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The Myth of Electability: What It Really Takes for Women to Win

by Emily Cain

For a much of this past year, instead of debating the policies or the experience of the candidates in the historically diverse Democratic presidential primary, we've been debating an increasingly flawed metric: electability. Electability is tossed around in the press and by pundits as if it can be measured or objectively determined. The reality is, however, that electability is determined on Election Day by voters, and past results are not always the best indicators of future elections. The debate about electability wrongly assumes that women or people of color are just less electable than certain (white) men. And I believe that that notion is just plain wrong. Drawing on my experience of 10 years in the Maine Legislature and my current role as executive director of EMILY's List, I will share insight into the myth of electability and examples of the important impact women have made over the past 35 years politically and how they have changed our political landscape along the way.

THE CURRENT POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

Women have had the right to vote since 1920, and a century later, after an election in which women made unprecedented gains, the US House of Representatives is still dominated by men, who make up more than three-quarters of its members. Of the nearly 2,000 people who have served in the US Senate since the founding of our country, 56 (2.8 percent) have been women. And only 325 of the 11,037 members of the House (2.9 percent) have been women. It was not until 1981 that a single woman served on

the United States Supreme Court. That was Sandra Day O'Connor. Now there are just three—one-third of a court making decisions every term on women's fundamental rights. There has been only one woman Speaker of the US House, one woman major party presidential nominee, and no woman elected president or vice president.

EFFECTING CHANGE

First, a little about EMILY's List. EMILY's List has been working to elect pro-choice, Democratic women for almost 35 years. It all started in 1985 when Ellen Malcolm, frustrated that there had never been a Democratic woman elected to the United States Senate in her own right, built a network to elect pro-choice Democratic women. The first meeting of the group was in Malcolm's basement. Her friends came over with their rolodexes. These women wrote to their friends asking them to commit to supporting Democratic women early in their campaigns, because "Early Money Is Like Yeast"—E-M-I-L-Y. These women found strength in numbers and helped elect Barbara Mikulski, US senator from Maryland in 1986.

Fast forward to 1991, when Anita Hill, a law professor, spoke up about sexual harassment in a US Senate hearing. Reaction to the all-male Senate committee's treatment of Professor Hill led to a wave that hit in 1992, "The Year of the Woman." Women across the country were watching. They were outraged. Women voters were determined to make their voices heard in the halls of power, and women were inspired to run and win in record numbers. EMILY's List helped elect four new

women senators and 20 new congresswomen that year, and the organization's membership grew by more than 600 percent.

These women have changed policies, and they've also changed Congress itself. They've claimed space for themselves and for future women leaders. Until Senator Barbara Mikulski led the Pantsuit Rebellion of 1993, women could not wear pants on the floor of the US Senate. Even as recently as 2009, women senators couldn't use the pool in the congressional gym because some of their male colleagues liked to swim naked. Thanks to former Senator Kay Hagan, the "men only" sign was changed to a "proper attire required" sign. Last year, Senator Tammy Duckworth became the first senator to give birth while in office. Senators are required to vote in person, but Senate rules did not allow babies on the Senate floor—so she asked Senator Amy Klobuchar, the senior Democrat on the Senate Rules Committee, to help change the rules so she wouldn't have to choose between caring for her baby and casting votes.

Today, EMILY's List is our nation's largest resource for women in politics and has raised over \$600 million to elect pro-choice Democratic women candidates. With a grassroots community of now over five million members, EMILY's List helps Democratic women win competitive campaigns across the country and up and down the ballot by recruiting and training candidates, supporting strong campaigns, researching the issues that impact women and families, and turning out women voters to the polls.

Since its founding in 1985, EMILY's List has helped elect 150 women to the

House, 26 to the Senate, 16 to governorships, and nearly 1,100 women to state and local office. Nearly 40 percent of the candidates EMILY's List has helped elect to Congress have been women of color. During the historic 2017–2018 cycle, EMILY's List raised a record-breaking \$110 million dollars and launched a record independent expenditure campaign. We helped elect 34 new women to the House, including 24 red-to-blue victories; enough seats to have delivered the US House majority alone.

