

Parity Perspective

Changing Priorities by Changing Party Rules: How Political Parties Can Increase the Recruitment of Women Candidates

While women's groups and political figures play important roles in recruiting qualified women to run for office, the power of political parties to increase the recruitment of women candidates has largely been untapped. Both major parties already have gender equity requirements for the selection of their national committee members.ⁱ Now it is time for them to take a more proactive role in ensuring that they have viable women candidates in position to win elections at all levels of government.

In many parts of the country, political parties are instrumental in the recruitment and funding of both men and women candidates. One study by the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University (CAWP) found that not only are women state legislators twice as likely as men state legislators to have never considered running for office before

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being encouraged, but that the primary sources of encouragement for those women were party officials or legislative leaders.ⁱⁱ Because most legislative elections are effectively decided by who wins the nominating contest of a district's majority party, parties have the potential to play an even more influential role if they strategically recruit women to run for winnable open seats.

There is currently great room for improvement in this area. The CAWP study found that male legislators were 16% more likely than women legislators to have been encouraged to run by a member of their political party. Because women are much more likely than men to require encouragement in order to consider running, this gap in recruitment by parties must be addressed.

Additionally, the study found that female state representatives were 28% more likely to have been discouraged from running for office than male state representatives. Since men and women who had been discouraged were equally likely to receive that discouragement from a party official, party officials must have been disproportionately discouraging women from running.

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In order to increase the number of women running for elected office, political parties need to consciously recruit and support more women candidates. Both major parties have already embraced gender parity in the selection of

internal leaders – for instance, every state and territory picks one man and one woman to serve in the Republican National Committee. But when it comes to selecting candidates for public office, American political parties have not taken the steps that many political parties abroad have taken to increase gender parity.

There are many types of gender-conscious electoral laws and party rules that can help to increase women's representation. Several of the most aggressive measures, such as reserving a number of legislative seats for women or mandating through legislation that political parties run a certain number of women each election, could be vulnerable to a constitutional challenge in the United States, and could also be difficult to implement in jurisdictions that select party nominees by popular primaries rather than conventions. But other measures, on a voluntary party-by-party basis, could prove both legal and effective.

Political parties should implement internal rules and procedures that would encourage and incentivize the increased recruitment and support of female candidates, thereby proving to their female constituents that they take seriously the need to increase women's representation in American government. Parties have a myriad of options that can help to increase women's representation. We have divided them into two categories: rules that are meant to increase awareness of women's underrepresentation in government among party leadership and allow for brainstorming on ways to recruit more female candidates, and rules that would incentivize the increased recruitment of female candidates by creating benchmarks of success directly tied to the number of women in the party running for political office.

Rules to Raise Awareness of the Underrepresentation of Women

Dialogue with Training Groups: The simplest of the reform proposals is for state political parties to commit to organizing meetings between party leaders and statewide organizations that train and recruit women to run for elected office. Parties could host these dialogues at least twice a year, and preferably more in the year leading up to a major election, to increase the number of women running for elected office. It will also allow for recruiting and training groups to alert party leadership to promising women that they have come across during their programs.

Gender Parity Task Forces: In conjunction with their meetings with statewide organizations that train and recruit women candidates, state parties could establish Gender Parity Task Forces to develop and execute plans for the party to recruit and train women candidates. These task forces could do their own recruiting and training, or contract with existing groups that already provide this service, including those with whom they have their bi-annual dialogues.

Internal Accountability: Statewide party leadership could prepare a report prior to each election cycle on the state of gender parity in the party's own leadership, among its elected representatives, and in political appointments made by those elected representatives; the number of women primary candidates, nominees, and general election winners in the most recent election; and its plans to recruit women for upcoming elections. If the numbers are lower than was projected before the previous election cycle, the party should propose new ways to increase the number of women it recruits to run for political office.

Rules to Incentivize the Increased Recruitment of Women

The fastest way for political parties to increase women's representation is to adopt measures that would incentivize the recruitment of more women candidates. State and local parties would set goals, based on the current state of women's representation in their area, for how many women they would hope to recruit each election cycle, and national political parties would award "Gender Parity Grants," financed by donations from party members who care about

increasing the number of women in elected office, to the state and local parties that met their goals.

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This reform is inspired by the widespread use of gender quotas in party nominations abroad. Currently about 110 countries use some form of gender quota, be they constitutional, legislated, or voluntarily implemented by political parties.ⁱⁱⁱ More specifically, over 100 political parties in 50 countries have

instituted party gender quotas, which set goals for how many women the party aims to nominate for each election. Although the success of these party quotas have varied by country, and can vary based on how strictly the party enforces them, in some countries, such as those in Northern and Central Europe, they have been wildly successful.^{iv}

A significant roadblock to implementing this particular type of party gender quota in the United States, apart from potential constitutional challenges, is the use of popular primaries. In most jurisdictions in the United States, the Democratic and Republican parties hold popular primaries in which voters themselves determine their party's nominees. This means that political parties in America have much less control over who will represent them in a general election than political parties do in countries in which party officials select who will be on the general election ballot. Therefore, without a change in nominating procedures, American political parties will be unable to establish strict goals for how many women the party will nominate. However, this does not mean that parties are not able to encourage more women to run in their primaries.

