

Reaching Executive Office: The Presidency and the Office of the Governor

The presidency—the highest “glass ceiling” in American politics—has yet to be shattered by a woman. Another major elective executive office—the office of the governor—has been within women’s reach. But in 2015, only six of the nation’s fifty governors are women, almost 100 years after the very first woman served as governor.¹ A net gain of five women over the course of nearly 100 years is slow progress by any standard. Almost half of states have yet to experience a woman governor.²

What challenges do women face in seeking the presidency and the governor’s office? Is America ready for a woman president in 2016?

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GENDER AND THE PRESIDENCY

Voters associate leadership with masculinity. And no elective office is more masculine than the presidency. The president, as commander-in-chief, is expected to embody masculinity and exhibit toughness.³ Voters associate the presidency with both masculine tasks and masculine traits.⁴ Given that the public expects masculine leadership and male leaders, it can be difficult for women to persuade voters that they can lead.⁵

The presidential selection process itself is a “gendered space” imbued with references to “toughness,” according to Georgia Duerst-Lahti.⁶ The prominence of war and terrorism issues and images in presidential campaigns can make a female candidate seem even

less appropriate for the job because voters hold gender stereotypes about politician issue competency in these areas.⁷ Potential female presidential candidates are less likely to have a background of military service—a credential also associated with the presidency.⁸

The United States lags behind many other countries in its failure to elect a female president. Currently 22 countries are led by a female president or prime minister.⁹ In a provocative argument, Eileen McDonagh argues that countries with female monarchs are more accustomed to women’s leadership.¹⁰ She suggests that the absence of a hereditary monarchy in the United States may have had the unintended consequence of dampening public support for women leaders. McDonagh also argues that the United States lags behind other nations in social welfare provision; having a stronger welfare state—a government function more in line with women’s traditional areas of expertise—would make for a political tradition more hospitable to a female president.

Although the United States has yet to elect a woman president, women presidential candidates are not new. Michele Bachmann sought the Republican presidential nomination in 2012, and Hillary Clinton, who secured 18 million votes in her 2008 bid for the Democratic presidential nomination, has been the most successful to date. But these women were not the first: the first woman to seek the presidency, Victoria Woodhull, did so in the late 1800s.¹¹ As Ruth B. Mandel observes, although most women who sought the presidency have not been serious contenders, they nevertheless had an impact on American politics.¹²

Only two women have ever appeared on major party presidential tickets. The first, Geraldine Ferraro, served as Walter Mondale’s vice-presidential running mate in 1984. Ferraro remains the sole woman ever selected by

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the Democratic party to be its vice-presidential candidate. And it was not until 2008 that the Republican party selected its first vice-presidential female candidate, Sarah Palin.

Although the vice-presidential candidate is not usually thought to have an independent impact on presidential vote choice, Palin's weaknesses as a candidate appear to have hurt the Republican ticket in 2008.¹³ Critics argue that her media appearances perpetuated the stereotype that women are not qualified for office, undermining the chances of future women candidates. However, Palin's persona and status as a mother of young children opened the door to new models of campaigning, making her a source of inspiration for other Republican women candidates.¹⁴

Gallup found that only 33% of the public was willing to vote for a woman for president in 1937; in 2012, that statistic was 95%

VOTER SUPPORT FOR A FEMALE PRESIDENT

Abstract willingness to support a woman for president has risen substantially since the public was first polled on this question. Gallup found that only 33% of the public was willing to vote for a woman for president in 1937; in 2012, that statistic was 95%.¹⁵ Public support seems to be higher for a Democratic woman presidential candidate than for a Republican woman president. A 2015 Pew Research Center poll finds that Democratic women are the most interested in seeing a woman president in their lifetime (69%) followed by Democratic men (46%), Republican women (20%) and Republican

men (16%). And a 2007 internet survey conducted by Kathleen Dolan specified the party of the woman presidential candidate.¹⁶ Among Democrats, 89% were willing to vote for a Democratic woman for president; among Republicans, 80% were willing to vote for a Republican woman for president.

