According to the pundits, the election year of 1992 was going to be “The Year of the Woman.” A record number of women candidates filed for offices at every level, emboldened by their newly aroused constituency in the aftermath of the Senate Judiciary Committee hearings concerning allegations of sexual harassment against Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas in October 1991.

In the 1992 elections, rather than having their sex be perceived as a disadvantage to be overcome, women candidates, possibly for the first time, were advantaged. Voters wanted change and women, as collective outsiders, represented an aspect of that change (Thomas and Wilcox 1998, 8).

Emily’s List, a feminist Political Action Committee (PAC), faced a new set of choices as it decided whom to endorse in 1992. Membership soared, reaching 24,000 from just 3500 in 1990 (the goal for 1992 had been to reach 5000). Money for candidates poured in from women who had never been politically active before, to the tune of $6.2 million for pro-choice, Democratic women candidates. Suddenly Emily’s List was the most powerful PAC in the Democratic Party, and it supplied candidates it endorsed with the kind of financial resources that could give them genuine clout.

In New York, two heroes of feminist politics announced that they would be candidates in the Democratic primary for US Senate. Elizabeth Holtzman had made a major splash in 1972 as a member of the House Judiciary Committee during the Watergate Hearings. She went on to be a founder and key leader of the Congressional Women’s Caucus in the 1970s (Gertzog 1995, 183). In 1980 she left Congress to run for Senate against Al D’Amato, losing by a narrow margin. Having served in elected positions of District Attorney and at New York City Comptroller since that time, she felt ready to take on D’Amato in 1992 and win. Then Geraldine Ferraro announced her candidacy. A congresswoman from 1978 to 1984, in 1984 Ferraro had been the first woman nominated by a major political party for the office of Vice President of the United States. What should Emily’s List do? Should they endorse one or the other or both in the primary race against two other candidates, Robert Abrams and Al Sharpton?
A Difficult Choice for Feminists in New York

Feminist political activists in general felt tortured about having to choose. Manhattan Borough President Ruth W. Messinger, who ran for Mayor five years later, said, “It is making people crazy. They know they want a woman, and they know they want to beat Al D’Amato. But that’s all they know” (Specter 1992). Leaders of New York National Organization for Women (NOW) sent a mass mailing endorsing Elizabeth Holtzman. Unwilling to choose, the National Women’s Political Caucus and other feminist PACs endorsed both candidates. Ann Lewis, former political director of the Democratic National Committee, urged women to send money to both. Liz Holtzman replied, “That is not how Solomon solved the problem. You can’t give Gerry half a vote and me the rest. The voting booth is about choices, and in the end you only get one” (Specter 1992). Yet many believed that to throw Emily’s List’s power behind one candidate and therefore against another with impeccable feminist credentials would be wrong. “To me the women’s movement means more than having women use power the way men do. This smacks of the bad old days of the machine” (Specter 1992).

What should Emily’s List do? With all the hype around the 1992 elections they were in a particularly intense spotlight. *Sixty Minutes* was doing a piece on Emily’s List. Founder Ellen Malcolm also knew that because her core network in DC had been key players in the successful effort to get a woman nominated for Vice-President in 1984, “people on our steering committee were very tied into Ferraro.”¹ They worried that any decision to endorse Ferraro would appear to be biased. The Steering Committee met to consider their decision.

**Background: Origins of Emily’s List**

Emily’s List is one of the more recent efforts to increase the number of women in elected office in the United States. Though women were enfranchised in 1920, very few were elected to state or federal office in the subsequent decades. It took the explosive energy of second wave feminism in the 1970s to spawn a new generation of organized efforts to increase women’s representation. The National Women’s Political Caucus (founded in 1971) and the Women’s Campaign Fund (founded in 1974) organized extensive efforts to encourage and train women candidates, provide contacts and “insider” information, raise funds, and mobilize grass roots support. Yet in 1975 only 4% of the members of Congress were female. Despite valiant efforts, twelve years later that proportion had risen only to 6% (Thomas and Wilcox 1998, 6-7).

