

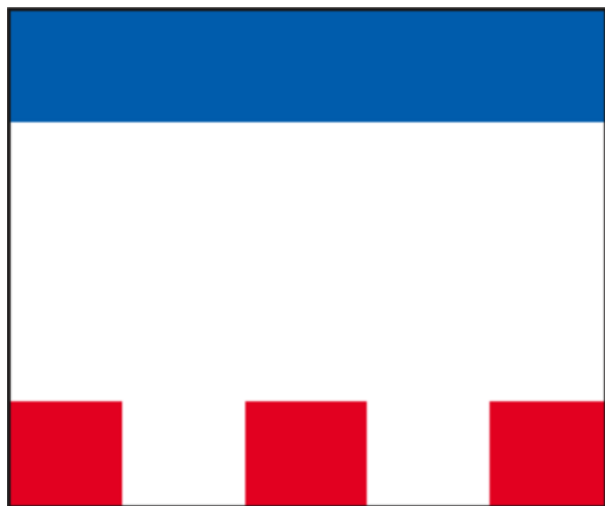


Women in politics

By Helena Andrews - 11/16/09 06:42 PM ET

No, the name isn't supposed to be facetious, tongue-in-cheek or even cougar-esque, despite its sound: WUFPAC.

"The honest truth [is] that it was just the acronym," explained 28-year-old Jessica Grounds, president of the Women Under Forty PAC, a political action committee dedicated to putting women under 40 in the legislator's seat.



On Election Day, the group had what Grounds called a "big win." Stephanie Miner, a 39-year-old WUFPAC-endorsed candidate, became the first female mayor-elect of Syracuse, N.Y.

Despite taking a big bite out of politics since its inception in 1999, WUFPAC says much more needs to be done. For them, the number of female politicians in state and federal office, though steadily increasing, still isn't big enough — and the number of young women in those roles is even smaller.

Only 17 percent of national legislators and 23 percent of state legislators are women.



"In this day and age," said Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-N.Y.), "that number should be much higher."

Gillibrand, 43, said she makes it a point to support women interested in entering public office. "I am hopeful that we will soon see the next generation of women elected leaders emerging at all levels of government."

The gap between generations is what WUFPAC is most worried about.

"You have this huge missing generation of women in Congress making policy," explained Grounds.

The average age of a lawmaker in the 111th Congress is 58. At 28, Rep. Aaron Schock (R-Ill.) is the youngest legislator of any gender. Nearly 11 years his senior, 39-year-old Rep. Stephanie Herseth Sandlin (D-S.D.) is the youngest female legislator. This December she will celebrate her birthday.

“If we don’t elect a [young] woman next year to Congress, there will be no women under 40,” said Grounds.

That fact might not seem so dire to some, but for the members of WUFPAC’s board, young women are “critical to the political conversation.”

The group has endorsed two 2010 congressional candidates: Krystal Ball in Virginia, who’s 27, and Heather Beaven in Florida, who’s 40.

And WUFPAC was the first organization to support Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-Fla.), whose experience with breast cancer prompted legislation in support of early screening for the disease. The 43-year-old congresswoman, according to Grounds, is a perfect example of a female lawmaker drafting legislation that matters on a personal level, something Grounds and others believe women do more often than their male counterparts.

Rep. Linda Sanchez (D-Calif.) agreed, calling women “a natural fit for public office” because it’s a job “that allows them to dedicate their work to making their community a better place. We need more moms in Congress, and more sisters and aunts, to look out for every issue, not just those considered to be men’s or women’s,” said Sanchez.

The problem, most agree, is getting women engaged in the political process sooner rather than later because, according to WUFPAC, the pipeline to political office begins early.

“Twelve of the last 19 presidents got into politics before the age of 35,” explained Grounds. “There’s a clear trajectory.”

Grounds also heads a nonprofit organization called Running Start. That program, which grew out of WUFPAC’s leadership, inspires women who want to run for office in the future. The summer program brings high school and college-age women from all over the country to Washington to teach them about “the nuts and bolts” of politics. This year the program has received nearly 30,000 applications for 50 slots.

“When I was growing up, my role models were strong, active women striving to make their community a better place,” said Gillibrand, whose office has an intern from the Star Fellowship, a program under Running Start.

Kaitly Shorey, a senior at St. Lawrence College, works in Gillibrand’s office as one of seven Star Fellows in the semester-long program. The 21-year-old government major said politics is “considered a man’s game.”

Shorey, however, said she's ready to jump right in. Raised in a tiny town of about 360 people, she grew up in a civic-minded family. Her father was the road commissioner, her mother was a state government health liaison and she was class president all four years of high school.

"Although it was small-town politics," she said of her family's political involvement, "I realized that if you're able to motivate people you can get change done. It takes a long time to accomplish, but I see the good in it."

It's an extremely promising outlook given that one of the main deterrents for women when it comes to entering public office, said Grounds, was that they are "slower to see politics as a venue for that positive change in society."

Another huge issue was that for many women, politics is traditionally seen as a "third career."

"You're a career woman and then a mom and then you decide to run for Congress," explained Grounds, adding that she's sensed a shift in the new crop of younger women in Congress, who approached their campaigns "strategically."

Gillibrand, Herseth Sandlin and Wasserman Schultz are examples of women who chose politics as a "first career," according to Grounds.

"When I was 33 and had high hopes of running for Congress, some people actually discouraged me from running for office and told me to wait my turn, or run for the school board," said Sanchez. "I find that many women face similar experiences and often wait around to be tapped on the shoulder."

For Shorey, young women supporting one another is just as important as being mentored by someone older.

"I've never been in a sorority or anything like that, but this is such an engaging and powerful environment," said Shorey of the seven Star Fellows who share a row house on Capitol Hill.

The six Democrats and one Republican living there often debate policy and are careful to hear one another out.

"I think that women are good listeners and they try to be more comprehensive — passionate, maybe," said Shorey of the difference between female and male legislators.

In the meantime, Sanchez is looking out for women like Shorey to bring that passion to the political machine. "I tell every young woman I see that I am tapping her on the shoulder."

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