

# Women Running for Office

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## Abstract

When women run for office, they tend to fare at least as well as their male counterparts. From vote totals, to fund-raising receipts, to media coverage, to voters' evaluations, male and female candidates have become increasingly indistinguishable from one another. This is not to suggest, however, that gender is irrelevant in US politics. It might not prevent women from winning their elections, but it substantially stunts their emergence as candidates in the first place. Women are less likely than similarly situated men to consider running for office and actually to emerge as candidates. This gender gap in political ambition can be traced to differences in the manner in which women and men perceive themselves as potential candidates, as well as how electoral gatekeepers view them. The extant scholarship, therefore, suggests that if we want to understand gender dynamics in contemporary US politics, then we must focus our efforts on the precandidacy stage of the process. More specifically, pinpointing the origins of the gender gap in political ambition and developing an understanding of how political ambition evolves are crucial next steps for the women and politics subfield.

Reflecting on Hillary Clinton's ultimately unsuccessful presidential bid, then-*CBS Evening News* anchor Katie Couric took to the airwaves on June 11, 2008 and told viewers, "Like her or not, one of the lessons of [the Clinton] campaign is the continued and accepted role of sexism in American life, particularly in the media." Two weeks later, then-Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi echoed this sentiment when speaking to a reporter from the *New York Times*: "Of course there is sexism. We all know that, but it's a given." These perceptions of bias were not restricted to political elites. *Politics & Gender*—the leading political science journal in the women and politics subfield—devoted a section of its March 2009 issue to the manner in which gender dynamics affected the 2008 presidential primary. Women's organizations, such as the Women's Media Center and MissRepresentation.org, produced documentaries that chronicled examples

of sexism in US politics. And the results of a 2011 national survey of thousands of “potential candidates”—lawyers, business leaders, educators, and political activists—revealed widespread perceptions of gender bias. More specifically, Richard L. Fox and I found that two-thirds of women believed that Hillary Clinton was subjected to sexist media coverage in her campaign. Moreover, roughly 80% contended that she faced gender bias from voters.

The irony, of course, is twofold. Foremost, Hillary Clinton received 18 million votes, nearly enough to garner the nomination. Further, and perhaps more importantly, the 2008 Democratic presidential primary was atypical. Not only did Clinton begin the race with levels of name recognition, public accomplishments, and a network of donors and operatives that many candidates never achieve, but she also entered the electoral arena with 17 years of well-publicized baggage and a media corps with whom she had previous relationships—some for better and some for worse. In other words, although it may be the case that the campaign environment Clinton navigated epitomized sexism and bias in the electoral arena, we must be careful not to assume that these dynamics transcend her presidential bid.

As I demonstrate in this essay, when women run for office, they tend to fare at least as well as their male counterparts. From vote totals, to fundraising receipts, to media coverage, to voters’ evaluations, male and female candidates have become increasingly indistinguishable from one another. This is not to suggest, however, that gender is irrelevant in US politics. It might not prevent women from winning their elections, but it substantially stunts their emergence as candidates in the first place. If we want to continue to examine gender dynamics in US politics, therefore, then we must focus our efforts on the precandidacy stage of the process. This essay concludes with some suggestions for how we might do so.

#### FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH: A PRETTY LEVEL PLAYING FIELD—WHEN WOMEN RUN, WOMEN WIN

When the 114th Congress convened in January 2015, 81% of its members were men. Large gender disparities are also evident at the state and local levels. Men occupy the governor’s mansion in 45 of the 50 states, run City Hall in 88 of the 100 largest cities across the country, and comprise more than three-quarters of statewide elected officials and state legislators. The low numbers of women in politics are particularly glaring when we place them in context. While the 1980s saw gradual, but steady increases in the percentage of women seeking elected office, and the early 1990s experienced a sharper surge, the last several election cycles can be characterized as a plateau. Indeed, the 2010 congressional elections resulted in the first net decrease in the percentage of women serving in the US House of Representatives

since the 1978 midterm elections. The number of women elected to state legislatures, which act as key launching pads to higher office, also suffered the largest single year decline in 2010. Although the 2012 and 2014 elections did not represent a net loss, as far as women's representation is concerned, the gains represented only a minimal increase. In addition, while many nations around the world make progress increasing women's presence in positions of political power, the United States has not kept pace. According to data compiled by the Interparliamentary Union, 99 nations now surpass the US in the percentage of women in the national legislature.

