

The Underrepresentation of Women in Elective Office

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Abstract

Despite the inroads women have made in American politics in recent decades, women still hold far fewer elective offices than men. This raises the question of why women fall short in this important mode of political engagement. Early research on this question emphasized the obstacles created by gender socialization, women's underrepresentation in the professions most likely to produce candidates, and women's family and household responsibilities. Scholars have also found that some voters use gender stereotypes in evaluating candidates. Importantly, however, the average female candidate wins the same percentage of the vote as the average male candidate, and that fact has become the basis for the widespread belief that voters are *not* systematically biased against female candidates—that the cause of women's underrepresentation must lie elsewhere. Cutting-edge political science research has found that women are less likely than men to even consider running for office, that recruiters prefer to recruit male candidates over female candidates, and that primary races that feature female candidates attract larger numbers of challengers than all-male primary races. But other cutting-edge work suggests that the widely accepted conclusion that voters harbor no bias against female candidates is likely incorrect. Future research will likely reevaluate this conclusion using new approaches and methods and will also delve deeper into the question of why women are less politically ambitious than men. These lines of inquiry will likely borrow insights from psychology, sociology, and economics, as well as the political science literature on race.

INTRODUCTION

Women make up 51% of the US population but, as of 2013, only 18% of the US House of Representatives, 20% of the US Senate, and 24% of state legislatures. There are only 5 female governors, and only 18% of cities with more than 30,000 residents are governed by female mayors (Center for American Women and Politics [CAWP], 2013). Women's presence in elective office has certainly increased in the last few decades (Center for American Women and Politics [CAWP], 2013), but the United States is still a long way from gender parity in politics.

Emerging Trends in the Social and Behavioral Sciences. Edited by Robert Scott and Stephen Kosslyn.
© 2015 John Wiley & Sons, Inc. ISBN 978-1-118-90077-2.

The sizeable gap between the percentage of the population that is female and the percentage of elective offices held by females has long been a subject of concern among political scientists. For scholars committed to descriptive representation, which is the idea that population groups should have representatives with traits and life experiences similar to their own, the shortage of female elected officials is clearly troublesome. But even scholars more concerned about the substantive representation of women view the gender gap as problematic, since numerous researchers have demonstrated that female elected officials tend to represent women's interests better than male representatives (Swers, 2002; Thomas, 1991). Thus, regardless of whether one's commitment is to descriptive representation or substantive representation (Mansbridge, 1999), the relative scarcity of women in American political institutions is often interpreted as an indicator that female citizens of the United States are less well represented by government than male citizens.

This raises the question of why women fall short in this important mode of political engagement: holding elective office. This essay describes some of the foundational research that has attempted to explain the gender gap, identifies the main areas of cutting-edge research, and suggests some promising directions for the future.

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

While much of the earliest research on women in politics was primarily descriptive, examining the characteristics, successes, and challenges of the few women who had succeeded in winning elective office (e.g., Diamond, 1977; Kirkpatrick, 1974), most of the early theoretical work on the gender gap in politics centered around three main hypotheses. The first, the situational hypothesis, proposed that women's traditional responsibilities as mothers, housewives, and homemakers left them little time for politics and offered them few opportunities to engage in the kinds of political discussions that tend to get people interested in politics (Almond & Verba, 1963; Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Lipset, 1960). The second hypothesis emphasized the role of structural factors, such as the underrepresentation of women in the occupations that most commonly produce candidates for public office (Darcy, Welch, & Clark, 1994; Duerst-Lahti, 1998; Welch, 1978) and the high reelection rates of incumbents in American politics—most of whom are men (Darcy *et al.*, 1994). Finally, there was the socialization hypothesis, which posited that from a young age, women are taught that politics is a "man's game," effectively discouraging the average woman from thinking about running for office (Orum, Cohen, Grasmuck, & Orum, 1977). Early empirical work trying to disentangle these hypotheses—which

are vague and likely interrelated—yielded few clear findings, although some researchers concluded that structural factors were important (Welch, 1978) and that socialization was not (Orum *et al.*, 1977; Welch, 1977).

One clear finding that did emerge, however, was that in general elections, female candidates were just as successful as male candidates in winning vote share and getting elected (Darcy & Schramm, 1977; Karnig & Walter, 1976). In the 1990s, scholars found that this result held up in tests that used new datasets of election returns, larger samples of female candidates, and more sophisticated statistical methods. For example, controlling for important differences in the type of general election race—such as whether it is an open seat race or an incumbent-challenger race—women who run for the US House of Representatives win as often as men (Burrell, 1994; Duerst-Lahti, 1998; Newman, 1994; Selzer, Newman, & Leighton, 1997). They also raise and spend the same amount of money in their campaigns as male candidates (Burrell, 1994; Fox, 2006; Uhlaner & Schlozman, 1986). On the basis of these findings, “when women run, women win” became a catchphrase in the women in politics literature. Most scholars concluded that campaign donors and voters do not discriminate against women (e.g., Burrell, 1994; Darcy *et al.*, 1994; Fox, 2006)—and therefore that something else must explain the low proportions of women in public office.

