Craig Volden, Alan Wiseman, and Dana Wittmer also find that women are more effective members of Congress.²¹

More studies are needed about how parties, interest groups, PACs, and donors affect the emergence and success of women candidates, as well as how the gender gap in ambition for Congress can be closed.²² Candidate recruitment is particularly needed for Republican women. While Democratic women compose 25% of all Democrats in the House and Senate, Republican women are only 10% of Republicans. Because half of women members of Congress served previously in the state legislatures, the discrepancy between women's representation in the two parties in the state legislatures is partly to blame.²³ The stereotype that women legislators are more liberal than men can help a Republican woman with general election voters but can limit the likelihood that she can successfully win the Republican nomination.²⁴

To better understand the low numbers of women in Congress, more analysis of how women reach state legislative office is needed.²⁵ State legislative service does not always translate to congressional service. Sarah Fulton and her coauthors found in a 1998 study of state legislators that gender affects ambition for a House seat in direct and indirect ways.²⁶ For example, because women legislators are older than male legislators, they are less likely to be interested in running for Congress; meanwhile, the presence of children at home decreases women's ambition for Congress while increasing men's. Likewise, Mack Mariani identifies a role for age and occupation in explaining the relationship between state legislative officeholding and congressional candidacy, noting that women state legislators tend to be older and less likely to hold the occupations that lead to running for Congress.²⁷

In addition, the underrepresentation of women of color in Congress requires more research. Only one woman of color—Carol Moseley Braun of Illinois—has ever served in the U.S. Senate; no woman of color serves in the U.S. Senate today. Women of color in Congress are typically elected from majority-minority districts.²⁸ But women of color ought to be able to win election from a broader range of districts, suggesting the need for more research on the possible resource deficits and challenges that party leader beliefs may play in limiting their opportunities.

Jennifer L. Lawless and Sean Theriault demonstrate that increasing the number of new women who reach Congress is not enough to ensure that women's congressional officeholding will increase with time; we must also determine whether women's careers take the same form as men's, and whether women retire at the same rates and for the same reasons.²⁹ Lawless and Theriault's analysis of members of Congress between 1983 and 2002 showed that "career ceilings" are more likely to affect women's retirement decisions than men's; in other words, women who have had long careers in Congress without achieving positions of leadership are less likely than men to remain in the institution. The implication is that more women would have to be elected over time just for women to maintain their current level of representation.

The role of campaign funding has generated attention from congressional scholars, but many questions remain. The escalating costs of campaigns and the role that self-financing plays in congressional races suggest that this is a critical question for analysis. Studies show that women and men raise comparable funds when they run in similar types of races.³⁰ We know less about how resources shape congressional candidate emergence, however, or primary election success.

Further Reading

Palmer, Barbara and Dennis Michael Simon. [*Breaking the Political Glass Ceiling: Women and Congressional Elections*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2008.](#)

This indispensable account of women's rise in Congress over time primarily examines the period between 1956 and 2006, providing historical background on women's presence in both the House and Senate. Chapters consider such factors as ambition, primary and general elections, and party differences among women. Most important, Palmer and Simon identify and describe the nature of "women-friendly" districts that are more favorable to electing a woman to Congress. Informative tables provide details on topics such as women's biographical backgrounds, and charts present useful statistics about women's presence and performance in congressional elections.

Reingold, Beth. [*Legislative Women: Getting Elected, Getting Ahead*. Boulder, Colo: Lynne Rienner, 2008.](#)

This edited volume focuses on women as legislators, examining both their election to legislative office and their behavior once elected. Chapters concern such topics as the presence and performance of women as congressional primary candidates over time, the role of race and gender within state legislatures, the relationship between gender and committee assignments, and access to congressional leadership positions. By examining voters, candidates, and legislators within one book, Reingold assesses the state of knowledge about women legislators and suggests directions for additional research.

Lawless, Jennifer L. and Kathryn Pearson. "The Primary Reason for Women's Underrepresentation? Reevaluating the Conventional Wisdom." [*Journal of Politics* 70.1 \(2008\): 67-82.](#)

This article presents a comprehensive statistical analysis of women candidates in congressional primaries from 1958 to 2004. Lawless and Pearson find that women have been a mere 8% of all primary candidates for the U.S. House of Representatives. They also find that women have performed well when they have competed in primaries. However, they find some evidence of gender differences in women's elections and conclude that women are not yet on a level playing field with men.

¹ Center for American Women and Politics, ["Women in Elective Office 2012,"](#) (New Brunswick, NJ: Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP), National Information Bank on Women in Public Office, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University, 2012).