Since the 2016 election, more than 49,000 women have reached out to EMILY's List about running for office, laying the groundwork for the next decade of candidates for local, state, and national offices. These women are our future, and at EMILY's List, we are planting seeds and forcing the change.

UNFAIR ASSUMPTIONS

Most women recognize that despite the recent historic political gains, the marches, and #MeToo and #TimesUp movements, we still face sexism every day. Even those groundbreaking women who ran and won in 2018 dealt with challenges that their male counterparts didn't face.

As candidates women face questions and assumptions that men do not. "How will you balance work and family?" "How are you going to take care of your children if you win?" Or if they are not mothers, then they are invariably asked, "When do you plan to have children?" or "Why don't you have children?" Women are also judged based on their appearance and tone of voice much more harshly than men are. Take the current presidential primary, for example. The women candidates face questions of electability, likeability, and authenticity, which are all code words for "this is a

type of candidate that I have not encountered before." In other words, sexism.

CAN WOMEN WIN?

But let's talk about electability. What is it? The highest name recognition? Who is top in the polls right now? Someone who looks like a leader I've seen before? Just think about it: both Barack Obama and Donald Trump were assumed to be unelectable up until they got elected. Off-year polls in previous elections had Gary Hart beating George Bush, Walter Mondale beating Ronald Reagan, and Bob Dole beating Bill Clinton. It's still too early to know what the environment of 2020 will be for the presidential race. And the fact of the matter is that no one is good at predicting electability, not voters, pundits, or journalists. Electability is an unfair and unhelpful metric. It is just code for "candidates that look like what we're used to." And it ensures that women and people of color face an unfair disadvantage that has nothing to do with their actual campaigns or candidacies.

The truth is women are very electable. America DID vote for a woman for president. While she lost the presidency due to 80,000 votes in three key states, Hillary Clinton earned 3 million more votes than Donald Trump. America voted for more women in 2018. Women won statewide and flipped House seats in key states like Minnesota, Arizona, and Nevada. The only statewide Democratic victory in Florida in 2018 was a woman. Women candidates won in three key states President Trump won in 2016: In Michigan, Democratic women won every major statewide election but one, including a clear victory for Governor Gretchen Whitmer. In Wisconsin, despite millions of dollars spent on attack ads, Tammy Baldwin

was decisively re-elected to the US Senate, and in Pennsylvania, formerly the largest state with no women in its delegation, four women were elected to the US House. And, importantly, all three women senators running in the Democratic primary have never lost a race.

Campaigns for political office should be about ideas and candidates and letting voters decide for themselves. It is not helpful when pundits focus on who can and cannot win. No matter who you support, we should all want a level playing field to ensure that we get our best candidate, not the one supported by the pundits or past conventional wisdom. A big part of winning the presidency is generating excitement and additional votes from our base, particularly women. In 2018, 54 percent of voters in battleground races were women, and we saw double-digit persuasion swings with those women, both with and without college degrees.

THE NEW NORMAL

So what does this changing political landscape mean—what is the new normal?

It means we will always have multiple women running for president. It means you should no longer see images of Congress that do not include a diverse group of women, and we will not have legislative committees working on policy issues like health care that do not include women. It means more women running for office, up and down the ballot, across the country—and winning. The new normal means women and girls can no longer be deterred by the belief that women are somehow in a separate lane and will be judged differently. It means that they'll be valued on who they are and what they care about, not by outdated gender stereotypes.

But the new normal can't just be about women in politics. The momentum for a fundamental shift in the role of women needs to ripple not just across government, but also across the private sector and communities around the country. The new normal means questioning business as usual everywhere to make sure women, members of the LGBTQ community, people of color, people of different religions, people who come from less-affluent backgrounds, and people with disabilities all have access to a seat at the table.

More women getting elected—that's just the start. 🐟

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