Alongside these findings, there has been an active line of research on whether voters use gender stereotypes in evaluating candidates. Since most voters do not have detailed knowledge of candidates, voters rely on cues—such as party labels or candidate sex—to draw inferences about them (Popkin, 1991). And numerous scholars have demonstrated that voters perceive female candidates as having different traits, policy preferences, and policy strengths than male candidates (e.g., Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993). For example, women tend to be viewed as more compassionate, more cooperative, more liberal, and better at handling issues such as education than men (e.g., Kahn, 1996). Men, on the other hand, tend to be seen as assertive, strong, and more competent in handling crime and foreign policy than women (Lawless, 2004). Sanbonmatsu (2002) argues that these gender stereotypes often give rise to a baseline preference for either male or female representatives, and that voters’ baseline preferences partially explain their choices over candidates in elections.

By itself, the foundational literature on voter stereotyping in politics does not explain the overall shortage of women in public office. It highlights that gender stereotypes can sometimes work against female candidates (Lawless, 2004), but it also shows that stereotyping can work in favor of female candidates, such as when so-called women’s issues are politically salient. Thus, the foundational literature on gender stereotyping in politics does not directly challenge the conclusion that voter sex discrimination is no longer relevant,

nor does it explain why, despite conditions that change from election to election, women continue to be systematically underrepresented in politics.

CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH

A great deal has changed since the 1970s, when scholars laid the foundation for research on women in politics. Traditional expectations for women to work inside the home have lessened (although have not disappeared—see Lawless & Fox, 2010). Women have secured greater presence in law, business, and other professions that regularly produce candidates for public office. And through retirements, occasional failed reelection bids, and term limits, the composition of American legislatures has gradually turned over in spite of the incumbency advantage. However, women's gains in elective office have not kept pace with these changes. The passage of time has therefore shown that structural and situational hypotheses cannot fully explain women's underrepresentation in American political institutions. That realization, combined with the conclusion that voter discrimination against female candidates is largely a phenomenon of the past, has led most researchers to explore the contributing role of gender socialization as well as women's fortunes in early stages of the electoral process.

Research on women's political ambition, meaning the desire to run for and hold elective office (Fowler & McClure, 1990), has been especially fruitful. Instead of studying actual female candidates and politicians and trying to back out the factors important to women's success in politics, as most existing works do, Lawless and Fox (2010) carry out a survey of men and women in the "candidate eligibility pool," which they define as people working in law, business, education, or political activism. The results of their Candidate Political Ambition Panel Study show that significantly fewer women than men even consider running for office. Part of this gender gap can be traced to differences in upbringing: as children, the women's parents were less likely to suggest to them that they run for office someday (Lawless & Fox, 2010, p. 66). But Lawless and Fox also find that women with the same level of qualifications as men are significantly less likely to evaluate themselves as qualified to run (Lawless & Fox, 2010, p. 116). This last finding aligns with findings in other disciplines, such as psychology and economics, where it has been shown that women are more risk averse than men (Byrnes, Miller, & Shafer, 1999) and shy away from competitive environments more so than men (Niederle & Vesterlund, 2007, 2011). All in all, this work suggests there are psychological differences between men and women that disproportionately inhibit the latter from running for public office.

Even if men and women *were* equally likely to consider running, eligible women are less likely than men to be recruited as candidates. Sanbonmatsu

(2006), for example, finds that party leaders are often more hesitant to recruit female candidates for fear that women might be less “electable” than men (see also Niven, 1998, 2006). Likewise, Fox and Lawless (2010) find that eligible women are significantly less likely to be recruited by party leaders, political activists, or elected officials. Thus, recruiters’ tendency to encourage men to run rather than women may explain some of the gender gap in political office.

In addition, for the relatively small group of women who do become candidates, recent research suggests that they face a more difficult path to election than men. In a study of primary elections for the US House of Representatives, Lawless and Pearson (2008) find that races featuring a female candidate tend to attract larger numbers of competitors. The researchers attribute this finding to perceptions among recruiters and potential candidates that female candidates are more vulnerable—meaning more likely to lose—than male candidates. There is also evidence that female candidates receive less media coverage than male candidates, and that the coverage they do receive is more likely to emphasize their appearances and emotions than the coverage that male candidates receive (Falk, 2008). These important lines of research not only suggest that female candidates have a more difficult time in the electoral process than men, but they also raise the question of whether more competitive primaries or media bias discourage women from running in the first place.

