Political Parity
A Program of Hunt Alternatives

Women Candidates and Political Parties

Political parties are central to American politics. They provide voters with cues about candidate positions, help conduct elections, and organize government. In contrast to the strong role that parties play in nominations in many other democracies, it is usually the voters in U.S. primary elections who select the parties' nominees; in general elections, voters cast ballots for a candidate rather than a party list. Nevertheless, one cannot ignore the role of parties in American elections. Parties can recruit and train candidates, provide endorsements and funding, and act as gatekeepers to the nomination.

Women are not new to party politics. Even before women won the right to vote, they were active in the Democratic and Republican parties. Today's women voters are even more likely than men to identify with one of the major parties, with men more likely than women to be independents.[1] But women do not usually lead their parties. As we will see, this affects women's election to office in direct and indirect ways. In particular, Republican women have not shared equally with men in their party's substantial gains. The representation of women within the Democratic party far exceeds that of women in the Republican party.

PARTY LEADERS AND WOMEN

A famous quote by Democratic party leader John Bailey encapsulates the historic situation of women candidates in their parties: "The only time to run a woman is when things look so bad that your only chance is to do something dramatic."[2] Much has changed for women candidates. Studies show that party contributions and expenditures are similar for male and female congressional candidates.[3] Burrell observes that women candidates "have become mainstreamed in the parties" since the 1990s because the parties recognize that women are competitive candidates.[4] Women have

also achieved party leadership positions. In Congress, Democrat Nancy Pelosi, the former speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, serves as the minority leader. Women have served as congressional committee chairs and have headed the parties' congressional campaign committees.[5] Florida Representative Debbie Wasserman Schultz chairs the Democratic National Committee today.

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But women are far from achieving equality in party leadership. It has been rare for a woman to chair either national party.[6] Neither party has elected a woman to preside over the U.S. Senate; Pelosi remains the only woman to lead either party within Congress.[7] Nor has a woman ever won a major party's nomination for president. In state and local party organizations, the picture is not much rosier.[8] And in state legislatures, only 16 women are leading chambers across 15 states.[9]

The underrepresentation of women as party leaders is detrimental to electing more women to office. Because male and female party leaders have different social networks and different beliefs about ideal candidate characteristics, the gender imbalance in leadership affects candidate recruitment.[10] This is unfortunate because studies show that women state legislative candidates and state legislators are more likely than

men to say that they ran for office because they were recruited.[11] The gender of party leaders is not the sole factor, however, since beliefs about women's electability and personal interest in increasing women's representation also matter.[12] Party organizations and party leaders could—if they so desired—play a significant role in the effort to achieve gender parity in officeholding.[13]

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Women, more than men, are reliant on party support for their election to office.[14] According to Crowder-Meyer, the type of recruitment strategy that local parties use impacts the likelihood that women will be selected.[15]

However, women in politics often see their parties as a hindrance rather than a help to their candidacies. A majority of locally elected women in a four-state survey said that party leaders had "discouraged potential women candidates from running for office because of their gender."[16] Kira Sanbonmatsu's case studies of state legislative candidate emergence in six states revealed that women's underrepresentation in legislatures is partly a failure of party leaders to recruit women; indeed, a statistical analysis of all states demonstrates that in states where parties play stronger roles in candidate selection, fewer women hold state legislative office.[17] Candidate gender can also factor into how the congressional campaign committees select candidates.[18] Party leaders, who are primarily interested in winning, do not always believe that women and men are equally competitive; party leader surveys show that it is common for party leaders to believe women will face electoral hurdles in at least some districts.[19] Women may also be overlooked for gubernatorial office.[20]

The global spread of gender quotas for candidates and legislators has left the United States behind; more than one hundred countries have some type of gender quota, and the adoption of quotas has been on an upward trend since the 1990s.[21] In the United States, quotas for women have not been the subject of debate. Yet, both the Democratic and Republican parties have traditions of gender-balanced rules.[22] Back in the 1920s, the Democratic and Republican National Committees expanded to incorporate one man and one woman from each state.[23] The Democratic party uses a gender quota for selecting delegates to its party conventions. And although more Democratic state parties than Republican state parties have rules mandating "50-50" representation on state party committees, such rules exist within both parties.[24]

PARTY DIFFERENCES

Data from the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) show that women are faring quite differently in the two major parties today: 16.9% of Republican state legislators in 2015 are women, compared with 33.8% of Democratic state legislators.[25] CAWP statistics also show that Democratic women are over 60% of all major party women state legislators and over 70% of members of Congress.[26] There are more than enough women in both parties to run for elective office—and for party office, too; many more women from both major parties could seek and hold office than currently do.[27]

The Democratic and Republican parties have taken polarized positions on women's rights issues since the 1970s, with important differences in the types of interest groups allied with each party.[28] These party differences—particularly on abortion—yield different campaign funding opportunities for Democratic and Republican women. It is much more likely that a woman—compared with her male colleagues—comes from a background of activity in women's organizations and is affiliated with a women's organization.[29] This is true of women of both parties. At the same time, however, Democratic

women seem to have more opportunities for financial support from women's organizations because of the role that abortion plays for many women's political action committees (PACs) and donor networks.[30]

The types of district characteristics most favorable to electing women differ for women of the two parties. Barbara Palmer and Dennis Simon find that non-minority Democratic women in Congress tend to be elected from ideologically liberal and very Democratic districts compared with Democratic men, whereas Republican women in Congress tend to be elected from more ideologically moderate districts—and therefore more competitive—districts than Republican men.[31] These differences may partly stem from the way that voters perceive Democratic and Republican women candidates. Republican women candidates are perceived as less conservative than Republican men candidates, which can be problematic for women's opportunities in Republican primaries.[32]

