

## 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 then. 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, brought a small decline in the number of women in Congress.

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Growth for women is occurring, but very slowly. Today 104 women hold congressional seats, including 76 Democrats and 28 Republicans; women make up only 19.3% of the U.S. House of Representatives and 20.0% of the U.S. Senate.<sup>1</sup> While women congressional candidates face similar experiences to men candidates in many ways, women remain much less likely than men to run for Congress. And a large partisan gap persists among the women who run and serve.

### THE PERFORMANCE OF WOMEN CANDIDATES

Research shows that women are competitive congressional candidates. In the most comprehensive analyses to date—extending from 1968 to 2012—Barbara Burrell concludes that women fare as well as men when they run for Congress.<sup>2</sup> Her extensive studies of primary and general election contests for the U.S. House of Representatives largely focus on the share of votes obtained by

female candidates, their success rates, and their fundraising ability. Burrell concludes that it is the scarcity of female candidates, rather than their poor performance, that explains the underrepresentation of women in Congress. The scarcity of women congressional candidates—even at the primary stage—was also found in a study by Jennifer L. Lawless and Kathryn Pearson: between 1958 and 2004, just 8% of primary candidates for the House were women.<sup>3</sup>

Burrell and other scholars emphasize the structural problem of incumbency.<sup>4</sup> Due to name recognition, experience, and resources, incumbent members of Congress are significantly advantaged when they seek reelection, making it difficult for challengers to run against them. Women members, like men members, benefit from incumbency. Nevertheless, women and politics scholars view incumbency as an institutional constraint: because most incumbents are male, the incumbency advantage makes it more difficult for relative newcomers, such as women, to win.

Incumbency is not the full story, however. After all, Burrell finds that even in open-seat contests, which are the easiest races for newcomers to win, women are running at low rates. Open-seat opportunities are a necessary but insufficient condition for increasing the presence of women in Congress.<sup>5</sup>

A great example of the power of open-seat opportunities is the banner year of 1992. It may seem that the media treats every election year as a potential “Year of the Woman”; but for most researchers, 1992 was indeed such a year. A record number of women sought congressional office that year: 11 women won major party nominations for Senate seats and 106 for House seats.<sup>6</sup> And a record number—53 women—served in Congress following the election, increasing women's presence in Congress to 10% from 6%.<sup>7</sup>

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A perfect storm of factors led to an unusual number of open-seat contests in 1992, creating a favorable political context for women.<sup>8</sup> To begin, it 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 put a spotlight on the dearth of women in the Senate. Although 1992 did mark a turning point for women's congressional candidacies, almost all of the newly elected women were Democrats.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the competitiveness of women candidates, the watershed year of 1992, and the help of women's political action committees (PACs), we have not seen a comparable rise in the number of women in Congress since 1992.<sup>10</sup>

On the bright side, some studies beyond Burrell's continue to show that women's and men's success rates are similar once incumbency is taken into account.<sup>11</sup> But while almost all of the research about women congressional candidates is positive and shows improvements for women over time, it is important to put a spotlight on some of the findings that suggest that women are not yet on a completely equal footing with men.

Even Burrell notes a few important exceptions to the general trend that women fare as well, if not better, than male candidates.<sup>12</sup> Women primary winners tend to be more likely to have prior elective experience com-

pared with men, raising the possibility that women have to be "better" than men. These findings are echoed in research by Sarah. Using a new measure of candidate quality, Fulton finds that being a woman negatively affected the vote share of incumbent congressional candidates in 1998 once candidate quality is taken into account.<sup>13</sup> 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. 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.

## Women members between 1984 and 2004 were more likely than men to bring home federal dollars

Kathryn Pearson and Eric McGhee, in a study extending from 1984 to 2010, demonstrate that women congressional candidates are more likely than men to have previous electoral experience and to enter winnable races.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, in a provocative 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup>

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Burrell finds that women incumbents are somewhat more likely than men incumbents to face general election challengers, meaning that women are less likely to have a “free pass” to reelection, similar to past studies.<sup>17</sup> Finally, Burrell also finds that Democratic women running in competitive House districts are less likely than men to win similar races.<sup>18</sup>

There is some debate about whether women face more competition than men at the primary stage. Some studies found that incumbent women candidates are at a disadvantage in primary races.<sup>19</sup> However, Burrell did not find that female congressional candidates usually face more primary competitors than male candidates.<sup>20</sup>

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## PARTY DIFFERENCES

More studies are needed about how parties, interest groups, PACs, and donors affect the emergence and success of women congressional candidates, as well as how the gender gap in ambition for Congress can be closed.<sup>21</sup> The candidate recruitment situation is especially dire for Republican women. While Democratic women are approaching one-third of all Democrats in the House and Senate, Republican women are only 10% of Republicans.<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup>

Research shows that women state legislators are more

reliant on party support than are men and that women, more than men, seek office as a result of recruitment.<sup>25</sup> Overall, women are more likely to arrive in office with encouragement and support compared with men.

