

Q&A

THE WOMEN'S VOTE

As the country approaches mid-term elections and actively debates the possibility of a woman running for the presidency in 2008, Case Professor of Political Science Karen Beckwith discusses the role and influence of women in politics.

Karen Beckwith is the first holder of the Flora Stone Mather Professorship in the College of Arts and Sciences and co-editor of Politics & Gender, a journal of the American Political Science Association.

► **CM: There's a perception that women don't vote for female candidates. Is that accurate?**

Until about 1980 the assumption was that both men and women always voted for men and that they were hostile to female candidates. Completely untrue. Evidence suggests that party identification and name recognition are more important determinants.

► **CM: When women run for office, are they as successful as men?**

It seems to be the case that when women run for office, women win. There are two problems with that claim. One is the incumbency effect. The incumbency re-election rate in the U.S. is over 90 percent. Because women are so seriously underrepresented in the House of Representatives a woman's best chances for running for office and winning will be when there is an open seat.

But a closer look reveals that a female incumbent re-genders the race. Female incumbents still win, but they have to fight off a challenger in the primary race, more than is the case for male incumbents.

► **CM: What is the representation of women in Congress?**

Currently, there are 67 women serving in the House and 14 women in the Senate. It wasn't until 1992, the so-called "Year of the Woman," that the percentages of women in the House of Representatives reached double digits. And when I say double digits, this

wasn't 99 percent, it was 10.8 percent. As recently as 15 years ago fewer than 10 percent of the House was female. Forty-seven women were elected in 1992. And that nearly doubled the previous number.

Look at the website for the Inter-Parliamentary Union, which has a list of women's representation in lower chambers in all the parliaments on the planet. Across 172 countries with representation of women in the lower house, the average is 16.7 percent women worldwide.

The U.S. isn't even at that average. We're listed 68 among 172 nations in terms of representation in a lower house; taking into account ties among nations, the U.S. actually ranks 81st.

► **CM: How do you explain such a low rank in the world?**

In the single-member electoral districts we have in the U.S., only one person can win a seat. In cases where only one person can win a seat, parties are less likely to support women compared to male candidates.

The fear is a single female candidate will lose the single seat—an unwarranted fear. Or the fear is that she'll win the seat and have complete control over the party's representation in the district.

In contrast, in political systems where many people represent the district, almost every party is going to win at least one seat. For example in the 1996 parliamentary elections in Italy, 39 seats were available in Tuscany. Under those conditions parties are more likely to nominate women.

Also, competition for elected office has been gendered in many nations by the introduction of quotas for women running for office and being elected to office.



► **CM: Can you see the U.S. instituting quotas?**

Our political culture emphasizes individual merit, individual initiative, fairness for everyone. There are strong equality norms in the U.S.—especially around equality of opportunity. The idea that we would structure access to office to guarantee one group's access to elections would be very difficult to initiate.

► **CM: You mentioned 1992 as being a year in which many women were voted into Congress. What factors led to that increase?**

It was an election year following the decennial census and the first House election following reapportionment and redistricting. Voting districts were changed; so there were fewer incumbents and many more districts with open seats available.

So every ten years there is a natural structural opportunity (with census and redistricting). If women are positioned for this, then they seem to have an equal chance with men.

Also, any political crisis that removes large numbers of incumbents also would offer opportunities for women to gain office. 1974 was one of those years. In 1974 nineteen women were elected to the House, almost all of whom were Democrats. That summer before the election Nixon resigned. Many Republican members of the House thought they couldn't win re-election so they retired, creating many open seats.

The 1992 elections were similarly influenced, by the Senate hearings of the Clarence Thomas nomination to the Supreme Court, which triggered a large number of female candidates for office.

► **CM: Do higher numbers of women in office have an affect on women's participation, as candidates and voters, in our election process?**

The prevalence of female candidates has some really positive impacts on women voters.

States that have a high percentage of female legislators tend to have higher turnouts among women voters. States that have a higher percentage of women sitting in state legislatures appear to encourage more female candidates.

In addition, the higher the percentage of women in a state legislature, the more informed women are in that state about politics.

► **CM: If we don't expect to see parity in Congress for quite a while, how likely is it that a woman will become president?**

Let me say, first of all, that I am structurally pessimistic about the chances of a woman even being nominated for president. Again the presidency is a single seat, so a party has to put all their chips in one basket.

The party that wins, wins everything; the party that loses, loses everything—every penny, every bit of mobilization, and it even loses some voters who won't turn out to vote the next time.

So loss has a big impact. Then again, if we elect a woman as president of the U.S., she would be the single most powerful woman on the planet for the first time ever. ☒

INTERVIEW BY SUSAN ILER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DANIEL MILNER