

Candidate Recruitment and Women's Routes to Elective Office

How do women reach elective office? Where did they get their start? What role does recruitment play in the candidacy decision? What about political ambition? There are many reasons to expect gender differences in how women reach office. For example, women and men typically work in different types of occupations and have different relationships to paid work, and women are usually the primary caregivers in their families. Women's underrepresentation in politics and gender differences in campaign experiences can make for different perspectives on candidacy. Meanwhile, social networks and relationships with political parties, interest groups, donors, voters, and the media can interact with gender. What does this mean for how women reach office?

PATHWAYS TO THE STATE LEGISLATURES

The most comprehensive research on this topic comes from the 1981 and 2008 Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) Recruitment Studies. CAWP surveyed state legislators in 1981 and again in 2008, comparing women state legislators with their male colleagues.¹ The presence of women in state legislative office is important in itself, given the significant policymaking role of the states. But women state legislators are also a pool of potential congressional candidates: about half of the women in Congress previously served in their state legislatures.²

The 2008 CAWP Recruitment Study reveals that women and men state legislators have somewhat different occupational backgrounds. Women are more likely to have backgrounds in health and education. The 2008 study found more women from business and law backgrounds than did the 1981 research. But men in the legislatures remain more likely to have those backgrounds. While women lawyers and businesswomen are important pools from which to recruit candidates, they are not the only pools. Business and law are usually seen as the most common stepping-stone occu-

pations for politics, but women can successfully reach office through female-dominated occupations, and in fact, they are more likely to do so. This means that the conventional wisdom about who can reach office fails to capture women's pathways into politics, and the pool of women who could seek office is larger than is commonly believed.³ The pool of women who could run for the legislature is more than sufficient to achieve gender parity in office-holding in the short to medium-term.⁴

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Political careers are often conceptualized as ladders: one must start on the first rung and work one's way up. In practice, this means that women sometimes think they could not run for Congress before serving in local and state office first, or that a woman couldn't seek a state legislative seat without first holding local office. It turns out, however, that previous officeholding experience isn't always necessary for a successful bid for state legislative office. In the 2008 CAWP Recruitment Study, 44% of women state representatives had no elective or appointive experience prior to entering the legislature.⁵ Thus, women need not have a longstanding plan or follow a particular series of steps to be successful.

SOCIALIZATION AND POLITICAL AMBITION

One strategy for increasing the number of women candidates is to cultivate women's interest in running for office. In an important series of books and articles that analyze the dearth of women candidates from the perspective of those in the "eligible pool" of citizens who could theoretically run for office, Jennifer Lawless

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and Richard Fox consider gender differences in orientations toward candidacy. Their “Citizen Political Ambition Panel Study,” which began in 2001 with a national sample of 6,800 citizens, examines women and men in the typical occupations that lead to candidacy—business, law, education, and political activism. These are individuals who could have run for office—they had the right resumes—but they did not. Why not? What differentiates those with and without plans to enter politics?

Lawless and Fox’s answer is the ambition gap.⁶ In the first wave of their study (conducted in 2001), they found

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that 19% of men, but only 10% of women, had seriously considered running, whereas 57% of women, compared with 41% of men, had never thought about it.⁷ Among those interested in running, women are less likely to set their sights on national office compared with men.⁸ These results are puzzling because prior research had argued that gender equality in the eligibility pool should lead to parity in officeholding.

A large part of the answer, according to Lawless and Fox, is that these women—though “qualified” on paper to enter politics—do not perceive themselves as qualified. Just 14% of women in the 2001 study of citizens said they were “very qualified” to run compared with 26% of men, while 28% of women and only 12% of men saw themselves as “not at all qualified.”⁹ Lawless and Fox conclude that open-seat opportunities and increasing women’s presence in the pipeline professions are insufficient to achieve gender parity; instead, they

argue that it is essential to close the gender gap in political ambition.¹⁰

In their most recent study, Fox and Lawless extended their eligibility pool approach to survey 4,000 young men and women about their political aspirations and the determinants of ambition.¹¹ Similar to their citizen study, they find a gender gap in political ambition. In this study, which involved an online 2012 survey, they also find that the predictors of ambition are similar in young women and men; however, young women are less likely to “possess the ingredients” that lead to an interest in running for office.¹² Although young women are interested in pursuing social change, they are less likely than young men to see electoral politics as the way to achieve change.

