

Revised Edition

# It Still Takes A Candidate

Why Women Don't Run for Office



Jennifer L. Lawless    Richard L. Fox

CAMBRIDGE

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## *Why Women Don't Run for Office*

Revised Edition

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## It Still Takes A Candidate

### *Why Women Don't Run for Office*

Revised Edition

*It Still Takes A Candidate* serves as the only systematic, nationwide empirical account of the manner in which gender affects political ambition. Based on data from the Citizen Political Ambition Panel Study, a national survey of almost 3,800 “eligible candidates” in 2001 and a second survey of more than 2,000 of these same individuals in 2008, Jennifer L. Lawless and Richard L. Fox find that women, even in the highest tiers of professional accomplishment, are substantially less likely than men to demonstrate ambition to seek elective office. Women are less likely than men to be recruited to run for office. They are less likely than men to think they are qualified to run for office. And they are less likely than men to express a willingness to run for office in the future. This gender gap in political ambition persists across generations and over time. Despite cultural evolution and society’s changing attitudes toward women in politics, running for public office remains a much less attractive and feasible endeavor for women than for men.

Jennifer L. Lawless is associate professor of government at American University, where she is also the director of the Women & Politics Institute. Her research focuses on gender, elections, and representation. Professor Lawless has published numerous articles in academic journals, such as *American Journal of Political Science*, *Perspectives on Politics*, *Journal of Politics*, *Political Research Quarterly*, *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, *Social Problems*, and *Politics & Gender*. She is a nationally recognized speaker, and her scholarly analysis and political commentary have been quoted in various newspapers, magazines, television news programs, and radio shows. In 2006, she sought the Democratic nomination for the U.S. House of Representatives in Rhode Island’s second congressional district. Currently, she serves as the editor of *Politics & Gender*.

Richard L. Fox is associate professor of political science at Loyola Marymount University. His research examines how gender affects voting behavior, state executive elections, congressional elections, and political ambition. He is the author of *Gender Dynamics in Congressional Elections* (1997) and coauthor of *Tabloid Justice: The Criminal Justice System in the Age of Media Frenzy* (2007). He is also coeditor, with Susan J. Carroll, of *Gender and Elections* (2010). His work has appeared in *Political Psychology*, *Journal of Politics*, *American Journal of Political Science*, *Social Problems*, *PS*, and *Politics & Gender*. He has also written op-ed articles that have appeared in the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*.

## Acknowledgments

We conducted the Citizen Political Ambition Panel Study because of our deep concern about women's political underrepresentation in the United States. Perhaps we are just impatient, but it seemed that women's broad inclusion in top elective offices was moving too slowly. And we sensed greater roadblocks to women's full political integration than had previously been identified. So, in an effort to uncover the degree to which gender interacts with the process by which people emerge as candidates, we went to work, surveying and speaking with thousands of women and men who are well suited to run for office. We believe that the first edition of this book – which was based on data from 2001 – went a long way in explicating the prominent role gender plays in the evolution of political ambition.

But after completing the first edition of the book, we knew there were several areas on which we were unable to elaborate. Although the first edition established the gender gap in political ambition and offered several explanations for it, we felt it was important to add greater empirical depth to the central findings, especially those dealing with the manner in which gender interacts with political recruitment and self-assessed qualifications. This edition does just that; we have substantially updated and revised the sections of the book that focus on the factors that contribute to the gender gap in candidate emergence.

We also felt it was important to write a revised edition of the book because of the significant changes to the U.S. political landscape that occurred after we completed our original survey in 2001. The past nine years have been particularly tumultuous: we have seen the waging of two wars, acrimonious partisan rancor in Washington, one of the most

unpopular and polarizing presidents in recent history, a shift in congressional party control, and the government's ineffective handling of the Hurricane Katrina disaster. In terms of women and politics, we have seen the ascension of Nancy Pelosi as the first female Speaker of the House, the emergence of Hillary Clinton as the first serious female presidential contender (not to mention the recipient of 18 million votes), and the nomination of Sarah Palin as the first Republican vice presidential candidate. It is hard to imagine a more important time to study the intersection of gender and political ambition and assess whether the prognosis for women's political representation has changed. Surprisingly, the results reported in this book reveal almost no change in the gender gap in political ambition. In 2001, we uncovered a 16 percentage point gender gap; seven years later, the gap was almost identical at 14 percentage points. If women are ever to achieve electoral parity, then it is clear that the change will not occur on its own.

