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THE LONG ROAD TO POWER FOR WOMEN IN POLITICS

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A century after women won the right to vote they remain significantly under-represented in federal and state elected office in the United States. Why do women, who comprise more than half of the population in the United States, still fall far short of that proportion in Congress and in state governorships? Political science research suggests there are multiple explanations, ranging from women's views on whether they are prepared to run to institutional and social constraints. The situation may be changing, however, given the record-setting number of women who ran for federal and state offices in the 2018 election cycle. Women continue to make advances in American politics, even if the rate of progress is slower than many would prefer.

INTRODUCTION

As our nation marks the centennial of the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, I am mindful of the public service of my mother-in-law, Martha Solow, who served with distinction for three terms in the New Hampshire House of Representatives. She began her career in elected office by running for the Select Board in Hanover, New Hampshire, in the mid-1970s. She shattered a glass ceiling by becoming the first woman elected to the Select Board in the town's history. Martha Solow learned early on, however, that change comes slowly. The Select Board's public meetings tended to be short on deliberation, which she

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found puzzling given the important issues that the Board was considering. She learned that the rest of the Select Board, all of whom were men, would meet a few days prior to the public meeting to hash out the agenda in private in the back room of the local coffee shop. Having been tipped off about the day and time of the next meeting, she strode into the back room and informed the members of the Select Board in no uncertain terms that they were violating New Hampshire's open meetings law. That was the end of the private meetings. Deliberation was forced into the open, where it belonged.

I tell this story to illustrate the larger point that while women have made significant strides in winning and wielding political power in the United States since the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, change has not come easily. And, as I plan to illustrate, women are still vastly underrepresented in public office, and there is much work left to do.

I. INCREMENTAL PROGRESS IN THE 2018 MIDTERM ELECTIONS

Let me begin by focusing on the 2018 midterm elections, where women were a significant presence. More women won nomination to the U.S. Senate, the U.S. House of Representatives, governors' offices, and state legislatures than at any other time in American history, according to the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University.¹ Twenty-three women won nominations for the Senate and 238 women won nominations for the House, breaking records set in 2012 and 2016 respectively.² Sixteen women were nominated for governor, surpassing the record of ten in 1994, and 3,418 women won nominations for seats in state legislatures, eclipsing the record set in 2016.³ After the 2018 elections, the percentages of offices held by women in Congress, statewide elected offices, and state legislatures were at an all-time high at 24% for Congress and 29% for statewide elected offices and for state legislatures.⁴ The numbers, while reflective of a sizeable store of energy and enthusiasm for women candidates in 2018, still point to a significant disparity. Although women comprise more than half of the adult

1. *Women Candidates: Records for Major Party Nominations*, CTR. FOR AM. WOMEN & POLITICS, RUTGERS UNIV., <https://cawp.rutgers.edu/women-candidates-records-major-party-nominations> [https://perma.cc/HX35-NWXM].

2. *Summary of Women Candidates for Selected Offices: 1970–2018*, CTR. FOR AM. WOMEN & POLITICS, RUTGERS UNIV., http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/resources/can_histsum.pdf [https://perma.cc/TD57-5TCP].

3. *Id.*

4. *Women in Elective Office 2020*, CTR. FOR AM. WOMEN & POLITICS, RUTGERS UNIV., <https://cawp.rutgers.edu/women-elective-office-2020> [https://perma.cc/C6YE-UQWG].

population of the United States,⁵ they remain significantly under-represented in elected offices even as we mark the centennial of the Nineteenth Amendment's ratification.

II. SUPPLY OF CANDIDATES AS AN EXPLANATION FOR THE DISPARITY

Why does the disparity persist? Scholarly research tells us that, when women run for office, they tend to win at the same rate as men.⁶ The larger issue appears to be one of supply, i.e., women are less likely to run for office than men. Scholars identify three potential explanations for this: (1) women are less likely to feel confident that they are ready to serve in elected office; (2) male party leaders are less likely to recruit women candidates; and (3) that women continue to bear disproportionate responsibility for caring for family members, making it difficult to juggle those obligations with the demands of public office.⁷

Scholarly research provides evidence supporting the argument that women tend to lag behind men in feeling confident about serving in elected office. In 2001, the Citizen Political Ambition Study surveyed a national sample of men and women from four fields⁸ that tend to serve as stepping stones to state legislative and congressional offices: law, business, education, and political activism.⁹ The study found that women were half as likely as men to view themselves as "very qualified" to run for office.¹⁰ This, in turn, predicted whether survey participants said they might run for office at some point in the future.¹¹ Men were far less likely than women to let their doubts about their qualifications influence their views about seeking an elected position. Men who viewed themselves as "not at all qualified" to run for office still had a 60% probability of saying they were considering running for office.¹² Women who said they were

5. *Sex and Age, ACS Demographic and Housing Estimates*, U.S. CENSUS BUREAU (2018), <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=United%20States&g=0100000US&tid=ACSDP1Y2018.DP05&hidePreview=true&table=DP05> [<https://perma.cc/2H8K-RSFW>].