The difficulties female candidates faced were (and still are) complex (see Carroll 1994; Witt et. al. 1993). The long struggle for woman suffrage surfaced deeply held cultural assumptions that politics and

¹All quotations from Ellen Malcolm are from a phone interview with author, August 31, 2000.
public life are essentially male arenas where the very presence of women is inappropriate and potentially dangerous. “Public women” were prostitutes. The legacy of these ideas remains in a persistent view that women are “too good” for “dirty politics.” In the years after 1920, women found that political careers—like other professions—were generally inhospitable to women, who found it extremely difficult to combine politics with private lives that involved motherhood or household responsibilities. A very high proportion of female candidates for Congress were, in fact, older widows of prominent male politicians who “inherited” their husband’s positions. Others faced continual suggestions that political success meant failure as a woman (i.e. as wife, as mother, and as sexually respectable). By the late 1980s, however, female candidates had become bolder in their responses to the barrage of inappropriate questions that came their way. Congresswoman Pat Schroeder responded to the question of how she, a woman, could run for Congress with “I have a brain and a uterus, and I use both” (Witt et. al. 1993, 73; see also Ferraro, 1985; Schroeder 1998; Woods 2000).

A further complication in the 1970s was that issues defined as feminist—such as the Equal Rights Amendment and abortion—had become among the most polarizing issues in American politics, dividing women and men alike. Yet, by the early 1980s there was evidence not only that women were voting in far greater numbers, but also that they voted on the whole somewhat differently than men. Under the leadership of Eleanor Smeal, the National Organization for Women studied the voting patterns of women and men in the 1980 election in which 46% of women voted for Ronald Reagan compared to 54% of men. The “gender gap” promised new political power for women. NOW posted monthly “gender gap” updates, analyzing differences between women and men regarding party identification, specific government policies, and issues. A Harris poll in early 1983 confirmed the importance of female voters in the 1982 election and the more rapid move of women voters—as compared to men—away from Reagan and towards the Democrats. Yet even as the media hype about the “gender gap” continued to build the paucity of viable candidates and elected women persisted (see Carroll 1994; Mueller 1988; Witt et. al. 1993, chapter 7).

In 1982, Ellen Malcolm, former organizer for Common Cause and press secretary for the National Women’s Political Caucus, gained a new perspective on one of the root problems for women candidates. An experience with Harriet Woods’s race for Senate in Missouri taught her about the importance of money, early money, to get campaigns off the ground.

When Woods, a veteran city and state politician in Missouri, announced her candidacy for the Democratic nomination to run against Republican Senator John Danforth, her party turned a cold shoulder. “We have to have a man for the job,” leaders said to her. She ran anyway, but discovered to her shock that even with the nomination financial support remained negligible. The Democratic National Committee finally offered $18,000 late in the campaign, not nearly enough to allow her to respond to the onslaught of attack
from her opponent. Woods called Malcolm who, in the brief time left, was able to raise only $50,000. Woods lost by less than 1% of the vote, and Malcolm believed that she could have won if the resources available to her had not been “too little, too late.”

Malcolm decided to found a new kind of feminist Political Action Group based on the theory that “early money is like yeast” from which she took the acronym EMILY. Women’s increased labor force participation, she reasoned, meant that they had—perhaps for the first time—resources to invest in the political process. At the same time, few women could make the large contributions toward which most political fund-raising was geared. Emily’s list would be designed to increase women’s contributions in ways that were targeted and effective. Malcolm, herself a major philanthropist and heir of one of the founders of IBM, had the resources to get it started.

**How Emily’s List Works**

Emily’s List uses a loophole in the campaign finance laws. Political Action Committees, as a rule, are not allowed to contribute more than $5000 to any one candidate. To get around this, Emily’s List uses a technique called “bundling.” Supporters write checks directly to candidates and send them in to Emily’s List, which sends them on to the candidates.

A new member pays $100 to Emily’s list in each two-year election cycle to cover overhead expenses for running the organization. S/he also pledges to contribute at least $100 to each of two candidates recommended by Emily’s List. Once enrolled, the member receives regular mailings about candidates endorsed by Emily’s List, with profiles of their careers, their stands on issues, and the likelihood that they could succeed. The member is free to contribute to any or all of the endorsed candidates, but the names are rotated from one mailing to the next so that if everyone funded the first two on their list, equal amounts would be raised for all.

Endorsement by Emily’s List is a highly centralized process. It is a partisan PAC. From the beginning, only pro-choice women in the Democratic Party have been eligible for consideration. A steering committee, made up of the founding mothers of Emily’s List, makes decisions based on staff recommendations. From the outset Emily’s List made a point of supporting only candidates which had a realistic chance of winning. According to founder Ellen Malcolm,

> The old boys network in politics didn’t believe the women could win. What we did was publicly talk a lot about how tough we were in deciding whom to recommend. And in fact we were. So it started to become a kind of a Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval” which helped decrease the credibility problem.