Other studies confirm that some types of voters are more supportive of a woman president than others. Dolan's analysis of the determinants of voting for a hypothetical woman candidate, using General Social Survey data from 1972 to 1998, finds that women, Democrats, and liberals are more supportive, as are younger people, less religious individuals, and more educated individuals.¹⁷

It is difficult for researchers to measure public support for a female presidential candidate because of "social desirability bias": due to social norms, voters may be reluctant in a survey interview context to reveal gender bias. To circumvent this problem, one study used a "list experiment" in which people can more privately reveal unwillingness to vote for a woman president. In the list experiment, respondents report the total number of statements on a list that they find upsetting without having to reveal *which* of the statements upset them. Using this technique, Matthew Streb and his coauthors found that 26% of the public were "angry or upset" by the idea of a female president.¹⁸ Though this experiment did not directly evaluate voter support for a female candidate, the authors concluded that their findings are cause for concern; the percentage of angry/upset voters in their study exceeds the percentage of people in national public opinion surveys who voice an unwillingness to vote for a hypothetical woman president. On the other hand, it is possible that their study—conducted in 2006—might have been partially influenced by public opinion toward Hillary Clinton's anticipated presidential candidacy.

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HILLARY CLINTON'S 2008 CAMPAIGN

Hillary Clinton's 2008 campaign for the Democratic nomination for president provided rich research opportunities for scholars. Clinton demonstrated that a female nominee is indeed possible; she only narrowly lost the nomination to Barack Obama. But her candidacy also served as a cautionary tale for future campaigns, including a 2016 Clinton run.

Although Clinton did not win the nomination and did not appear on the 2008 general election ballot, the Democratic primary contest does allow for detailed analyses of voting behavior. Analysis of 2008 exit polls by Leonie Huddy and Tony Carey, Jr. paints an optimistic picture about the role of gender bias in the electorate—or at least, the Democratic primary electorate.¹⁹ Huddy and Carey conclude that racial bias hurt Obama's candidacy more than gender bias hurt Clinton's candidacy in the 2008 Democratic presidential primaries. Meanwhile, Kinder and Dale-Ridder find that in-group solidarity by gender did not benefit Clinton as much as in-group solidarity by race helped Obama.²⁰ Similar to Huddy and Carey, they conclude that Clinton was not harmed by traditional gender attitudes among Democratic primary voters.

Clinton's fundraising prowess, aided by her access to her husband's fundraising network, also represented a vast departure from the previous cases of female presidential candidates. As a former First Lady, her case is somewhat exceptional. Interestingly, Clinton's campaign was also noteworthy because a majority of her contributions were from women.²¹

Other research about Clinton's 2008 bid paint a more worrisome picture about what the future holds for women seeking the nation's highest office. Media coverage, in particular, raises questions about the country's readiness for a female president. Media commentary about Clinton—particularly on the cable networks—

often included extremely sexist commentary.²² This sexist coverage was surprising to researchers because media coverage of women candidates has become more equitable over time. Many voters perceived unfair press treatment of Clinton.²³ Regina Lawrence and Melody Rose found that Hillary Clinton received a similar amount of coverage to Barack Obama, but that her coverage was more negative.²⁴

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Sadly, as Kristina Horn Sheeler and Karrin Vasby Anderson argue in their recent book, the misogyny evident in Clinton's treatment—including the widespread and seemingly acceptable ways that she was “pornified,” or framed in the blogosphere and cable networks with elements reminiscent of pornography—may be a better gauge of public opinion towards women presidents than traditional public opinion surveys.²⁵

Gender dynamics were also evident in Clinton's own campaign strategy, which reveals the gendered opportunities and constraints she faced as a presidential candidate.²⁶ Clinton's service on the Senate Armed Services Committee, vote in favor of the Iraq war, and concerted effort to demonstrate toughness and preparedness with respect to defense and national security issues were successful in overcoming what has been the most significant hurdle for women presidential candidates.²⁷ Ironically, Clinton's very success in

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crossing the “toughness” threshold for a female presidential candidate proved to be a double-edged sword because of the accompanying perception that she was not feminine. Thus even credentialed, resourced women candidates must navigate gender stereotypes as they campaign for president.²⁸

