

# MORE WOMEN CAN RUN

GENDER AND  
PATHWAYS  
TO THE STATE  
LEGISLATURES

SUSAN J. CARROLL  
& KIRA SANBONMATSU

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Legislatures*

Susan J. Carroll

*and*

Kira Sanbonmatsu

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More Women Can Run

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## CHAPTER 1

# Rethinking Candidate Emergence

Almost half a century after the emergence of the contemporary feminist movement with its emphasis on equality for women in all spheres of life, women continue to be dramatically under-represented among public officials in the United States. Women hold fewer than one in five seats in the U.S. Congress and fewer than one in four seats across all the nation's fifty state legislatures (Center for American Women and Politics 2013b). No woman has won election to the presidency. Nationally, women have not reached parity with men at any level of office, and at the state legislative, statewide, and federal levels women have never constituted more than about one-quarter of all officeholders. As of 2013, twenty-four states have never had a woman as governor and twenty-two have never been represented by a woman in the U.S. Senate (Center for American Women and Politics 2013a, 2013f).

The under-representation of women in office persists despite a long history of women's political involvement. Women have been running for public offices—including the presidency—since the late 1800s. Nearly half a century has transpired since the emergence of the modern women's movement which aimed, among other objectives, to increase the number of women in elective office. Progress for women in running for and holding elective office in the United States is apparent in historic firsts, such as Geraldine Ferraro's and Sarah Palin's nominations as vice presidential candidates and Nancy Pelosi's selection as Speaker of the House. Although a woman has yet to win the presidency, the recent candidacies of Hillary Clinton and Michele Bachmann suggest that such a milestone is imaginable. And while women fall slightly short of men's levels in most forms

of political participation other than office holding, on one very important measure of political involvement—voting—women participate at higher rates than men and have since 1980 (Center for American Women and Politics 2011a).

Women enjoy the freedom to stand for office and are therefore on an equal footing with men in a legal sense. But the persistent gender imbalance in office holding raises questions about democratic legitimacy, the inclusivity of American politics, and the quality of political representation. The degree of correspondence between the characteristics of a population and the faces of its governmental officials conveys a message about the capabilities of different groups (Mansbridge 1999). Important policy implications also flow from the presence—or absence—of women in government.<sup>1</sup> The perceived openness of government, the ability of groups to mobilize and voice their interests, the climate within political institutions, the political agenda, and policy outcomes—in short, the conduct of American politics—are shaped by the extent to which elected officials resemble the people.

Despite a half century of activism devoted to electing more women to office and considerable academic research on this topic, there is still disagreement about which strategies would be most effective in increasing the numbers of women in office. Some believe the problem is largely internal to women themselves and that women must be socialized to be more politically ambitious. Others argue that societal changes in gender roles and responsibilities are necessary before women will seek and win election in much larger numbers. Still others believe the answer lies in recruitment efforts by parties and organizations. While some argue for encouraging women to run everywhere, others believe in a more focused strategy of targeting open seats. Some believe that more needs to be done to raise large sums of money for women candidates; others feel public financing of campaigns is a preferable strategy.

Our objective in this book is to move the debates over why women continue to be under-represented forward by reconsidering some of the critical assumptions underlying both academic research and activist efforts. But in order to do so, we first need to review in more detail four of the most common explanations for women's under-representation: political opportunity, voter bias, social roles, and political factors.

1. For a review of the literature about women's representation in the United States, see Reingold (2008).

One class of explanations centers on the shortage of openings for new candidates. Political scientists have long emphasized the important role that the political opportunity structure plays in restricting the flow of women into public office. Electoral arrangements are not necessarily gender-neutral and can work to women's collective advantage or disadvantage.

Studies from the 1970s and 1980s found that women candidates for legislative seats fared better in multimember than in single-member districts (e.g., Carroll 1994; Darcy, Welch, and Clark 1994; Rule 1990). Apparently, party leaders were more likely to put forward a woman candidate and voters were more likely to support her when she would occupy one of several seats, rather than the *only* seat. In fact, when multiple seats were at stake, the presence of a woman candidate was often thought to help the party's ticket appear more balanced. However, all congressional seats are single-member. And at the state legislative level, the long-term trend has been one of conversion of multimember to single-member districts, spurred in large part by the Voting Rights Act and concern over equitable representation of minorities. As a result, most legislators, at the state as well as at the national level, are now elected in single-member districts.

