

Female Candidates and Legislators

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Abstract

For decades, scholars have uncovered evidence that male and female legislators' priorities and preferences differ and that women's inclusion brings to elite-level politics a more cooperative leadership style. They also point to the symbolic benefits associated with more diversity among candidates and office holders. Although these effects are not uniform, there is no question among political scientists that women's presence in US political institutions bears directly on issues of substantive and symbolic representation. Accordingly, it is important to understand why we have so few women in politics, whether they are willing to run for office, what happens when they do, and the extent to which their presence systematically affects the legislative process. I cover each of these topics in this review, emphasizing the latest and most interesting research that speaks to these questions.

INTRODUCTION

In Fall 2013, many Americans experienced—firsthand—the consequences of political dysfunction. From furloughed workers to disgruntled tourists to patients denied access to federally funded clinical trials, the effects of the government shutdown were widespread. Around-the-clock coverage of Washington, DC’s inability to pass a federal budget—including headlines like “In Shutdown Blame Game, Democrats and Republicans United: It’s the Other Side’s Fault”—reinforced the worst clichés about politicians (Gold et al. 2013). Yet amid the dysfunction, many saw a silver lining: women in politics.

It was women, on both sides of the aisle, who received credit for ultimately ending the government shutdown. Former US Senator Mark Pryor became a “huge fan” of his female colleagues after watching them spearhead the negotiations. “Women in the Senate is a good thing,” he told a reporter (Bassett 2013). “We’re all just glad they allowed us to tag along so we could see how it’s done.” Women, who at that time chaired or sat as ranking members of 10 of the Senate’s 20 committees, could also take much of the credit for passing the budget, the transportation bill, the farm bill, the Water Resources Development Act, and the Violence Against Women Act. Indeed, Senator John McCain remarked, “I am very proud that these women are stepping forward. Imagine what they could do if there were 50 of them” (Newton–Small 2013).

Of course, that would involve quite a bit of imagination. After all, women’s numeric underrepresentation in American politics is glaring. Women hold only 19% of the seats in the US Congress, serve as governor in only five of the 50 states, comprise just one-quarter of state legislators and statewide elected officials across the country, and run City Hall in just 18% of the 1,351 US cities with a population that exceeds 30,000.¹ At least as important as women’s underrepresentation in US politics is evidence of stagnation. Whereas the 1980s and early 1990s saw gradual increases in the number of women seeking elective office, the last several election cycles represent a plateau in the number of female candidates and elected officials at both the federal and state levels. The 2010 congressional elections resulted in the first net decrease in the number of women serving in the US House since the 1978 midterms. The number of women elected to state legislatures, which act as key launching pads to higher office, also suffered the largest single-year decline in 2010. Although the 2012 and 2014 elections did not amount to a net loss in women’s numeric representation, the marginal gains did little more than compensate for the 2010 setback. As many nations around the world make progress increasing women’s presence in politics, the United States has simply not kept pace. Today, 99 nations surpass the United States in the percentage of women in the national legislature (see **Table 1**). And despite the cultural and political components that factor into the proportion of women who hold seats in any nation’s legislature, more than 50 democratic countries outrank the United States (see sidebar, “Women’s Political Representation Globally”).

Women’s numeric underrepresentation is critical because of the consequences it carries for political representation and democratic legitimacy. It is not just Senators Pryor and McCain who have noticed that women in politics make a difference. For decades, scholars have uncovered evidence that male and female legislators’ priorities and preferences differ and that women’s inclusion brings to elite-level politics a more cooperative leadership style. They also point to the symbolic benefits associated with more diversity among candidates and office holders. Although these effects are not uniform, there is no question among political scientists that women’s presence

¹For recent data, as well as trends over time, on women’s representation at all levels of office, see the website of the Center for American Women and Politics at http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/fast_facts/index.php (accessed July 18, 2014, for this article).

Table 1 Worldwide rankings of women in the national legislature^a

Rank and country	Percent women
1. Rwanda	63.8
2. Andorra	50.0
3. Cuba	48.9
4. Sweden	45.0
5. South Africa	44.8
6. Seychelles	43.8
7. Senegal	43.3
8. Finland	42.5
9. Nicaragua	42.4
10. Ecuador	41.6
11. Belgium	41.3
12. Iceland (tie)	39.7
Spain (tie)	39.7
14. Norway	39.6
15. Mozambique	39.2
16. Denmark	39.1
17. Netherlands	38.7
18. Timor-Leste	38.5
19. Mexico	37.4
20. Angola	36.8
100. United States	18.3
International Average	22.3

^aSource: Inter-Parliamentary Union, "Women in National Parliaments," as of May 1, 2014. <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>.

in US political institutions bears directly on issues of substantive and symbolic representation. Accordingly, it is important to understand why we have so few women in politics, whether they are willing to run for office, what happens when they do, and the extent to which their presence systematically affects the legislative process. I cover each of these topics, emphasizing the latest and most interesting research that speaks to these questions. The review makes clear that several areas remain ripe for future research, so I conclude by offering suggestions for how scholars interested in women and politics might proceed.²

WHY DOES THE UNITED STATES HAVE SO FEW WOMEN IN POLITICS?

