

October 1, 2013

Primary Problems: Women Candidates in U.S. House Primaries

Despite slight gains in congressional representation in 2012, women make up only 18.3% of the United States Congress. Research points to multiple reasons for women’s political underrepresentation, including the need for more women to run. But when women do run, how do they fare? Researchers have found little evidence of gender bias in vote totals, fundraising receipts, and even primary victory rates in congressional campaigns.¹ However, these analyses are limited, and few examine party differences.

Recognizing in particular the dearth of Republican women in Congress, we look at primary win rates of Democratic and Republican women in U.S. House races from 1994 to 2012 to better identify the challenges women face in running for and winning congressional offices. We find that Republican women have faced primary problems, particularly in the last two election cycles. We offer evidence of and explanations for these problems and look ahead to the 2014 midterm elections to see whether this challenging trend for Republican women will continue.

Evidence: Primary Win Rates

Democratic, non-incumbent women candidates for the U.S. House of Representatives have won their primaries at higher rates than Republican, non-incumbent women candidates since 1994.

Additionally, more Democratic than Republican women have run in primaries as challengers or for open seat contests in all but two of those years. In the Republican wave elections of 1994 and 2010, non-incumbent Republican women candidates outnumbered their Democratic counterparts. However, the differences between primary win rates for Republican women and Democratic women’s primary win rates were largest in those years, with Republican women’s win rates the lowest to date. Finally, while 2012 saw the second highest number of non-incumbent Republican women primary candidates since 1994, only 31% of non-incumbent Republican women – versus 50% of non-incumbent Democratic women – made it to the general election ballot.

Open Seat Contests

Republican women candidates have been least successful in primary races for open House seats, particularly since 2008. In 2008, 2010, and 2012, there has been a difference of at least 20 percentage points between Democratic and Republican women candidates’ primary win rates in open seat contests, with Republican women less likely to be successful.

In 2010, Republican candidates – men *and* women – picked up 37 of 45 open seats in the U.S. House. Republican women won only 4 of those 37 seats because so few female open seat candidates (13.3%) made it through their primaries. These data reflect a very significant missed opportunity to increase Republican women’s representation in Congress and, more particularly, in the House Republican caucus.

Challengers

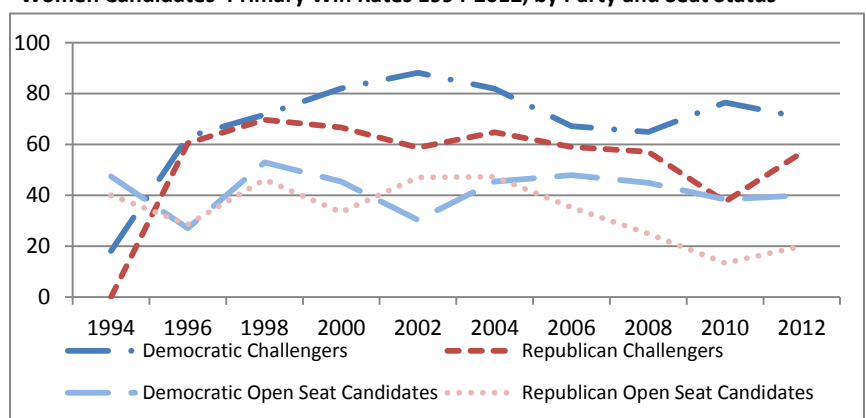
Primary win rates for both Republican and Democratic women House candidates are higher in contests where they are running to challenge an incumbent in the general election. However, Republican women are still less likely than Democratic women to win in these contests. Moreover, the primary win rate for Republican women challengers dipped to 37.5% in 2010, a year when 51 Republican challengers defeated Democratic House incumbents. Thus, even in races where general election victory is less likely,

U.S. House Primary Candidates and Win Rates 1994-2012, by Party

	Democratic Women Candidates	Democratic Women Win Rate	Republican Women Candidates	Republican Women Win Rate
1994	78	48.72%	81	37.04%
1996	104	49.04%	65	44.62%
1998	68	61.76%	50	58.00%
2000	66	65.15%	50	54.00%
2002	71	56.34%	55	50.91%
2004	85	60.00%	59	55.93%
2006	95	53.68%	47	40.43%
2008	97	47.42%	43	41.86%
2010	77	46.75%	113	27.43%
2012	145	50.34%	86	31.40%