While the movement away from multimember districts has made this feature of the electoral system less significant today than in the past, a second feature of the political opportunity structure—the power of incumbency—appears potentially as important now as in the 1970s. Scholars of women and politics have long argued that incumbency poses an obstacle slowing the movement of women into public office (e.g., Burrell 1994; Carroll 1994; Darcy, Welch, and Clark 1994; Fox 2000). Most incumbents seek re-election, and most of those who seek re-election win. For example, at the congressional level, more than 90 percent of incumbents who seek re-election have won their races in recent elections. When an incumbent does finally step aside, a backlog of candidates often exists, most of them men, eager to run for the vacated seat. The electoral advantages that accrue to incumbents, including name recognition and fundraising, virtually insure that women's advancement into public office will be slow and incremental, and scholars have frequently viewed the staying power of incumbents as the most important obstacle standing between women and parity in representation.

However, recent evidence from states where term limits have been implemented for state legislative seats suggests that incumbency may not be the most important impediment to women's numerical representation after all, or at least its effects are not as straightforward as once thought.

Forced retirements created by term limits in more than two dozen states have provided numerous political opportunities for women in the form of open seats. Yet, research has found that in many cases women have not taken advantage of these opportunities. For example, Susan J. Carroll and Krista Jenkins (2001) found that no woman candidate entered either party's primary for more than two-fifths of all state house seats vacated because of term limits in 1998 and 2000. And in both 1998 and 2000, more women nationwide were forced to leave state houses because of term limits than were elected to house seats that opened up because of term limits. While term limits broke the stranglehold of incumbency and created possible opportunities for women to seek and win legislative seats in record numbers, far too few women candidates pursued these opportunities, and consequently term limits did not lead to large increases in the number of women legislators in most states where they were implemented.

Thus, removing the barrier of incumbency does not seem sufficient in and of itself to dramatically increase the number of women officeholders. And a change in electoral rules that would mandate an increase in women candidates, such as a gender quota, does not appear to be on the horizon in the United States.

## **VOTER BIAS AND GENDER STEREOTYPES**

The second set of explanations for women's under-representation centers on voter attitudes toward women candidates. The fact that voters have both positive and negative stereotypes of women candidates has been well documented in numerous studies conducted over the years by both scholars and activist groups such as the National Women's Political Caucus and the Barbara Lee Family Foundation (National Women's Political Caucus 1984, 1987; Alexander and Andersen 1993; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993a, 1993b; Kahn 1996; Barbara Lee Family Foundation 2001, 2002). On the one hand, voters view women candidates as more compassionate, caring, honest, inclusive, and consensus-oriented and as more likely to have new ideas, stand up for their beliefs, and understand the needs of voters. Women candidates are seen as more competent than men on issues such as child care, health care, women's issues, the environment, and poverty. On the other hand, women are viewed as less able than men to handle the emotional demands of public life, less able to handle a crisis, not as tough, and less decisive. Women also are viewed as less competent than men on financial issues, military concerns, and foreign policy.

Moreover, there are some voters who are predisposed to vote against women candidates. Since 1937 the Gallup polling organization has asked Americans if they would vote for a woman for president. The proportion of citizens who reported that they would not vote for a woman has declined dramatically over time, and in recent years only about one in ten or fewer admit to having an anti-woman bias (Dolan 2004; Lawless 2004b). However, scholars have long suspected that this question is subject to strong social desirability effects and that the proportion of voters who would not vote for a woman is actually higher. Based on a list experiment, one recent study estimated the proportion of voters who are angry or upset over the idea of a woman presidential candidate is about one-fourth, suggesting that voter bias against women candidates may indeed be greater than indicated in polling results (Streb et al. 2008).

While research has clearly demonstrated that gender stereotypes and voter bias exist, answering the question of whether and how these affect women's campaigns and election outcomes has proven more difficult. In order to investigate whether voter attitudes are to blame for women's under-representation, researchers have compared the experiences of men and women candidates in state legislative and congressional elections. Their studies indicate that women and men candidates attract equal levels of support from voters once incumbency status is taken into account (e.g., Darcy and Schramm 1977; Burrell 1994; Seltzer, Newman, and Leighton 1997). As a result, some researchers called the idea that women have a more difficult time winning office a "myth" (Seltzer, Newman, and Leighton 1997: 90).

