

Introduction to Parity Perspectives on Promoting Women Candidacies

Closing the Political Ambition Gap

Central to any conversation about increasing the percentage of women officeholders is the gender gap in political ambition and how political actors can close this gap by implementing systematic methods of increasing the recruitment and support of women candidates.

A study by Jennifer Lawless and Richard Fox quantified the gender gap in political ambition, or the gender gap in willingness to run for elected office. In their “Citizen Political Ambition Panel Study,” which they performed in both 2001 and 2011 with a national sample of 1,969 men and 1,796 women in occupations that most commonly lead to political candidacy – business, law, education, and political activism – Lawless and Fox found that women are less likely than men to think they are qualified to run for office, to consider running, or to seek higher-level state and national positions if they do decide to run.ⁱ

While early research hypothesized that gender equality in the pool of eligible candidates (those with requisite professional experience) would lead to gender parity in elected office, Lawless and Fox’s 2001 and 2011 studies explain why this has not happened. According to their research, which controlled for eligibility, prospective women candidates were 16 percentage points less likely than their male counterparts to even consider running (59%-43% in 2001 and 62%-46% in 2011).

Also disconcerting is the fact that while the gender gap between men and women who have at one point considered running for office has remained steady over the last decade, the gender gap among those who are still interested in running for office in the future has grown from five percentage points to eight (23% of men and 18% of women in 2001 to 22% of men and 14% of women in 2011). While men are still just as likely to want to run for office in the future, women are now less likely than they were a decade ago.

Women are less likely than men to think they are qualified to run for office, to consider running, or to seek high-level state and national positions if they do decide to run.

Luckily, there is a way to combat this gender gap in political ambition: increasing the recruitment of women candidates by political actors (elected officials, political organizations, and political parties). These actors already play a crucial role in the recruitment of qualified, politically-viable candidates. If they were to focus their efforts on recruiting a larger number of politically-viable women candidates, there could be a dramatic increase in the number of women candidacies, and therefore the number of women serving in elected office.

Currently, however, there is not just a gender gap in political ambition, but also a gender gap in political recruitment. In Lawless and Fox’s study, women were 10 percentage points less likely than men to be encouraged to run for office by a political actor (39%-49%). But when encouraged, Lawless and Fox found, women were just as likely as men to respond favorably.ⁱⁱ

Even though encouragement increases the chances that both men and women will run for office, it has been shown to be more central to a woman’s decision to run than to a man’s. Scholars at the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University (CAWP) found that while men are more likely than women to be encouraged to seek elected office, men are also more

likely to run for office without such encouragement.ⁱⁱⁱ In CAWP's 2008 survey of 1,268 state legislators, 43% of male respondents stated that it was entirely their own idea to run for office, whereas only 26% of female respondents said the same. On the other hand, 53% of women admitted that they had not considered running before someone else suggested it. Just 28% of male respondents had not already considered running. For this reason, it is particularly important that women are recruited, as they may be half as likely as men to seek elected office without encouragement.

There are currently many efforts underway to increase the recruitment and support of women candidates, and without these efforts, the number of women officeholders today would be even lower. Women's organizations and PACs like EMILY's List, the National Women's Political Caucus, and the WISH List have continued to recruit, train, and fund women candidates with great success. Additionally, political icons such as Sarah Palin have utilized their celebrity to support women candidates in primary elections. And most recently, the National Republican Congressional Committee launched a new effort called Project GROW to increase the recruitment of Republican women candidates. These efforts are crucial to increasing the number of women in elected office, and should be encouraged and strengthened.

ⁱ Lawless, J. & Fox, R. (2012). Men Rule: The Continued under-Representation of Women in U.S. Politics. *Women & Politics Institute, American University*. <http://www.american.edu/spa/wpi/upload/2012-Men-Rule-Report-web.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Carroll, S. J., & Sanbonmatsu, K. and Walsh, D. (2009). *Poised to Run: Women's Pathways to the State Legislatures*. New Brunswick, NJ: Center for American Women and Politics, Rutgers University.