

Gender, Political Ambition and the Decision Not to Run for Office

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Gender, Political Ambition, and the Initial Decision to Run for Office¹

Since the early 1980s, U.S. gender politics scholars have produced an impressive and expanding body of work that attempts to explore the role gender plays in the electoral system. Much of this work has been motivated by the underlying premise that a government dominated by male elected officials is biased against the election of women and, accordingly, does not fairly represent the public, particularly the interests of women. This notion has been supported by research that finds that the representation of women's interests requires a greater inclusion of women leaders in public office (see Swers 2002; Dodson 1998; Rosenthal 1998; Thomas 1994). Surprisingly, though, much of the recent research that examines the performance of women candidates finds no evidence of bias against them. More specifically, in terms of fundraising and vote totals, often considered the two most important indicators of electoral success, investigators find that women fare just as well, if not better, than their male counterparts (Smith and Fox 2001; Burrell 1998, 1994; Cook 1998; Dolan 1998; Thompson and Steckenrider 1997; Darcy, Welch and Clark 1994; Leeper 1991). In fact, Seltzer, Newman and Leighton (1997, 79), in a study of voting patterns, have gone as far as to state emphatically: "A candidate's sex does not affect his or her chances of winning an election . . . Winning elections has *nothing* to do with the sex of the candidate" (emphasis added).²

Despite what appears to be a neutral and unbiased electoral system, a glance at the top elective offices in the United States reveals a deep gender disparity: 86% of U.S. Senators, 86% of the members of the House of Representatives, 88% of state governors, 88% of big city mayors, and 78% of state legislators are male (CAWP 2003). Investigators tend to offer three basic explanations for these enormous disparities. Foremost, scholars point to the incumbency advantage. Research certainly supports the notion that incumbency makes the inclusion of previously excluded groups a slow, difficult task (Jacobson 2002; Carroll and Jenkins 2001; Burrell 1994; Darcy, Welch, and Clark 1994). Other researchers point to the eligibility pool as the most important explanation for the small number of women candidates and elected officials (Duerst-Lahti 1998; Darcy, Welch and Clark 1994). As Clark (1994, 106) explains, "Women are not found in the professions from which politicians inordinately are chosen – the law and other broker-type businesses. Therefore, they do not achieve the higher socioeconomic status that forms the eligibility pool for elective office." According to this explanation, as women's presence in the fields of law and business increases, so, too, will their economic status and their likelihood of seeking elected positions (see Thomas 1998; Williams 1990; Simon and Landis 1989). Finally, a few investigators posit that gender inequity in the candidate recruitment process hinders the selection of women candidates (Sanbonmatsu 2000; Niven 1998). Common to each of the three explanations is the exhortation that gender parity will occur only if more women simply make the decision to run for office (e.g. Seltzer, Newman and Leighton 1997; Burrell 1994; Chaney and Sinclair 1994).

¹ The collection of the data for this project was collected in collaboration with Jennifer L. Lawless, an assistant professor of political science at Brown University. Jennifer Lawless wrote the description of the methods for this report. Thus, in describing the methods of the study and the presentation of the findings, I often refer to "we."

² This is not to suggest, however, that candidate sex has become irrelevant in the electoral arena. To the contrary, many scholars find that gender stereotyping, linked to traditional sex roles, continues to pervade the electoral environment (Bystrom and Kaid 2000; Niven 1998; Flammang 1997; Fox 1997; Kahn 1996; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993a; 1993b). While the assumption that women do not belong in politics has dissipated, vestiges of traditional sex-role orientations continue. Many actors in the electoral arena – voters, party officials, candidates, journalists – transfer their stereotypical expectations about men and women to male and female candidates. Despite the apparent role of gender, these studies are usually not linked to the final question of whether women win or lose elections.

Research that examines barriers to the inclusion of women as candidates for office provides some answer to the question of why deep gender disparities in office holding persist. But with the exception of one poll conducted in 1994 by the National Women's Political Caucus (NWPC), and one single state study (Fox, Lawless and Feeley 2001), no research specifically examines the manner in which men and women initially consider seeking public office. Are professionally accomplished women and men equally likely to consider a run for elective office? Are differences in political ambition between men and women generational? Does the support network or encouragement to run for office influence men and women differently? Does traditional sex-role socialization play a role in how women and men think about seeking public office? Do vestiges of traditional socialization continue to inhibit some women from thinking they should seek elective office? If we are to understand women's prospects for fuller representation in high-level office holding, then we must first determine whether well-situated women have the same desire as similarly situated men to serve in such positions.