POLITICAL RECRUITMENT

Studies also indicate that candidate recruitment is critical. The 2008 CAWP Recruitment Study found that women were much more likely than their male colleagues to have run for the legislature because they had been recruited. In fact, a *majority* of women state legislators had not seriously thought about running for the legislature until someone else suggested it.¹³ Asked why they sought their current seat, 24% of women state representatives, compared with only 15% of their male colleagues, said that being asked by the party or an elected official was the single most important reason they ran.¹⁴ Similarly, Fox and Lawless find that citizens are more likely to think about running for office if they have been recruited.¹⁵

In the 2008 CAWP Recruitment Study, political parties and public officials were the most influential sources of encouragement among those women and men legislators who ran at least in part because of recruitment.¹⁶ Because candidacy has not been a typical path for women, and because of gender bias in politics, it is perhaps not surprising that women need more recruitment and encouragement compared to men. Another

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study also finds that among state legislative candidates, women are more likely to have run because of encouragement.¹⁷ Party recruitment activities may be especially important in local politics. Melody Crowder-Meyer finds that greater activity by local parties can increase the presence of women candidates for local office, but that the gender and networks of party leaders shape those effects.¹⁸ Thus, while American elections are often characterized as candidate-centered rather than party-centered, parties often play an important role in encouraging candidates to enter races. Indeed, a majority of state and legislative party leaders from the fifty states reported on a survey that new state legislative candidates are typically encouraged to run by the party rather than coming forward on their own.¹⁹

Political parties are not the only agents of recruitment. Women's groups and PACs have identified, trained, and supported women's candidacies for decades. Organizations interested in electing more women to office recognize the critical role of recruitment. For example, organizations such as Emerge America, EMILY's List, and the Excellence in Public Service programs are seeking to identify women and encourage them to run. These efforts are especially important because women are more likely than men to cite organizations as important to their bids for office.²⁰

According to Carroll and Sanbonmatsu, the decision to run is more "relationally embedded" for women, meaning that women are more likely than men to evaluate the effects of their candidacies on their families and consider whether they have sufficient support and encouragement from political actors.²¹ In light of this gender difference, the presence of supports and resources is critical to increasing women's representation; the absence of obstacles is insufficient to increase women's representation.

Both major political parties could expand and intensify their efforts to encourage women to run for office, but

the problem is more acute on the Republican side. Just 16.9% of Republican state legislators are women in 2015, compared with 33.8% of Democratic state legislators who are women.²² Democratic women are 60% of major party women state legislators and over 70% of women members of Congress.²³

The dearth of Republican women in office does not necessarily imply that the Democratic party has a monopoly on recruiting women candidates. In fact, Fox and Lawless do not find party differences among women citizens in terms of recruitment by party leaders, although Republican women were less likely than Democratic women to have been recruited to run by a political activist.²⁴ And more women of color could be recruited by both parties to seek office from a wider range of districts.²⁵

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Party recruitment of candidates can help women, but it can also be problematic for women. Party leaders, who are usually male, tend to seek out candidates like themselves, and they have more access to and knowledge of male potential candidates.²⁶ The women state representatives in the 2008 CAWP Recruitment Study were somewhat more likely than their male colleagues to have experienced efforts to discourage their candidacies. And women of color who are serving in the state legislatures are even more likely than non-Hispanic white women legislators to experience efforts to discourage their candidacies.²⁷

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Kira Sanbonmatsu's statistical analysis shows that party efforts to restrict the nomination negatively affect women's state legislative representation.²⁸ Meanwhile, David Niven's analysis of Florida state legislative candidates found that women were more likely to drop out of contests where their party was strong, indicating that women may lack party support.²⁹ Thus, recruitment can help women decide to seek office, but negative recruitment can play a role as well. In the 2008 CAWP Recruitment Study, women of color in the state legislators were disproportionately likely to have overcome efforts to discourage their candidacies.³⁰

Because of the greater attractiveness of holding state-wide and federal office compared to many local and state legislative offices, recruitment may be less important for those races. In other words, it may not be necessary for the party to "beat the bushes" to find an interested candidate. At the same time, though, there is much at stake for the two parties in recruiting the best candidates. The national parties want to field the best congressional candidates for competitive seats—particularly today with intense party competition and electoral volatility.

