

So many ‘Years of the Woman’, so little time



In this post, Kimberly Killen warns readers to be wary when reading media reports of the “Year of the Woman,” as they can be cyclical and paint a misleading portrait of women in politics.

In the last two decades, the media have become fond of a particular electoral frame – the “Year of the Woman”. It has been circulated in at least three elections – 1992, 2008, and 2010 – and is set to make a comeback this year, with **the power being in the hands of women voters**. However, the tagline “Year of the Woman” makes it sound like women are rolling up to Congress by the bus and taking over. This is clearly not the case. The original “Year of the Woman” in 1992 saw women’s numbers in the Senate *triple* – to, disappointingly enough, six Senators from the previous two – and, in 2010, the number of women in Congress actually *dropped*.

This frame bothers me for a number of reasons; from what it is actually missing in its reporting to the way it frames women and the potentially damages mobilization potential.


1. Numbers are confusing.

While, yes, there are more women running for Congress in a given year, this does not mean there will be more in Congress after the election. Women still must deal with certain social expectations of gender as well as the fundraising or possible incumbent advantage of their male opponents. Yet a less reported reason for such a decrease is that more women candidates are running against each other. Since 1998, the **number of woman vs. women** races for Congress has been around 11 or 12. However, while this figure may not seem terribly impressive, it’s a big increase since 1992, when there were only six races, or 1988, when only three races featured women running against one another. The “Year of the Women” narrative, though, predominantly focuses on the record number of filings rather than the logistics behind them or the rate at which they win. This focus can miss that women’s presence in Congress can actually shrink as a consequence of them competing for the same place. Adding some potential losses by women in races against men, and suddenly congressional representation has contracted. This isn’t to say women should run against women – that would be ludicrous to say – it just recommends taking a broader look to encompass more than just filings and look at logistics of a race and the possibility for winning.

2. The right type of woman.

The women’s-only race can also become a commentary on the feminist vs. the “traditional” women social debate, i.e. the Democrat vs. the Republican woman (as if they cannot be both, the opposite or neither). It sets this up as a fight between the right way to be a woman, rather than analysing their campaigns or focusing on the issue positions they are taking. While the media cannot be fully blamed for this sort of structure, as candidates themselves or even their **opponents may decide to address the “type” of woman they are**, it detracts from the race to look at how the status of women is changing like they’re some big, amorphous blob (to see fun examples of this check out a few examples of “women voters” articles [here](#), and [here](#)).

3. Opportunity of a lifetime.

This political narrative additionally treats women candidates and their increasing numbers in the electoral cycle as a puzzle that needs to be solved, as they ask and investigate the social, economic and political factors that spur women to run for office. This interpretation not only treats the women running for office as unique or a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence, but also steamrolls over the issues they support and stand for to instead focus on the body they inhabit – **that** of a woman’s. 

The “Year of the Woman” narrative is complex, and there are many other factors and variants circulating (2010’s “Year of the Republican Woman”, for example). But perhaps what I find most strange and irritating is that despite the “record” language, which focuses on the “newness” of women candidates, and the differentiation of these candidates by their gender, the narrative can contribute to this idea that women politicians are everywhere. I mean, just look at Hillary Clinton, Nancy Pelosi, and Sarah Palin. We’ve gained parity, right? Right? No. While women are running more, the “Year of the Woman” narrative doesn’t seem to have much to say on the more unique occurrence – winning. Only **16.8 percent of seats in Congress are currently held by women**, and while 2008 may have been a ground-breaking year, no woman has sat in that executive seat.

So you tell me. Will the media ever start covering woman candidates as just candidates? Is it possible? Would it limit our understanding of a race?

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