The Year of the Woman? Candidates, Voters, and the 1992 Elections

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The struggle for political power has been long and difficult for women in the United States. The barriers to participation in politics have been both legal and cultural, overt and subtle. In colonial America there were few direct limits on women's participation. However, the combination of franchise restrictions based on property ownership and the overwhelming propensity for property to be held in a man's name meant that few women participated in electoral politics as either voters or officeholders.[1]

In one of the great ironies in American political history, the war for national independence led directly to the overt disenfranchisement of women in the United States. The national constitution left the determination of voter eligibility to the newly formed states. The revolution, with its emphasis on political rights, created pressure for moving away from property-based eligibility for suffrage. In being forced in the writing of their constitutions and their voting laws to confront de jure property-based restrictions, states also had to confront the de facto prohibi-

[1] R. Darcy, Susan Welch, and Janet Clark, *Women, Elections, and Representation* (New York: Longman Press, 1987), 3–6.

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tion that existed for almost all women. By 1807 every state explicitly prohibited women from voting. The impact of these changes were profound. By 1840 over 80 percent of white adult males were eligibile to vote in local, state, and national elections in the United States, up from less than 25 percent at the turn of the century. Over essentially this same period (1807 to 1838) no woman was eligible to vote in any governmental election.[2]

The period from 1838, when Kentucky granted limited suffrage to women, through 1920, when the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution granted women full suffrage, was marked by state-by-state variations in voting rights. While the period after 1869 (when Wyoming became the first territory or state to grant full political equality to women) was one of expanding states' voting rights for women, the vast majority of women were still disenfranchised during the first two decades of the twentieth century.[3]

With the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, women were granted legal access to the ballot box equal to that of men. Initially, their actual exercise of the franchise lagged behind that of men. Moreover, the women who did vote were likely to reflect the vote preferences of their husbands. The women's vote that the early suffragettes had hoped for—women voting as a block for candidates who supported a social reform agenda including child labor laws, minimum wage, health and housing regulations—never materialized.[4] Not until the late 1960s did the gap between men and women in both voter registration and turnout for national elections all but disappear. Since 1980 the turnout rate for women in presidential elections has equalled or exceeded that of men. Given that women make up slightly more than half the adult population, they have constituted an absolute majority of voters in presidential elections since 1964. Similar trends in turnout can be found for nonpresidential elections. In the realm of voting, gender-based de jure and de facto barriers to participation have been removed.[5]

Yet in order for women to make a difference in electoral politics three conditions must be met. First, women's policy concerns must be different from men's; second, candidates must address the issues that women are concerned with, and women must also be able to discern differences among candidates on these issues; and third, women must ultimately be willing to vote for candidates on the basis of their stands on these issues.

[2] Frank Sorauf, *Party Politics in America* (Boston: Little Brown, 1984), 20; Darcy, Welch, and Clark, *Women, Elections, and Representation*, 6-7; Chilton Williamson, *American Suffrage from Property to Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960), 115.

[3] See Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilde Gage, eds., *History of Woman Suffrage* (Rochester, NY: Charles Mann, 1887); Helen L. Sumner, *Equal Suffrage* (New York: Harper, 1909); and Darcy, Welch, and Clark, *Women, Elections, and Representation.*

[4] Sandra Baxter and Marjorie Lansing, *Women and Politics: The Visible Majority* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983), 17-22; Ethel Klein, *Gender Politics: From Consciousness to Mass Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 13-21.

[5] Harold Stanley and Richard Niemi, *Vital Statistics on American Politics* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1990), 80.

Ironically, the traditional women's rights issues, championed by the women's movement, are not the issues over which men and women disagree. These issues include abortion rights, support for the equal rights amendment (ERA), support for legislation guaranteeing equal pay for equal work, and willingness to support women candidates.[6] However, there are gender gap issues that relate to attitudes toward violence, defense spending, nuclear war and power, social welfare programs, and the environment. Scholars have argued that differences in attitudes among men and women on these issues go back to the 1930s. When candidates distinguish themselves on these issues, women are more likely than men to support the candidate with the kinder and gentler policy stance.[7] Clearly 1992 provided the right combination of conditions for linking the gender gap in public opinion with the outcome of the presidential election.

Demonstrating that men and women exercise their franchise with equal regularity is not to suggest that gender equality has been achieved in electoral politics, however. Voting is only half the battle for women to wield political influence proportionate to their numbers. Equally important is for women to be directly involved in the day-to-day process of making public policy. This requires that women be adequately represented in the ranks of local, state, and national elected officials—a point dramatically illustrated during the televised Senate confirmation hearings for Clarence Thomas's appointment to the Supreme Court. And yet here progress for women has lagged far behind. In recent years the percentage of seats in the U.S. House of Representatives held by women has hovered between 5 and 6 percent, barely above the 2 percent held by women in the years immediately following passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. The numbers are even worse in the U.S. Senate, where, before the 1992 elections only two of the seats were held by women and where as recently as 1979 there were no women senators. Of the advanced industrial democracies of Europe and North America, only Great Britain's parliament has had as dismal a record as the U.S. Congress over the past century.[8] Except for Geraldine Ferraro's historic vice presidential bid in 1984, no woman has even been nominated to run for the vice presidency or presidency.