Since the emergence of the women and politics subfield in the 1970s, scholars have focused on trying to understand why so few women occupy positions of political power in the United States. The earliest research found that overt discrimination accounted for many of the gender disparities

²My review focuses almost exclusively on congressional and statewide candidates. With the exception of Hillary Clinton, no female presidential candidate has been a serious contender. Given Clinton's unusual background, extrapolation from her experiences is limited in generalizability. (For more on her experiences in the 2008 Democratic presidential primary, see Carlin & Winfrey 2009, Carroll 2009, Lawless 2009.)

WOMEN'S POLITICAL REPRESENTATION GLOBALLY

Although this review focuses on female candidates and legislators in the United States, it is important to note that many nations around the globe that have more women in politics have at least as patriarchal a history as the US. This suggests that electoral rules play a large role in explaining variation in women's political representation. In nations where the rules of the electoral game include quotas, legislatures see substantial increases in women's political representation and the diffusion of public policies that benefit women (Dahlerup 2012, Krook 2009, Paxton et al. 2010). Moreover, McDonagh (2009) argues that, at least in part because of quotas, many democracies are more likely than the United States to view women as well suited to govern. Even without quotas, though, other democracies with relatively traditional cultures tend to see a greater proportion of women in politics because they do not have the winner-take-all and single-member district systems prevalent in the United States. Female candidates are more likely to emerge and succeed in proportional party list electoral systems (Norris 1994, Rosen 2013, Tremblay 2012).

in office holding (Githens & Prestage 1977). Electoral gatekeepers all but prohibited women from running for office in the 1970s (Rule 1981, Welch 1978), and those women who did emerge as candidates often faced sexism and a hostile environment (Witt et al. 1994).

Throughout the last few decades, though, overt discrimination has fallen out of favor as an explanation for women's absence from electoral politics. The public's attitudes toward women in politics have evolved. According to the General Social Survey (2010), 75% of Americans no longer believe that men are better suited emotionally for politics than are women. When asked about the "major reasons" for women's underrepresentation, only 14% of citizens agree that "women aren't tough enough for politics," and only 16% contend that "women don't make as good leaders as men." By 2012, a Gallup poll revealed that 95% of Americans said they would be willing to vote for a female presidential nominee if she were nominated by the respondent's political party and qualified for the job.

Studies of fundraising and vote totals corroborate the public opinion data: Women who run for state and federal office fare just as well as their male counterparts (Fox 2010, Seltzer et al. 1997, Smith & Fox 2001). This is true not only in general elections but also in congressional primaries (Burrell 1992, Lawless & Pearson 2008). Of course, even if we observe no gender disparities in election outcomes, that does not mean the electoral process is as gender neutral as it is commonly described. If the women who run for office are more qualified than the men against whom they compete, or if party leaders and other electoral gatekeepers encourage only the most qualified women, then the apparent absence of voter bias against female candidates might reflect the higher average quality of female candidates as compared to men.

This important caveat notwithstanding, the growing contradiction between a political system that elects few women and a body of research that finds gender parity on election day has led political scientists to turn to two institutional explanations for women's numeric underrepresentation in the United States. First, they point to the incumbency advantage (Darcy et al. 1994, Palmer & Simon 2008). Not only do the overwhelming majority of incumbents seek reelection in both state legislative and congressional elections, but their reelection rates are very high (Jacobson 2012). These circumstances make it difficult for any marginalized group, such as women, to make substantial gains from one election cycle to the next. Second, women's historic exclusion from the professions that tend to lead to political careers contributes to the gender disparities in office holding. Because they are underrepresented in the political pipeline—such as in the fields of law and business—women are less likely than men to possess the educational and occupational backgrounds common among most candidates (Darcy et al. 1994, Duerst-Lahti 1998, Thomas 1998).

Like the discrimination explanation, however, the incumbency and pipeline explanations are somewhat limited. Certainly, overcoming institutional inertia is slow going and the incumbency advantage poses a significant hurdle. But term limits at the state legislative level have increased the number of open seats in the 15 states where they are currently mandated. Yet those states have not seen an increase in the percentage of female candidates or state legislators. The number of incumbent women forced to vacate their seats tends to exceed the number of women elected to seats that open as a result of term limits (Kousser 2005). As for the pipeline explanation, recent data on career patterns indicate that women are moving swiftly into the professions that yield most candidates. Almost 35% of practicing lawyers are women (American Bar Association 2014). More than 50% of those working in managerial and professional specialty occupations in business are women (Catalyst 2015). Similar trends are evident as women move into top positions in secondary education, the professoriate, and college and university administrations. But women's emergence as candidates has not kept pace with the educational and professional credentials they have acquired.