6. Barbara Burrell, *Women Candidates in Open-Seat Primaries for the U.S. House: 1968–1990*, 17 LEGIS. STUD. Q. 493, 496 (1992); Kira Sanbonmatsu, *Do Parties Know That "Women Win"? Party Leader Beliefs about Women's Electoral Chances*, 2 POL. & GENDER 431, 433 (2006).

7. JULIE DOLAN ET AL., *WOMEN AND POLITICS: PATHS TO POWER AND POLITICAL INFLUENCE* 95 (Traci Crowell et al. eds., Rowman & Littlefield 4th ed. 2020) (2006).

8. Richard L. Fox & Jennifer L. Lawless, *Entering the Arena? Gender and the Decision to Run for Office*, 48 AM. J. POL. SCI. 264, 271 (2004).

9. *Id.*

10. *Id.*

11. *Id.* at 273.

12. *Id.*

“not at all qualified” only had a 30% probability of saying they were considering running for office.¹³ In a follow-up survey of the study participants, conducted in 2008, the investigators found significant gender-based disparities when respondents were asked whether they possessed political skills viewed as necessary to succeed in running for office. Women were less likely than men to say they were knowledgeable about public policy issues; had professional experience relevant to politics; and were good at public speaking, fundraising, and self-promotion.¹⁴

The Citizen Political Ambition Study also found disparities between women and men when it came to encouragement and recruitment. Only 22% of women in the study reported having discussed running for office with family members and friends, compared to 33% of men.¹⁵ Six percent of women had discussed seeking office with party leaders, compared to 12% of men.¹⁶ Nine percent of women had had those conversations with community leaders, compared to 15% of men.¹⁷

An earlier study of party county chairs and locally elected women in four states—California, New Jersey, Ohio, and Tennessee—also found evidence that party elites, predominantly men, tended to discourage women from running for office. Sixty-four percent of women elected officials surveyed for the study indicated that party leaders had discouraged them from running because of their gender, and 46% said they had experienced gender-based discrimination.¹⁸

III. WOMEN’S EXPERIENCES VARY BY RACE AND ETHNICITY

While women’s comparatively low levels of self-confidence and gatekeeping on the part of male party leaders may help to explain why women run for office at lower rates than men, recent scholarship has also stressed the importance of viewing women’s experiences through an intersectional lens. The experiences of Latina and black women candidates may be markedly different from that of white women because of the effects of dual systems of oppression rooted in race or ethnicity as

13. *Id.* at 273 tbl.4.

14. Richard L. Fox & Jennifer L. Lawless, *Gendered Perceptions and Political Candidacies: A Central Barrier to Women’s Equality in Electoral Politics*, 55 AM. J. POL. SCI. 59, 67 (2011).

15. *Entering the Arena*, *supra* note 8, at 269 tbl.2.

16. *Id.*

17. *Id.*

18. David Niven, *Party Elites and Women Candidates*, 19 WOMEN & POL. 57, 64–65 (1998).

well as gender.¹⁹ A study of white, black, and Latina women candidates for state legislature and local government offices found striking differences in the women's narratives when they discussed why they were running for office. Black and Latina candidates tended to speak with "more confidence and self-direction," indicating they had decided on their own to seek public office.²⁰ White women candidates in the study were more likely to cite encouragement from others as a key element in their decision-making process.²¹ Another study of women candidates found that white women candidates were more likely to portray themselves as accidental leaders and to express ambivalence about ambition, whereas black women candidates were more likely to present efficacious narratives that reflected a belief in having the ability to make a difference through public service. Latina candidates tended to employ both frames in discussing their candidacies.²² The differences in women's narratives about their candidacies may have been related to their backgrounds. The study suggested that black women were more likely than white women to have honed their political skills through participation in churches and civil rights organizations. Latina candidates also were more likely to have developed civic skills through racial justice organizations.²³

The extant research on women and why they do or do not seek elected office identifies multiple explanations, including levels of self-confidence, social networks that could either empower or discourage women candidates, and personal factors related to family and home life. These experiences also appear to vary by race and ethnicity. Understanding these factors may help in recruiting and supporting more women candidates, and that is good for representative democracy.