A small number of studies even challenge the widely held belief that sex discrimination by voters is a phenomenon of the past. As Milyo and Schosberg (2000) explain, statistically equal vote tallies of male and female candidates is insufficient evidence for concluding that the electorate does not discriminate against the females. In fact, Milyo and Schosberg show that female candidates are more likely to face high-quality challengers than male candidates, and so to win the same vote share as a male, a female actually has to be of higher quality than the male. They argue that men’s and women’s equal vote totals are therefore evidence of voter discrimination against female candidates, not evidence of its absence (Milyo and Schosberg (2000)).

In a similar vein, Anzia and Berry (2011) show that the women who actually succeed in the electoral process are more effective legislators than the men who succeed, as evidenced by the amount of funding they direct to their home districts and the number of bills they sponsor and cosponsor. This, too, suggests that the women who successfully navigate the electoral process are of higher quality than the men who do the same. Presenting more evidence of this pattern, Fulton (2012) interviews activists and potential candidates about the quality of US House incumbents and finds that on average, female incumbents are rated as higher quality than male incumbents. Once she includes this measure of incumbent quality in her regression models of vote share,

Fulton finds that female incumbents earn about 3 percentage points *less* than male incumbents. Thus, in contrast to earlier conclusions that voter discrimination against female candidates is a phenomenon of the past, these studies suggest that it may be alive and well—and likely a contributor to women’s political underrepresentation.

If voter discrimination against female politicians does still exist, however, it is not clear how, when, and where it operates. A natural starting point for renewing the investigation into voter discrimination is the literature on gender stereotyping, but new work by Brooks (2013) takes a fresh look at stereotyping and concludes that it does *not* negatively affect voters’ evaluations of female candidates. Specifically, Brooks carries out a series of survey experiments on a nationally representative sample of Americans and finds that stereotyping does not lead voters to give lower ratings to female candidates on favorability or likely effectiveness if elected, nor do voters apply harsher penalties to female candidates who cry, blunder, or act angry or tough on the campaign trail. In light of her findings, Brooks concludes that the likely causes of women’s underrepresentation are differential socialization and political ambition—not discrimination.

The cutting-edge research on this topic therefore builds on the foundational literature by identifying gender socialization as a factor in women’s underrepresentation, but it also opens a fresh debate over one of its core conclusions: the more scholars have investigated women’s rates of advancement at various stages of the electoral process—recruitment, primary elections, and general elections—the more it seems that women do not actually compete on even terrain with men. But does that imply that voters themselves discriminate against women? The answer is still not clear. Brooks’ findings show that gender stereotyping does not negatively impact voters’ evaluations of female candidates. However, there is also evidence that the average female candidate is of higher quality than the average male candidate but receives the same vote share—an indicator that voters are, in some way, discriminating against women politicians.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The puzzle of why there are so few women in elective office in the United States is far from resolved. Recent research has made substantial headway, but a great deal more needs to be done in order to fully understand the nature of the problem—and to understand how the gender gap in public office-holding might be narrowed or closed. Two lines of inquiry seem especially promising.

The first is a continued, deepened focus on the role of voters. As of today, the women in politics literature offers conflicting conclusions about whether sex

discrimination by voters contributes to women's underrepresentation, and those conclusions are drawn from two very different approaches to studying the issue. On the one hand, there is a body of work—rooted in political psychology—that relies heavily on surveys and experiments to test theories of how and when voters use gender stereotypes. These studies tend to offer rich theoretical development and precise tests of the proposed theoretical mechanisms, but they may not capture how voters make decisions about real candidates in real elections. On the other hand, studies that compare male and female candidates' vote shares assess voters' actual decisions, but they say less about the mechanisms of any bias uncovered, and they also struggle to control for all of the candidate and voter characteristics that could influence voters' choices. A research agenda dedicated to reconciling these conflicting conclusions should be a priority if we are to advance our understanding of the causes of women's underrepresentation in elective office.

There is a great deal of opportunity for theoretical and empirical progress in this area. As a starting point, the more theoretically rigorous of the two bodies of work—that on gender stereotyping—should be expanded to explore potential forms of sex bias other than stereotyping. Gender stereotypes are a form of *cognitive* bias—beliefs that women are more likely to possess certain traits, issue competencies, or ideologies. However, voters might also have *affective* responses to women that negatively (or positively) impact their likelihood of voting for female politicians (e.g., Allport, 1954). The possibility that such responses could lead to sex discrimination at the polls has not been sufficiently studied in the literature.¹

In addition, the literature focuses almost exclusively on voters' *explicit* beliefs about female politicians and gives little attention to *implicit* attitudes—those that voters are not consciously aware of and cannot control. This is a notable omission. As Glaser and Finn (2013) explain, even though the act of voting is a deliberative process, there is still great potential for implicit attitudes to play a role in voter decision-making. Scholars studying the puzzle of women's underrepresentation should make this a focus in future research.²