SARAH PALIN AND CONSERVATIVE WOMEN

Susan J. Carroll and Kelly Dittmar have observed that although they were very different candidates from different parties, Sarah Palin—as a vice-presidential candidate—confronted many of the same gender stereotypes that Hillary Clinton navigated in 2008. For example, media coverage of Palin reflected gender stereotypes and included scrutiny that was atypical compared with past male vice-presidential candidates.²⁹ Palin also received systematically worse coverage compared to her male counterpart.³⁰ Perhaps more than for any other national female candidate, the public developed an understanding of Palin shaped by popular culture, and specifically by Tina Fey’s impression of Palin on *Saturday Night Live*.³¹

The presence of a Republican woman on the 2008 general election ballot put feminist organizations in a dilemma

As Schreiber notes, the presence of a Republican woman on the 2008 general election ballot put feminist organizations in a dilemma and forced them to articulate specific reasons that they did not support Palin’s historic candidacy.³² Meanwhile, Schreiber notes the significance of a conservative Republican woman vying for high office, making visible the diversity of women’s ideological perspectives. Palin’s candidacy gave conservative women’s organizations a chance to contest the agenda of feminist organizations and articulate an alternative vision of what it means to represent women.³³

Since 2008, Palin has aided other conservative women directly with endorsements and contributions through “Sarah PAC.” But more significant, perhaps, is her innovative “Mama Grizzly” image. This campaign strategy, which she has popularized for other women candidates, is a new way to blend femininity, masculinity, and conservatism.³⁴ As Linda Beail and Rhonda Kinney Longworth observe, the “Hockey Mom” and other frames through which Palin has been understood as a candidate are partially reflective of existing narratives around women candidates and the Republican party.³⁵ But these frames also disrupt conventional understandings and transform opportunities for female candidates in some respects.

While Michele Bachmann sought the Republican nomination in the 2012 election cycle, she was unable to distinguish herself from a crowded field and did not last far into the primary season. Both Bachmann and Palin come from the Tea Party branch of the Republican party, which is fueled at the grass roots by women activists. Dittmar and Carroll note that although Bachmann’s campaign had weaknesses, her treatment by the press was shaped by the gender stereotypes that women presidential candidates have faced in the past.³⁶ In a systematic content analysis of coverage of the 2012 campaign for the Republican nomination, Dianne Bystrom and Daniela V. Dimitrova find that Bachmann fared similarly with her male opponents in some respects.³⁷ However, they also found that she received less coverage and less issue-based coverage.

As more Republican women campaign for the vice presidency and presidency, understanding how gender and party intersect in campaigns and voting behavior has become more important. The images projected by Sarah Palin—including the “Frontier Woman” and “Hockey Mom”—are tied not only to gendered images in American society and politics, but also to party, class, and race understandings.³⁸

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In an experimental study conducted in 2005, Mirya Holman and her coauthors find that Republican women can more easily overcome women candidates' traditional disadvantage on terrorism and national security than Democratic women.³⁹ Republican women benefit from the stereotype that the Republican party is better able to handle these issues; meanwhile, Democratic women candidates can be doubly disadvantaged by stereotypes because both their gender and party suggest a lesser ability in these areas.

One of the severe challenges facing the Republican party with respect to the woman president question is the dearth of Republican women in the pool of potential presidential candidates. Because Republican women are vastly outnumbered by Democratic women in Congress—and especially the Senate—fewer Republican women are positioned to launch a credible bid for the presidency. And both Republican and Democratic women are dramatically underrepresented in gubernatorial office, another important source of presidential candidates.

WOMEN OF COLOR AND THE PRESIDENCY

Jane Junn observes that Obama's 2008 victory over Clinton arguably makes the possibility of a female presidential candidate more likely because Obama's victory displaced the image of the president as a white male.⁴⁰ However, Junn argues that the victory reaffirms the perception that "African American candidates" are male and that "women candidates" are white. She concludes that more work needs to be done to change these dominant candidate images and make room for women of color.