² Barbara Burrell, [*A Woman's Place is in the House: Campaigning for Congress in the Feminist Era*, \(Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994\).](#)

³ Lawless, Jennifer L. and Pearson, Kathryn. "The Primary Reason for Women's Underrepresentation? Reevaluating the Conventional Wisdom." [*Journal of Politics* 70.1 \(2008\): 67-82.](#)

⁴ Susan J. Carroll, [*Women as Candidates in American Politics*, 2nd ed, \(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994\);](#) R. Darcy, Susan Welch, and Janet Clark, [*Women, Elections and Representation*, \(Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1994\).](#)

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- ⁵ Gaddie, R. K. and Bullock III, C. S. "Congressional Elections and the Year of the Woman: Structural and Elite Influences on Female Candidacies." *Social Science Quarterly* 76.4 (1995): 749-762.
- ⁶ [Carroll 1994](#); Clyde Wilcox, "Why Was 1992 the "Year of the Woman"? Explaining Women's Gains in 1992," *The Year of the Woman: Myths & Realities*, eds. Elizabeth Adell Cook, Sue Thomas, and Clyde Wilcox, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994) 1-24.
- ⁷ Center for American Women and Politics, ["Women Candidates for Congress 1974-2010,"](#) (New Brunswick, NJ: Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP), National Information Bank on Women in Public Office, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University, 2010).
- ⁸ [Center for American Women and Politics, 2012.](#)
- ⁹ [Wilcox 1994.](#)
- ¹⁰ [Carroll 1994.](#)
- ¹¹ [Wilcox 1994](#), 11.
- ¹² Richard L. Fox, "Congressional Elections: Women's Candidacies and the Road to Gender Parity," *Gender and Elections: Shaping the Future of American Politics*, eds. Susan J. Carroll and Richard L. Fox, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 187-209.
- ¹³ [Lawless and Pearson 2008](#); [Fox 2010.](#)
- ¹⁴ Barbara Palmer and Dennis Michael Simon, *Breaking the Political Glass Ceiling: Women and Congressional Elections, Women in American politics, 2nd ed.*, (New York: Routledge, 2008).
- ¹⁵ [Fox 2010.](#)
- ¹⁶ H. L. Ondercin and S. Welch, "Women Candidates for Congress," *Women and Elective Office: Past, Present, and Future*, Second Edition, eds. Sue Thomas and Clyde Wilcox, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 60-80, quote 77.
- ¹⁷ [Lawless and Pearson 2008](#); [Palmer and Simon 2008.](#)
- ¹⁸ Sarah A. Fulton, Running Backwards and in High Heels: The Gendered Quality Gap and Incumbent Electoral Success, *Political Research Quarterly* (forthcoming).
- ¹⁹ Kathryn Pearson and Eric McGhee, Strategic Differences: The Gender Dynamics of Congressional Candidacies, 1982-2002 (2004). Paper presented at the Midwest Political Science Association Annual Meeting, Chicago, IL.
- ²⁰ Anzia, Sarah F. and Berry, Christopher R. "The Jackie (and Jill) Robinson Effect: Why Do Congresswomen Outperform Congressmen?" *American Journal of Political Science* 55.3 (2011): 478-493.
- ²¹ Volden, Craig, Alan Wiseman, and Dana Wittmer. [The Legislative Effectiveness of Women in Congress. 2010.](#) Working paper.
- ²² Jennifer L. Lawless and Richard L. Fox, *It Still Takes a Candidate: Why Women Don't Run for Office*, Rev. ed (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Jennifer L. Lawless and Richard L. Fox, "Men Rule: The Continued Under-Representation of Women in U.S. Politics," (Washington, D.C.: Women & Politics Institute, 2012).
- ²³ Elder, Laurel. "Whither Republican Women: The Growing Partisan Gap among Women in Congress." *Forum-A Journal of Applied Research in Contemporary Politics* 6.1 (2008); Kira Sanbonmatsu, Susan J. Carroll, and Debbie Walsh, "Poised to Run: Women's Pathways to the State Legislatures," (Center for American Women and Politics, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University, 2009).
- ²⁴ Koch, Jeffrey W. "Do Citizens Apply Gender Stereotypes to Infer Candidates' Ideological Orientations?" *Journal of Politics* 62.2 (2000): 414-429; King, David C. and Matland, Richard E. "Sex and the Grand Old Party: An Experimental Investigation of the Effect of Candidate Sex on Support for a Republican Candidate." *American Politics Research* 31.6 (2003): 595-612.
- ²⁵ [Sanbonmatsu, Carroll, and Walsh 2009](#); Kira Sanbonmatsu, *Where Women Run: Gender and Party in the American States*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006).
- ²⁶ Fulton, Sarah A., Maestas, Cherie D., Maisel, L. Sandy, and Stone, Walter J. "The Sense of a Woman: Gender, Ambition, and the Decision to Run for Congress." *Political Research Quarterly* 59 (2006): 235-248.
- ²⁷ Mariani, Mack D. "A Gendered Pipeline? The Advancement of State Legislators to Congress in Five States." *Politics & Gender* 4.2 (2008): 285-308.
- ²⁸ Hardy-Fanta, C., Lien, P. T., Pinderhughes, D. M., and Sierra, C. M. "Gender, Race, and Descriptive Representation in the United States: Findings from the Gender and Multicultural Leadership Project." *Journal of Women Politics & Policy* 28.3-4 (2006): 7-41.
- ²⁹ Lawless, Jennifer L. and Theriault, Sean M. "Will She Stay or Will She Go? Career Ceilings and Women's Retirement from the U.S. Congress." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 30.4 (2005): 581-596.

³⁰ [Fox 2010](#); Barbara Burrell, "Political Parties, Fund-raising, and Sex," (*Legislative Women: Getting Elected, Getting Ahead*, ed. Beth Reingold, Lynne Rienner, 2008) 41-58.