The numbers have been somewhat more encouraging at the state and local level. True, before the 1992 elections only three of the nation's fifty governorships

[6] Robert S. Erikson, Norman R. Luttbeg, and Kent L. Tedin, *American Public Opinion* (New York: Macmillan, 1988), 202–203; Laura L. Vertz, "The New Feminist Politics" in Benjamin Ginsberg and Alan Stone, eds. *Do Elections Matter?* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1986), 136–137.

[7] Erikson, Luttbeg, and Tedin, *American Public Opinion*, 199–202; Kathleen A. Francovic, "Sex and Politics—New Alignments and Old Issues," *PS* 15 (Summer 1982): 439–48; Vertz, "The New Feminist Politics," 138–140; Robert Y. Shapiro and Harpreet Mahajan, "Gender Differences in Policy Preferences: A Summary of Trends from the 1960s to the 1980s," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 50 (Spring 1986): 42–61.

[8] Norman Orstein, Thomas Mann, and Michael Malbin, *Vital Statistics on Congress* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, 1990), 212–265; Darcy, Welch, and Clark, *Women, Elections and Representation*, 67–69.

were held by women. However, in recent years almost 20 percent of other elected state-wide executive offices (for example, lieutenant governor) have been held by women, as have over 15 percent of state legislative seats. And approximately 10 percent of the nations mayors and 20 percent of town and city council members are women. While even the best of these numbers is far below the 51 percent that corresponds to women's proportion of the population, they are significantly higher than the figures for national office summarized above. Indeed, in some states as many as a third of the legislative seats have been held by women.[9] This greater success for women at the state and local level has led some scholars to suggest a kind of trickle-up theory in which women have slowly been working their way up the political ladder. Gains at the national level, according to this argument, are simply a matter of time.[10]

In 1992, women's time may have come. Deemed the Year of the Woman by some, a number of factors combined to open the door wider for women seeking higher office. The end of nearly half a century of cold war and an almost reflexive reaction in the aftermath of the Persian Gulf conflict turned the nation's attention inward to domestic problems. And there was no shortage of problems. A deep and prolonged economic recession combined with twelve years of federal neglect had expanded the ranks of the unemployed, the poor, and the homeless. The nation's economic and transportation infrastructure was inadequate. America's education system seemed to be failing in important ways. Health care costs were spiralling out of control while the quality of health care for most Americans declined. Environmental degradation was reaching crisis proportions. Inner cities, nearly abandoned by federal government, had become tinder boxes for economic and racial conflict. Twentieth-century diseases like AIDS were spreading with alarming speed, while nineteenth-century diseases like tuberculosis were making an ominous comeback.

Why would increased attention to domestic politics be of special advantage to women candidates? In part, because women have been especially hard hit by these problems. Supreme Court decisions in *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services* (1989) and *Rust v. Sullivan* (1991) chipped away at the right to an abortion, reenergizing what had become an admittedly complacent pro-choice movement. Women, who earn on average 60 percent of what men do, suffer disproportionately in a failing economy. As the primary care givers in most families, they most directly feel the pinch of tighter budgets and the pain of inadequate health care. And women are most likely to be victimized by violent crime, a seemingly unavoidable outgrowth of hard economic times and deteriorating inner cities.

The easing of cold war tensions and the ascendancy of domesetic affairs also serve women well as candidates, because women as a group have historically

[9] "Female Ranks in Elected Jobs Get a Big Boost," *New York Times*, 8 November 1992.
[10] Darcy, Welch, and Clark, *Women, Elections, and Representation*, 93-108, 132-146.

been more dovish than men—a stance that is often viewed with suspicion during times of international conflict. According to public opinion polls, women are more likely than men to favor humanitarian foreign aid over military aid. They are also more likely than men to call themsleves doves and to have viewed U.S. entry into both World Wars and the Korean and Vietnam conflicts as mistakes. Greater pacifism among women survived into the relatively more hawkish era of the 1980s and 1990s. According to national polls, women were 15 percentage points less likely to support the development of star wars and 19 percent more likely to oppose U.S. involvement in Central America. And a Harris poll conducted prior to the start of the Persian Gulf war showed that 73 percent of women opposed attacking Iraqi forces, a view shared by only 48 percent of men. Women were also slightly less likely than men to support surgical air strikes against Iraq.[11]

