In the United States election campaign culture, “Early Money Is Like Yeast”1 – nourishment for the political “dough” that over the past 25 years has allowed pro-choice Democratic women to rise in national politics and claim elected office all while raising the specter of gender equality and women’s rights.

The little moniker is behind the acronym EMILY’s List2, which was the name given to the first political action committee in the United States that focused exclusively on getting progressive women candidates supportive of abortion rights elected to the U.S. Congress and U.S. State Houses. It is today of one of the United States largest such private group organized to elect a certain group of candidates. The saying is a reference to a convention of political fundraising: that receiving lots of donations early in a race is helpful in scaring off challengers and attracting other, later donors.

EMILY’s List, the political action committee intend on giving pro-choice women political clout, started pretty small with a charismatic leader, Ellen Malcolm (Photo, at the Democratic Convention in Denver in 2008), who in 1985 had gathered 24 other women activists in her home to brainstorm about ways to funnel individual small checks to targeted political campaigns benefitting women’s rights and women’s empowerment. Since then, the organization which claims some 692,000 members in the United States, has bundled more than $82 million in election campaign donations. Almost half of it was raised just for the 2009-2010 election cycle. These amounts might not seem that much, considering that in the most recent Congress Election last November a total of close to $4 billion was spent.3 But those $82 million were enough to make a stark difference over the past 25 years: enough for example to help elect 94 pro-choice Democratic women to the U.S. House of Representatives, 16 to the U.S. Senate, nine into governors’ mansions as head of U.S. states and hundreds of women to the state legislatures, state constitutional offices and other key local offices during this time.

“Twenty-five years ago in 1985, there were no Democratic women in the Senate. Zero, None,” said then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi in April 2010 at an anniversary party honoring the legacy of the action group.4 In 1985, of the 435 Members of the U.S. House of Representatives, only 23 were women (11 Republicans, 12 Democrats). The first campaign that EMILY’s List became involved in 1986 was the groundbreaking efforts to elect Barbara Mikulski from Maryland to become the first Democratic female senator. Having just won re-election last November, Senator Barbara Mikulski is now the longest serving female Senator in U.S. history. Today, in the 112th Congress which convened in January 2011, there are 17 women senators, 12

1 http://emilyslist.org/about/
2 http://emilyslist.org/splash/signup/splash01/
4 http://www.politicsdaily.com/2010/04/30/emilys-list-25-years-of-funding-pro-choice-democratic-women/
of them Democrats. The House of Representatives has 74 women parliamentarians (50 of them Democrats, 24 Republican). However, only one of the Congressional Committees, the one on Foreign Affairs, is run by a (Republican) woman. (In contrast: there were three Committee Chairwomen, the most ever, under the last Democratic Congress). While this is improvement over the situation a quarter century ago, the total Capitol Hill ratio of estrogen versus testosterone in both chambers of the U.S. parliament still is one to six. Shockingly, that makes the United States practically on par or worse than many developing countries in terms of gender equality for elected officials: with only roughly 17 percent of U.S. parliamentarians female, the United States ranks 70th in the world⁵ (in comparison: Rwanda is first with 56 percent, followed by Sweden with 45 percent; Germany has almost 33 percent). “Even Iraq and Afghanistan require that their parliaments be 25 percent women”⁶, complains Stephanie Schriock, the current president of EMILY’s List. As a former campaign finance director for the 2004 presidential aspirations of Democratic candidate Howard Dean, Stephanie Schriock knows about the importance of reaching out to engage women in U.S. politics – as financial contributors as well as office holders.

The group’s legacy goes well beyond recruiting and supporting candidates. EMILY’s List did not only change the number of American women in office, but also the number of women working in U.S. political campaigns. Many of those first pioneering female campaign workers of the 1980s have ended up in elected office themselves. And many of the Democratic female politicians with positions of influence in today’s Washington, DC, could count on the support of EMILY’s List early in and throughout their political career. One such example is the current U.S. Secretary for Health and Human Services, Kathleen Sibelius, who got money from the group for her winning race for governor of Kansas, the position she held before being called into President Obama’s cabinet.

From its original focus on helping women candidates storm Capitol Hill, EMILY’s List has since branched out to help in recruiting women as candidates for state and local offices, supporting and running their campaigns and mobilizing Democratic women voters. Thus, for any Democratic presidential candidate, who is traditionally more dependent on the American female vote than his or her Republican counterpart, an endorsement by EMILY’s List is an important stamp of approval. It signifies that the candidate for the highest U.S. office is taking a stance pro-women’s empowerment and pro-choice.

Indeed, EMILY’s List was so successful over the years that the American conservative political spectrum copied it in 1997 by funding the Susan B. Anthony List⁷, a political action committee run by a group of Republican women. Its goal is it to elect Republican women candidates to office in the United States on the Federal, state and local level, who need to fulfill one main qualification: they have to be anti-abortion rights.

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⁵ http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm
⁶ http://www.politicsdaily.com/2010/04/30/emilys-list-25-years-of-funding-pro-choice-democratic-women/
⁷ http://www.sba-list.org/