Identifying and explaining the persistent gender gap in political ambition is vitally important. But it is safe to say that when we began the project, we really did not know what we were getting into. The ramifications of what it would entail to administer – by ourselves – a multiwave national mail survey to seven thousand “eligible” candidates had not dawned on us. At the conclusion of a yearlong foray into data collection, we had signed, folded, sealed, and stamped almost twenty-five thousand pieces of mail. We fed every envelope into the printer, by hand. We wrote a personal note on each letter, encouraging the recipient to complete the survey. We affixed an actual stamp to each piece of mail. If nothing else, this endless procession of mind-numbing tasks proved our shared mania and self-loathing.

Then, of course, there was the obsessive monitoring of the mail. On a bad day, when only a few completed surveys would arrive, our hopes for the project's success would plunge. Our faith was almost always restored the following day, when hundreds of surveys would pour in. (As a pointer for those administering a mail survey, we learned that Mondays and Fridays are good mail days, but Tuesdays and Wednesdays are not.) Ultimately, the project was a great success; almost four thousand good-hearted souls violated the rational choice paradigm and took the time to fill out a lengthy survey with nothing to gain other than advancing social science (and getting us off their backs).

As proof of our insanity, we decided to do it all over again seven years later. This time, though, we had an additional step that required tracking down current address information for the respondents. Through our

searches, we learned of exciting new marriages, new babies, new careers, and unfortunate tragedies. We learned that we could not follow up with one respondent because she had been moved into the Witness Protection Program. We learned that we could not contact another because he was standing trial, as were many of his colleagues in Enron's government relations department. Overall, through extensive Internet searches and phone calls, we managed to obtain current address information for nearly three thousand members (82 percent) of the original sample of respondents. We then commenced the mail survey process, which amounted to the signing, stuffing, sealing, and stamping of 11,904 pieces of mail. Ultimately, we were very gratified when more than two thousand women and men completed the second-wave survey.

Obviously, the completion of a project like this requires help and assistance from numerous people, and we would like to thank them all. We are particularly grateful to Walt Stone and Linda Fowler, both of whom offered extensive and insightful comments at various stages of this project. Kathy Dolan, who expressed support for the work even in its earliest stages, provided helpful feedback on the manuscript as well. We would also like to thank Dominique Tauzin, who joined us on many occasions to help put out the mail. In addition, she made numerous phone calls to badger people to complete the survey (something we did not have the nerve to do).

From a practical standpoint, our endeavor would have been impossible without Jonathan Ma and Eliana Vasquez. They provided invaluable assistance in assembling the initial sample and helping to track the flow of mail. We could not have executed the second wave of the study without logistical help from Carol Cichy and Dave Rangaviz. And we thank My-Lien Le, who constructed the index for the book in record time and with an obsessive-compulsive attention to detail.

We are also grateful to many people who provided feedback on the survey instruments and who read parts of the manuscripts. Cliff Brown, Barbara Burrell, Eric R.A.N. Smith, Terry Weiner, and Harriet Woods offered advice on the original survey. In addition, several individuals working in politics and at women's organizations offered suggestions for the second-wave survey. We thank Marya Stark (Emerge), Marcia Cone and Simone Joyaux (Women's Fund of Rhode Island), Ilana Goldman (Women's Campaign Forum), Susannah Shakow (Running Start), and Mary Hughes. Dave Brady, Dick Brody, Mo Fiorina, Brian Frederick, Amy Gangl, Claudine Gay, Simon Jackman, Kent Jennings, Terry Moe, Karen O'Connor, Zoe Oxley, Kathryn Pearson, Kira Sanbonmatsu,

Wendy Schiller, Keith Shaw, Sean Theriault, and Sue Tolleson Rinehart helped us tighten our analysis and offer a more compelling contribution. We would also like to thank Jane Mansbridge and Lori Marso, who took the time to tutor two empirically minded political scientists in some of the finer points of feminist theory.