This report presents the results of the first broad-based national sample of potential men and women candidates. I hope to shed light on how women and men think about running for office and the manner in which their attitudes will affect the future prospects of gender parity in U.S. governing bodies.

Studying the Initial Decision to Run for Office

Although understanding why candidates run is a critically important question, an empirical study of how people choose to run for office is very difficult to execute. Many undocumented considerations enter the decision to run. When a potential candidate decides not to enter a race, for example, the decision is often unknown and, thus, that individual is difficult to locate and survey. In addition, many individuals who ultimately run for office may never have considered themselves potential candidates prior to being recruited to run. Further, research attempts to identify potential candidates can even cause political controversies. Maisel and Stone (1998) explain, for instance, that some members of Congress attempted to persuade the National Science Foundation not to fund a study of potential House of Representatives candidates because the members feared that the study might spur qualified challengers to enter races they would otherwise have not considered entering.

In an attempt to survey potential candidates and examine gender differences in political ambition, we drew a sample from what might generally be considered the candidate "eligibility pool" (see also Fox, Lawless and Feeley 2001). We defined the eligibility pool for elective office as men and women in the three professions that tend to yield the highest proportion of political candidacies: law, business, and education (Moncrief, Squire, and Jewell 2001; Dolan and Ford 1997; Burrell 1994). Within each group, we stratified by gender, so as to have an equal number of men and women in each category.

Ultimately, we distributed a four-page mail survey to a national sample of 2,700 men and 2,700 women, each of whom could be considered part of the "eligibility pool."³ We asked respondents about their socio-demographic backgrounds, familial arrangements, political activism, political outlook, political experience, and perceptions and willingness to run for office.⁴ From the original sample of

³ We employed a standard four-wave mail survey protocol in conducting the study. Respondents received an initial letter explaining the study and a copy of the questionnaire. Three days later, they received a follow-up postcard urging participation in the project. Two weeks after the postcard, we sent to respondents another copy of the questionnaire and a follow-up letter. We supplemented this final piece of correspondence with an email message to those respondents for whom we had email addresses.

⁴ Turning specifically to the three sub-samples from which we drew respondents, we obtained a random sample of 1,800 (900 men and 900 women) lawyers from the 2001 edition of the *Martindale Hubble Law Directory*, which provides the addresses and names of practicing attorneys in all law firms throughout the country. Business people (900 men and 900 women) were randomly selected from *Dun and Bradstreet's Million Dollar Directory, 2000 - 2001*, which lists the top executive officers for all public and private companies with over one million dollars in annual sales. We sampled an equal number of male and female presidents and vice-presidents. Educators were selected from both primary and secondary educational institutions. For secondary education, we compiled a random selection of 600 public and private colleges and universities, from which we sampled 300 men and 300 women professors and administrative officials. For primary education, we compiled a national sample of 1,200 public

5,400, 454 surveys were either undeliverable or returned because the individual was no longer employed in the position. From the 4,946 remaining members of the sample, we received responses from 2,843 respondents (1,506 men and 1,337 women), for a response rate of 57%. After taking into account respondents who refused to complete the questionnaire or filled in very few answers, we were left with 2,724 usable surveys, a 55% response rate, which is higher than that of typical elite sample mail surveys (see Fox, Lawless and Feeley 2001; Fox and Schuhmann 1999; Maisel and Stone 1998; Carroll 1994).⁵

**Table 1 – The Eligibility Pool:
Profile of Women and Men Lawyers, Business Executives, and Educators**

	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>
Party Affiliation:		
Democrat	51 % **	36 %
Republican	29	36
Independent	18	25
Other	2	3
Race:		
White	84	83
Black	9	7
Latino/Hispanic	5	7
Other	3	2
Place of Residence:		
Major City	32	30
Suburb	39	40
Rural Area	7	8
Small Town	22	23
Education Level:		
Did not Complete College	7	5
Bachelor's Degree	15	16
Graduate Degree	78	79
Household Income:		
Less than \$ 50,000	8	4
\$ 50,000 – \$ 75,000	10	10
\$ 75,001 – \$ 100,000	17	15
\$ 100,001 – \$ 200,000	35	37
More than \$ 200,000	31	35
Mean Age	45.4 **	49.4 **
Sample Size	1,248	1,454

Note: Sample sizes for each question vary slightly, as some respondents chose not to answer some demographics questions.

