

“Why More Women Aren’t Elected: The Gender Gap in US Politics”

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There are currently 144 women that hold a seat in the United States Congress and 391 men. Women make up only 26.9% of our legislative branch, but over 50% of our population. Those we are represented by do not match the demographics of our population. I believe this has a large impact on the laws that we create and whether or not they best serve the American people. In this paper I will outline why it is that we have so few women within our elected federal government even though women make up more than half of those represented.

There are three steps in getting elected to public office. You first decide to run, then you campaign, and lastly you get the votes on election day. Of course it is vastly more complicated than that, but I chose to simplify it this way to try to identify the point at which it becomes harder for women to outcompete men. It turns out there isn't one step in the process that serves as the turning point for women candidates. Each part of the election cycle presents its own challenges for women. The journals and articles I have read all suggest different answers to the question, a few have even said it is the wrong question to ask. I am determined to find out why there is such a gap between the percentage of women that make up our population in this country and the number of women in high elected office positions in our government. Why don't more women win elections?

Women face more obstacles and higher standards than men do when running for office, which makes it harder for them to get elected. It is harder for women to become candidates, there

are more challenges for a woman during a campaign, and voter biases against women ensure they get less votes on election day.

I will separate this paper into three sections. First I will address step number one: becoming a candidate. There are several reasons why fewer women become the candidate of a major party in an election for a high level position. Next I will address challenges women face when campaigning. After they make it through the obstacles that step one presents, the candidate must decide how to handle the inevitable sexism they will experience while running a political campaign in America. Lastly, we will discuss the last step to winning an election, getting the votes. It all comes down to election day. After you make it through successfully becoming a candidate and campaigning for as long as 2 years, you still have to win the election.

The first step to winning an election is actually becoming a candidate. This is not as easy as you may think, especially for women. There are many factors that dissuade women from running in the first place.

In the article “Why Women Don't Run for Office” by Janie Boschma and Ellen Weinstein, some of these factors are laid out. In childhood, parental encouragement and playing sports are important factors that translate to an interest or willingness to run for office one day. Girls do not receive this encouragement as much as boys in most cases. The article cites a study conducted by Jennifer Lawless and Richard Fox that indicates that Women who played sports were about 25 percent more likely to exhibit political aspirations. Boys are encouraged to run for leadership roles more often than girls in school. The gap really emerges in college, when male

political ambition grows and female political ambition fades. Lawless states, “College-age men who didn’t think they’d ever be qualified to run for office were still 50 percent more likely than women with the same doubts to consider running anyway.” Women are not given the encouragement at an early age that would push them towards considering running for office.

Another reason women do not run for office is the lack of confidence they have in their qualifications. An article by Claire Cain Miller speaks to this lack of confidence. She suggests that women underestimate their own abilities and assume they need to be much more qualified than men do to run for the same position. This is a common phenomenon and is displayed in other fields too, not just politics. She cited one study that found that when both men and women performed equally on a science test, women were under the impression that they performed worse, and were not as likely to enter a science competition as a result. Women believe they need to work longer and build up qualifications more than men do in order to run for office. Miller uses Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) as an example of this. Gillibrand was an associate at a Law Firm when she first heard the speech by Hillary Clinton that she said was for her a “personal call to public service.” She still waited an entire decade after hearing this speech to decide to run for office. Gillibrand stated, “It took 10 years volunteering to have the actual self-confidence to say, ‘I can run for office.’ Women are the biggest self-doubters.” Even when women are recruited to run for office they still have more doubts than men. Senator Susan Collins (R-ME) reported speaking with several potential candidates who were considering running over the years and said she never heard a man say he didn't feel qualified enough or wasn't ready yet. This, however, was not the case with female potential candidates. Senator Collins said several women came to her about feeling like they needed more time to build up experience before running. Miller states, “Part of the reason is that society rewards men for

ambition, but not necessarily women, and women are socialized to be hesitant about promoting themselves.”

Once a woman decides to become a candidate, they have to face the obstacles that come with running a campaign.