These circumstances suggest that understanding the gender dynamics that underlie the process by which individuals decide to run for office is a fundamental step for developing a fuller understanding of the root causes of women's underrepresentation. When women run, women win. But if they are systematically less likely than men to emerge as candidates, then the horizon for gender parity is not as bright as conventional assessments suggest.

DO WOMEN RUN FOR OFFICE?

Richard L. Fox and I have spent the last decade arguing that a gender gap in political ambition is a major cause of women's numeric underrepresentation (Lawless & Fox 2005, 2010, 2012). Because the gender gap in candidate emergence has taken hold as a central impediment to gender parity, it is important to review both its theoretical underpinnings and the empirical evidence that supports it.

Prior to our research, most scholars of political ambition relied on a rational choice paradigm that focused on the political and structural circumstances involved in running for a particular office (see Black 1972, Maestas et al. 2006, Rohde 1979, Schlesinger 1966, Stone & Maisel 2003). The number of open seats, term limits, levels of legislative professionalization, and party congruence with constituents are among the factors individuals consider when seeking any elective position or deciding whether to run for higher office. In short, aspiring candidates are more likely to seek office when they face favorable political and structural circumstances. The paradigm assumes that, when faced with a favorable political opportunity structure, a potential candidate will enter a race.

Although this approach has generated broad theoretical contributions to understanding who enters specific races at particular times, it does not indulge the notion that the candidate emergence process might differ for women and men. Indeed, with the exception of general gauges of political interest, financial security, and political experience, candidate characteristics—including sex—are treated as relatively exogenous. Yet if the notion of a candidacy never crosses an individual's mind, then he/she will never face a political opportunity structure. And in this initial step of the candidate emergence process, interest in seeking elective office is motivated by personal experiences and attitudes (see Lasswell 1948). Traditional gender socialization provides ample reason to suspect that women's and men's attitudinal dispositions will differ such that they will not be equally likely to consider a candidacy and ultimately face the political opportunity structure.

We argue that the primary institutions of social and cultural life in the United States continue to impress upon women and men—from an early age—traditional gender roles and expectations (Lawless & Fox 2005, 2010, 2012; see also Fowlkes et al. 1979, Freedman 2002). Not only do women continue to bear the responsibility for a majority of household tasks and childcare, but

they also face a more complicated balancing of these responsibilities with their professions than do men. A masculinized ethos in many public and private institutional settings reinforces traditional gender roles. Political organizations and institutions that have always been controlled by men continue to promote men's participation in the political arena and do not sufficiently encourage women to break down barriers in traditionally masculine spheres and environments (see Enloe 2004). Further, whereas men are taught to be confident, assertive, and self-promoting, cultural attitudes toward women as political leaders continue to suggest that these characteristics are inappropriate or undesirable in women. Traditional gender socialization, in short, creates a set of circumstances in which the complexities of women's lives, both in terms of their self-perceptions and how society perceives them, depress their political ambition.

In order to test our theory, we launched the Citizen Political Ambition Studies (Lawless & Fox 2005, 2010, 2012). In 2001, we conducted the first of three national mail surveys of potential candidates—lawyers, business leaders, educators, and political activists. The goal of the survey was to identify and explore the reasons for gender differences in political ambition among women and men who are already well-situated to run for office. We recontacted our initial survey respondents in 2008 and sought to determine how political ambition evolves over time. And in 2011, we conducted a new survey with a new sample of potential candidates. The new survey allowed us to assess the extent to which the gender gap in ambition remained intact for a new generation of potential candidates.

Put simply, men and women do not have equal interest in seeking elective office, and this gender gap has remained steady over time. In the 2001 survey, 51% of the respondents stated that the idea of running for an elective position had at least “crossed their mind.” Turning to the respondents who considered a candidacy, though, the data presented in **Figure 1** highlight a significant gender gap among the 2001 respondents: men were 16 percentage points more likely than women to have considered running for office. Notably, this gender gap did not vary with political party, income level, age, race, profession, or region.

Women are not only less likely than men to consider running for office; they are also less likely actually to do it. Overall, 12% of the respondents had run for some elective position. But men were 40% more likely than women to have done so (9% of women, compared to 14% of men; difference significant at $p < 0.05$). Although there was no statistically significant gender difference in election outcomes among those potential candidates who ran for office, women were less likely than men to reach this gender-neutral “end stage” of the electoral process.