Difference of means test comparing men and women, **p < .01, *p < .05

Our sample of the “eligibility pool” (Table 1), therefore, is a broad cross-section of equally credentialed and professionally similar men and women who are positioned to serve as future candidates for elective office. Although the samples are roughly equal in terms of race, place of residence, region,

school teachers and principals (600 men and 600 women). Respondents were selected through an Internet search of public school districts, from which we then located the websites of individual schools and the names of their employees. For a more detailed description of how the samples were drawn, please contact the author.

⁵ Response rates within the three sub-samples were: lawyers – 67%; business executives and leaders – 45%; educators – 61%. We attribute the relatively lower response rate of the business executives and leaders both to the fact that this group would seem to have the least interest in participating in an academic survey and to the fact that we could not follow-up with them by sending a personalized email message, since email addresses are not listed in *Dun and Bradstreet's* directory.

education level, and household income, there are two statistically significant differences between men and women in the sample. Women are more likely to be Democrats, while men are more likely to be Republicans and Independents, a finding consistent with recent polls showing a partisan gender gap among the general U.S. population. Further, women in the sample, on average, are four years younger than men, a probable result of the fact that women's entry into the fields of law and business is a relatively recent phenomenon.

Gender Differences and Considering to Run for Office

Do men and women have equal interest in seeking elective office? Prior research in the area of gender and political ambition has found that women tend to demonstrate lower levels of ambition for seeking political office. Almost all of the prior research, however, considers women and men who have already entered politics (e.g. Bledsoe and Herring 1990; Burt-Way and Kelly 1992; Constantini 1990). While this may provide some guidance in generating our expectations, research on those who have already chosen to enter politics does not speak directly to questions concerning the initial decision to run. The National Women's Political Caucus poll (1994) found that women lawyers and political activists had less interest than men in seeking office, for example, but a study of potential candidates in New York found roughly equal interest in office holding between women and men (Fox, Lawless, and Feeley 2001).

To measure interest in office seeking, respondents were asked several questions. First, men and women were asked directly whether they ever considered running for office. Table 2 presents the results of this question, broken down by profession. The findings clearly show that, across professions, women are significantly less likely than men to have ever considered running for office. And the gender disparity between men and women in each of the professions is remarkably similar; men in each of the professions are more than twice as likely as women to say that they have seriously considered running for office. The survey also asked respondents about their overall level of political participation in such activities as voting, interest group membership, and community involvement. On all of the political participation measures, we found no substantively significant gender differences. Interest in seeking office, then, stands out as the largest gender difference in any area of political participation.

Table 2 – Gender Differences in Considering to Run for Office (across professions)
Question: Have you ever thought about running for office?

	Total Sample	Lawyers		Business Owners/ Executives		Educators		
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Yes, I have seriously considered it.	7 %	16 %	10 %	23 %	5 %	11 %	5 %	10 %
Yes, it has crossed my mind.	29	39	37	44	21	30	24	40
No, I have never thought about it.	64	46	53	34	74	59	72	50
N	1,248	1,454	533	577	273	378	430	483

Note: Difference of means test significant at $p < .01$ in all comparisons of men and women.

To measure interest in office holding in a manner that does not rely entirely on self-perceptions of whether a respondent considered running, we asked potential candidates whether they ever took any of the steps required to mount a political campaign. More specifically, respondents were asked whether they

ever discussed running with party leaders, community leaders, family members, or friends. In addition, they were asked if they ever discussed or solicited financial contributions from potential donors, and whether they investigated how to place their name on the ballot. Comparisons between men and women's answers to all of these questions again highlight stark gender differences in political ambition (see Table 3). Men are significantly more likely than women (across all professions) to have engaged in all of these fundamental campaign steps.

