

Missouri Makeover

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Until the recent mid-term election, the “Show Me State” never elected a woman to the US Senate. Claire McCaskill, a Missouri native, changed history when she narrowly defeated Jim Talent in this year’s midterm election. Born in 1953, Claire McCaskill grew up in rural Missouri, where her father worked at the McCaskill feed mill. During her childhood years, Claire McCaskill’s parents entered the world of politics; her father, William, served as Missouri’s insurance commissioner and her mother, Betty, made history when she became the first woman elected to Columbia, Missouri City Council. Claire McCaskill was a bright student and graduated at the top of her high school class. After graduation, the future US senator found a job as a waitress, which helped her through her years at the University of Missouri-Columbia. McCaskill graduated with a bachelor’s degree in political science and went on to receive her law degree. Early on, McCaskill clerked for the Missouri Court of Appeals in Kansas City, worked her way up the ranks in the state legislature, and was elected Missouri state auditor in 1998, a position she held until her election to the US Senate (10 things 2006, par 5). Claire McCaskill is a strong and talented political figure who overcame big odds to defeat Jim Talent in the 2006 Missouri’s US Senate election.

A record number of women now serve in congress, but white men still overwhelmingly dominate the national legislature (Ohlemacher 2006, par 2). Susan Carroll, in “Voting Choices,” explains the role the gender gap plays in elections (Carroll 2005, 94). Today, Carroll claims, more women than ever are voting and participating in government, which could create what Kathleen Dolan calls the “affinity effect,” whereby women will vote for female candidates (Dolan 2004, 14). The “affinity effect” is

intensified in years like the current one, when voters lose trust in government, because women are often stereotyped as more honest and competent than men, making them perfect candidates to clean up rampant corruption (Dolan 2004, 65). However, Dolan also points out that general voting decisions are mostly based on three variables: political party identification, candidate image, and issues; sex of the candidate theoretically plays a limited role in elections (Dolan 2004, 90), but in the Missouri race, being a woman undoubtedly benefited Claire McCaskill.

Some political scientists theorize that entering politics may be significantly more difficult for women than for men. Jennifer Lawless and Richard Fox contend that women often do not run for office because they do not get proper support from family and friends, and because they do not come from patriarchal “pipeline professions,” such as law and business (Lawless & Fox 2005, 26). Women also face the challenge of defeating male incumbents, which proves extremely difficult today due to gerrymandering, name recognition, and campaign fund raising (Dolan 2004, 52). When gendered issues like terrorism, defense, and the economy top voters’ list of key issues, women tend to face big campaign difficulty, because they are seen as weak on these issues, though voters perceive them as strong on welfare, health, and children’s issues (Dolan 2004, 64). Based solely on these theories, Claire McCaskill’s chance for victory seems bleak; but with a little luck and a lot of experience, McCaskill pulled off a stunning victory.

Since an early age, Claire McCaskill was close to politics, and had very strong family support during her time in office. As Lawless and Fox argue, “choosing to run for office is not a spontaneous decision; rather, it is the culmination of a long, personal evolution that often stretches back into early family life” (Lawless & Fox 2005, 154).

Both of Claire McCaskill's parents served in public office while she was young, setting an example for her to follow. Additionally, her mother, Betty, was the first woman elected to local office in Missouri (10 Things 2006, par 2). Claire McCaskill not only had supportive parents, she had amazing role models. Betty McCaskill showed that women could succeed in the public sphere, at a time when society believed a woman's place was in the kitchen. If many women had the level of family support that Claire McCaskill received, we might be closer to reaching gender parity in congress than we currently are.

McCaskill also has an advantage over many other women because she comes from a "pipeline profession." Based on the 109th congress, "law, business, education, and politics are the leading professions that precede congressional careers" (Lawless & Fox 2005, 26). Claire McCaskill worked in both law and politics before her election to US Senate. After finishing her law degree, she took a job as a clerk in a federal Court of Appeals and later became prosecutor in Jackson County, Missouri. McCaskill's resume in politics is equally impressive and includes many positions in the state legislature and state auditor. Since men largely dominate "pipeline professions" many women have a difficult time running for office. Most women, unlike Claire McCaskill, usually come from "compassion" professions like education and healthcare.

Voters, therefore, stereotype women as being compassionate, honest and competent. In this year's midterm election, this stereotype worked well for McCaskill and other female candidates. On honesty and compassion, Dolan writes, "this can be a valuable asset for women candidates in times when voter dissatisfaction with government and incumbent leaders is high" (Dolan 2004, 65). Over the last year, Republicans have been involved in a number of corruption scandals across the nation, from Bob Ney to

Jack Abramoff to Mark Foley. American voters are looking for an end to the “culture of corruption” and Claire McCaskill was able to exploit this vulnerability perfectly (Salant 2006, par 2). McCaskill’s opponent Jim Talent faced the unfortunate luck of being both a Republican and an incumbent in a year when Americans sought change in government.

