

Women across nation, South Jersey making record strides on campaign trail this year

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By

While 1992 might have been called Congress' "Year of the Woman," 2012 has brought what Rutgers University's Eagleton Institute of Politics considers a "surge" in women vying for congressional seats.



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Freeholder candidate Margie Love (left) chats with surrogate candidate Dick Hickey during the Woodbury Fall Arts Festival, Saturday, Sept. 29, 2012. (Staff Photo by Lori M. Nichols/Gloucester County Times)

A redistricting year could be to blame, but South Jersey's candidates – ladies running in freeholder, state Assembly and congressional races – chalk it up to the Hillary Clintons and Sarah Palins who pried open opportunity's door.

"When Hillary Clinton stepped up, it really was very inspiring. I know it was to me because I know it's not easy to run for office on a good day,"

said Cassandra Shober, a Democrat challenging well-entrenched incumbent U.S. Rep. Frank LoBiondo in the state's Second Congressional District. "A lot of those women who have made it different for somebody like me, it's opened that door to say, 'Why not?'"

This election year, 18 women – 12 Democrats and six Republicans – are running for seats in the U.S. Senate, with the last record set in

2010 with 14 running. Plus, 2012's 163 female candidates for the U.S. House of Representatives beat a 2004 record of 141 female candidates, according to Eagleton's Center for American Women and Politics.

The country, however ranks 78th in the world for the percentage of women in high-ranking government positions, according to the United Nations. Rwanda, Andorra and Cuba rank first, second and third, according to the same U.N. ranking system.

"It's slow progress, but also from a long historical view, it's the blink of an eye," said Ruth Mandel, Eagleton's director. "It means enormous social and cultural change in the space of a couple of generations."

Mandel said 2012's surge could have everything to do with the last census.

"Frequently, the election year after the Census and redistricting there are more opportunities," she said, pointing out similar waves in 1992 and 2002.

Once a decade, when Census numbers are compiled, district lines are redrawn, sometimes resulting in new seats opening up. Mandel said more officials retire in the year following a Census and changes in constituencies can push incumbents to rethink a decision to vie for office.

"And so there are more opportunities in those years," she added. "When the political landscape shifts through redistricting or term limits, corruption or scandals – when you have a story with dozens of men being arrested or indicted – there is more of an opening for women

to run and say, 'Time for a change, people are looking for a change.'"

Plus, presidential election years are prime times for groups to encourage and recruit more women to run, according to Mandel.

"You have to have women who want to do it, who are willing to do it, and historically that hasn't been the case," Mandel said. "It's all about encouraging women to look at the opportunity and to look at themselves as political candidates. Women are not as inclined as men to think of themselves that way."

That may not be a steadfast theory in South Jersey, however, where Shober, a political newcomer, is taking on a longtime Republican man; women are on the ballot in Gloucester, Salem and Cumberland County freeholder races; and a special Assembly election is pitting two Gloucester Township women against each other for the second year in a row.

"In my party, people respect me and asked me to do this because they know I'm strong, and can stand up to these people," said Shelley Lovett, a Republican running against incumbent Democrat Assembly Gabriela Mosquera for the Fourth District seat. "There always has to be somebody that breaks ground, and after they are successful, people say, 'I think I can do that, too.' Truly a lot of capable women are out there."

While Lovett, a breast cancer survivor, and her political opponent Mosquera, a member of the Assembly's Women and Children Committee, have an agenda to support women's issues at the state level, Lovett said a woman offers a well-rounded perspective.

Margie Love, a Republican candidate for Gloucester County freeholder, called the perspective a view "with a 360-degree lens," one that considers the impact a financial decision, for instance, would have at a personal level, Lovett added.

"Maybe it's an emotional connection, and maybe it's a good thing," Lovett said.

Then, there's the difference between women on the ballot and women moving on to hold the elected offices, Mandel pointed out.

In the next month, women vying for office will be under added pressure not to feed female stereotypes on the campaign trail. And with campaigns playing out in a much more visual way, all candidates, male and female, are under pressure to maintain their image, Mandel said.

"People would say what's most important is what your principles are," Mandel explained. "It's very difficult, at the county or local level, for people to get past the way someone sounds, looks or the projected image."

Shober admits she's had could-be constituents comment on her hairstyles, and Mosquera has encountered comments about her age.

But, they say, it doesn't bother them.

"I can't be worried about what people think of me," Mosquera said. "I'm only worried about the job at hand."

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