Women of color face higher hurdles in pursuing executive office than non-Hispanic white women. When Shirley Chisholm, the first African American woman elected to Congress, ran for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1972, she was disappointed by

the lack of enthusiasm for her candidacy among both feminist leaders and civil rights leaders.⁴¹ More recently, when Carol Moseley Braun, the only African American woman ever to have served in the U.S. Senate, sought the 2004 Democratic presidential nomination, she received the support of women's organizations but not African American organizations; those organizations may be more likely to support an African American male candidate over a woman.⁴²

Women of color are far more poorly represented as statewide officeholders compared with other offices

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such as state legislative office and seats in the U.S. House of Representatives.⁴³ The dramatic underrepresentation of women of color in the Senate and statewide elective executive office, including the office of governor, means that very few women of color hold the traditional credentials for a presidential bid.

WOMEN GOVERNORS

The 2010 elections brought women of color somewhat closer to presidential politics. History was made in 2010 when two women of color were elected as governors. Nikki Haley, of South Carolina, is Asian American, and Susana Martinez, of New Mexico, is Latina. Both are Republicans and both have been mentioned as potential vice-presidential candidates. The governor's office is a common stepping stone to the presidency. In fact,

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while major party presidential nominees are usually either governors or U.S. senators, research shows that governors seem to be advantaged over senators in presidential elections.⁴⁴ Because women currently occupy the governor's mansions in only six states, women are significantly outnumbered compared to men as potential presidential contenders.

Political Parity find that states with multiple women in high office—measured as the office of U.S. Senator and governor—are systematically different from other states

Women's pathways to gubernatorial office are not easy. Voters appear to be more comfortable with women in typically "feminine" statewide elective executive offices, such as state education official, than in more "masculine" offices such as that of governor.⁴⁵ Stephen Stambough and Valerie O'Regan found that women gubernatorial candidates between 1976 and 2004 fared worse than men on average, and Linda Fowler and Jennifer Lawless found the same in a study of women's candidacies in the 1990s.⁴⁶ Moreover, Stambough and O'Regan found that Democratic women were more likely to be nominated in states where more women served in the legislature, consistent with an argument about the relationship of the pool of potential candidates to the presence of actual candidates. The pattern of women's presence as Republican gubernatorial nominees differed from that of women's presence as Democratic gubernatorial nominees. Republican women were less likely to be nominated in states with open-seat contests (without Democratic incumbent candidates). Because open seats present more favorable opportunities, Republican women seem to be more likely than

Democratic women to run as sacrificial lambs.

In a new study that extends from 1978 to 2008, Jason Windett examines the state characteristics that predict the presence of women gubernatorial candidates.⁴⁷ He argues that women candidates will be more likely to emerge where the pool of experienced candidates is larger and where the opportunity structure is favorable. Using a statistical analysis and excluding nonviable candidates, he finds that women are more likely to enter primaries in states with more women in the legislature and states with a more favorable climate for women candidates (such as states with a history of women's officeholding and those where women have higher status in educational attainment and in the labor force). This suggests that there is a cultural or state tradition of electing women to office, and it highlights the importance of women's election to state legislatures. Women state legislators serve as the pool for higher office, and they also help to create a favorable climate for other women candidates.

Similarly, Political Parity find that states with multiple women in high office—measured as the office of U.S. Senator and governor—are systematically different from other states.⁴⁸ These state populations tend to be more Democratic, racially diverse, and young. It also matters if states have a stronger tradition of electing women and if they have public financing.

In a new article about women's pathways to the governor's mansion based on interviews, Windett finds that male governors were more likely than female governors to have experienced party recruitment in their political careers.⁴⁹ He argues that "women lag behind in party backing."⁵⁰ This evidence could help explain why more women are not serving in the office.

Windett also argues that family responsibilities and children in particular were commonly mentioned by the women governors he interviewed, but not by men

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governors.⁵¹ The age of children affected what office the women first ran for and when they ran. In sharp contrast, the male governors Windett interviewed rarely mentioned family factors as considerations in their political careers.