In her book *Gender and Candidate Communication*, Dianne G. Bystrom analyzes three different aspects of political campaigns comparing men and women candidates. These three aspects are how candidates present themselves to voters, how the media presents candidates, and how voters respond. Bystrom writes about a poll that was conducted in 2000 which provides some insight into the public’s perception of female candidates and how these perceptions can be seen as barriers to their election. The poll focuses on how viable candidates are for being elected President. The results indicated that one third of those surveyed believed “there are general characteristics about women that make them less qualified to serve as president.” The same poll also showed that a majority of those surveyed thought a man would do a better job at leading the nation during a crisis than a woman would, and that a man would be better at making “difficult decisions” than a woman. There are clearly gendered stereotypes that women must overcome when seeking high political office. She then goes on to emphasize the importance of how women present themselves to the public. She writes about the analysis of campaign commercials from males and females running against each other for a seat in the US Senate. Some qualities women relied on in their commercials were personal tone, experiences, and anecdotes, inviting audience participation, addressing the audience as peers, and identifying with the audience’s own experiences. Men, on the other hand, use strategies like affirming their own expertise, presenting

conclusions before giving examples, and depersonalizing issues by using historical examples and stories rather than personal experiences of himself or the audience. These are two very different strategies for political campaign ads, she calls these the Feminine style and the Masculine style. Women often use these “feminine” strategies because they need to appear more likable in order to be elected. Men do not have to be seen as likable to be elected. Bystrom also looks at the influence of the media on voter perception. She concludes that voters have better attitudes towards candidates who are portrayed by the media in a gender appropriate manner which suggests that women are more restricted by engendered structural factors than men. She found that when candidates exhibited more masculine traits, voters viewed them as more competent. Women candidates are continuously treated in a biased manner by the media in terms of their appearance, gender, and marital status. She states, “when newspaper stories mentioned the candidate’s appearance, they were much more likely to comment on the female candidate rather than on the male candidate.” This reinforces the gender stereotypes that concern the “appropriate role” of women in society. Even when running for office, women are expected to look a certain way and have certain roles like being a mother and wife. Men are not held to these same standards.

These gender stereotypes are also discussed in *Gender in Campaigns for the U.S. House of Representatives* by Barbara Burrell. Burrell confirms that there are many instances of sexism in the political process that serve as evidence of stereotypes being a detriment to women candidates. This is evident in the comparison of how candidates present their families. A woman’s family life is scrutinized more than a man’s. An article in the Washington Post highlights this double standard by pointing out the “hard truths” about female candidates and their families. Not only do you have to worry about being qualified for the position you are

running for, you also have to be worried about how the position will affect your children. This is especially true in cases where women have young children while running for office. Women without kids who run are also scrutinized harshly. It is believed that they will never understand the concerns of families. The Barbara Lee Family Foundation lays out the DOs and DON'Ts for women to handle this scrutiny. For example, they say 'Do give credit to your support system or spouse that helps with the kids, but Don't give too much credit because that could make you seem uninvolved. Do share examples of how you balance work life and family life. Don't give too many examples because voters want you to be focused on them and their needs.' Women have to jump through hoops to show the perfect balance between being a good mother and being good at their job.

Another sexist tradition in political campaigns is the "beer gap" which refers to choosing a candidate that you would most like to have a beer with. There are many instances of women candidates being frowned upon for not having interest in or knowledge of commonly masculine topics such as sports. One example of this was in the 2010 special election. Senator Ted Kennedy (D-MA) had died in office from brain cancer and a special election was held to replace him. The democratic candidate Martha Coakley, the attorney general at the time, did not have the passion or knowledge about the Boston Red Sox her opponent did. The lack of that passion and knowledge along with not seeing its relevance to seeking a seat in the US Senate resulted in Coakley getting a ton of negative publicity. Her indifference to the subject was ultimately her downfall. She lost the election to the Republican state senator Scott Brown.

Another focus of the media is on women's appearance. Jennifer Lawless and Danny Hayes conducted a study analyzing how voter perception of a candidate changes based on how the media writes about their appearance. They suggested two hypothetical candidates, a man and

a woman, and wrote fake articles depicting their appearance in a few ways. For each candidate they had one article that doesn't comment on appearance, one that comments on appearance but remains neutral, one that negatively comments on appearance, and one that positively comments on their appearance. Their study found that the resulting voter perception was not affected by whether the candidate was female or male. I would not argue with these results, I think it makes sense that negative comments on someone's appearance would influence voters negatively, regardless of gender. The flaw I see with this study is not how it was conducted or even the results, I think they miss the point entirely. Of course men would be negatively affected if the media comments on their appearance in a negative way. The problem is that the media does not make these types of comments about men nearly as much as they do about Women. Women get media coverage about their fashion choices often, good or bad. Men tend to get coverage about more substantive issues like policy. They address this concern of mine towards the end of the article, giving a few examples of when male politicians have received coverage about their looks. I think this too is flawed because they provide only a few instances when men have had to deal with this, and every single example they give is a positive one. One describes the candidate as "strapping" and another mentions his "bulging biceps." This is not a fair assessment of male vs. female media coverage in my opinion.