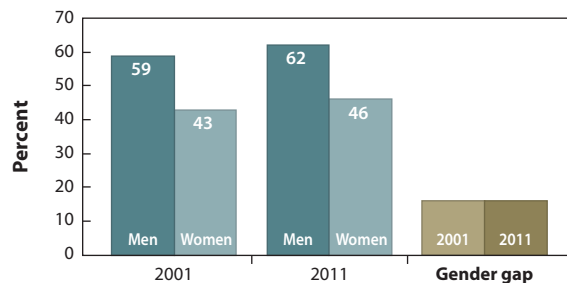


Figure 1

The enduring gender gap in political ambition is demonstrated by responses to the question “Have you ever considered running for office?” In 2001, for women, $N = 1,621$; for men, $N = 1,829$. In 2011, for women, $N = 1,766$; for men, $N = 1,848$. Bars represent the percentage of women and men who responded that they had “seriously considered” or “considered” running for office (this includes respondents who actually ran for office). The gender gap is significant at $p < 0.05$ in both the 2001 and 2011 comparisons.

The political environment certainly changed in the decade after we conducted the 2001 survey. The events of September 11, 2001, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Nancy Pelosi's election as the first female Speaker of the House, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama's 2008 battle for the Democratic presidential nomination, Sarah Palin's vice presidential candidacy, and the rise of the Tea Party movement are only some of the recent developments that might affect interest in running for office. But the gender gap in political ambition in 2011 was just as large as it was a decade earlier (see the center columns in **Figure 1**).³

Once the gender gap in political ambition was established as a central cause of women's underrepresentation in US politics, political scientists began to focus on identifying the reasons why women are less likely than men to consider running for office. Many explanations have emerged, but two have gained the most traction: recruitment patterns and gender differences in self-perceptions.

First, a gender gap in political recruitment works to the detriment of female potential candidates. Political parties are often critical in candidate recruitment and nomination, especially at the state legislative and congressional levels (Aldrich 2000, Jewell & Morehouse 2001). And although encouragement from the parties can be instrumental in propelling a candidacy for anyone, scholars have long known that electoral gatekeepers are strategic in their recruitment efforts (Maestas et al. 2005). Moreover, recruitment to public office is a selective process that reflects various dimensions of social stratification (e.g., Aberbach et al. 1981). Recruitment dynamics are not nearly as overtly biased against women as they were in the 1970s and 1980s. Contemporary studies of electoral gatekeepers uncover little evidence of direct bias against potential female candidates, and there is nothing to suggest that they are tapped only as sacrificial lambs in races they cannot win (Fulton et al. 2006, Niven 1998). But by identifying and recruiting candidates from their own male-dominated networks, gatekeepers—most of whom are male—tend indirectly to favor men (Crowder-Meyer 2013, Sanbonmatsu 2006).

Indeed, among potential candidates, men are about 15% more likely than women to have received the suggestion to run for office from a party leader, elected official, or nonelected political activist (Fox & Lawless 2010). This is vital when we consider the implications of political recruitment. Among the 2011 sample of potential candidates, 67% who were encouraged to run for office by at least one electoral gatekeeper had considered running, compared to 33% of respondents who reported no such recruitment (difference significant at $p < 0.05$; Lawless & Fox 2012). Women are just as likely as men to respond favorably to the suggestion of a candidacy; they are just less likely to receive it (see also Fulton et al. 2006).

Second, gender differences in potential candidates' self-efficacy prevent women from emerging as candidates. Despite comparable credentials, professional backgrounds, and political experiences, highly accomplished women from both major political parties are substantially less likely than similarly situated men to perceive themselves as qualified to seek elective office (see Fox & Lawless 2011). More specifically, in both 2001 and 2011, we found that men were almost 60% more likely than women to assess themselves as "very qualified" to run for office (Lawless & Fox 2010, 2012). Women were more than twice as likely as men to rate themselves as "not at all qualified." Importantly, women and men rely on the same factors when evaluating themselves as candidates;

³Because men might be more cavalier than women when assessing whether they ever thought about pursuing an elective position (see Lawless & Fox 2010), we also asked members of our eligibility pool sample whether they ever investigated how to place their name on the ballot, or ever discussed running with potential donors, party or community leaders, family members, or friends. Men are significantly more likely than women to have engaged in each of these fundamental campaign steps.

but women are less likely than men to believe they meet these criteria. Women are also more likely to doubt their abilities to engage in the mechanics involved in a political campaign.