Executive office seems to be more challenging for women to achieve compared with legislative office. Because the governor is the sole decision maker, she or he is invested with more power than an individual legislator. The idea that voters might be more comfortable with women in legislative rather than executive roles is held by many campaign consultants. In a national survey conducted in 2010, Kelly Dittmar found that 43% of Democratic consultants believe it is more likely that voters will support a woman for the U.S. Senate than for governor; among Democratic consultants, about one-third believe that voters are equally likely to vote for a woman for either office and 14% say that voters are more likely to vote for a woman for governor.⁵² One survey respondent in Dittmar's study explained: "It's more difficult for voters to envision a female candidate in an executive role, than as 1 of 100 senators."⁵³ These consultants recommended an emphasis on toughness in races for the office of governor. In contrast, Republican consultants were much more likely to see similarity across the two offices, with 72% saying voters are equally likely to vote for a woman for governor or Senator.

Studies conducted by the Barbara Lee Family Foundation for over a decade also provide practical advice for women gubernatorial candidates.⁵⁴ For example, *Keys to the Governor's Office* advises women to lead a statewide

ballot campaign or assist with a candidate's statewide campaign to "demonstrate executive leadership." *Keys* recommends a solid background of political experience, as well, given that voters appear to be more likely to be willing to accept women candidates with previous statewide experience; men seem better able than women to persuade voters that private sector experience can be a credential for a gubernatorial bid.

Strength is seen by voters to be a function of character; toughness is a trait demonstrated in politics through one's actions

The Barbara Lee Family Foundation report, *Turning Point*, features Lake Research Partners and American Viewpoint findings based on 2010 surveys of registered likely voters in eight states with women gubernatorial candidates, two states with only male candidates, and a control group; surveys were also conducted with an oversample of young women voters in select states.⁵⁵ *Turning Point* finds new opportunities for women candidates, including the rise of "strength" rather than "toughness" as an important trait; whereas strength is seen by voters to be a function of character, toughness is a trait demonstrated in politics through one's actions. Women are also competitive on the trait of "problem-solving," which is important to voters. In more recent reports, women candidates are given specific advice about the most effective advertising strategies.⁵⁶

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Future Research Directions

One of the most pressing areas for additional research is the candidate emergence process for governor and U.S. Senator—the most common stepping stones to the presidency. The informal processes that surround gaining political party and financial support for statewide office-seeking can shed light on candidate scarcity, which is one of the central problems facing women with respect to running for governor and president.⁵⁷ The role of so-called “dark money” that is being spent in the

Citizens United era raises questions about transparency in elections generally, including elections featuring women candidates.

And while Hillary Clinton is the current frontrunner for the 2016 Democratic nomination, whether the short term could bring a female Republican frontrunner for the nomination or a woman of color from either party is much less clear.

Further Reading

Lawrence, Regina G. and Melody Rose. *Hillary Clinton's Race for the White House: Gender Politics and the Media on the Campaign Trail*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2010.

This book considers women's access to the presidency, with a focus on Hillary Clinton's 2008 campaign for president. Historical background is provided on gender and presidential elections. The authors analyze Clinton's campaign closely and use content analysis to test the question of whether the media were biased in coverage of Clinton. They also speculate about the likelihood of electing a woman to the presidency in the future.

Barbara Lee Family Foundation. 2012. “Turning Point: The Changing Landscape for Women Candidates.” A Report by the Barbara Lee Family Foundation.

The Barbara Lee Family Foundation's series “Keys to the Governors' Office” offers practical advice for women gubernatorial candidates. This report presents findings from surveys, focus groups, interviews, and campaign

tracking conducted in 2010, focusing on eight gubernatorial races. The report finds some positive developments for women candidates, concluding that women candidates today have more gender-related strategic advantages. The research was conducted by Lake Research Partners, American Viewpoint, Inc., and Hughes & Company.

Sheeler, Kristina Horn, and Karrin Vasby Anderson. 2013. *Woman President: Confronting Postfeminist Political Culture*. College Station: Texas A & M Press.

This book argues that there has been a backlash against what the authors term “female presidentiality” which can be seen in the 2008 presidential election. The authors situate the election in historical context and analyze the ways that media coverage, popular culture, and campaign discourse rhetorically constructed the presidency as a gendered office in 2008. They argue that both antifeminism and postfeminism were evident in the election and that parody contributed to the reinscription of the presidency as a masculinist institution.

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