

Why More Women Don't Hold Office

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Over the course of the past few years, I have surveyed and interviewed nearly 4,000 people who we might consider “eligible candidates”—highly successful individuals who occupy the professions most likely to precede a career in politics. Although about 50 percent of the people I spoke to had considered running for office, women were more than one-third less likely than men to have considered a candidacy. And they were only half as likely as men to have taken any of the actions that usually precede a campaign—like investigating how to place their name on the ballot, or discussing running with potential donors, party or community leaders, or even mentioning the idea to family members or friends. If we focus only on the 50 percent of people who *had* thought about running, women were one-third less likely than men to throw their hats into the ring and enter actual races.

We can't really begin to figure out how to minimize the gender gap in political ambition if we don't understand its roots. I'd like to share my experiences as a woman candidate in a state with a poor history of electing women and a very male-dominated political establishment. I'd like to begin a conversation about political ambition, why men have it, and why women don't. And I'd like to hope that we can use the results of my research and my experiences to guide us in thinking about how to incorporate more women into the political sphere.

Women in Office—Then and Now

It's true that over the course of the past 20 years, the number of women in Congress has more than tripled. Since the end of World War II, the number of women serving in the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate has grown by more than 800 percent. In fact, California's Democratic congressional delegation, which is the largest state party delegation in Congress, is comprised of more women than men. Things aren't so bad, right?

Wrong. The United States ranks 82nd worldwide in the percentage of women in our national legislature. Even after the gains women made this election cycle, 84 percent of the members of the House and Senate are male. Eighty-two percent of state governors are male. Seventy-eight percent of state legislators throughout the country are male. Eighty percent of big city mayors are male. And the last several election cycles indicate a plateau in both Democratic and Republican women's entry into the political sphere. Further, a recent national study of college students found that men are nearly twice as likely as women to say they might be interested in running for office at some point in the future. Voter bias against women candidates also appears to be on the rise: nearly one in every four Americans agree that “Most men are better suited emotionally for politics than are most women.”

The prospects for women's full inclusion in our political system, in other words, are looking increasingly bleak. It makes sense, then, to turn to the women who are well situated to consider running for office, assess what's holding them back and work to alleviate these barriers. Based on my research, I've identified three basic barriers women face: family roles, what it means to be a "qualified" candidate and recruitment efforts.

Family Roles

Prominent female politicians, like vice presidential candidate Geraldine Ferraro in 1984 and California gubernatorial candidate Dianne Feinstein in 1990, had to answer for the conduct of their children and spouses. Yet examples of male politicians having to offer a public defense and justification of their parenting skills or family life are far less common. Women who enter the public sphere, therefore, often face a "double bind" that men rarely need to reconcile. This double bind is something that's clearly familiar to women who are well-positioned to run for public office today. Of the people I interviewed, women were about twice as likely as men to be single, separated or divorced. They also were 20 percent less likely than men to have children. Hardly surprising, since being a wife or mother can impede professional achievement.

In families where both adults are working, generally in high-level careers, women are 12 times more likely than men to be responsible for the majority of household tasks, and more than 10 times more likely to be responsible for the majority of child care responsibilities. As a businesswoman from Chicago says: "Women are responsible not only for the family but also for earning half the money. Now we're also supposed to run for office? How much can you possibly ask?"

Perceptions of Qualifications

An active member of the Sacramento County Taxpayers League described a recent exchange with a woman who he thinks would make an excellent candidate. He said: "She is an all-American athlete, Phi Beta Kappa, Rhodes scholar finalist, Harvard Law grad and adviser to the president. I met with her for dinner the other night and basically begged her to run for office. She told me she doesn't think she's qualified. She'd never consider running. I don't get it. Who is qualified if she's not?"

Sixty percent of men, but less than 40 percent of women, think they're qualified to run for office. Keep in mind that these men and women have the exact same credential and qualifications. They just don't perceive them this way. But it gets worse—not only do these women think that they're not qualified to run, but they also are more likely to let their doubts hold them back. A woman who doesn't think she is qualified to run for office has less than a 25 percent chance of even thinking about running. The average man who doesn't think he's qualified still has about a 60 percent chance of contemplating throwing his hat into the ring.