Fortunately, there is a vast social psychology literature on stereotypes, prejudice, and implicit bias (e.g., Allport, 1954; Brown, 1995; Fiske, 1998; Plous,

1. Most women in politics scholars rule out the possibility of "overt" bias or discrimination by voters (e.g., Dolan, 2010; Fox & Lawless, 2011) but do not make it clear what overt bias is. Moreover, claims that overt bias is a phenomenon of the past are typically based on work showing that male and female candidates win equal vote shares in general elections. As discussed above, one cannot infer the absence of sex discrimination by examining candidates' vote shares unless one accounts for variation in candidate quality (Fulton, 2012; Milyo & Schosberg, 2000).

2. It is also possible that some voters are more (or less) inclined to vote for women simply because they would like to see more (or fewer) women holding public office—not because of any beliefs or feelings about individual female candidates. Dolan (2010) considers this form of bias, but she is interested in whether voters' gender stereotypes explain their egalitarian views, not in whether egalitarian views make voters more likely to vote for female candidates.

2003), and scholars can borrow its insights and apply them to the question of why there are so few women in elective office. The literature on race in American politics has done this extensively. For example, race in politics scholars have dedicated considerable attention to questions of how prevalent racism is, how racism can and should be measured, and how racism manifests itself in politics (e.g., Carmines, Sniderman, & Easter, 2011; Sniderman & Carmines, 1997). There is also some discussion in this literature about whether racial stereotyping is, itself, a form of racism or something different (see Bullock, 1984; Citrin, Green, & Sears, 1990; Sigelman, Sigelman, Walkosz, & Nitz, 1995; Williams, 1990). Most importantly, race in politics scholars do not dismiss questions of whether, how, and why voters discriminate against minority candidates but rather study them intensively. Scholars of women in politics should take a similar approach going forward.

Researchers should also explore how sex bias among certain *subgroups* of voters might translate into fewer women holding public office. To take one example, the women in politics literature finds that the use of gender stereotypes *does* put female candidates at a disadvantage with Republican voters (Dolan, 2010; King & Matland, 2003, Sanbonmatsu & Dolan, 2009).³ These findings are not currently a focus of the literature, but they stand to be consequential for women's political representation. Consider the fact that more than 200 seats in the US House of Representatives are thought to be "safe" seats for Republicans in the 2014 elections (Rothenberg Political Report, 2014). Presumably, "safe" Republican districts are composed of mostly Republican and Republican-leaning voters. And if Republican voters are less likely to vote for a female candidate than a male candidate, then in nearly *half* of US House districts, it may be harder for women to get elected than men. Thus, even if the American electorate *on average* is not biased against female candidates, bias among particular subgroups of voters could make it difficult for women to reach parity in public office-holding.

Beyond the study of sex discrimination by voters, there is a second line of inquiry that holds great promise for the future: research on gender socialization and its impact on women's political ambition. The cutting-edge research discussed above has made major advances in this area, documenting clear differences in the political ambition of eligible men and women, long before they actually emerge (or do not emerge) as candidates. More difficult, however, is pinning down the causes of that differential ambition. Yet, if gender socialization is one of the main contributors to women's lesser political ambition, it is important to continue the investigation of how socialization creates barriers for greater representation of women in government. This area of research will continue to intersect with psychology, sociology, and economics

3. Republican voters might also be less likely to support female candidates for reasons other than gender stereotypes, but those possible avenues of bias have not yet been studied.

and will likely rely increasingly on panel survey datasets that track individual respondents from childhood to adulthood.

It may be that these two lines of inquiry—the study of voter bias against (or in favor of) female candidates and the study of political ambition—will overlap more in the future than they have in the past. For example, one of Lawless and Fox's (2010, pp. 122–126) most striking findings is that 77% of men and 91% of women in the eligibility pool believe that there is sex bias in the electoral arena. Is this a misperception or an accurate assessment? If there is some truth to this belief, then sex bias in the electorate may well be a factor in lessening women's ambition to run for office. It might also be a factor in explaining recruiters' preference for male candidates: perhaps, they are simply anticipating women's greater vulnerability with voters. Likewise, while it could be that prospective primary challengers overestimate women's vulnerability when they disproportionately flock to races in which women are running, it may also be that those women are actually more vulnerable. A focused study of voters' treatment of female candidates could therefore cast new light on these existing findings.

Ultimately, decision-making authority in American politics rests with voters. Thus, in continuing the investigation of why there are disproportionately few women in elective office, it makes sense to widen the lens of inquiry to once again consider whether and how voters play a direct role—and to consider the multiple ways in which voters' views could affect observable political outcomes.

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