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# When Women Win: EMILY's List And The Rise Of Women In American Politics



**WHEN WOMEN WIN**

EMILY'S LIST  
AND THE RISE OF WOMEN  
IN AMERICAN POLITICS

Ellen R. Malcolm

*with* CRAIG UNGER



## Synopsis

The dramatic inside story of the rise of women in elected office over the past quarter-century, from the pioneering founder of three-million-member EMILY's List to one of the most influential players in today's political landscape. In 1985, aware of the near-total absence of women in Congress, Ellen R. Malcolm launched EMILY's List, a powerhouse political organization that seeks to ignite change by getting women elected to office. The rest is riveting history: Between 1986 when there were only 12 Democratic women in the House and none in the Senate and now, EMILY's List has helped elect 19 women Senators, 11 governors, and 110 Democratic women to the House. Incorporating exclusive interviews with Hillary Clinton, Nancy Pelosi, Tammy Baldwin, and others, *When Women Win* delivers stories of some of the toughest political contests of the past three decades, including the historic victory of Barbara Mikulski as the first Democratic woman elected to the Senate in her own right; the defeat of Todd Akin (a legitimate rape) by Claire McCaskill; and Elizabeth Warren's dramatic win over incumbent Massachusetts senator Scott Brown. *When Women Win* includes Malcolm's own story the high drama of Anita Hill's sexual harassment testimony against Clarence Thomas and its explosive effects on women's engagement in electoral politics; the long nights spent watching the polls after months of dogged campaigning; the heartbreaking losses and unprecedented victories but it's also a page-turning political saga that may well lead up to the election of the first woman president of the United States.

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## Customer Reviews

When Women Win is about the meteoric rise of Emily's list and the woman behind it, who has more or less kept out of the limelight, remarkable in that she created one of the major political forces in America. Ellen Malcolm was on the periphery of the civil rights movement in the 1960s. She had a bit of experience as a volunteer for some political campaigns, but was looking for a way in which she could have a large impact as a philanthropist. The women's movement, in its infancy was fighting for rights, equality and beginning to raise awareness of inequality, The absence of opportunity for women, and more fundamental issues which held women back, prevented us from reaching our full potential. At the time there were 2 women in the legislature, and historically only 2 women had ever served in their own right (a few serving in place of their spouse, when they passed on during their term). She decided that if women were more fairly represented, many of those issues would be easier to address. The sole focus of EMILY's list was to support female candidates, and try to reach parity in the legislature.. Ellen Malcolm started EMILY's list with her rolodex, and parties, meetings with friends and their rolodexes. The organization seems to have bloomed almost overnight, at least with a very short time horizon for an organization with the kind of reach and impact which EMILY's list has. The organization was, at first, a way for Ellen Malcolm to make focused contributions to female candidates anonymously. The idea was well received and a grassroots coalition quickly formed. They pulled in a lot of small donations. Once they organized and made an effort to raise meaningful amounts of money, the organization grew exponentially and they realized they could do more than what they had been. They began to actively search for and recruit candidates. While EMILY's list started small it quickly grew into a formidable organization which in some ways resembles a venture capitol firm ; they recruited, groomed and coached candidates, provided funding, advice, connections, know how to women seeking elected office, as well as to women who they thought would make strong candidates. They have been behind quite a few now well heeled politicians. This book tells the story of the formation and rise of the organization, along with a blow by blow description of some of their early battles It is interesting not only as a story about the founding and rise of a fairly successful nonprofit, but also because of the anecdotes which show the more human side of some of the women in office, and the struggles they had to get there. EMILY's list is now something of a force to be reckoned with. I was frankly surprised to find that some of my more active friends had not heard of them. The primary goal of the organization has not shifted, but the reach very much has. Certainly getting equal or proportionate representation is a worthy goal. Many would have expected to, and settled for things moving more slowly than Ellen Malcolm and her founding group did. The rapidity with which she and EMILY's list turned

things around is remarkable. I would not necessarily go so far as to say that the work is all done yet, but a huge amount of progress has been made. I am not particularly happy about (nor shocked by) the extent to which money shapes politics. That is a fundamental assumption and part of the working mantra of EMILY's list. The organization also has a singular and discrete goal: to get women elected (though they have been responsible for appointments as well). A big part of reaching that goal has been via fundraising and campaign contributions, the name of the organization itself pointing to the magic of a campaign war chest. While I may not agree with all of the decisions made along the way, I believe that the organization as a whole has made an enormous and positive impact, getting 51% of the population better representation. I think that there are people who could learn a great deal about starting and growing an organization by reading this book. I have already recommended it to at least 1 friend who has started an organization that seems to be growing out of control. I do have to wonder though how quick a start it would have been off to without the enormous seed capital, which Ellen provided. That is truly an unanswerable question. The book also has some interesting backstory on how some now prominent and powerful women became so. The book is an easy read and fascinating history. It is one which should be of interest to those who are interested or involved in women's issues, or starting/ running an NPO. It would also be of interest to historians and those interested in political science or civil rights. It really is a fascinating behind the scenes look at part of our political landscapes, one which is often discounted.