The implications for women's candidate emergence are striking because these self-evaluations are statistically and substantively significant predictors of whether a respondent ever considered running for office, actually ran for office, took any of the concrete steps that tend to precede a campaign, or expressed interest in running for office at some point in the future. They might also explain why the women who run for Congress tend to be more qualified than the men against whom they compete (Fulton 2012, Pearson & McGhee 2013), as well as why women seem to work harder than men when they are elected. Anzia & Berry (2011) find that congresswomen secure roughly 9% more spending from federal discretionary programs than do congressmen, and they sponsor and cosponsor more bills than do their male colleagues.

The latest research suggests that these trends will likely continue well into the future. Survey responses from a national random sample of nearly 4,000 high school and college students reveal a dramatic gender gap in political ambition among 13- to 25-year-olds (Fox & Lawless 2014; see also Elder 2004). When asked if they ever thought about running for office, young men were almost twice as likely as young women to report having thought about running "many times." Women were roughly 20% more likely than men never to have considered it. Put somewhat differently, 35% of women, compared to 48% of men, considered running for office. The evidence suggests, therefore, that the gender gap in political ambition is present well before women and men enter the professions from which most candidates emerge. The origins of the gender gap are only beginning to receive scholarly attention, but parental encouragement, politicized educational and peer experiences, participation in competitive activities, and a sense of self-confidence spur young people's interest in running for office. On each of these dimensions, women, particularly once they are in college, are at a disadvantage (Fox & Lawless 2014).

Although incumbency and women's presence—or lack thereof—in the pipeline professions contribute to their absence from positions of political power, the gender gap in political ambition is a fundamental culprit. Deeply embedded patterns of traditional gender socialization make it far less likely for women than men, even today, to emerge as candidates.⁴ And this pattern seems to hold for the next generation.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WOMEN RUN FOR OFFICE?

When women do throw their hats into the ring, gender dynamics continue to play an important role. Women, for instance, are more likely than men to emerge as candidates in "women-friendly" districts, so they face geographic restrictions that male candidates generally do not confront (Palmer & Simon 2008). Female congressional candidates face more primary competition than do their male counterparts (Lawless & Pearson 2008). Women often raise more money than men so as to ensure that they perform as well at the polls (Fiber & Fox 2005). And gender stereotyping in the media and by the voters has traditionally presented a barrier to female candidates that men need not surmount (Dolan 2010, Kittilson & Fridkin 2008, Lawless 2009). Hence, even though women have learned to succeed in this environment, the electoral playing field is often considered more demanding and complex for women than men.

⁴Gender dynamics are apparent in the development of progressive ambition as well. Among state legislators, women and men have different perceptions about the desirability of serving in higher office (Fulton et al. 2006). Women are also more likely than men to depart from Congress prematurely when they hit a "career ceiling" and can no longer affect the legislative agenda. Women who depart voluntarily from Congress are less likely than similarly situated men to seek higher office (Lawless & Theriault 2005).

Although each of these challenges is difficult to overcome, scholars have devoted the most attention to gender stereotyping, probably because it has been perceived to be the biggest threat. For 20 years, political scientists have generally argued that female candidates are treated differently—and often worse—than male candidates in the press and by the electorate. Many studies, nearly all of which focus on presidential, senatorial, and gubernatorial candidates, find not only that women receive less overall and less prominent media coverage than men, but also that gender differences emerge in the content of the coverage they do receive (Heldman et al. 2005; Kahn 1994, 1992). Press coverage of female candidates is more likely to focus on the horse race and a lack of viability (Smith 1997), and to emphasize women’s appearance, personality, family roles, and compassion. Men are more likely than women to garner attention that focuses on their professional backgrounds, credentials, office-holding experience, and leadership (Braden 1996, Bystrom et al. 2004, Carroll & Schreiber 1997, Kahn 1996).

These portrayals in the media are consistent with—and are assumed to reinforce—voters’ perceptions of gender differences among politicians. Female candidates and office holders, for example, are generally viewed as more liberal than male candidates of the same party (Alexander & Andersen 1993, King & Matland 2003, Koch 2000). Voters tend to assess men as assertive, active, and self-confident, whereas they identify women as compassionate, willing to compromise, and people-oriented (Huddy & Terkildsen 1993, Lawless 2004b). Male candidates are perceived as more competent than women in the areas of military crises, crime, and the economy; women are viewed as more competent when the issues at hand are gender equity, education, health care, and poverty (Alexander & Andersen 1993, Huddy & Capelos 2002, Huddy & Terkildsen 1993, Lawless 2004b, Sanbonmatsu & Dolan 2009).

Gender stereotyping is relevant not only because it demonstrates the degree to which traditional gender roles and expectations permeate contemporary society, but also because it can affect voters’ assessments of candidates. For the most part, the traits and issue expertise accorded to male politicians are viewed as more important for politics (Falk & Kenski 2006, Fox & Oxley 2003, Kahn 1996, Kittilson & Fridkin 2008, Lawless 2004b).

