

What It Takes to Run for Office

Inspired by our [story on Gabrielle Giffords, Kirsten Gillibrand, and Debbie Wasserman Schultz](#)? Raise your voice by running for local, state, or national office

By Marnie Soman

Strong women don't have a reputation for keeping quiet. But in running our communities and country, our voices still aren't loud enough. Only 17% of Congress is female, and a mere 6 out of 50 states have women as governors — a sad state, since everybody benefits when women participate in politics.

"If we can engage more women nationwide...we will not only be able to rebuild the economy, but we'll be able to put America on stronger footing," says Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, who started [Off The Sidelines](#), a campaign she says is "a national call to action for women to engage and be vocal about the issues they care about, to amplify their voices."

Fighting for equal political representation has never been easy, but the upcoming year (2012) provides a rare opportunity to boost the number of female faces in elected office. More voters will turn out since it will be a presidential election year, district lines will be redrawn, and new seats will open up — a prime situation for female candidates.

Who, me? If you're thinking, "What does this have to do with *me*?" you aren't alone. Women are less likely to see themselves as candidates without an outside push, says Mary Hughes, founder and director of [The 2012 Project](#), a non-partisan campaign aiming to place more women in legislatures. You don't have to be a "politician" to run for office. All you have to be is passionate — about your community, about the issues that matter to you, about making a difference.

"Lots of women have run with little or no campaign experience, and have won," says Catherine Gray, vice president of political programs for [The White House Project](#), a non-partisan not-for-profit aimed at increasing female leadership. "They do what women do — they roll up their sleeves and they jump in whole hog."

And, you probably have way more knowledge and experience than you realize. (Think participation in the PTA or your college alumni association.) “Plenty of women have been public leaders, but they think of it as community service,” says Hughes. “That is exactly the right stepping stone for a candidacy.”

In fact, having little to no traditional political experience can work *for* you. “More and more, voters are looking for authenticity,” explains Hughes. “Both men and women appreciate what it means to be a working mom.”

Skills you’ve earned in your day-to-day life can lead to successes in candidacy and in office. For example, at work, do you managing a team, negotiate contracts, or communicate effectively? And at home — do you supervise your household budget, juggle schedules, or broker compromises? Women (and men) with backgrounds in finance, health, energy and other hot-button areas bring something special — and necessary — to the table: knowledge.

Start at the beginning The first (and most important) step is deciding to run. “Women may choose not to participate because they don’t like the aggressive nature of politics, the rough and tumble, the vitriol,” says Gillibrand. “But despite all that, they can run. And lots of people will help them.”

The first thing you’ll have to do is call your family and friends, and rally what Gray refers to as your “kitchen cabinet — the people who are willing to take the journey with you.” That means friends and family, but also people you’ve worked with (whether that’s in a boardroom or the PTA). Then, really think over and talk out the topics you care about most. Fill in your knowledge gaps so you can clearly articulate your ideas.

Next, you’ll need to look up requirements for office (city, county, and state board of elections’ websites will have this information), file the paperwork, and declare yourself a candidate. After that, open a bank account so you can raise funds, find yourself a campaign manager and a finance director, and start raising money and recruiting volunteers.

Sharpen your skill set If this all sounds overwhelming don’t let anxiety squash your momentum. There are tons of organizations dedicated to helping women run and win campaigns. They’ll walk you through every step, from finding a mentor to training for the campaign trail. In candidate “schools” — which range from a one-day or evening intensive to a week long program — you’ll learn the nuts and bolts of what it’s like to run and how to do it successfully. They might include sessions on talking to the media,

fundraising, time management, and more. [The White House Project](#) has a program called [Go Run](#), and [The Center for American Women and Politics](#) can help you find resources in your state.

More ways to make a difference

- **Volunteer** Whether you donate your time to a campaign or to a program in your community, you can be integral in whatever inspires you — whether that's the food on tables across America (check out [Plate to Politics](#)) or the environment (look into earth-minded organizations).
- **Speak up** Consider what matters to you, learn more about it, and voice your opinion by writing letters or taking to your blog.
- **Inspire and encourage others** Put your life experience to work by mentoring. Or, join a group that helps women through the electoral process. If you know another woman who'd be great in office, prompt her to run. Women wait to be asked, and are 50% less likely than men to even consider candidacy. [She Should Run](#) has an online form. Fill it out and they'll send your nominee an invitation to run.

Read more: [How to Get Elected to Office - What It Takes to Run for Office - Good Housekeeping](#)