It should not come as a surprise, therefore, that scholars have devoted the last few decades to gaining a better understanding of why so few women occupy positions of political power in the United States. And, generally speaking, they have reached a consensus. While electoral gatekeepers all but prohibited women from running for office in the 1970s and early 1980s, and those women who did emerge as candidates often faced sexism and a hostile environment, such is no longer the case. At the candidate level, individual accounts of women who face overt gender discrimination once they enter the public arena are increasingly uncommon. Public opinion data indicate that an overwhelming majority of Americans no longer believe that men are better suited emotionally for politics than are women, and an even greater proportion of citizens express a willingness to support a qualified, female party nominee for the presidency. When we turn to campaign fund-raising receipts and vote totals, often considered the two most important indicators of electoral success, researchers find that women perform just as well as, if not better than, their male counterparts. And detailed content analyses of the media coverage candidates receive no longer reveal gender differences. Not only do journalists devote a comparable number of stories to men and women running for office, but those articles look the same. Thus, the notion that overt discrimination against female candidates—be it by voters, donors, or reporters—pervades the campaign trail and accounts for the low number of women in politics that has fallen out of favor with political scientists.

In light of the growing contradiction between a political system that elects few women and a body of research that identifies the electoral environment as increasingly unbiased against female candidates, political scientists have turned to two institutional explanations for women's numeric underrepresentation. First, they point to the incumbency advantage. Not only do the overwhelming majority of incumbents seek reelection in both state legislative and congressional elections, but their reelection rates are also very high. Under these circumstances, increasing the number of electoral opportunities for previously excluded groups, such as women, can be glacial. Second,

women's historic exclusion from the professions that tend to lead to political careers contributes to the gender disparities in office holding.

The conventional assessment that emerges from these institutional explanations is that, overall, we are on a steady course toward equity in women's numeric representation. When women run for office, they perform comparably to men and are treated similarly. Hence, as women's presence in the "pipeline professions" approaches men's, we should see the number of female elected officials approach the number of men as well. Yet, despite these assessments, the rosy prospects for women's representation they offer, and women's increasing presence in the professions from which most candidates emerge, significant gains in women's numeric representation have not materialized in recent election cycles.

#### CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH: THE GENDER GAP IN POLITICAL AMBITION

Over the course of the last decade, Richard L. Fox and I have argued that, missing from conventional analyses of women running for office is an understanding of the manner in which gender affects levels of political ambition and interacts with the likelihood that they will throw their hats into the ring in the first place. That is, if women and men are not equally likely to express interest in running for office, then women's presence in the political pipeline and open seat opportunities that arise are insufficient for bolstering women's candidate emergence. To investigate this proposition, we developed and conducted the Citizen Political Ambition Study, a series of mail surveys and interviews with women and men in the pool of potential candidates. The samples of women and men are roughly equal in terms of race, region, education, household income, profession, political participation, and interest in politics. Our goal was to conduct a nuanced investigation of how women and men initially decide to run for all levels and types of political office, either now or in the future.

The original survey, carried out in 2001, served as the first national study of the initial decision to run for office. Based on mail survey responses from 1969 men and 1796 women, we found strong evidence that gender plays a substantial role in the candidate emergence process. More than half of the respondents (51%) stated that the idea of running for an elective position had at least "crossed their mind." But men were 16 percentage points more likely than women to have considered running for office. Notably, this gender gap persisted across political party, income level, age, race, profession, and region. Further, women were not only less likely than men to consider running for office; they were also less likely actually to do it. Overall, 12% of the respondents had run for some elective position. Men, however, were

40% more likely than women to have done so. Although there was no statistically significant gender difference in election outcomes, women were less likely than men to reach what is characterized as a seemingly gender-neutral “end-stage” of the electoral process.

In 2011, we completed a survey of a new sample of 1925 male and 1843 female potential candidates. Remarkably, despite the changing political landscape and the emergence of several high-profile female candidates between 2001 and 2011, women remained 16 percentage points less likely than men to have thought about running for office. Even though they have risen to the top ranks within the often male-dominated professions, and despite the fact that they yield from the management and leadership positions that tend to position candidates for the highest public offices, women express far less ambition than men to enter the upper echelons of the political arena.

Although explicating in detail the factors that underlie the gender gap in political ambition is beyond the scope of this essay, two central barriers bear at least brief mention. First, one of the biggest impediments keeping women from emerging as candidates centers on self-perceptions of qualifications to run for office. Despite comparable credentials, men are almost 60% more likely than women to assess themselves as “very qualified” to run for office. Women are more than twice as likely as men to rate themselves as “not at all qualified.” Women’s self-doubts are important not only because they speak to deeply embedded gendered perceptions, but also because they play a much larger role than do men’s in depressing the likelihood of considering a candidacy.

A gender gap in political recruitment serves as the second factor that keeps women from running for office. Women, across party lines, are less likely than men to receive the suggestion to run for any political office from a party leader, elected official, or political activist. They are also less likely to receive the suggestion to run for office from “nonpolitical actors,” such as colleagues, spouses / partners, and family members. The lack of recruitment is a particularly powerful explanation for why women are less likely than men to consider a candidacy; more than twice as many respondents who have been encouraged to run—compared to those who have not—have considered throwing their hats into the ring. Importantly, women are just as likely as men to respond favorably to the suggestion of a candidacy. They are just less likely than men to receive it.

