



So, You Want to Run for Office? Five Questions Every Woman Must Answer
Before She Decides to Run

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richmondWOMAN, November 2005

Published online at www.richmondwoman.net

“When women run, women win!” This is the motto of the National Women’s Political Caucus, a “grassroots organization dedicated to increasing women’s participation in the political process.”

Now it is obviously true that not all women candidates win. But, research shows that women who run for office are just as likely to win as men who run, and, contrary to conventional wisdom, they fare just as well as men in vote getting and fundraising. “Gender, Political Ambition and the Decision Not to Run for Office,” Richard L. Fox, <http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/Research/FundedResearch.html>

So, why aren’t there more women in office? The bottom line is that fewer women run. The interesting question is why?

Fox’s research, funded by the Center for American Women and Politics, revealed that even “well-qualified women are less likely than their male counterparts to consider running for office” and when they do, they more often seek local offices, such as school board. Fox found that “lower levels of personal income, less external support for a candidacy, more demanding household obligations, and self-perceptions that they are not qualified” were among the factors discouraging women from considering elective office.

Fox concluded that the disparity in office-seeking aspirations between women and men suggests that more research must be done about “the manner in which women and men in contemporary society come to be socialized about politics and the acquisition of political power.” His findings also support the need for added attention to how the discouraging factors might be overcome in the candidate recruitment process.

The reality is that, if you’re a woman and you’re considering a run for office, you’re among a minority of women. The good news is that, if you do your homework, overcome the self doubts, and put yourself out there, you have just as good a chance of winning as a similarly qualified man. The bad news is that it is unlikely that anyone in your family, among your friends or business associates, or from your political party is going to invite you to run for office or encourage you to do so once you’ve decided.

All this means is that you've got to invite yourself to the dance, and prepare yourself for success. Based on my experience working with women candidates, here are five questions I think any woman considering a run for office needs to answer before she makes the decision to run.

Why are you running?

If you can't answer the "why" question clearly and succinctly, speaking from the heart, you have no business running for office.

The most successful women candidates I have seen are those fueled by personal passion. Remember the woman who ran for Congress after her husband was killed and her son wounded by a gunman who opened fire on the Long Island Railroad? She is still passionately engaged in ending gun violence and still serving in Congress.

Find your passion. What do you want to change? How can running for office allow you to make the change you want? Why are you the right person to make the change you want?

Does idea of running for office jump off the rack and scream "buy me, buy me?"

This is the "gut check" question.

First, get some feedback. Talk to your family, business associates, and political leaders about the office you are considering.

Make sure that your family understands that, if you run, your priorities may stay the same but your time commitments may not. Help them face the reality that they'll be in the public eye.

Find out how flexible your business associates will be about the time demands of any elected office. Can you work a flexible schedule? What will happen if you have to leave the office to attend an emergency meeting? If you want to run for the Virginia legislature, can you take leave for all of January, February and part of March?

Next, get a financial and physical check up. Make sure that you don't have any personal family financial history about which you are unaware that will surface in the campaign (think Geraldine Ferraro). Double check to ensure that your health and stamina are up to the stress of a campaign.

Now, sit quietly and listen to your gut. Do you have an irresistible impulse to run? If running for office were a dress, would it be jumping off the rack and screaming "buy me, buy me?" Or, is there a little voice in your head trying, like a helpful saleswoman, to get you to do this? If it's the latter, you should not let the voice talk you into running.

Do I have strong personal charisma or an issue that will drive voters to the polls to vote for me?

This is what I call the “Torque Factor.” Emotion drives motion. Voters are more likely to turnout and vote for someone who has a powerful personality or a compelling message. Some candidates have both (see, e.g., Doug Wilder in his recent race for mayor).

If you are passionate about why you are running, you can learn to communicate your vision in a way that will generate the important emotional connection. Terry Pearce’s book, “Leading Out Loud,” provides a road map to becoming an authentic speaker who can inspire audiences to share your vision.

Be honest with yourself, though. If you are a terrible public speaker, uncomfortable in front of audiences, you’ve got some homework to do before you announce your candidacy.

Do I have 75 friends and family members who will contribute money and time to my campaign?

This is what I call the rule of 75. Whether you are running for City Council or for Congress, if you don’t have 75 friends and family members who will contribute money and time to your campaign, it will be difficult (not necessarily impossible) for you to build the foundation you will need to mount a successful campaign.

In Richmond, the average expenditure by those running for City Council in 2004 was around \$35,000. That’s 75 times an average contribution of \$466.66. You may be able to run on less, but if you do, you’ll still need the sweat equity generated by at least 75 strong supporters to get you going and keep you going in a strong grass roots campaign.

If you’re thinking about running for Congress, you should know that the average candidate spent about \$500,000 in 2004. If you have 75 donors who can give the maximum personal contribution of \$2,000, you’re 30% there. That would be a good start that will help convince others that you are a viable candidate who deserves their support.

How will I get out of this race if I decide I don’t want to run or can’t win?

When you decide to run, you need to make sure that you have an “Exit Strategy.” Getting out of a campaign gracefully, while maintaining your dignity and your viability as a candidate in a future race, requires a carefully crafted strategy. Like a pre-nuptial agreement, the “exit strategy” needs to be designed and written before you get married to the campaign.

If you’ve asked yourself these five questions, and you like the answers, you’re ready to make the decision whether you should run. All that remains is to learn

what it takes to run a successful campaign, including how to raise the money you'll need. I recommend that you start by reading Women for Change, which includes a very practical guide to how you prepare to run a campaign. And, I'd encourage you to seek candidate training such as that provided by the Sorensen Institute at UVA, the Women's Campaign School at Yale or by the major political parties. Then, you'll be prepared to move forward with confidence once you've invited yourself to the dance and declared your candidacy.

Resources:

Books:

Women for Change: A Grassroots Guide to Activism and Politics, Thalia Zepatos and Elizabeth Kaufman (Facts on File 1995)

Beyond the Double Bind: Women and Leadership, Kathleen Hall Jamieson (Oxford University Press 1995)

Leading Out Loud: Inspiring Change Through Authentic Communication, Terry Pearce (Jossey-Bass 2nd Edition 2003)

Conferences/Training:

National Women's Political Caucus Training Program, www.nwpc.org

The Women's Campaign School at Yale University, www.wcsyale.org

Southern Women in Public Service, <http://www.stennis.gov/swips.htm>

The Sorensen Institute, <http://www.sorenseninstitute.org>

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