Together, the findings in Tables 2 and 3 indicate that women, even in the top tier of professional accomplishment, are far less likely to consider a run for public office than are their similarly situated male counterparts.⁶

Table 3 – Gender Differences in Taking Steps Prior to Seeking Office (across professions)
Question: Have you ever . . .

	Total Sample		Lawyers		Business Owners/ Executives		Educators	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Discussed running with party leaders?	4% **	8 %	7% **	13 %	2 % *	5 %	2 % +	4 %
Discussed running with friends and family?	17 **	29	25 **	37	12 **	21	12 **	25
Discussed running with community leaders?	6 **	12	9 **	17	4 **	9	3 **	8
Solicited or discussed financial contributions with potential supporters?	2 **	4	2 **	7	1 *	3	2	2
Investigated how to place your name on the ballot?	4 **	10	4 **	15	2 **	6	4 *	7
N	1,248	1,454	527	550	272	368	430	482

Note: Significance levels for difference of means test comparing women and men: ** p < .01, * p < .05, + p < .10.

To understand women and men's differential attitudes toward electoral politics, we sought to understand whether men and women feel differently about taking part in the different aspects of an electoral campaign. Some research has suggested that while women and men may be equally interested in being policy-makers, women are less likely to be drawn to the rigors of an electoral contest (Staton/Hughes 1992). In fact, party recruiters in a number of states have acknowledged that they prefer masculine behavioral traits when thinking about potential candidates (Niven 1998). To assess possible gender differences, we asked the potential candidates how they would feel about engaging in five of the typical activities or aspects associated with being part of any election: attending fundraisers, dealing with party officials, meeting constituents, dealing with the press, and engaging in a time-consuming campaign. The results, presented in Table 4, reveal that women are significantly more likely than men to feel positively about participating in three of the five campaign activities. Although these differences appear

⁶ From this point on, I no longer present data broken down by profession, as there are similarities in gender differences across all professions.

to be substantively quite small, when given the opportunity to rate a campaign activity as “very positive,” women offer this reply significantly more often than men for all five items. These findings suggest that women, contrary to expectations, are not repelled by the primary activities of a campaign, and are even more willing to engage in them than men.

Table 4 – Gender Differences in Willingness to Participate in Campaign Activities
Question: How would you feel about engaging in the following aspects of an electoral campaign?

	Positive		Very Positive	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Attending Fundraisers	44%	46%	15% **	11 %
Dealing with Party Officials	41	38	11**	7
Going Door-to-Door to Meet Constituents	43**	37	16 **	9
Dealing with Members of the Press	48**	38	14 **	9
The Time Consuming Nature of Running for Office	80*	77	32 **	23
N	1,226	1,429	1,226	1,429

Note: Sample sizes vary slightly as some respondents omitted answers to some questions. The response “very positive” is included in the “positive” category.
 Significance levels of difference of means test comparing men and women: **p < .01, *p < .05

Before examining some possible explanations for the great gender disparities in interest in electoral politics, it is important to determine the types of offices men and women express interest in holding. Table 5 shows the office interests of those members of the sample who indicated at least some interest in office holding. Some analysis suggests that women will be more likely to focus their political involvement at the local level (e.g., Fox 1997; Burrell 1994) or in positions that match their stereotypic strengths (Fox and Oxley 2003). Accordingly, Table 5 divides the offices into the local, state, and federal levels. In assessing office interests, respondents were asked to identify which office they would most likely seek first, as well as which offices they might ever be interested in holding. As might be expected, women demonstrate greater interest in local level offices; women are significantly more likely than men to select school board as the first office for which they might run. Men are more likely to identify a state office. Further, 15 percent of men, compared to only 7 percent of women, identify a federal office as their first choice. In terms of interest in any of the offices (bottom half of Table 5), women and men are most similar in their interest in local level office; the gender gap in interest gradually increases with increases in the level of office.

Men’s greater interest in high-level offices suggests that gender parity, particularly for these offices, may be difficult to achieve.