However, a newer set of studies suggests more complexity than is conveyed by the popular slogan, "When women run, women win." For example, female members of Congress attract more primary opponents than men (Lawless and Pearson 2008; Palmer and Simon 2012), and female congressional incumbents need to be of higher quality in order to yield the same vote share as male incumbents (Fulton 2012). Whether and to what extent voter attitudes are problematic remains the source of some academic debate (Sanbonmatsu 2002b; Dolan 2010; Brooks 2011), although voter stereotypes about the traits and abilities of female and male politicians are generally thought to alter the campaign choices of female candidates but not to prevent women from running and winning (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993b; Kahn 1996; Dittmar 2012). Stereotypes are believed to be most problematic for women in elections for high-level executive offices such as governor or president (Kahn 1996; Carroll 2009; Carroll and Dittmar 2010). To the extent that voter biases hinder women candidates, these biases are likely to be less consequential for women's bids for less visible and/or entry-level

offices such as state legislative seats. Moreover, party leader attitudes are probably more influential—and potentially more problematic—in shaping women's emergence and success as state legislative candidates than are voter attitudes (Sanbonmatsu 2006a, 2006b).

## THE SOCIAL ROOTS OF POLITICAL INEQUALITY

Another set of explanations focuses on women's disadvantages in society and the resulting scarcity of women candidates. We can better understand this line of inquiry through the framework used to analyze women's mass political participation. Admittedly, becoming a candidate is an uncommon way to participate in America's democracy. Only one president, 100 U.S. senators, 435 members of the U.S. House of Representatives, 50 governors, and 7,382 state legislators are elected (with other officials elected depending on the state and locality) out of a population of more than 300 million Americans. Candidacy is uncommon, but it is a form of political participation nevertheless.

In a classic article from the 1970s, Susan Welch (1977) identified three possible explanations—situational factors, structural factors, and political socialization—for why women participated in a variety of political activities at lower rates than men. These explanations are as applicable to running for office as they are to other forms of participation. Situational factors are those related to women's private life responsibilities, especially caring for husbands and children. Women have traditionally borne greater responsibility than men for child rearing and household maintenance. According to this explanation, women's domestic responsibilities have led them to have less exposure to politics and less time to participate. Several studies have concluded that family responsibilities are a major consideration for women in deciding whether to run for office. Young children have been a deterrent; women have tended to wait until their children are grown before seeking office (e.g., Kirkpatrick 1974: 230; Lee 1977; Carroll and Strimling 1983; Carroll 1989). Similarly, spousal support of their political ambitions seems critical for women; few women have run for and been elected to office with less than fully supportive spouses (e.g., Stoper 1977; Carroll and Strimling 1983; Flammang 1997: 167).

Structural explanations focus on women's under-representation in demographic categories that are associated with high levels of participation among men. In the 1970s and 1980s, women in the general population were less likely than men to have advanced degrees and high incomes, and they were attorneys or business executives less often than men. Because

public officials tend to be well educated, have high incomes, and frequently have occupations in law or business, women less often than men were considered to have the background characteristics (and thus the resources and experiences) that might lead to candidacy (Kirkpatrick 1974; Darcy, Welch, and Clark 1994).

The third of Welch's explanations for participation differences focused on socialization differences between women and men. As she acknowledged, the socialization explanation—that women were socialized into a more politically passive role—was a common one in the conventional political science literature of that era (e.g., Githens and Prestage 1977; Lee 1977; Soule and McGrath 1977). However, Welch found little support for this explanation although she did not test it directly. Rather, she found that “women as a whole participate as much as men once structural and situational factors are considered” (1977: 726).

Two decades later another major study of gender differences in political participation came to similar conclusions, arguing that resources seemed to matter more than social learning or adult roles in accounting for participation differences. Kay Lehman Schlozman, Nancy Burns, and Sidney Verba (1994) found that women were disadvantaged with regard to the resources (e.g., money and civic skills) that facilitate political participation. They concluded that if women had political resources equivalent to those of men, gender differences in political participation would be notably diminished.

Although many researchers, like those above, have concluded that the socialization explanation has less validity than other explanations, a major recent study of women and men in the professions of business, education, law, and politics—the social eligibility pool from which candidates often emerge—has revived interest in this explanation, arguing that differences between women and men in political ambition are due largely to gender-role socialization. As Jennifer L. Lawless and Richard L. Fox explained, their “central argument” is “that the gender gap in political ambition results from longstanding patterns of traditional socialization that persist in U.S. culture” (2005: 6–7).

The implication of these accounts focused on the social roots of inequality is that once women are freed from disproportionate familial responsibilities, command the same economic resources as men, hold prestigious occupations at rates similar to those of men, and acquire political ambition similar to men's, the gender gap in participation—including women's office holding—will close. If women's lives were to become more like men's lives, in other words, the political participation gender gaps would be eliminated. In their study of political participation, Nancy Burns, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Sidney Verba concluded that, were the agenda of