CONGRESSIONAL CANDIDATE EMERGENCE

A study of candidate emergence for 2006 open congressional seats reveals mixed results about party receptivity to women candidates. Brian Frederick and Barbara Burrell examined the "positional pool" of eligible candidates by collecting data on state and local officeholders within each open-seat district; the "mentioned pool" of potential candidates mentioned in the media; a pool of potential candidates provided by "informants" or those within leadership positions within each district; and the actual candidates who entered the primaries.³¹ Both the share of women in the positional pool (21%) and the pool of potential candidates identified by informants (29%) exceeded the presence of women as the actual primary candidates who

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entered (18%)—indicating a dropoff from "potential" to "actual" congressional candidate. Some gender differences also emerged in the survey Frederick and Burrell conducted of all of the potential plus actual candidates. They found that women potential candidates were more likely to have received interest group encouragement than men and that local party interaction was similar for women and men. However, the women were less likely than the men to have received encouragement from either a state party or a national party committee.

NEW EXPERIMENTAL RESEARCH

Another challenge to increasing women's representation has been identified in a provocative new study by Kristin Kanthak and Jonathan Woon: women may be more "election averse" than men on average.³² Their study did not examine electoral politics directly. Instead, the college-student subjects in their experiment could volunteer to "run" (and "campaign") to be the representative of their small group. In their study, the task at hand was not governing but completing a simple addition task—a task on which women and men performed equally well. The critical gender difference in their study was that although women were equally likely to volunteer to be the representative from their group, they were less likely to do so if the selection mechanism was an election with a "campaign" to select the person. In other words, the ability and willingness of women to lead was thwarted by the necessity of standing for election. The authors conclude that elements of competition and evaluation that are involved in elections may discourage women from seeking public office.

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Future Research Directions

More research is needed on the process by which interest groups, PACs, and parties identify candidates for office. Who is mentioned in the media—and who is not mentioned—deserves more analysis as well. Future research could be modeled on Niven's study that examined candidates who declared but dropped out, or Frederick and Burrell's study comparing the candidate pool with actual candidates in open-seat congressional races.³³ These types of studies could shed light on the pre-primary candidate emergence process.

New efforts are underway to recruit more Republican women to run for office, although these efforts do not seem to approach the resources already available to

Democratic women.³⁴ Republican women's underrepresentation persists, and the Republican party's recent successes have failed to substantially change the situation facing Republican women. The fate of Republican women seems to be intimately linked to the fate of moderates more generally.³⁵ More attention to the geographic differences that are associated with Republican women's success might shed light on how more Republican women might reach office in the future.³⁶ To better understand the reasons for women's underrepresentation, including Republican women's underrepresentation, scholars should study the strength of recruitment and support mechanisms that are available to women candidates.³⁷

Further Reading

Carroll, Susan J., and Kira Sanbonmatsu. 2013. *More Women Can Run: Gender and Pathways to the State Legislatures*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Analyzing nationwide surveys of state legislators conducted in 2008 and 1981 by the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP), this book advances a new approach for understanding women's election to office, challenging assumptions of a single model of candidate emergence and the necessity for women to assimilate to men's pathways to office. Carroll and Sanbonmatsu argue that a relationally embedded model of candidate emergence better captures women's decision-making than an ambition framework in which candidacy is self-initiated. They argue that more women can run if more efforts are made to recruit women of varying backgrounds. Their research also examines party differences and the reasons that Democratic women are outpacing Republican women.

Lawless, Jennifer L. and Richard L. Fox. *It Still Takes a Candidate: Why Women Don't Run for Office*. Rev. ed. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

In this revised version of their popular book *It Takes a Candidate*, Lawless and Fox examine the ambition gap among women and men citizens. They conduct a panel study of citizens positioned to run for office from the fields of business, law, education, and political activism based on surveys conducted in 2001 and 2008. Topics of the book include the relationship between gender and family life, recruitment to politics, and the role of qualifications. Their account emphasizes the effects of traditional gender socialization on political ambition. They find that women are less likely than men to have considered running for office. The authors argue that this ambition gap is central to the underrepresentation of women in elective office.

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Lawless, Jennifer, and Richard L. Fox. *Girls Just Wanna Not Run: The Gender Gap in Young Americans' Political Ambition*. Washington, DC: Women & Politics Institute.

This report uses a survey of college students between the ages of 18 to 25 to investigate the origins of the gender gap in political ambition. Lawless and Fox find that even in college, women are less likely to exhibit interest in a future bid for office than men. College men are more likely than college women to find a career in politics attractive. The report shows that

college women are less likely to view themselves as qualified for candidacy, and that college men are much more likely to have received encouragement from to run for office. Importantly, Lawless and Fox note that the gender gap in ambition does not mean that women aren't interested in making a difference; instead, both women and men want to bring about societal change. Whereas women are more likely to see working through charitable organizations as a means to that end, men are more likely to see candidacy as the appropriate venue.

Reference

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