One aspect of that support concerns financial support. Because there is more infrastructure in the form of organizations such as EMILY's List on the Democratic side than Republican side, the world of campaign finance and support seems to put Republican women at a tremendous disadvantage compared with Democratic women.<sup>26</sup> Republican women candidates are also less likely to be running as incumbents.

Women's PACs have helped recruit, train, and fund women congressional candidates since the 1970s, and in the 1992 Year of the Woman, they played a key role and helped women candidates take advantage of the available opportunities.<sup>27</sup> One of the most important PACs is 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.<sup>28</sup> Efforts to elect Republican women are much less visible than are Democratic efforts.<sup>29</sup>

Pearson and McGhee's study that extends from 1984 to 2010 finds some important differences across women of the two parties.<sup>30</sup> Nonincumbent Democratic women are running in more favorable districts than are nonincumbent Republican women. Moreover, Republican women are disadvantaged in their general election races even after a host of factors are controlled.

The Republican party is aware of its deficit with women candidates, and some new efforts have emerged to help Republican women win office; at the same time, the party is not monolithic in supporting the goal of electing more women.<sup>31</sup> The Republican party commits very little direct money to primary candidates, and women do not seem to be disadvantaged in this regard.<sup>32</sup>

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Today's Republican voters do seem to perceive women and men candidates differently to some extent, providing both opportunities and challenges. For example, Republicans see women as more emotional than men, but view women as more likely to be honest.<sup>33</sup> On one of the most important traits in today's partisan politics—the ability to work out a compromise—Republican women are advantaged over Republican men.<sup>34</sup>

Many scholars and practitioners emphasize the need for more comprehensive and sustained recruitment efforts on the part of the Republican party, as well as for a stronger infrastructure to support Republican women candidates.<sup>35</sup>

## WOMEN-FRIENDLY DISTRICTS

Geography is an important aspect of women's election to Congress. Barbara Palmer and Dennis Simon show that women are more likely to be elected from what they call "women-friendly districts."<sup>36</sup> 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.

Nonminority Democratic women are elected from districts that are more liberal, urban, educated, diverse, and higher-income than Democratic men.<sup>37</sup> Nonminority Republican women have been more likely to represent districts that are more moderate and more urban and somewhat less racially diverse than Repub-

lican men, although many of the gender differences in district type narrowed between 2002 and 2010 among Republicans. Gender differences among Latina and Latino members of the Congress are similar to the differences among nonminority women and men.

Meanwhile, the congressional districts that elect African American women—all but one of whom are Democrats—largely resemble the districts that elect African American men, except that the women's districts have slightly poorer populations and a slightly smaller percentage of blue-collar workers. 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 depend 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.<sup>38</sup> Three states have never sent a woman to either chamber of Congress.

The election of women to Congress is arguably a "political innovation": the idea or practice of electing a woman can be thought to spread or diffuse to other locations, according to Heather Ondercin and Susan Welch. 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."<sup>39</sup>

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## Future Research Directions

One area for additional research concerns why state legislative service does not always translate into a bid for a congressional seat. 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.<sup>40</sup> 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.<sup>41</sup>

The underrepresentation of women of color in Congress also requires more research. Only two women of color—Carol Moseley Braun of Illinois and Mazie Hirono of Hawaii—have ever served in the U.S. Senate; only Hirono serves today. Women of color in Congress are typically elected from majority-minority districts.<sup>42</sup> 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. The challenges facing women of color in seeking Senate seats may differ from those of men of color, who are also underrepresented.<sup>43</sup>

Few scholars have examined the retirement issue and women's congressional careers. One exception is that 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.<sup>44</sup> 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 some attention from congressional scholars in the past, 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.<sup>45</sup> We know less about how resources shape congressional candidate emergence, however, or primary election success. The effects that *Citizens United* is having on women's congressional bids also warrant continued investigation.<sup>46</sup>

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## Further Reading

Burrell, Barbara. 2014. *Gender in Campaigns for the U.S. House of Representatives*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

This book is a comprehensive investigation of women's congressional candidacies from 1994 to 2012. Burrell examines all stages of congressional elections, the backgrounds and impact of members of Congress, and the role of interest groups, PACs, parties, and gendered themes in congressional elections. The findings paint a positive picture of the playing field for women congressional candidates today, although there are a few areas of gender difference. The book emphasizes the dearth of women entering congressional primaries and the continued importance of incumbency.

Palmer, Barbara and Dennis Michael Simon 2012. *Women and Congressional Elections: A Century of Change*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

This indispensable account of women's rise in Congress over time primarily examines the period between 1956 and 2010, 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 importantly, 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. 2008. *Legislative Women: Getting Elected, Getting Ahead*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.

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.

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