Source: Center for American Women and Politics

Women Candidates’ Primary Win Rates 1994-2012, by Party and Seat Status



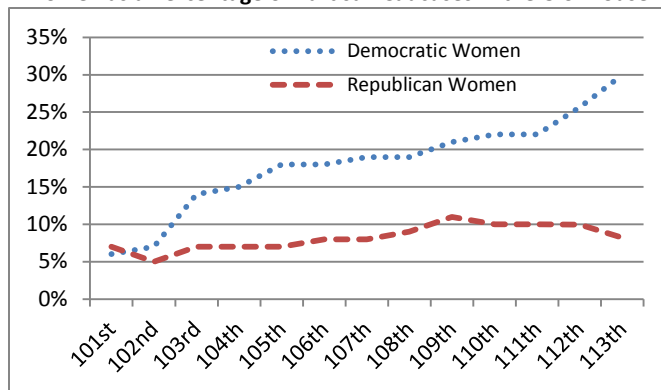
Source: Center for American Women and Politics

Republican women are struggling to make it through their primaries.

Explanations: Ideology, Recruitment, and Support

These data reveal a troubling trend for Republican women candidates in the most recent primaries for the U.S. House. While they outnumbered Democratic women candidates among non-incumbents in the 2010 primaries, more Democratic women made it to the general election. These partisan disparities continue in general election outcomes. In the 113th Congress, 78 members – or 17.9% - of the House of Representatives are women. Women make up 30% of the House Democratic Caucus, but only 8% of the House Republican Caucus. Women’s congressional representation will only increase with greater success of among women non-incumbent candidates, and that success appears much more limited for women running as Republicans. What explains this trend? We offer three potential explanations worthy of greater study and scrutiny as we approach the 2014 elections.

Women as a Percentage of Partisan Caucuses in the U.S. House



Source: Center for American Women and Politics

1. **Ideology:** The ideological shift to the far right among the Republican primary electorate presents a unique challenge to women candidates, who have historically been more moderate, and are often perceived as more liberal, than their male peers.² To win primaries, Republican women candidates have had to demonstrate strong conservative credentials.
2. **Recruitment:** In 2010, 12.2% of Republican primary candidates and 21.5% of Democratic primary candidates for the U.S. House were women. In 2012, 12.9% of Republican primary candidates and 25% of Democratic primary candidates were women. These data reveal the strong need for female candidate recruitment in *both* major political parties, but even more so among Republicans.
3. **Support:** Supportive infrastructure – whether from parties or outside organizations – influences both women’s decisions to run and their electoral success.³ However, much of the direct recruitment and many training programs and women’s PACs available have targeted Democratic or progressive women. The starkest differences are in the availability of campaign funds and levels of outside spending. For example, while EMILY’s List contributed nearly \$5 million to Democratic women candidates in 2012 and spent another \$7.5 million in support of their candidacies or against their opponents, no comparable organization supports Republican women at this level.

Looking Ahead to 2014

How will women fare in the 2014 congressional elections? More specifically, will Republican women fare better in 2014 U.S. House primaries than they have in 2010 and 2012?

The Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) has already begun monitoring [2014 races](#) for women candidates. As of September 2013, we know of 144 potential women candidates for U.S. House primaries, including 102 Democrats and 42 Republicans. Of those 142, 74 (57D, 17R) are incumbents, leaving 70 non-incumbents (45D, 25R) as likely primary contenders thus far in the 2014 cycle. While these data are very preliminary, they reveal no significant change in the pattern of partisan differences.

The recent launch of [Project GROW \(Growing Opportunities for Women\)](#) by the National Republican Congressional Committee indicates that the Republican Party is making a more concerted effort to recruit women candidates for 2014 U.S. House contests. However, they will likely need to seek out more conservative women, as there are no signs that the Republican primary electorate has shifted toward the ideological center.⁴

For the latest data on women in the 2014 election, visit CAWP’s [Election Buzz](#) page.

¹ See [Lawless and Pearson 2008](#); Burrell [1994, 2008](#); Fox [2010](#); [Crespin and Dietz 2010](#)

² See [Alexander and Anderson 1993](#); [Huddy and Terkildsen 1993](#); Koch [2000, 2002](#); [McDermott 1997](#)

³ See Center for American Women and Politics 2008, [“Poised to Run: Women’s Pathways to the State Legislatures”](#)

⁴ A [Pew Poll](#) taken July 17-21, 2013 found that while Tea Party Republicans – who hold more conservative views than Republicans overall - make up a minority (37%) of all Republicans and Republican-leaning independents nationally, they make up about half of the Republican primary electorate.