The last step to winning an election is actually getting the votes on election day, for women and men candidates this is largely out of their hands. When male and female candidates are equally qualified, women are faced with a 3% vote penalty. 3% does not seem like a lot, but in 1998 there were 5 women who ran for congress that lost by a margin of 3% or less. That can make a world of difference. The same happened again in 2006. Sarah Andrea Fulton, a political

science professor from Texas A&M University, conducted a study to determine what specific demographic could be causing this variation. She found that Independent White Male voters are 23% less likely to vote for a woman when the qualifications are equal across the board. In 2006 there were 9 women that lost congressional elections by a margin of 3% or less. If they had been men, they likely would have won.

We are inherently biased. Many people are subconsciously sexist but insist they are not. Daniel Bush, PBS senior political reporter, spoke with white men across Pennsylvania and Ohio in May of 2016 to hear their thoughts on voting for a woman for high political office. Old men and young men, middle class and upper class, Republican and Democrat, each one said they were not sexist. Yet, many of them also said that they were very uncomfortable with the idea of a woman being President of the United States. This plays into what he calls the theory of Ambivalent Sexism which separates sexism into two different categories. First you have “hostile” sexism, which encompasses overtly negative views about women. Hostile Sexism would be shown with issues like gender discrimination and obvious misogyny. The second kind, which is “benevolent” sexism, describes attitudes and actions men take toward women that are based, deep-down, in feelings of superiority and dominance. Gender bias that influences how people vote is usually rooted in “benevolent sexism.” We often have biases that we are not even aware of but they still have an effect on decisions we make, including who to vote for.

In “Gender Stereotypes and Vote Choice” by Kira Sanbonmatsu, a different argument is made. She agrees that there are stereotypes and biases at play, but argues that this might not be a detriment to women. Sanbonmatsu describes the reliance on gender stereotypes in this situation as a “low-information shortcut.” Essentially, voters make assumptions about candidates' policy views based on their gender when they do not have information to base their decisions on. She

cites studies that demonstrate voter perception based on gender. The subjects were given a short speech or biography of a candidate, each one was exactly the same apart from the candidates gender. Those with the woman candidate thought she seemed more liberal and better able to handle issues that require compassion, better for women's issues, and possessing more feminine traits. Those with the male candidate thought he seemed more reliable and better able to handle crime, defense and foreign policy issues. All of those assumptions were made solely on the gender of the candidate.

Men are not the only ones that have these biases. Many women are also hesitant to vote for other women. I personally find this rather ironic, you would think that as a woman you would be in full support of having more women in our government, but that is not always the case. This behavior is often due to internalized misogyny. The concept is discussed by Adrian J. Dehlin in his study, *Sexist Beliefs and Internalized Misogyny* in the *PSI CHI Journal of Psychological Research*. He states, "Given the omnipresent nature of misogynistic and sexist messages received by women in patriarchal societies, the internalization of sexist ideology is often automatic and unnoticed." These deeply rooted issues can be extremely hard to overcome or even identify. He explains how internalized misogyny often manifests itself with political decisions. In the 2016 Presidential Election many women, especially white women, voted for Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton. This prompted a lot of discussion about internalized sexism in women and women holding beliefs that support their own oppression. His study found that those who voted for Trump reported significantly higher levels of sexism and internalized misogyny. This concept is surely not limited to the 2016 election. Gender bias and sexism have a huge impact on important decisions, including decisions made in the voting booths.

In all three of the steps I laid out, women have an unfair disadvantage. Women are not given the same encouragement or push to become a candidate. They face more obstacles during a campaign, whether it be unfair media coverage or unjustifiable double standards. And, women have to account for stereotypes and gender bias affecting voter decisions. It has been proven that men are more likely to run whether they feel they are qualified or not, women only run when they know they are qualified.

It seems that the biggest issue to present itself within my research has been the lack of women choosing to run for office. If more women run for office, there is a better chance that we will start overcoming all of the obstacles that exist. There are so many factors that play into the lack of representation of women in public office in this country. From a very young age women are dissuaded from seeking higher roles, especially in government. There are stereotypical defined roles for women in society that we need to break from. In the 21st century we should see women as more than just mothers. Women should be able to have opinions on all important issues, not just “women’s issues.”

Only very recently in our country’s history did women gain the right to vote, let alone run for office. The U.S. is also one of the few large developed countries that do not have a gender quota or structural ways to encourage women to run. I am not necessarily suggesting we implement a gender quota, but we need to do more research on ways we can fix this underrepresentation as a country. We are moving too slowly.

As a nation, we need to do better to encourage women to run for office. Women provide an important perspective that has long been dismissed in our country at the highest levels. We are falling behind as a nation. As the most diverse country in the world we have a duty to encourage

fair representation of all demographics. Women make up more than half of our population, they should make up more than  $\frac{1}{4}$  of our elected government.

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