Many of the stereotypes that women candidates face transcend party lines. For example, Kira Sanbonmatsu and Kathleen Dolan find that in the 2006 American National Election Study Pilot Survey, voters perceive women in Congress to be better able to handle the issue of education than men within their party, but less able to handle the issue of crime.[33] However, gender stereotypes seem to advantage Democratic women more than Republican women. Moreover, Republican voters are less likely than Democratic voters to express abstract support for voting for a woman candidate, confirming that Republican women appear to face greater electoral hurdles when compared with Democratic women.[34]

CHALLENGES FACING REPUBLICAN WOMEN

The situation of Republican women merits special attention, given the pattern of continued growth that Democratic women are experiencing compared with the stagnation that characterizes the situation of Republican women within their party.[35]

Some analyses reveal disproportionate barriers facing Republican women. For example, Pearson and McGhee show that non-incumbent Republican women are less likely than non-incumbent men to win their races; this finding of disadvantage persists even when other factors are controlled.[36] And in a new analysis of stereotypes, research by Public Opinion Strategies reveals that Republican women can benefit from stereotypes that are favorable to them, such as being perceived as more honest and more likely to work out a compromise.[37] But they also find that Republicans are more likely to see women as less emotionally suited for politics. Republicans are much less likely than Democrats to see strengths of women in politics and less likely to see benefits resulting from an increase in the presence of women in leadership roles.[38]

Because women are more reliant on party support and are more likely to come to office because of a policy motivation, the growing conservatism of the Republican party and disconnect between the party and moderates are putting Republican women at a disadvantage.[39] In contrast, the more liberal ideology of Democratic women compared with Democratic men does not disadvantage Democratic women in primaries. In a cross-state analysis, Laurel Elder finds that Republican women are faring the worst in more Republican and more conservative states.[40]

Future Research Directions

More research is needed on how women access party leadership roles.[41] Leaders of local and state parties may go on to run for office, making the party organization itself an important candidate pool.[42] Because party leaders can affect the recruitment and nomination of candidates, achieving gender parity in party leadership would facilitate gender balance in elective office. Work by Melody Crowder-Meyer about the role of local parties points to the need for more data on women's local officeholding and recognition that parties are often critical at the start of a political career.[43] It is also essential for research to examine the role of parties in funding local and state legislative women candidates; to date, most campaign finance analysis has focused on Congress. Because candidates—including congressional candidates—stand to benefit from party endorsements, and because parties at all levels try to recruit candidates and clear the field for their preferred candidates, more research is needed on the internal decision-making of party organizations, including the congressional committees of both parties.[44]

Few studies have focused on how electoral rules governing nominations affect women's election to office across states.[45] In one recent study, Pamela Fiber-Ostrow shows that women in California fare better when they run for the legislature under open rules (which allow cross-over voting and independent voters) compared with more closed rules that give the parties more control over nominations.[46] More research is needed to investigate how these types of institutional differences affect women across states.

Further Reading

Sanbonmatsu, Kira. *Where Women Run: Gender and Party in the American States.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006.

This book argues that political parties are actively involved in encouraging—and discouraging—candidates for state legislative office. Drawing on 2001 and 2002 interviews conducted in six states and a 2002 national survey of state party leaders and legislative party leaders sent to all fifty states, Sanbonmatsu finds that party gatekeeping affects women's state legislative representation negatively. She finds that party leader doubts about women's electability and the gendered nature of party leaders' social networks—which are usually male—reduce the likelihood that women will be recruited to run for office.

Crowder-Meyer, Melody. 2013. "Gendered Recruitment without Trying: How Local Party Recruiters Affect Women's Representation." *Politics & Gender* 9 (4): 390-413.

Using a national survey of local party leaders conducted in 2008, Crowder-Meyer considers the role of parties in shaping women's candidacies for local office. She argues that local office is a critical entry point to politics and that parties are important recruiters for this first rung on the political ladder. Crowder-Meyer connects party recruitment activities to the identification of women candidates for office. However, she finds that the effect of recruitment depends on party and on the recruitment strategy that parties employ.

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Sanbonmatsu, Kira, and Kathleen Dolan. 2009. "Do Gender Stereotypes Transcend Party?" *Political Research Quarterly* 62 (3): 485-494.

This article uses national survey data from the 2006 American National Election Studies Pilot Study to compare voter beliefs about men and women within the two major parties. The authors argue that gender stereo-types exist within both parties. However, Democratic women are more likely to benefit from favorable gender stereotypes than Republican women, while Republican women are more likely to be disadvantaged by gender stereotypes. The authors also find that the public is more likely to see differences between women and men in Congress on issue positions rather than issue competency.

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8   A 2008 canvass of state party chairs revealed that 11 of 50 Democratic state party chairs and 8 of 50 Republican state party chairs were women. Kira Sanbonmatsu, Susan J. Carroll, and Debbie Walsh, "Poised to Run: Women's Pathways to the State Legislatures," (Center for American Women and Politics, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University, 2009). Daniel Shea and Rebecca Harris found that women chaired 30% of Democratic local party organizations and 21% of Republican organizations. Daniel M. Shea and Rebecca C. Harris, "Gender and Local Party Leadership in America." *Journal of Women Politics & Policy* 28.1 (2006): 61-85.

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