Under the system we propose, local and state parties would set goals for how many women they would recruit to run in their primary elections, and especially in primary elections for positions in which a nominee from the party would have a good chance of winning in the general election. That way, women who are recruited and win their parties' nominations will also be likely to enter office.

An important benefit of this system is that unlike strict gender quotas, it does not preclude any qualified men from running in a particular district if they are so inclined: as long as they are able to defeat the recruited woman candidate, they will be on their way to political office. Additionally, national and local parties will be able to negotiate expectations for how many women will be recruited to run, and especially how many will be recruited to run in winnable districts based on the current electoral realities the local parties are facing. Therefore, the Democratic Party in a Republican-leaning state like South Carolina will not be held to the same standard as the Democratic Party in a Democratic-leaning state like Massachusetts. Instead, as long as the South Carolina Democratic Party recruited the agreed-upon number of women to run for winnable seats, the National Democratic Party would award them the "Gender Parity Grant," thereby rewarding them for their effort to increase the representation of women in their state government.

Profile of a Party's Effort

The Republican Party knows that it has a woman problem. In 2012, women, who made up 53% of the American electorate, voted for Democratic President Barack Obama at a rate of 55%. Additionally, only a third of women state legislators are Republican, only a fifth of in the U.S.

Senate are Republican, and only a quarter of women in the U.S. House of Representatives are Republican. In order to address the dearth of Republican women serving in elected office, the Republican National Committee, along with the National Republican Congressional Committee, Republican Governors Association, National Republican Senatorial Committee, Republican State Leadership Conference, and College Republican National Committee, recently launched “Women on the Right UNITE,” which will oversee two new initiatives to increase the recruitment of Republican women candidates at the state and national level.



The Republican State Leadership Committee’s “Right Women, Right Now” aims to recruit 300 new women to run for office at the state level, while The National Republican Congressional Committee’s “Project GROW” (Growing Republican Opportunities for Women) will focus on recruiting women to run for Congress and assisting them with their campaigns.^v Republican National Committee Chairman Reince Priebus explained, “For the first time ever all six committees are coming together to show you that we recognize America needs more women involved in political leadership and to show our commitment as a party to developing better relationships with women voters. We recognize that getting more women into politics means offering support and training for women of all ages, from staff to those seeking elected office, and simply asking more women to run.”^{vi}

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Republicans hope that by adding more female faces to their party, they will be able to attract more women voters. As Missouri U.S. Rep. Ann Wagner, one of just three female Republican representatives first elected in 2012 (compared to 17 Democratic women), explained, “We have a message I think that reaches women and we need to

make sure that we’re actively and aggressively telling that story. And there’s no better way to do it than being a woman who talks about it.”^{vii}

Since its June launch, Project GROW has already recruited four women to challenge male Democratic incumbents and is working with 14 female candidates for Congress across the country. “They are the women that we want to be a part of our team. So we’re actively going and talking to them about why it’s important for them to step up and run for Congress,”^{viii} said Wagner of the women she and other Republican congresswoman are encouraging to run.

If these initiatives prove successful, they could serve as models for the Democratic Party, which, though it already has far more women running for and being elected to public office than Republicans, has yet to achieve gender parity in its recruitment and nominations either.

In order to address the gender gap in political ambition, we must do everything we can to ensure that more qualified women decide to run for office. Otherwise, we will continue to suffer from a dearth of women’s voices in lawmaking and leadership. It is time for the political parties to embrace the goal of electing more women. International comparisons suggest that no other reform, absent government-imposed quotas, has greater potential to increase the representation of women in elected office than gender-conscious party rules.

ⁱ For the Democratic Party, see The Charter and Bylaws of the Democratic Party of the United States (2012, Sept. 7) ARTICLE THREE, Sections 1e and 2a; For the Republican Party, see The Rules of the Republican Party (2012, Sept.) RULE NO. 1.

ⁱⁱ Carroll, S. J., & Sanbonmatsu, K. and Walsh, D. (2009).

ⁱⁱⁱ Frequently Asked Questions. *QuotaProject: Global Database of Quotas for Women*. Retrieved August 21, 2013, from <http://www.quotaproject.org/faq.cfm>

^{iv} Dahlerup, D., & Freidenvall, L. (2008). *Electoral Gender Quota Systems and Their Implementation in Europe*. European Parliament: Policy Department: Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs.

^v Walshe, S. (2013, June 28). GOP's Push to Woo Female Candidates, Voters. Retrieved September 26, 2013 from <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2013/06/gops-push-to-woo-female-candidates-voters/>

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} Ibid.