Staff recommendations are based on indicators that show a candidate is “viable.” These include:

- Demographics and history of the district
Analysis of opponents or potential opponents
Analysis of candidate’s education, political experience, etc.
Demonstrated success at fund-raising
Poll data to demonstrate name recognition and grass roots support.

Such indicators have been criticized primarily by supporters of candidates who did not receive endorsement. The last item has been most controversial. Polling is expensive—costing upwards of $14,000. For some candidates this requirement is a catch-22. They cannot receive money without a poll. They can not afford a poll without some money. Malcolm, however, remains adamant that Emily’s list is about winning races. Its recommendations are intended to place women’s contributions where they can do the most good. This, in turn, requires a policy that she thinks of as a kind of “tough love.” “No poll, no dough” is the rule. She also defends Emily’s List’s selectivity as a commitment not to waste resources either on races where the woman is sure to win or on those that are demonstrably unwinnable. By contrast, NWPC and the Women’s Campaign Fund, both non-partisan, tended to support any woman who met their criteria in terms of support for key women’s issues (Witt et al. 1993, 125-151). (While they were important sources of support for women candidates in the 1970s and 1980s, neither ever approached the level of fundraising success or impact of Emily’s List.)

Public interest lobbies such as Common Cause remain extremely critical of the practice of bundling, which has routinely been used by corporations to avoid the legal limits on PAC donations (Simon 1994). Emily’s list, however, argues that until campaigns are fully financed with public funds, its practices make the process more, not less, democratic. Notably, Emily’s list does not lobby officials after they are elected, though it would cut off future support from anyone who did not vote pro-choice.

1992: “Year of the Woman”

Emily’s List had some success in the 1980s, including a few striking victories. When Barbara Mikulski ran for Senate in 1986, Emily’s List contributed $250,000 to her campaign ($1 out of every $5 she raised), and claimed her victory as evidence of a winning strategy. Between 1986 and 1990 Emily’s List helped elect seven Democratic women to the U.S. House: Nita Lowey (NY), Jolene Unsoeld (WA), Jill Long (IN), Patsy Mink (HI), Rosa DeLauro (CT), Maxine Waters (CA), and delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton (DC). In 1990 it supported Ann Richards (TX) and Barbara Roberts (OR) in their successful gubernatorial campaigns (McLean 1995, 175-76). By 1990, Emily’s List donated $1.5 million to 14 candidates and its membership list expanded to 3500. Not until 1992, however, “The Year of the Woman,” did Emily’s List assume the role of one of the most powerful PACs in the nation. This phenomenal growth was the result of two factors: an aroused constituency and an unusual opportunity for newcomers.

The Anita Hill Effect

Despite evidence of a gender gap in voting, few politicians in the 1980s felt much pressure to address
women as a group. That changed in the fall of 1991.

The Senate confirmation hearings on President Bush’s nominee to replace retiring Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall were not expected to provide a flashpoint of feminist resurgence. A civil rights leader who had argued landmark civil rights cases, Marshall had been the only African-American to serve on the Court. Bush’s proposed replacement, Clarence Thomas, was a conservative African-American and former director of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Civil rights and feminist leaders were strongly opposed to Thomas who had been an outspoken opponent of affirmative action, but they had little expectation that they could do more than place a few objections on the record.

Then on October 6, 1991, two media sources (reporter Nina Totenberg on National Public Radio Newsday) revealed that the Committee had suppressed testimony alleging that Thomas had engaged in sexual harassment. The next day in Anita Hill, an African-American law professor from Oklahoma, held a press conference to confirm these charges. Suddenly the fault lines of race and gender were visible. Men generally shrugged. African-Americans perceived racism in the sensationalism that surrounded the charges. Women, by a substantial proportion but in differing degrees by race, were outraged that the testimony had been covered up. On October 8, Democratic congresswomen marched from the House to the Senate and demanded an investigation. Their angry confrontation was high drama for the media. Airwaves filled with women calling to say, “they just don’t get it, do they?” In short order the Senate Judiciary Committee changed its mind and extended its hearings to incorporate public testimony from Anita Hill.

For three days, the nation stopped to watch hearings in which a committee of eight white men grilled a genteel, African-American woman law professor. Anita Hill’s quiet dignity contrasted sharply to her interrogators’ palpable discomfort and ineptitude, particularly as senior liberal, Ted Kennedy, himself had a record of sexual peccadillos. They made light of this “sexual harassment crap” and turned their questions repeatedly to details containing sexual innuendo. Many, many women were not amused. From private homes to political campaigns, the debate catalyzed a new wave of activism.