Gender bias and sexism heighten women's inclinations to doubt their abilities. After all, they are accustomed to operating in an environment where they feel they face a double standard and a doubting atmosphere. It follows that even women who think they are qualified to run for public office believe they need to be more qualified than men just to compete evenly. In fact, women who think they're qualified to run for public office tend to state very specific credentials. In contrast, most men do not make specific linkages between their professions and the political environment. Instead, they reference passion, leadership, and vision. An attorney from Oklahoma captured this distinction well when he

explained that “All you need is the desire to serve. That makes you qualified for the job. You can learn the details of policymaking later.”

Recruitment

Unlike men, well-positioned women potential candidates are significantly less likely than men to report being tapped to run for office. The accomplished and politically engaged women I spoke with were about twice as likely as men to never have had a political leader suggest they explore running for office. Four successful women attorneys in their forties, for example, all state that they follow politics closely. All belong to political interest groups. And all contribute to political campaigns. Yet not one has ever received even the mildest suggestion to run for office. In fact, women I surveyed were one-third less likely than men to have been recruited—*ever*—to run for office from a party leader, elected official, or political activist.

But now let me turn to the good news. Potential candidates who receive the suggestion to run for office are more than four times as likely as those who receive no such support to think seriously about a candidacy. And women are just as likely as men to respond positively to recruitment messages. For many, recruitment from political leaders serves as the key ingredient in fomenting their thoughts of running. An attorney from Connecticut commented that her interest in running for office stemmed directly from party leaders’ interest in her as a candidate: “I considered running [for the legislature] because Democratic Party leaders suggested that I do it. You need to have the party’s support in order to have a viable run for any office. It wouldn’t have occurred to me without the suggestion from the party.”

Comments from women and men who have been recruited reflect how party support brings the promise of an organization that will work on behalf of a candidate. Statements from those who have not received political support for a candidacy demonstrate that, without encouragement, a political candidacy feels far less feasible. External support is important to potential candidates from all political parties and professional backgrounds. But women are significantly less likely than men to receive it.

Here's How We Can Take Action

We must think creatively about how to integrate family with politics, as well as be cognizant of the double bind that even highly successful, professional women face. We must identify and condemn the kind of sexist behavior that leads women to feel that they must be twice as good to get half as far in the political sphere.

But perhaps most easily, realistically, and concretely, we must recruit more women to run for office. The AFL-CIO and its affiliates’ political programs, for instance, are committed to increasing the number of public officials concerned about working families. Since 1996, the federation has actively worked to elect pro-worker candidates and actively assist union members running for public office. And union members are winning their elections. Currently, more than 3,000 union members hold elected office.

But that’s not all. We need to go to high schools and colleges and encourage girls and women to engage in politics. Every time any of us runs across a woman who seems to fit the bill, we need to tell her—and we need to tell her more than once—that she should consider running for office. If she needs to hear it 17 times before it sinks in, then we need to tell her 17 times.

The stakes are too high for us to sit back and not aggressively fight to convince more women to enter electoral politics. The Senate Judiciary Committee never again will grill a woman who charges a man with sexual harassment the way they did Anita Hill because one woman—Dianne Feinstein—now serves as one of the committee’s 19 members and 15 other women serve with her in the Senate. Policies surrounding gender equity, day care, flex time, abortion, minimum wage increases and food stamps will continue to receive attention only if we elect more women legislators, because they are the most likely to prioritize these issues.

Deeply embedded patterns of traditional family roles, perceptions of what it means to be a qualified candidate, and a gender gap in political recruitment make politics a much less likely path for women than men. But it doesn’t have to remain this way. It’s up to us to change these dynamics, and that’s the challenge that I issue to all of us.

Jennifer Lawless, a political science professor at Brown University, author of [It Takes a Candidate: Why Women Don't Run for Office](#) and 2006 [candidate for Congress](#) from Rhode Island, describes the barriers to public office women face.