A growing body of new research, however, has come to challenge this view. After all, not only have voters’ attitudes toward female candidates evolved since the 1980s and 1990s (when much of the gender stereotyping literature was conducted), but with the growth of party polarization at the elite level (Fiorina et al. 2006), the party heuristic has also become more useful, and party-line voting has increased (Bartels 2000). Candidates tend to focus on party differences with their opponents, and the news media cover partisan conflict as a central aspect of campaigns (Bruni 2002). When voters navigate the current political environment—one in which both gender and partisanship may be relevant—candidate party, in most cases, is likely to trump candidate sex as an evaluative criterion.

And this is exactly what recent scholarship has found. Danny Hayes and I, for example, conducted a detailed analysis of local newspaper coverage of US House races in nearly 350 congressional districts across the country leading up to the 2010 midterm elections (Hayes & Lawless 2015). After analyzing 4,748 articles, we found virtually no gender differences. News coverage of women was just as common as coverage of men, and the content of campaign stories was nearly indistinguishable across the sexes. The frequency with which reporters referred explicitly to candidates’ sex or gender—for instance, noting how they dressed or their family roles—was the same for men and women. We also failed to uncover any gender differences in the traits used to describe the candidates. Women were just as likely as men to be portrayed as competent, strong leaders. Men were just as likely as women to be described as empathetic and having integrity. The lack of gender stereotyping was also evident in voters’ assessments of the candidates. Our analysis of the 2010 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, a nationally representative survey of citizen

Table 2 Evaluations of 2010 US House candidates' competence and integrity, by candidate party and sex^a

	Democratic candidates		Republican candidates	
	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>
Competent	4.14 (2.03)	4.16 (1.92)	4.36 (1.89)	4.54 (1.84)
Has integrity	4.25 (2.04)	4.21 (1.97)	4.52 (1.92)	4.61 (1.91)
N	8,172	26,068	7,146	28,547

^aData come from the 2010 Common Content of the Cooperative Congressional Election Study. Cell entries are means, with standard deviations in parentheses. Measures are on a 1–7 scale, with higher values indicating more positive evaluations. N varies slightly across traits, as some respondents did not answer both questions. None of the gender differences is significant at $p < 0.05$.

attitudes toward US House candidates, uncovered no gender differences in ratings of male and female House candidates' competence (a "male" trait) or integrity (a "female" trait). The absence of gender differences is striking given the unusually large sample size (see **Table 2**).

Our results are not anomalous. Hayes (2011) conducted a content analysis of newspaper coverage in the 2006 US Senate elections and then used those results to predict voters' attitudes toward the candidates. His analysis suggests that assessments of candidate attributes can be affected by news coverage but that gender stereotyping is limited by voters' reliance on party stereotypes. Dolan's (2014) assessment of public opinion from the 2010 House elections produced similar findings; voters' evaluations of congressional candidates—male or female—are driven largely by party affiliation, not gender. Women are also not evaluated any differently than men even when the media focus on their appearance (Hayes et al. 2014). And Brooks' (2013) experimental data reveal that women who act tough, get angry, or even cry on the campaign trail are not viewed any differently than men who do the same thing. Moreover, she finds that female candidates do not have to strike a balance between femininity and toughness. Indeed, in the rare cases when voters make gendered assumptions about candidates, the stereotypes they invoke benefit, rather than hurt, female candidates.

Ultimately, the more recent research suggests that women do not experience a more hostile campaign environment than do men, at least as far as news coverage and voter evaluations are concerned. The fundamentals of elections—partisanship, ideology, general assessments of the state of the country—are the main determinants of voting behavior, regardless of the sex of the candidate. We have known for decades that similarly situated male and female candidates perform equally well at the ballot box. There is now quite a bit of evidence that they are also evaluated similarly along the way.

DOES WOMEN'S PRESENCE IN POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS MATTER?

The central reason why political scientists study women's underrepresentation and their experiences on the campaign trail is that decades of research suggests that women's presence in political institutions bears directly on issues of substantive and symbolic representation. Electing more women reduces the possibility that politicians will overlook gender-salient issues. Further, the presence of more women in politics brings to the government a greater sense of political legitimacy. As Mansbridge (1999, p. 651) explains:

Easier communication with one's representative, awareness that one's interests are being represented with sensitivity, and knowledge that certain features of one's identity do not mark one as less able to

govern all contribute to making one feel more included in the polity. This feeling of inclusion in turn makes the polity democratically more legitimate in one's eyes.

If women do not run for office, or if the campaign environment they navigate is more onerous than men's, then that threatens both public policy and democratic legitimacy.

