

POLITICS

Breaking down the barriers to power

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"...and by the way in the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors."

Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, March 31, 1776

"In education, in marriage, in religion, in everything disappointment is the lot of women. It shall be the business of my life to deepen that disappointment in every woman's heart until she bows down to it no longer."

Speech by Lucy Stone, National Women's Rights Convention, Cincinnati, 1855

"...in every human Breast, God has implanted a Principle, which we call Love of Freedom; it is impatient of Oppression, and pants for Deliverance...the same Principle lives in us."

Letter by Phillis Wheatley to the Reverend Samson Occom, February 11, 1774

Abigail Adams, Lucy Stone and Phillis Wheatley are memorialized on the Women's Monument in Boston and their quotes underscore the outreach of three extraordinary women whose words and deeds stand today as examples of women who worked to break barriers and, in their own way, negotiated for greater equality.

Because of the tremendous efforts of Adams, Stone, Wheatley and other women before and after them, there have been significant advancements for women in many arenas. Glass ceilings have been broken in business, professions, education and in the elected office.

But there is still much work to do because women remain markedly underrepresented in the bastions of power in business, politics and industry.

Today's good and bad news

The bad news first. Women are vastly underrepresented in state elected office.

Massachusetts ranks 21st in the nation in the number of women in elective office. There are 37 women in the 160-member House of Representatives. There are 12 women in the 40-member state Senate. Combined, women comprise 24.5 percent of the Legislature. Women are nearly 50 percent of the population.

The good news is that when women run for open seats, they tend to win more than 50 percent of the time.

Is elected office for you?

Women are naturals at politics but not naturals at playing the political game. On the plus side, women are more at ease in connecting with voters and at having empathy for and a broader understanding and concern around the issues, especially as they affect children and families.

Women are the desirable voters sought out by pollsters for targeted campaign advertising and, increasingly, as political operatives savvy enough to run local and national campaigns.

Remember the race to capture the soccer moms who were the coveted voters for the last few presidential campaigns? Today, these women are still the most important voting segment to track.

So, why can't the progressive state of Massachusetts field and elect more women to elected office?

First, the barrier to entry in politics is high since money dictates the initial strength of any political campaign.

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Fundraising is one of the most daunting aspects of anyone's campaign, but even more so for women candidates.

It has been well documented that women candidates on the average don't raise as much money as their male counterparts. If women candidates are not properly financed, they won't win. The key to breaking down that barrier is for women candidates to learn how to raise money equal to men. And that means developing the many strong networks they have.

Developing and working your networks

Historically, women are the most successful when they use their diverse network of supporters to help them in their campaigns. Whether their supporters come from their local children's school organizations, alumni groups, churches, business organizations or philanthropic efforts, it is necessary to develop those networks so they form the basis of the organization.

Mentorship is another avenue for education and support. Women who have been mentors to other women can invite them to join their campaign, and women who are being mentored by others can use their

expertise to guide them in their search for campaign help.

Testing the waters

There is no one correct way to launch a political career, though a commitment to public service is always the best starting point. It is also a good idea to conduct research on any potential elected office that you may be considering.

There are many organizations that will help you determine if, when and where you may want to throw your hat into the ring. There are also many websites and Internet applications that can help you with your search, from political blogs to social networking groups such as Facebook and Myspace.

The best political opportunities, however, are the ones that are known from the inside, before the public is notified. Being involved in the political life of your community can also help you can find out first about an open seat and determine how best to proceed.

Learning to play, winning the game

Many women may think that being in elected office is less desirable because of the politics involved. Women tend to be straightforward, no-nonsense multi-

taskers who see politics as a man's world.

Politics, however, are played out in most aspects of life, and the women who have risen to the top of their professions have had to learn how to navigate the political waters of business and boardrooms. Many have succeeded over and above men to get there.

It is clear that the strategies of winning use similar methods in business and politics. It is about knowing where you are going and being able to communicate that goal to others to help you get there. If you don't know what your goals are, nobody else will either.

Imagine yourself as a candidate with a clear vision, a compelling message and a base of supportive people to help you succeed. Start with your own circle of friends and family. Test your messages on them and ask them for help. Then you are on your way.

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