The less militaristic stand of women on foreign policy had domestic corollaries of relevance to women as candidates in 1992. According to polls conducted in the mid-1980s, women were 9 percent less likely than men to support the death penalty and 21 percent more likely to favor the banning of handguns. Women also appear more progressive (more compassionate, according to some) than men on other social issues. They were, for example, 8 to 17 percent more likely than men to support government involvement in health care, in the reduction of income differences between rich and poor, in the provision of jobs, and in the maintenance of social programs. Women were also 12 percent more likely to support the closing of all nuclear power plants after the Three Mile Island accident in 1979, and gender differences as great as 20 percent have been found in support for nuclear power. Reasonably large gender differences can also be found on some civil liberties issues, especially those that intersect with concerns of family and child raising. Women are what is normally considered more anti-civil libertarian than men. For example, women were from 6 to 17 percent less likely to allow X-rated movies, to legalize marijuana, or to allow communists to teach in colleges. They were also 10 percent more likely to choose "traditional values" on issues of sexual morality, family life, and religion.[12]

The final potential advantage gained by women candidates as the nation's attention turned to domestic politics is in some sense a double-edged sword. Largely because of their traditional role as mothers and keepers of home and hearth, domestic politics and social welfare issues have always been treated as a more legitimate arena for women. It is no coincidence that the Prohibition

[11] For evidence of women's more pacifist or dovish stands, see Alfred Hero, "Public Reaction to Government Policy" in John Robinson, Jerrold Rusk, and Kendra Head, eds., *Measures of Political Attitudes* (Ann Arbor, MI: Institute for Social Research, 1968); Gerald Pomper, *Voter's Choice: Varieties of American Electoral Behavior* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1975); Shapiro and Mahajan, "Gender Differences in Policy Preferences"; and Erikson, Luttbeg, and Tedin, *American Public Opinion*.

[12] Statistics regarding the gender gap in public opinion are drawn from Shapiro and Mahajan, "Gender Differences in Policy Preferences"; Erikson, Luttbeg, and Tedin, *American Public Opinion*; and Baxter and Lansing, *Women and Politics*.

party, which was dominated by women, was among the first to champion domestic reforms such as women's suffrage, a national income tax, the direct election of U.S. senators, and child labor laws.[13] Issues of childcare, healthcare, education, drug abuse, and so forth bridge the gap between private and public life and make it easier for women to cross into public life. Even the word "domestic," which comes from the Latin word for "house," highlights this connection.

Beyond the prominence of domestic politics, women candidates benefited from three additional factors in 1992. First, in hard economic times, voters rightly or wrongly tend to punish the president's party, and over the last two decades women have been more likely to run for office as Democrats than Republicans. Equally important, since at least 1980 women voters have been more likely than men to identify with the Democratic party and to support Democratic candidates.[14] Second, incumbency is a tremendous advantage in congressional elections; on average well over 90 percent of incumbents who run for reelection win. Since most incumbents are men, this creates a kind of electoral glass ceiling for women. However, the unprecedented wave of retirements (sixty-six) and primary losses (19) among members of Congress in 1992, and the redrawing of district lines that occurs after every national census meant that many women candidates were running for open seats in which there was no incumbent, dramatically improving their chances not only of running, but of winning. And third, the general disenchantment with Washington politics as usual, illustrated by Bill Clinton's campaign slogan that he was the "candidate of change," and Ross Perot's unprecedented rise from obscurity to presidential contender also gave an advantage to women, the ultimate political outsiders. Who better, ironically, to clean the House than women?

Long-term trends in women's integration into public life may have provided the firewood, and the circumstances of the 1992 election may have been the kindling, but it was the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas spectacle that set the resurgent women's movement ablaze. Public consciousness was dramatically raised about both the tenuous position of *Roe v. Wade* and the sordid, degrading realities of sexual harassment in the workplace. Equally important, however, the televised image of the all-male Senate Judiciary Committee put in stark relief the gender imbalance in Congress, and the very tangible relationship between who represents women and the quality of their lives. Because of those hearings, many voters decided that if given the chance they would vote for a woman candidate, in part because she was a woman. Because of those hearings a number of party and grassroots organizations redoubled their efforts to find and fund

[13] Steven Rosenstone, Roy L. Behr, and Edward Lazarus, *Third Parties in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 75–78.

[14] Stanley and Niemi, *Vital Statistics on American Politics*, 98–100; Michael Nelson and Associates, *The Election of 1984* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1985), 106; Michael Nelson and Associates, *The Election of 1988* (Washington DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1989), 82.

women candidates. And because of those hearings a number of women decided that they would put themselves on the line and run for local, state, and national office.