**An Unusually Open Year for Newcomers**

Energy and opportunity came together in the 1992 campaign. Even as public attention focused on the lack of women in Congress, the election of 1992 offered an unusual number of open seats. Not only had redistricting after the 1990 census prompted numerous retirements, but also recent scandals involving the House Bank and Post Office made incumbents vulnerable. House members had been found with their hands in the public till, overdrawing accounts, for example, with no penalty. And finally, in the aftermath of the Gulf War, foreign policy issues were not prominent. Instead, domestic issues were at the forefront of most campaigns and Democrats could look to the charismatic leadership of the Clinton campaign to dramatize their stands.
Emily’s List reaped great benefit from women’s newly aroused awareness of their marginalization and lack of representation in Congress. Membership surged, and millions of dollars in donations passed through the office to the hands of endorsed candidates. Suddenly being a female candidate was not a handicap. Indeed, women came to symbolize the changes that many citizens—both male and female—thought were needed. Analysts and pundits began to predict that new attitudes, new energy, and a large number of open races portended a “year of the woman.”

New York Senate Race

In New York, incumbent Senator Al D’Amato looked vulnerable. For two years he had been the subject of a Senate ethics investigation of allegations about conflicts of interest. Though the committee voted in the summer of 1991 not to censure him, the scent of scandal remained (Gruson 1992; see NYT February 3, 1992, A, 1).

Sensing this, Democratic candidates begin to line up at the gate including Representative Robert Mrazek, Reverend Al Sharpton, Attorney General Robert Abrams, City Comptroller Elizabeth Holtzman, and former Representative and Vice Presidential candidate Geraldine A. Ferraro. The two women were seasoned feminists with a wealth of political experience, just the kind of candidates Emily’s List was looking for.

Elizabeth Holtzman had unseated conservative Republican Emmanuel Cellars in 1972 at the age of 31. An activist in the anti-war movement, she took Cellars’s old seat on the House Judiciary Committee just in time for the Watergate Hearings. Soon, the sharp intelligence of the young woman with the large glasses was etched into the awareness of millions who watched the hearings unravel Richard Nixon’s presidency. Columns, cartoons, and news stories alike made her a prominent national figure. In subsequent years in the House, Holtzman was a founding member and guiding figure in the creation of the Congressional Women’s Caucus that became a key voice for women’s issues (see Gertzog 1995, chapters 9-10). She left the house to run for the Senate in 1980, a contest she lost by less than 1% to Al D’Amato. Through the eighties she served in elected positions as District Attorney in New York and then as the City Controller. Throughout her career, she had been viewed as “the purest of feminist fighters,” proving her credentials as an advocate for women’s rights on issues like abortion, violence against women, and military spending (Purdum 1992). And she had never lost in a Democratic primary.

Geraldine Ferraro, an assistant DA in Queens, successfully ran for Congress in 1978. More moderate than Holtzman on issues like crime, law and order, and foreign policy, her solid record in Congress made her an obvious choice when discussion of the “gender gap” in the early eighties ballooned into pressure within the Democratic Party to nominate a woman for the Vice-presidency. Once nominated in 1984, Ferraro became a hero to millions of women and a role model for girls who for the first time could actually imagine that they might grow up to be the President. At the same time, the bruising campaign demonstrated that a “gender gap”
was not enough, that women would not automatically vote for a female candidate, and that political advances for women would continue to be hard won. This was also the time that Ellen Malcolm was hatching an idea for Emily’s List.

Holtzman and Ferraro each claimed that she was the best candidate to defeat D’Amato in 1992. Ferraro entered the race in May 1991 to general skepticism from politicians who worried about the political baggage remaining from the 1984 campaign when the press delved into her husband’s business dealings and she herself had stonewalled for a time before releasing their tax returns. Despite high negative ratings (in early 1991 her “unfavorable” rating was at 33%) “Ferraro—a fierce, mercurial, engagingly physical campaigner—began a whirlwind campaign anyway” (S. Ferraro 1992). Her campaign gained considerable momentum both in polls and in fund-raising following the Senate Judiciary Hearings on Clarence Thomas. By February 1992 she had pulled even with the presumed leader, Robert Abrams, according to the Marist Institute Poll, and she had raised $2 million. The Hill/Thomas hearings also prompted Holtzman to announce her candidacy and run a series of ads with images of herself as a member of the House Judiciary Committee in the Watergate Hearings. Playing on the theme of integrity, she asked voters to “Elect senators to stand up for the dignity and rights of women” (Roberts 1992, 1). Holtzman claims that her early polls showed her winning the primary by a substantial margin, though published polls placed her third (Holtzman 1996, 246). Given the nature of D’Amato’s vulnerability on ethical questions, and her own close race against him in 1980, Holtzman portrayed herself as the candidate with the highest level of integrity as well as the strongest feminist record (Holtzman 1996, 246-48, 250). Each of them desperately needed the support and the credibility that Emily’s List could supply.