We also could not have conducted the study without financial support from American University, Brown University, Cal State Fullerton, the Carrie Chapman Catt Center at Iowa State University, Stanford University, Union College, Hunt Alternatives Fund, and the Barbara Lee Foundation. Debbie Walsh and Sue Carroll at the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University supported the project from the outset and also provided funding and a place to work. Norman Nie and the Stanford Institute for the Quantitative Study of Society helped fund part of one of the first waves of the survey. Darrell West, as the director of the Taubman Center for Public Policy at Brown University, helped issue a report based on our first survey; he then did the same for the second survey when he became vice president of governmental studies at the Brookings Institution. We are very pleased that women's organizations and public officials use these reports to encourage more women to run for office.

Several students also made important contributions to the project: Jinhee Chung, Shana Gotlieb, Ben Gray, Peter Jewett, Erik Kindschi, Marne Lenox, AnneMarie MacPherson, Ben Mishkin, Oriana Montagni, and Teresa Tanzi. Adam Deitch copyedited multiple versions of the second survey, promoted the book widely in 2005 and 2006, and assures us that, one day, he will actually read it.

We also want to thank our friends, as well as our colleagues at our former institutions, Brown University and Union College, and our current institutions, American University and Loyola Marymount University, for providing great camaraderie. And we would be remiss not to thank our editor at Cambridge, Ed Parsons, who encouraged and supported us through both editions of the book and who seems to share our need for immediate feedback.

Finally, we would like to thank our families, who put up with endless interruptions and listened to numerous complaint sessions about the progress of both editions of the book and the coauthor. Thank you Margie, John, Louis, Dominique, Lila, and Miles.



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## Electoral Politics

### *Still a Man's World?*

Cheryl Perry made partner at a prestigious law firm in Hartford, Connecticut, when she was only thirty-three years old. She is active professionally, holding positions with the city's bar association and the Connecticut Trial Lawyers Association. In addition, Ms. Perry served on the coordinating committee for the 1996 Olympics. Several of her peers in the legal community have repeatedly urged her to consider running for elective office. But when asked if she considers herself qualified to run, Ms. Perry replies, "Absolutely not. I'd never run."<sup>1</sup>

Tricia Moniz also looks like an excellent candidate for public office. A sociology professor at a large university, she has won four campuswide teaching awards, is an authority in the areas of juvenile justice and diversity, and finds her expertise sought out by many state and city agencies. Because of her professional experience, Professor Moniz works closely with community and political party leaders who regularly consult her on public policy issues. When asked if she feels qualified to serve as an elected official, she laughs and says, "Lord no," elaborating that she does not feel qualified to serve even at the local level.

Randall White also seems to fit the bill for entering the electoral arena. A college professor in Pennsylvania, he has published numerous works on biblical interpretation. A dedicated teacher with a strong interest in local politics, he frequently attends and speaks at city council meetings. When

<sup>1</sup> To protect anonymity, we changed the names and modified identifying references of the women and men we surveyed and interviewed for this book. The backgrounds and credentials we describe, as well as the specific quotes we use, are taken directly from the surveys we administered and interviews we conducted.

asked if he feels qualified to seek elective office, Professor White immediately responds, "Yes; I am much smarter and a lot more honest than the people currently in office." He confidently asserts his qualifications to run for a position situated even at the state or national level.

Kevin Kendall lives outside of Seattle, Washington, and began practicing law in 1990. Since then, he has become a partner in his law firm. In addition to working as a full-time litigator, Mr. Kendall is active in several professional associations and nonprofit community organizations in and around Seattle. When asked whether he feels qualified to pursue an elective position, Mr. Kendall states, "I am a quick study. People tell me I should run all the time." Asked to name the level of office for which he thinks he is most suited, Mr. Kendall responds, "I could run for office at any level. I've thought about it a lot and, one day, probably will."