Table 5 – Office Specific Interests of Prospective Women and Men Candidates

	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>
What is the first office you would most likely seek?		
Local Offices:		
School Board	53 % **	37 %
City, County, or Town Council	23	24
Mayor	3	5
State Offices:		
State Legislator	11 *	18
Statewide Office (i.e. Attorney General)	2	1
Governor	1	1
Federal Offices:		
U.S. House of Representatives	5 **	10
U.S. Senate	2 *	4
President	0	1
For what other offices might you ever be interested in running?		
Local Offices:		
School Board	43 %	40 %
City, County, or Town Council	33	36
Mayor	10 **	16
State Offices:		
State Legislator	22 **	32
Statewide Office (i.e. Attorney General)	11	10
Governor	6 **	12
Federal Offices:		
U.S. House of Representatives	15 **	27
U.S. Senate	13 **	20
President	3 **	6
Sample Size	816	1,022

Note: Sample sizes represent respondents willing to consider a candidacy; individuals who said they would never run were dropped from the analysis. Percentages for what other office respondents might be interested in holding do not add up to 100% because respondents often expressed interest in more than one office.

Levels of significance for difference of means test comparing men and women: **p < .01, *p < .05

Explaining Gender Differences in Ambition for Office-Seeking

A great deal of prior research provides insight into why women might continue to be less interested than men in seeking elective office. In this section, I consider four possible explanations for women’s lower levels of interest in office holding: political and demographic factors, levels of external support, traditional family dynamics, and self-perceptions of electoral viability.

Age, Party Affiliation, and Personal Income

The first set of explanations focuses on key demographic factors that may explain women’s differential interest in holding public office. One frequently speculated explanation for gender disparities in electoral office is generational (Burrell 1994; Bernstein 1986). In other words, traditional sex-role socialization likely affected previous generations of women, but younger professional women will not face the same obstacles. The findings in Table 6 simply do not support this explanation. While women under forty years of age are slightly more likely to be interested in seeking office than older women, younger men are also more interested than older men. The lack of any significant generational gap

suggests that if vestiges of traditional socialization deter women from considering a candidacy, then these vestiges affect women of all generations.⁷

**Table 6 – Gender Differences and Considering to Run for Office
(by Age, Party, and Personal Income)
Percent of Respondents Within Each Category Who Have “Considered” Running for Office**

	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>
Age:		
Under 40 years of age	41 % ^{***a}	59 %
40 – 59 years of age	33 **	53
60 and older	38 **	55
Political Party:		
Democrat	39 ^{***a}	58
Republican	35 **	51
Independent	33 **	52
Income Level (per year):		
Less than \$50,000	29 **	54
\$ 50,001 – \$ 100,000	36 **	56
Over \$ 100,000	41 **	55
Sample Size	1,209	1,404

Note: Sample sizes vary slightly, as some respondents omitted some questions.
Levels of significance: ^a indicates significant difference at $p < .01$ among women within that category.
There are no significant differences within the categories of men.

Across all three party affiliations, men are also significantly more likely than women to have considered running for office. Nonetheless, Democratic women are slightly more likely to think about seeking office than are their Republican and Independent counterparts. This can be generally explained by the fact that the Democratic party agenda embraces policy priorities more closely allied with self-identified feminists. Women who self-identify as feminists are more likely than non-feminists (41% to 30%) to have considered running for office. In terms of party affiliation and interest in office-seeking, there are no significant differences among men of different political parties.

Turning to the last demographic category, women across all categories of personal income are less likely than their male counterparts to have considered running for office. Importantly, though, among women, personal income and interested in seeking elective office are positively correlated. This is important because there is a significant gender difference in personal income; 56% of men, compared with only 41% of women, earn annual incomes exceeding \$100,000. This finding suggests that as women’s incomes begin to equalize with men’s, women’s interest in running for office might increase as well.