IV. WHY THIS MATTERS: THE POSITIVE EFFECTS OF DESCRIPTIVE REPRESENTATION

Research on the benefits of electing more women to public office frequently cites the value of improved representation in a descriptive sense. When elected leaders share the backgrounds and experiences of

19. Mirya R. Holman & Monica C. Schneider, *Gender, Race, and Political Ambition: How Intersectionality and Frames Influence Interest in Political Office*, 6 *POL., GROUPS, & IDENTITIES* 264, 265 (2018).

20. Angela Frederick, *Bringing Narrative In: Race-Gender Storytelling, Political Ambition, and Women's Paths to Public Office*, 34 *J. WOMEN, POL. & POL'Y* 113, 113 (2013).

21. *Id.* at 126.

22. Angela Frederick, "Who Better to Do It Than Me!": *Race, Gender & the Deciding to Run Accounts of Political Women in Texas*, 37 *QUALITATIVE SOC.* 301, 307 (2014).

23. *Id.* at 319.

their constituents, those commonalities can guide leaders' priorities and their approach to governance. Electing more women to office tends to re-shape and re-focus legislative agendas to include policies that are important to women, such as access to improved health care, child care, and education. The nature of policy discussions also tends to shift when a critical mass of women is involved, with the dynamics of deliberation moving more in the direction of building consensus as opposed to focusing on conflict or overpowering an opponent.²⁴

The benefits of descriptive representation also can extend to political participation. Research has found that when women are on the ballot, women voters report increased interest in politics, greater frequency of political discussion, and higher levels of internal political efficacy, i.e., a stronger sense that they can have an effect on political outcomes.²⁵ The benefits of having women candidates on the ballot extend to the political socialization of future voters as well. A survey of adolescent girls found that, in states where female candidates were on the ballot for high-profile offices, girls were more likely to report increased expectations of political involvement when they became eligible to vote. These expectations were mediated through increased levels of discussions about politics at home.²⁶

In sum, there are at least two significant benefits that can result from having more women seek and win elected office. As more women gain political power, they can shape the policy agenda and discourse to further reflect the concerns of women. And, when women run for office, they can increase political participation not only among current women voters, but also future women voters.

CONCLUSION

There is no question that women have made substantial gains in acquiring political power since the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. But, as the numbers make clear, women have a long way to go in accumulating power in proportion to their presence in the population. Progress has been slow in coming, and that is not likely to change any time soon. Beyond the traditional barriers to power that women have faced, a new threat has emerged. Women candidates are now facing significant amounts of harassment and abuse on social media. To

24. DOLAN ET AL., *supra* note 7, at 175.

25. Lonna Rae Atkeson, *Not All Cues Are Created Equal: The Conditional Impact of Female Candidates on Political Engagement*, 65 J. POL. 1040, 1052 (2003).

26. David E. Campbell & Christina Wolbrecht, *See Jane Run: Women Politicians as Role Models for Adolescents*, 68 J. POL. 233, 244 (2006).

illustrate this point, one need only look to the case of California Congresswoman Katie Hill, who resigned in late October 2019 after nude photos of her were posted online without her consent, and she became the target of “a barrage of threatening messages” on social media.²⁷ Representative Hill had served less than one year in the House of Representatives. Online harassment and abuse of women politicians is also an issue in the United Kingdom, where many female Members of Parliament (“MPs”) report receiving numerous threats directed toward them and their families on social media. Eighteen women MPs decided not to stand for Parliament again in the United Kingdom’s General Election in December 2019, with several, including a cabinet minister, citing online harassment and abuse as a factor in their decisions.²⁸

This emerging trend is offensive and disturbing, and it threatens to undermine the considerable progress that women have made in seeking elected office. If women are to maintain and build on their hard-won achievements since the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, we must all provide unwavering vigilance and allyship on behalf of women candidates in the face of these threats.

27. See Liam Stack & Laura M. Holson, *Katie Hill Gives Farewell Speech to Congress, Denouncing “Gutter Politics”*, N.Y. TIMES (Oct. 31, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/31/us/politics/katie-hill-speech.html> [<https://perma.cc/GL2W-KGLK>].

28. See Frances Perraudin & Simon Murphy, *Alarm Over Number of Female MPs Stepping Down After Abuse*, GUARDIAN (Oct. 31, 2019, 3:40 PM), <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/oct/31/alarm-over-number-female-mps-stepping-down-after-abuse> [<https://perma.cc/WJ3M-GNYQ>].