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The Year of the Woman, but not in NY

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By Mitchell Moss

This has been a special year for women in politics. Canada has chosen a female prime minister; the new premier of Turkey is a woman; Texas has elected a female U.S. senator and New Jersey Republicans nominated a woman for governor. By the end of this year, many of the nation's major states - California, Texas, Illinois - but not New York will have women in high elective office. Despite New York's progressive reputation and liberal ideology, this is not fertile territory for females. The state that once sent Bella Abzug, Shirley Chisholm, Geraldine Ferraro and Elizabeth Holtzman to Congress, as well as producing the next justice of the Supreme Court, has been eclipsed by the electoral achievements of women in other states.

The easy answers - that the right type of women don't run, that women can't raise the large sums of money required for big-state campaigns, or that women don't unite behind a single candidate - may be accurate, but they don't adequately explain the overwhelming lack of success by female candidates in the Empire State. The problem is rooted in the structure of our political parties, in the way we evaluate female candidates for public office, and in the careers available to females in New York City and State.

The fact that New York is largely a one-party state - and New York City certainly a one-party city - reduces the number of political paths, for both men

and women, by half. The Democratic Party's hegemony means that political success is determined through party conventions or primaries - two processes that favor candidates with organizational support, whether from unions or party regulars. One-party politics favors incumbents, since intraparty conflict can result in political exile for failed challengers. Without a competitive party system, incumbents have the equivalent of life tenure, making it especially difficult for challengers to raise serious money. The Republican Party doesn't even use statewide races to build up future candidates and to reach out to new constituencies. In other states, the Republicans recognize that female candidates are assets that overcome the party's ideological baggage.

There is no shortage of intelligent and ambitious females capable of holding public office. As the recent appointment of Judith Kaye as chief judge of the State Court of Appeals demonstrates, New York electoral politics is far less open to female achievers than other professions and careers, such as law, publishing, advertising and finance. These careers are just as demanding as politics, but women recognize that the competitive milieu of New York business - even with its sexism - is more responsive to brains and talent than the insular world of politics. Few states offer as many routes to success - apart from politics - as New York.

Male politicians in New York are aggressive and confrontational; just look at Mario Cuomo, Ed Koch and Al D'Amato. But when Elizabeth Holtzman ran for the U.S. Senate last year, she was criticized for being too aggressive a charge rarely applied to a man. Was Al D'Amato too hard on Jacob Javits and Bob Abrams? Of course not; toughness is required for men in politics, whether in New York or the nation. Perhaps we must overcome cultural stereotypes for women to Succeed in New York.

Ironically, the new pressure to elect racial and ethnic minorities to public office may further weaken the prospects for females in New York. The recent selection of Carl McCall for State Comptroller over Carol Bellamy was partially motivated by the Democrats' desire for an African-American on next year's statewide ticket. Sooner or later, New Yorkers will pay for their failure to nominate and elect women to high office. But unless we recognize how high the barriers are. New York will continue to lag behind the nation.

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