The findings from the Citizen Political Ambition Study cast a cloud over future prospects for gender parity in US political institutions and provide compelling evidence that gender remains relevant in the study of female candidates.

## FUTURE RESEARCH: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

For the past 30 years, one basic question has guided much of the research on gender and elections: Why do so few women occupy elective office? The research now seems to have converged on the premise that women running for office are formidable competitors, able fund-raisers, and serious subjects of media attention. In other words, once they make it onto the campaign trail, a candidate's sex provides little explanatory power for the circumstances he/she will face. The enduring gender gap in political ambition, however, suggests that rather than focusing on end-stage assessments of the electoral playing field, our time would now be better spent addressing at least three aspects of the precandidacy stage of the process and the reasons women are less likely than men to emerge from the pool of eligible candidates and face the voters, donors, and media.

First, research on candidate emergence identifies a substantial gender gap in political ambition that is well-established by the time women and men enter the professions from which political candidates tend to emerge. But we are extremely limited in the conclusions we can draw about the origins of the gap or the manner in which early life experiences shape interest in running for office. For most people, 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. So, to gain a complete understanding of the gender gap in political ambition, we must pinpoint its origins. In assessing the cognitive and contextual processes that affect whether and how women and men come to view themselves as candidates, early political socialization merits investigation. Examining these gender differences at their source, as opposed to relying on retrospective assessments of events that occurred decades earlier, is the only way to get at the source of the gender gap.

Of course, if we are to gain a fuller understanding of the roots of women's lower levels of political ambition, then we must also study how ambition evolves among adults. As women gain greater exposure to women in politics, do they become more likely to consider running for office? Are they less likely to view the political environment as sexist and more likely to believe they can overcome adversity in male-dominated spheres? What are the long-term implications of Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin's candidacies? Did these women serve as lightning rods to fuel women's political ambition? Or did their experiences depress levels of interest in running for office? It may take time for the presence of women in such high levels of political power to trickle down to the candidate eligibility pool and inspire future candidacies. Only by tracking women and men's political ambition over time can we assess these dynamics. Panel data become vital for this line of inquiry.



Finally, gender differences in perceptions play a critical role in the candidate emergence process; and because perceptions dictate behavior, they are just as important as reality. Yet we have only begun to understand how women and men's perceptions of themselves as candidates and the electoral arena affect the decision to run for office. Are there gender differences in how perceptions of bias, personal skills, traits, and the costs associated with running for office affect political ambition? Are there gender differences in how women and men view the opportunity structure associated with different levels of office? Do women perceive an easier campaign and political environment when they consider pursuing positions that are more typically occupied by women? Only by answering these questions can we begin to gauge prospects for a perceptions of a level electoral playing field.

These new avenues of research must be complemented with investigations that continue to track women's electoral success when they do emerge as candidates. Future investigators, however, must be very careful when generating broad assessments from end-stage analyses. We must withstand the temptation to conclude that, because there are no gender differences in vote totals, fund-raising receipts, or media coverage, the electoral process is "gender-neutral." When women become candidates and make it to the Election Day, they perform as well as men. But gender exerts a fundamental role in US campaigns and elections long before the first donors are solicited, newspaper articles written, or ballots cast. And it is at this precandidacy stage of the process where academics have their work cut out for them.

#### FURTHER READING

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## JENNIFER L. LAWLESS SHORT BIOGRAPHY

**Jennifer L. Lawless** received her PhD in political science from Stanford University in 2003 and her BA in political science from Union College in 1997. She is a Professor Government at American University, where she is also the Director of the Women & Politics Institute. Her teaching and research focus on gender politics, electoral politics, and public opinion. She has published numerous articles in academic journals, such as the *American Political Science Review*, *American Journal of Political Science*, *Journal of Politics*, and *Politics & Gender*. She is also the author of *Becoming a Candidate: Political Ambition and the Decision to Run for Office* (Cambridge University Press, 2012) and the lead author of *It Still Takes A Candidate: Why Women Don't Run for Office* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

A nationally recognized speaker on electoral politics, Dr. Lawless' analysis and commentary have been quoted in outlets, including the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, CNN.com, MSNBC.com, FOXNews.com, the CBS Evening News, ABC World News Tonight, the Today Show, and the Situation Room with Wolf Blitzer.

In 2006, she sought the Democratic nomination for the US House of Representatives in Rhode Island's second congressional district. Although she lost the race, she is very active in politics. She served on the national board of Emerge America from 2009 to 2011 and is currently an advisory board member.

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