McCaskill also won as a Democratic woman in a relatively Republican state. In 2004, George W. Bush won Missouri by a seven point margin and he defeated Al Gore in 2000 by a four point margin. Voters in Missouri chose Jim Talent over the Democratic incumbent in the 2002 midterm election. Although Missouri probably cannot be classified as a solid red state, voters have been leaning Republican since 2000. Winning Talent’s seat meant that Claire McCaskill would have to successfully swing moderate voters who preferred Republicans in the past. She chose to focus on moderate female voters, hoping the “affinity effect,” and certain gendered issues would help her win; she was correct.

Jim Talent was well aware of how important these women voters were in the senate election, and did his best to win their votes. Since 2004, Talent worked as an advocate for breast cancer awareness and an advocate of finding a cure. However, as Massimo Calabresi writes in Time Magazine, “Talent's breast cancer awareness effort is personal and heartfelt: his mother died of the disease in 1988. But like everything a candidate does in campaign season, the pink arch event was also high-wattage politics — part of a massive push by the first-term incumbent Senator to woo nearly two million other women: those registered to vote in Missouri” (Calabresi 2006, par 2). In addition, Talent started a campaign arm called “women for Talent” which held nine events across the state rallying women around Talent; and toward the end of the campaign, Talent’s

television advertisements focused on feminine issues like nursing home safety, healthcare and fighting drug abuse (Calabresis 2006, par 3). Pushing gendered issues looked like a good strategy for Talent to win some female votes, but ultimately failed.

McCaskill won some female swing votes by taking the correct side of a key hot-button gendered issue in Missouri: stem cell research. Missouri voters decided on a controversial ballot initiative to increase research on embryonic stem cells and many voters linked the stem cell issue to the senate candidates. The stem cell issue is significant because according to the Pew Center for the Public and the Press, it is an issue that “women have come to support by a large margin over the last four years” (Calabresi 2006, par 5). Stem cell research is increasingly perceived as a social welfare issue, because of the potential benefits the research might bring to society; gendered issues like welfare tend to help women like McCaskill. During the Major League Baseball World Series, Claire McCaskill ran an advertisement in which actor Michael J. Fox endorsed her based on her support for stem cell research. Scrambling to catch up, Jim Talent responded with an advertisement featuring “current and former local pro athletes Kurt Warner, Mike Sweeney and Cardinals pitcher Jeff Suppan” (Calabresi 2006, par 5). Women swing voters were turned off by the masculine gendered advertisements; Jim Talent knew how important feminine issues were to the election, yet pushed the masculine commercial on voters anyway.

In addition to stem cells, “for Missouri voters, the No. 1 issue has consistently been Iraq” (Marek 2006, par 2), giving Claire McCaskill a unique edge. Kathleen Dolan contends that issues like security and terrorism give men an advantage because voters do not trust women to handle tough foreign policy issues. However, Dolan’s analysis only

holds true if voters support the policy in question; in the case of Iraq, “Seven in ten women oppose the war, compared with 58% opposition among men, according to a recent CNN poll” (Calabresi 2006, par 6). Voters see the war as a consequence of patriarchal government and Claire McCaskill, an anti-war woman, as a voice for change. Jill Zuckman, writing in the Chicago Tribune, confirms “unhappiness with the war in Iraq, the government's inept response to Hurricane Katrina and a desire for practical solutions may lead [voters] to back women challengers at the expense of many Republican incumbents” (Zuckman 2006, par. 7). Appealing to moderate women voters who oppose the war probably tipped the election to McCaskill.

The weekend before the election, Las Vegas odds makers favored Jim Talent to keep his senate seat in Missouri (State Senate Races 2006, par 2), and it seems reasonable. Claire McCaskill was running as a female Democrat in a state that had favored Republicans in the last six years and had never elected a woman to the senate. Additionally, she ran as a challenger to an incumbent, a difficult task to begin with, and generally even more difficult for women. Missouri voters saw the war in Iraq as the number one issue, which generally favors male candidates. Yet Clair McCaskill outmaneuvered Jim Talent, winning moderate women swing voters using the gendered stem cell issue and spinning Iraq in her favor. She also picked up some votes by relying to some extent on the “affinity effect,” and she also took advantage of the sex stereotype that women are honest and best able to clean up corruption in Washington. Claire McCaskill’s victory in the Missouri senate race probably isn’t the biggest upset in American political history, but it is certainly a monumental event for McCaskill and all women in politics

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