Perhaps the best place to consider the evidence for these claims is in the research about substantive representation. This is the area where most scholars focus and also where we see the most consistent results. For the most part, gender differences emerge in legislators' priorities and preferences. Based on an analysis of bill sponsorship and floor remarks in the 104th through 107th Congresses, for example, Gerrity et al. (2007) find that women who replace men in the same district are more likely to focus on "women's issues," such as gender equity, child care, employee flex time, abortion, minimum-wage increases, and the extension of the food-stamp program (see also Burrell 1996). Moreover, both Democratic and moderate Republican women in Congress are more likely than men to use their bill sponsorship and cosponsorship activity to focus on "women's issues" (Swers 2002). Dodson (1998) highlights such behavior in her discussion of the Women's Health Initiative, which she explains was enacted only because women in Congress noticed that the National Institutes of Health (NIH) guidelines did not require female subjects in clinical trials. The congresswomen appealed to the General Accounting Office to issue an audit, which revealed that only 13% of NIH appropriations were spent on women's health (see also Paolino 1995). Women on both sides of the aisle successfully advocated for women's greater inclusion in all clinical trials, as well as substantial increases in appropriations devoted to women's health care. Studies of state legislative behavior also uncover female legislators' greater likelihood to champion women's interests (Bratton 2005, Thomas 1994).

Substantive representation pertains not only to policy priorities and voting records; women's presence in political institutions can also infuse into the system a distinct style of leadership. Tolleson-Rinehart's (1991) study of mayors finds that women tend to adopt an approach to governing that emphasizes congeniality and cooperation, whereas men tend to emphasize hierarchy. Other research finds that because female mayors are more likely than men to seek broad participation and inclusion in the budget process, they tend to be more likely than men to admit and address the fiscal problems facing their cities (Weikart et al. 2007). Similar findings apply at the state legislative level. Kathlene (1994) uncovers significant differences in how male and female state legislature committee chairs conduct themselves at hearings: Women are more likely to act as facilitators, whereas men tend to use their power to control the direction of the hearings. Women's likelihood to conduct business in a manner that is more cooperative, communicative, and based on coalition building than men's can directly affect policy outcomes. Because they are more concerned with context and environmental factors when deliberating on crime and punishment, for instance, female state assembly members are more likely than men to advocate for rehabilitation programs and less likely than men to support punitive policies (Kathlene 1995).

Of course, the extent to which a legislator's sex shapes policy or affects leadership styles is substantially constrained by party. This is a particularly important caveat given the growth of party polarization, which has reduced the number of moderates in state legislatures and the US Congress. Both women and men are first and foremost partisan creatures. As Osborn (2012) demonstrates in her 50-state analysis of state legislative roll call data, legislators' party identities affect the alternatives they present and the policy agendas they create. In the US Senate, Swers (2013) finds that the stark differences between the parties on issues pertaining to women, families, and children also mean that Democratic and Republican legislators assume very different roles and positions. As a result, the evidence for gender differences in substantive representation has waned over time. Schwindt-Bayer & Corbetta (2004) find, for example, that controlling for party

and constituency influences, member sex does not predict the “liberalness” of representatives’ roll call behavior in the 103rd–105th Congresses. Based on an analysis of roll call votes in the 108th and 109th Congresses, Frederick (2009) concludes that Republican women are ideologically indistinguishable from their male counterparts. This is the case even when the analysis focuses strictly on “women’s issues.”

Beyond substantive representation, political scientists point to symbolic representation and the role model effects that women’s presence in politics brings to female citizens (Pitkin 1967). Although symbolic effects are quite difficult to quantify—and, accordingly, this literature is less developed empirically—the logic underlying symbolic representation is straightforward:

Women in public office stand as symbols for other women, both enhancing their identification with the system and their ability to have influence within it. This subjective sense of being involved and heard. . . makes the election of women to public office important because, for so many years, they were excluded from power. (Burrell 1996, p. 151)

This is not only a theoretical proposition. Many scholars link the presence of female candidates and elected officials to female citizens’ political attitudes and participation. The presence of female House candidates, for instance, can bolster female constituents’ willingness to discuss politics, even after controlling for sociodemographic and attitudinal indicators linked to greater levels of political interest and discussion (Hansen 1997; see also Burns et al. 2001). As the percentage of a state’s female legislators increases, so do female citizens’ levels of external efficacy (Atkeson & Carrillo 2007; see also Atkeson 2003). Female voters are more likely to be familiar with the records of their senators when they are represented by women (Jones 2014). Campbell & Wolbrecht’s (2006) cross-national study uncovers a positive relationship between the presence of highly visible female politicians and adolescent girls’ expectations of political engagement.