Gender Differences and External Support for Running for Office

Recruitment and encouragement lead many individuals who otherwise may have never run for public office to become candidates (Niven 1998; Fowler and McClure 1989). Are women just as likely to

⁷ The age variable was broken down into a number of different age categories. Regardless of the manner in which age was examined, the findings hold; women of all ages are less interested in running for office than men of all ages. We display the results in terms of three generations for ease of exposition.

receive support and encouragement to run? To measure whether men and women received the same levels of external support to run for office, respondents were asked whether anyone ever suggested that they launch a candidacy. More specifically, respondents were presented with a list of seven political actors who might have suggested and / or encouraged a candidacy: party officials, elected officials, and non-elected political activists (formal actors); and friends, spouses, family-members, and co-workers (informal actors).

Table 7 – Gender Differences in External Support for Running for Office

	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>
Have any of the following individuals ever suggested that you run for office?		
Formal Political Actors:		
Official from a political party	12 % **	20 %
Elected official	14 **	23
Non-elected political activist	14 **	22
Informal Actors:		
Friend or acquaintance	46 **	56
Spouse or partner	23 *	27
Family member	30 *	35
Co-worker or business associate	37 **	44
Likelihood of Considering to Run for Office if you were contacted by:		
Any Formal Political Actor	73 *	81 *
Any Informal Actor	61 **	74 **
Sample Size	1,226	1,429

Note: Entries represent the percent responding “yes” to each question. Sample sizes vary slightly, as some respondents omitted questions.

Levels of significance for difference of means test comparing men and women: **p < .01, *p < .05

Table 7 reveals that women are less likely to have received the suggestion to run for office, regardless of the source. The differences are particularly stark in terms of formal political actors. This is a powerful explanation for why women have been less likely to consider running for office, since multivariate analysis finds that the suggestion to run is among the strongest predictors of whether an individual considers a candidacy (regression results not shown). In fact, as indicated in the bottom half of Table 7, the gender gap in the interest in seeking elective office narrows substantially when a formal political actor offers the suggestion.

Family Arrangements and Interest in Office Holding

The degree to which traditional gender socialization still influences how men and women elites view politics is unclear. In many cases, the women in our sample have already overcome traditional barriers; they are partners in law firms, business executives, and educators (professors, principals, and teachers). The growing body of research on the role of gender stereotypes in the electoral process, however, suggests that traditional gender socialization continues to play an important role in electoral politics (e.g. Sanbonmatsu 2002; Flammang 1997; Kahn 1996). Do greater family obligations hinder women from considering running for office?

Table 8 provides a breakdown of the respondents’ family arrangements. Women respondents are significantly less likely to be married and have children. Clearly, some women who become top-level professionals de-emphasize a traditional family life. When we consider the household division of labor, though, we see that women who live with a spouse or partner are nine times more likely than men to be

responsible for more of the household tasks; the numbers are similar for childcare arrangements. Hence, from the outset, it is important to note that among members of the sample “being married” and “having children” carry different responsibilities for men and women.

Table 8 – Familial Arrangements and Considering to Run for Office

	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>
Marital and Family Status		
Married	67 %**	84 %
Has Children	66 **	85
Has Children Living at Home	43	51
Has Children Under Age Six Living at Home	17	16
Household Duties for Those Who are Married		
I complete more or all of the household tasks	46 **	5
There is an equal division of labor in the household	43	36
My partner is responsible for more or all of the household tasks	11	59
Childcare Arrangements for Those with Children		
I am responsible for more or all of the childcare tasks	44 **	5
There is an equal division of childcare in the household	28	26
My partner is responsible for more or all of the childcare tasks	6	46
I have other childcare arrangements	22	23
Likelihood of Considering to Run for Office Based on Household Division of Labor		
I am responsible for more or all household tasks	33 **	51
There is an equal division of labor in the household	37 **	51
My partner is responsible for more or all of the household tasks	48 **	56
Children Living at home:		
Yes	40 **	55
No	32 **	53
Sample Size	1,202	1,397

Note: Sample sizes vary slightly, as some respondents omitted questions. The “Likelihood of Considering to Run for Office” portion of the table includes all respondents who considered running for any office. Significance levels of difference of means test comparing men and women: ** p < .01, *p < .05

While the degree to which traditional family dynamics continue to prevail in American culture is perhaps striking, the important question for our purposes is whether these dynamics affect whether men and women are equally likely to consider running for office. The bottom half of Table 8 reveals that as women’s responsibility for household tasks decreases, interest in considering running for office increases. Household division of labor does not correlate to men’s likelihood of considering to run for office.