**Dilemma: Feminism and Politics**

Feminists have had a decidedly ambivalent relationship to electoral politics. Many, in fact, see it as an arena that is so male-dominated and fraught with inevitable compromise that they choose to focus their energies elsewhere (Freeman 2000). An important strain of feminist activism, however, has from the early 1970s, concentrated on increasing women’s participation as voters, candidates, and elected officials. These feminists imagined not only greater equality for women but also the transformative impact of what they saw as feminist values and practices: cooperation, sisterhood, and a broadened vision of the common good. In New York, feminists engaged in such efforts had spent years working in the campaigns of both Holtzman and Ferraro, never imagining that the two might be pitted against each other in a single race. When that happened, the choice they faced was excruciating. The National Women’s Political Caucus and the Women’s Campaign Fund endorsed both of them. Ann Lewis’s recommendation that women split their campaign donations between the two prompted Holtzman’s tart response about the indivisibility of the ballot: “You only get one vote” (Specter 1992). New York City and State NOW leaders sent out a mass mailing outlining what
they saw as the superior qualifications of Elizabeth Holtzman, her longer and deeper record on women’s issues.

Emily’s List, however, had a strategy of endorsing one candidate per race and targeting its efforts toward winnable races. The goal was to make the most efficient and responsible use of members’ resources and then to help those it endorsed not only with funds, but also with access to a wide national funding network. Adherence to this approach resulted in enormous benefits as the very fact of endorsement by Emily’s list conferred not only money, but also a huge jump in visibility and credibility (Sullivan 1996, 66-67, 70). For the first time, in New York, feminist political strategies came into direct conflict.
Epilogue (B)

Emily’s List did endorse Ferraro, based, they said, on the indicators that suggested that she was a more viable candidate. In order to meet concerns about bias, they set up a separate committee of four: Malcolm, Jody Franklin, political director of Emily’s List, Mary Hewes, a political consultant in San Francisco, and Deborah Ness, Deputy Director at the National Abortion Rights Action League. Neither Hewes nor Ness were members of the Emily’s List Steering Committee nor did they have any prior connection to Geraldine Ferraro. They were charged with making a thorough evaluation of the Senate race in New York, and bringing their recommendation to the Steering Committee.

Malcolm recalls their process:

We decided that the goal of Emily’s List was to add pro-choice Democratic women to high office. When more than one woman is running, our first benchmark decision would be: do we have to choose? We concluded that we would choose if it appeared that by not choosing, neither woman would win. Our goal was to win the general election.

In view of the fact that Robert Abrams was the front runner, the committee decided that it would be necessary to make a choice.

We then did the evaluation; did our own poll of voters, met with both candidates, talked with their campaigns many times, evaluated their ability to raise money, and concluded that at every level Gerry was the stronger candidate. Polls showed more support for Gerry upstate. Holtzman had a hard time moving outside New York City. Gerry had a national ability to raise money and the kind of political charisma that was going to be necessary to beat D’Amato.

Holtzman was outraged. It was Holtzman who accused Emily’s List of funding its friends and playing politics in the old, male way. She was the person who charged that “this smacks of the bad old days of the machine” (Specter 1992). Holtzman’s campaign finance director even claimed that the endorsement was “fixed,” charging in a press release that the Emily’s List endorsement was as fair and open as the Thomas hearings” because they were hell-bent on endorsing a friend, not beating Alfonse D’Amato” (Johnson 1992). Holtzman went on to run a very negative campaign with ads questioning the ethics of Ferraro’s husband. Both were defeated by Attorney General Robert Abrams, who in turn lost to D’Amato in the November election.

Despite this disappointment, however, the proportion of women in Congress rose from 8 to 10% as a result of the 1992 election. One hundred and six women were nominated by major parties in congressional races and 47 of them won. In the Senate 11 women received nominations and 6 won. It was the largest one time increase as well as a record in absolute numbers for women candidates and winners alike. In this sense, 1992 was a “watershed” year for women.
Bibliography