As is the case with most research, the findings are not entirely uniform. Dolan (2006) and I (Lawless 2004a), working with American National Election Studies data, uncover little empirical evidence to support the claim that the presence of female candidates translates into any systematic change in women’s political attitudes or behaviors. In particular, I find that women represented by women tend to offer more positive evaluations of their members of Congress, but this difference does not consistently translate into political interest, trust, efficacy, or participation. The key factor driving constituents’ political attitudes and participation is party congruence with their representative, not gender congruence. It may be the case, though, that symbolic representation is not dyadic, and that women reap the benefits of female candidates and legislators even when they are not personally represented by them. Or it may be that female constituents see a boost in political interest and efficacy only when their legislator shares their party identification (see Reingold & Harrell 2010).

In its entirety, the evidence suggests that although gender now makes very little difference net of party when it comes to roll call votes, there remain meaningful participation differences on some important issues. Moreover, women’s presence in politics likely conveys a sense of democratic legitimacy that is normatively attractive, albeit difficult to operationalize.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Throughout the last 40 years, political scientists have done an excellent job shedding light on why women are underrepresented in politics, why they are less likely than men to emerge as candidates, what they experience on the campaign trail, and whether they legislate differently than their male counterparts. As is the case with all subfields, scholarship on female candidates and legislators has

raised as many questions as it has answered. Thus, I conclude this review with a few suggestions for how political scientists might move forward and gain an even better handle on the role gender plays in electoral politics.

First, scholars would be wise to continue to focus on the gender gap in political ambition. This area of research seems the most fruitful, as it is here that we see substantial gender gaps across the board: Regardless of party, profession, income, or region, female potential candidates are less likely than men to consider running for office, less likely to take the steps that typically precede a campaign, less likely to throw their hats into the ring, and less likely to receive encouragement to do so. There has been no progress in the last decade, and the gender gap in political ambition among college students is as big as it is among professionally established adults.

We have reached the point where these findings are generally accepted. It is now time to delve more deeply into the reason behind them. Are certain recruitment messages particularly effective in encouraging women's candidacies? Can the dissemination of information showing that women perform as well as men at the polls combat women's negative attitudes and pessimistic expectations about the electoral process? What specific steps can political parties, electoral gatekeepers, and political activists take to improve women's assessments of themselves as candidates? Field experiments—perhaps in which political scientists and advocacy groups collaborate to assess the types of appeals that are most effective in mobilizing women to run for office or best able to counter the gender gap in self-efficacy—might be a particularly promising way to shed light on the nuances of how women are socialized to think about the electoral process and why we have seen so little generational change.

Second, political scientists should consider gender's relevance in the electoral arena even if it does not manifest itself in the form of gender stereotyping. The electoral landscape appears far more favorable to women now than it was two decades ago, and the media and voters may not be the obstacle for female candidates that they once were. There remain many ways that gender dynamics could still play a role in contemporary elections, though. Scholars might investigate why perceptions of gender stereotyping are so robust despite so little empirical evidence. Does strategic campaign behavior by female candidates help pre-empt gender stereotyping? Does the lack of stereotyping reflect that women are better candidates than the men against whom they compete? Do they need to work harder to achieve the same results? By operationalizing some of these concepts, we will better understand the extent to which women and men compete on a level playing field, as well as whether women have learned to succeed by outworking and out-strategizing their competitors.

Third, we must think creatively about how to measure substantive and symbolic representation. Party effects confound gender effects, regardless of whether we assess legislative priorities, roll call votes, or citizens' political behavior. But as the end of the 2013 government shutdown made clear, there seems to be something different about the way women govern. Perhaps ending the shutdown was an anomaly, but this is an empirical question, and it raises several others. Are women more likely than men to be key players at the state legislative and congressional levels in particularly dire times? Are they more likely than men to advocate for bipartisan solutions when the stakes are particularly high? Are they less likely than men to support measures and amendments that work to stymie the legislative process and serve as roadblocks? And does the attention they receive for leading with a different style resonate with women in the population, even those who are not directly represented by a female legislator? Little of the vast and growing body of work on party polarization considers the potentially relevant gender dynamics.

Finally, scholars of US politics might start to import key findings from the comparative politics literature. The majority of my review concentrates on female candidates and legislators in the United States, but there is so much variation across the states that research on electoral rules

and context should probably feature more prominently in our analyses. McDonagh (2009) compellingly argues that women's representation is linked to a government's support of social welfare provisions and public policies that are consistent with "maternal" roles. This framework would certainly be useful for understanding variation in women's presence in politics not only across the globe but also throughout the United States.

The confluence of gender, political behavior, and political institutions carries profound theoretical and methodological implications for scholarship on women and politics. The good news is that scholars interested in understanding gender dynamics in candidate emergence, campaigns and elections, or the legislative process have endless opportunities for investigation, and their work cut out for them.

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