Women's political organizations were particularly important in 1992. Groups like NOW, The National Women's Political Caucus, Emily's (Early Money is Like Yeast) List, the Women's Campaign Fund, and the Fund for a Feminist Majority channelled resources, volunteers, and expertise to the burgeoning number of women candidates. And a new organization, Wish (Women in the Senate and the House) List, was formed by Republican women to support their party's candidates who favor abortion rights. More women than ever before had chosen to fund women campaigning for elective office, and these groups provided the conduit for many in the newly energized political majority. 1992 marked a coming of age for these women's political organizations, which had exceeded past records in raising money for women candidates. For example, the Women's Campaign Fund more than doubled their receipts from 1990 to 1.2 million.[15] Emily's List grew from 3,500 to 24,000 members in less than a year and also quadrupled its donations over 1990 to more than $6 million.[16] If this activity is sustained, the traditional advantage that men have had over women candidates in fundraising for their campaigns will be permanently erased.

More women ran for public office in 1992 than ever before in U.S. history—a significant accomplishment in and of itself. But how did they fare?[17] None of the three women running for governorships won, but twenty-one of the thirty-four female candidates for other statewide executive offices did, including all four who ran for state attorney general, four of the seven who ran for lieutenant governor, three of the five who ran for state treasurer, and two of the five who ran for secretary of state. In addition, a record number of state legislative seats were won by women. While these victories only add incrementally to women's totals, a little more than 20 percent of all state-wide elected offices and a little less than 20 percent of all state legislative seats are now held by women. When the 147-member Washington state legislature convenes in 1993, nearly 40 percent of the legislators will be women—the highest percentage in the country and the closest to the elusive 50 percent mark ever achieved by a state congress.

Women candidates fared well for national office as well. In the Senate, four of the eleven women candidates were elected, with Lynn Yeakel losing a very

[15] As reported to authors by the Women's Campaign Fund, 2 March 1993.

[16] R. W. Apple, Jr., "Steady Local Gains by Women Fuel More Runs for High Office," *New York Times*, 24 May 1992; Richard L. Berke, "Women Discover the Political Power of Raising Money For their Own," *New York Times*, 31 May 1992; and Timothy M. Phelps, "'92, A Year of Her-story," *New York Newsday*, 4 November 1992. Statistics for the Women's Campaign Fund and Emily's List were updated by the authors through phone conversations (2 March 1993) with representatives of both organizations.

[17] Public opinion and voting statistics from the 1922 elections were drawn from *New York Times* election coverage from 4, 5, and 8 November 1992. Exit poll data reported in the *New York Times* (and elsewhere) was collected by Voter Research and Surveys.

close race in Pennsylvania to incumbent Arlen Specter, one of the principal villains in the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas controversy. In the process, several firsts were achieved. There are now a record six women in the Senate. Carol Moseley Braun of Illinois is the first African-American woman elected to the Senate. And California is the first state in which both U.S. Senators are women—Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein. Of the record 106 women running for the House, 47 of them won, including 24 nonincumbents. This brought the percentage of women in the new House to nearly 11 percent—also a record. Not surprisingly, five of six women senators and thirty-five of the forty-seven congresswomen are Democrats. All of the newly elected female members of Congress also support abortion rights.

Was there a gender gap in the presidential vote? Forty-six percent of women as compared to 41 percent of men voted for Bill Clinton. Since 1980, women have been giving the Democratic presidential candidate more votes than the Republican, but their allegiance to Bill Clinton was especially important in the 1992 three-way race. The most striking examples of the gender gap are within educational groupings. The greatest disparity between men and women existed at the two ends of the educational achievement scale. Female college graduates voted 49 percent for Clinton as compared to the 40 percent support he received among males with the same level of education. Also, 58 percent of women without a high school diploma voted for Clinton, while only 49 percent of men in this educational group supported him. While the most highly educated women made up 20 percent of the electorate and the least educated women only 3 percent, it is clear they share some common ideological ground. It appears that neither group of women identified with the one dimensional image of family values portrayed at the Republican National Convention.

It would, of course, be a mistake to treat these numbers as evidence that the battle for equal representation for women has been won. Six percent of the Senate, 11 percent of the House, even 20 percent of state legislatures and executive offices is still underrepresentation. Success also varies dramatically by state. For example, only 4 percent of Kentucky's 1993 state legislature will be women. And only three of the twenty-four women who won a seat in the House actually defeated incumbents. Nonetheless, a poll conducted for *U.S. News and World Report* asked whether the country would be "governed better" if more women held public office: 61 percent responded yes, and 12 percent no. In 1984, only 28 percent thought women office holders would improve things. Significantly, in the 1992 poll, 80 percent of women under 30 wanted more women in office.[18] It seems clear that 1992 has been a watershed of sorts and that the 1990s may well be the Decade of the Woman.

[18] As reported in "Will 1992 Be the Year of the Woman?" *U.S. News and World Report*, 27 April 1992.