Excellent information. Very well researched and documented I have been telling all the women I know that they need to read this. Young women today seem to have no idea how much more clout they have, than those of us who held jobs in the 60s and 70s.

People who know next to nothing about Emily's List and have not thought a lot about why there are so few women in politics may find this book illuminating. But that is not my situation, and I suspect that I am hardly unique. I got the book hoping for some new and deep insights about women in politics, and what is involved in getting more women into politics. But--disappointingly--the book really does not provide them. It is also written in a chatty/anecdotal style that I found annoying and infantilizing. So, after the first five chapters, I moved from read mode to skim mode. I don't regret the decision. By my lights, the book is just too shallow, and too chatty. It could gainfully have been a lot shorter.

The cover of this book features Hilary Clinton and the title implies that it is a study of all elected women in America, so I obviously had to review this book as part of this election cycle. While I wish this book was what it promised, the story of how women have now truly won over their male counterparts in politics with Ellen Malcolm's help, in reality, this is a highly biased history of a major political committee through the propagandistic view of its founder. The trouble is that women are still less represented in politics in America than in most other first world countries. The misconception that women now have their fair share and have broken the glass ceiling is spread by books like this with a fiscal and political investment in the cause so far. Malcolm writes that the last glass ceiling to break is the presidency, and cheers Hilary Clinton towards this goal. Seeing a woman elected president is an admirable goal, but what that woman does in office will determine if women running for this office in the future will be looked at as equals. Perhaps something about the type of women that Emily's List has been actively funding has meant that the examples they set make it so that it is still difficult for a woman without their assistance to be nominated to a major political office in America. Because I am skeptical, here is a short sample of some women currently in the Senate. There are only twenty women in the Senate today, so my study covers nearly half of them. After Stanford, Dianne Goldman, worked in city government before being elected to the Board of Supervisors and then became the Mayor, before winning a Senate seat. Barbara Levy Boxer worked as a stockbroker, journalist, Board Supervisor, as a House Representative, before winning the seat. Mazie Hirono worked as a member of the Hawaii House of Representatives and Lieutenant Governor of Hawaii, before also serving in the House and Senate. Malcolm focuses on Mikulski in this book, noting that after reaching the honor of being the longest serving female Senator, she is not running for a sixth term. Barbara Ann Mikulski was a social worker, community organizer, member of the City Council, then the House and finally the Senate. Elizabeth Ann Warren was a professor of law at Harvard and other schools, wrote many respected legal papers that led to some practical changes in the legal system, before serving on the Congressional Oversight Panel and Assistant to the President, and then winning a Senate seat. Deborah Ann Greer Stabenow was a member of a County Board of Commissioners, the Michigan House of Representatives, the Michigan Senate, the federal House, before climbing into the Senate. Claire McCaskill worked as a State Auditor, County Prosecutor, member of the Missouri House of Representatives. Jeanne Shaheen worked in the New Hampshire Senate, as a Governor, as the director of the Harvard Institute of Politics, before winning a Senate seat. This list of achievements does not sound like these were meek women without powerful careers in legal, medical and other respectable professions that needed Emily's List's help if they ever hoped to win an

election (and there are only five other female Democrats in the Senate that I'm not mentioning here). All of these women started with hard work in the law, or community organization or academia and gradually climbed up until they were visible enough to win national campaigns. The Index isn't in the review copy I received, so I can't double-check how each of these women were promoted by Emily's List, or if any of them were not. One of the women Malcolm mentions frequently is Nancy Pelosi, but she is the exception to this pattern. Instead of gradually working up to the top, she was elected to the House when Philip Burton died, leaving his seat to his wife, who was dying of cancer and designated Pelosi of all people as her successor. Pelosi never ran for the Senate, remaining in the house until she eventually won the Speaker seat for four years. Malcolm explains her significance in the election of women in general by writing that before only widows would win their husband's seats: "when it came to electing a Democratic woman in her own right, that had never happened" (x). To fight against this plight, Emily's List came up with a sophisticated marketing strategy dedicated to winning political parity for women (x). Marketing campaign? This is definitely the problem in American politics. Instead of simply expressing political positions, and making heart-felt speeches during elections, both male and female candidates are always presenting their best angle and reciting the marketing talking points given to them by their party or committees like Emily's List. All across the world, women have won by delivering a unique, pertinent message, but in American all messages are washed through this marketing filter. Malcolm stresses that Emily's List is the "most powerful political-action committee in the United States" (xi). If this is the case, it is to blame for the problems they have failed to resolve despite all this power. Here is how Malcolm explains the debt two of the women I surveyed above owe her a debt of gratitude:

"Mikulski's journey from being a scrappy street-fighting community organizer in Maryland to making history as the first Democratic woman elected to the United States Senate in her own right. It was the story of a California Democratic Party volunteer named Nancy Pelosi, who hosted a fundraiser for EMILY's List at her San Francisco home in the eighties and went on to become the Speaker of the House" (xii). I read this section before doing my survey, but after it this makes more sense. Mikulski is referred to as a "street-fighter" and Pelosi is apparently merely a "volunteer" before Malcolm saves them from their mediocre existences. What role could Malcolm have played in a Senator's widow's nomination of Pelosi as her replacement on the ticket? Is Malcolm saying that Pelosi was a complete unknown and was thus pushed upwards simply because she helped Emily's List raise funds? And before Mikulski ran for national office, she was on the City Council and hardly was

she fighting in the streets waiting for Malcolm to rescue her. Why would propaganda of these grand proportions be necessary? Why would only a single woman's campaign funding group have ever managed to get women elected? What exactly is at the root of their power? The answers to these questions cannot be found in this book because Malcolm cannot and does not examine the story as history, but instead uses the narrative as a self-promotion marketing tool. There are many other negative absurdities in this text, like the notion that only after Anita Hill's explosive testimony that Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas had sexually harassed her, did scores of women candidates sweep into office for the first time (xiii). So, if not for one woman's tragedy, none of those little irrelevant women could have won an election on their own merit? She further writes that before Emily's List: "The political establishment had made it so difficult for women to win seats in the House, much less the Senate, that women couldn't possibly acquire the experience and credentials necessary to be taken seriously on the presidential level." She celebrates that with her help: "After thirty years, there is an incredibly strong bench of women with convincing credentials" senators, governors, and cabinet officials (xvi). All across the world women have been reaching near 50/50 splits in equivalents to the US House and Senate, while in the US the percentage is still 20. So, the last thirty years has seen a much slower progress for women in office than even in some Muslim countries, where women have served as president. "Convincing credentials"? "Taken seriously"? Why do these nonsensical points need to be mentioned. All of the Senators I reviewed had "convincing" credentials, and only Pelosi had a somewhat shady "unconvincing" start. This attitude is repeated in mainstream media, and newscasters ask if Hilary Clinton can be taken seriously or if she has convincing credentials seeing that she is a woman. That's sexual discrimination because it distracts attention from her political positions to her sex organs. Perhaps the trouble with Malcolm is that she started out as "apolitical" when she attended Hollins all-women's college in 1965 (1). She writes that she was awakened from apathy by the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy, followed by the race riots that led to 26 deaths, 700 injuries and 1,500 arrests in only one of the over a hundred cities that erupted in violence in 1968. These events convinced her that she had to fight "poverty and racism, as well as the war" (2). So that in 1970, she moved to D.C. to join "a new nonpartisan, grassroots citizens' lobby" called Common Cause (3). She did later lose this passion for politics when she surrendered her presidency over Emily's List recently, prior to publishing this book. It is possible, that Malcolm's pessimism about women

in office stems from the conditioning she experienced growing up in the 50s. But what do assassinations of two men have to do with the power struggle of women. Women's rights are not mentioned in the trinity of political causes she initially set out to right. Also, Malcolm spent most of her life between Common Cause and her own committee, so she is the one with limited real-world political experience, and if anybody was fighting in the streets among the women mentioned in this review, it was probably her. Perhaps, her bitterness with the winning women she says she admires stems in the fact that she started where they started, but was never elected to a major political office herself. I would be very interested in reading a detached, critical biography of Malcolm's life in a couple of decades.--Pennsylvania Literary Journal: Summer 2016: [...]

This is a book that does not offer scholarly insight into the manner in which women are elected to office. Rather, this is a treatment that offers insight into how a pro-woman interest group can work to help elect women. It discusses the strategy used by the group to achieve their goals, electing women to office. All in all, a very readable book and informative.

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