The sentiments of these four individuals exemplify the dramatic gender gap we uncovered throughout the course of investigating eligible candidates' ambition to seek public office. These four women and men all possess excellent qualifications and credentials to run for office. They are well educated, have risen to the top of their professions, serve as active members in their communities, and express high levels of political interest. Yet despite these similarities, the two women express little desire to move into the electoral arena. The two men confidently assert the ease with which they could occupy almost any elective position. Although the factors that lead an individual first to consider running for office and then to decide to seek an actual position are complex and multifaceted, we find that gender exerts one of the strongest influences on who ultimately launches a political career.

The critical importance gender plays in the initial decision to run for office suggests that prospects for gender parity in our political institutions are bleak. This conclusion stands in contrast to the conventional wisdom of much political science scholarship. Because extensive investigations of women's electoral performance find no discernible, systematic biases against women candidates, many scholars conclude that, as open seats emerge and women continue to move into the professions that precede political candidacies, more women will seek and occupy positions of political power. These circumstances are certainly prerequisites for women to increase their presence in elective offices. We argue, however, that it is misleading to gauge prospects for gender parity in our electoral system without considering whether well-positioned women and men are equally interested and willing to run for office.



As fundamental as political ambition is to women's emergence as candidates, there is a glaring lack of empirical research that focuses on gender and the decision to run for office.<sup>2</sup> This may be a result of scholarship following history; men have dominated the political sphere and U.S. political institutions throughout time. Writing in the late 1950s, for example, Robert Lane (1959, 97) remarked that political scientists have "always had to come to terms with the nature of man, the political animal." Fifteen years later, another prominent political scientist, David Mayhew (1974, 6), described politics as "a struggle among men to gain and maintain power." It is not surprising, therefore, that when we wrote the first edition of this book, none of the sixteen published academic books that concentrated predominantly on political ambition focused on gender.<sup>3</sup> A 2004 search of scholarly journals in the disciplines of political science, sociology, and psychology revealed a similar pattern. The only national study of the interaction between gender and political ambition appeared in 1982, when Virginia Sapiro reported that female delegates to the 1972 national party conventions were less politically ambitious than their male counterparts. Over the course of the two decades following Sapiro's study, eight articles have investigated gender and the candidate emergence process.<sup>4</sup> Six of the articles are based on samples of actual candidates and

<sup>2</sup> Consistent with its traditional use in most political science research, our definition of *political ambition* is synonymous with the desire to acquire and hold political power through electoral means. Some scholars offer a broader conception of political ambition; it can manifest itself in forms other than running for office, such as serving as a community activist, organizing letter-writing campaigns and protests, or volunteering for candidates or issue advocacy groups (e.g., Burrell 1996). Because holding elective office is the key to increasing women's representation, we focus on the conventional definition of the term and examine the reasons women are less likely than men to enter the electoral arena as candidates.

<sup>3</sup> Of the sixteen books, one includes a case study of a woman's decision to run for office (Fowler and McClure 1989), one includes a chapter that addresses the role that race and gender might play in the candidate emergence process (Moncrief, Squire, and Jewell 2001), and one includes a chapter that elaborates on the manner in which the scholarship has not sufficiently addressed the intersection between gender and political ambition (Williams and Lascher 1993). We conducted this search with WorldCat, which includes all books cataloged in the Library of Congress. We used "political ambition," "candidate emergence," and "decision to run for office" as the initial search terms and then narrowed the list to include only those books that focused on interest in pursuing elective office. We excluded single-person political biographies.

<sup>4</sup> A search of articles using PAIS International (1972–2004), Sociological Abstracts (1974–2004), PsycINFO (1887–2004), and JSTOR (including all volumes and issues of political science journal articles published after JSTOR's "moving walls") yielded more than two hundred results for "political ambition," "candidate emergence," and "decision to run