Gender Differences and Self-Perceptions of Electoral Viability

Some recent research leads to the expectation that women may feel more hesitant than men about entering politics because they perceive themselves as less qualified (Fox 1997; Kahn 1996; Naff 1995). Having matched samples of men and women allows us to test more clearly whether the self-perceptions of women and men are equal. In other words, do women and men view themselves as equally viable candidates for elective office? To test this proposition, we asked respondents two questions: how they rated their qualifications to hold elective office; and their likelihood of winning their first election (see Table 9).

By a margin of over 20 percent, women rate themselves less qualified than men to hold office. Women in the sample are twice as likely as men to rate themselves unequivocally as “not qualified.” Considering that potential candidates who perceive themselves as more qualified are more likely to consider running for office (bottom half of Table 9), the gender gap in self-perception is critically important. The holds true for whether respondents believe that they would win their first election. Again, men were significantly more likely to think that they would win their first race.

Table 9 – Self Perceptions of Qualifications and Likelihood of Winning an Electoral Office

	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>
Overall, how qualified do you feel you are to run for office?		
Qualified or Very Qualified	36 % **	57 %
Somewhat Qualified	34	29
Not Qualified	30	14
If you were to become a candidate for public office, how likely is it that you would win your first campaign?		
Likely or Very Likely	25 % **	37 %
Unlikely	43	44
Very Unlikely	31	20
Likelihood of Considering to Run for Office if:		
Rated Self as Qualified or Very Qualified	58 **	72
Rated Self as Likely or Very Likely to Win	36 **	46
Sample Size	1,202	1,397

Note: Sample sizes vary slightly, as some respondents omitted questions. The “Likelihood of Considering to Run for Office” portion of the table includes all respondents who considered running for any office. Significance levels of difference of means test comparing men and women: ** p < .01, *p < .05

Conclusion and Discussion

This report attempts to address two questions. Are men and women in the eligibility pool of potential candidates equally likely to consider running for office? And second, if there are differences in levels of political ambition, what accounts for the gender gap? Turning to the first question, the evidence is clear: well-qualified women are less likely than their male counterparts to consider running for office. And when women do think of running, they are more likely to be interested in local level positions. As far as the second question is concerned, women’s lesser interest in office holding is linked to a number of factors: lower levels of personal income, less external support for a candidacy, more demanding household obligations, and self-perceptions that they are not qualified. A clear finding that emerges across all of these results is that men in this eligibility pool, regardless of personal or professional characteristics, feel greater comfort and freedom to think about seeking office.

These findings carry broad implications for both the academic study of gender politics and for practical politics. In terms of academic research, we must reassess the general explanations for women’s under-representation. The explanations of incumbency and too few women in the pool of eligible candidates both assume that similarly situated men and women will be equally interested in running for office. The findings presented suggest that is not the case. Moreover, the findings presented in this report point to the importance of investigating candidate recruitment processes and the manner in which women and men in contemporary society come to be socialized about politics and the acquisition of political power.

At a practical level, these results suggest that we are a long way from a political reality in which women and men are equally likely to aspire to attain high-level elective office. For political actors

interested in increasing the numbers of women serving in office, though, these findings offer some direction. In a final measure of women and men’s interest in office-holding, we asked respondents to assess their future attitudes toward running for office (see Table 10). While women are still significantly more likely than men to say they would never run, the differences are small. And the number of women who say they would definitely be interested in running “someday” is equal to that of men.

Table 10 – Gender Differences in Future Interest in Seeking Office

	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>
What is your attitude toward seeking office in the future?		
I would definitely like to run in the future.	3%	2 %
I might run if opportunity presented itself.	14 *	18
I would not rule it out forever, but currently no interest.	54	57
I would absolutely never run for office.	30 **	23
Sample Size	1,248	1,454

Note: Sample sizes vary slightly, as some respondents omitted questions.

Significance levels of difference of means test comparing men and women: **p < .01, *p < .05

These results suggest that while women have been less likely than men to have ever considered running for office, they are almost equally receptive to thinking about running in the future. This should offer some hope to organizations that seek to increase the number of women in elective positions.

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