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Why Are Women Still Not Running for Office?

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	i
Still a Man's World: The Under-Representation of Women in Elective Office	1
The Citizen Political Ambition Study	2
The Gender Gap in Political Ambition	3
Explaining the Gender Gap in Political Ambition	5
Not Interested in the Game: Attitudes Toward Campaigning.	5
No One Ever Asked: Electoral Gatekeepers and Political Recruitment	6
Women's Work Is Never Done: The Persistence of Traditional Family Dynamics	7
Qualified, But Not Feeling That Way: Self-Perceptions of Electoral Viability	8
Bias in the Electoral Arena: Assessments of the Political Environment	10
Where Do We Go From Here? Summary and Discussion	11
Concluding Comments	13
Appendix: Sample Design and Data Collection	14
Notes	16
About the Authors.	18

Executive Summary

Extensive research shows that when women run for office, they perform just as well as men. Yet women remain severely under-represented in our political institutions. In this report, we argue that the fundamental reason for women's under-representation is that they do not run for office. There is a substantial gender gap in political ambition; men tend to have it, and women don't.

Our results are based on the Citizen Political Ambition Study, a research project we have been conducting over the course of the last seven years. In 2001, we surveyed more than 3,700 lawyers, business leaders and executives, educators, and political activists about whether they ever considered running for office. We re-surveyed more than 2,000 of these individuals in 2008. Because we surveyed well-matched pools of men and women who work in professions that most typically precede a political candidacy, we can provide the first comprehensive investigation of the process by which women and men decide to enter the electoral arena. We can also determine the extent to which political ambition has changed over time.

We offer clear and compelling evidence that women, even in the highest tiers of professional accomplishment, are substantially less likely than men to demonstrate ambition to seek elected office. These results hold regardless of age, partisan affiliation, income, and profession. In addition, despite the historic events of the last seven years – such as the war in Iraq, frustration with the political process, and the emergence of a more diverse group of political candidates and leaders – overall levels of political ambition for women and men have remained fairly constant. In 2008, men continue to enjoy more comfort, confidence, and freedom than women when thinking about running for office

We link this persistent gender gap in political ambition to several factors. Women are less likely than men to be willing to endure the rigors of a political campaign. They are less likely than men to be recruited to run for office. They are less likely than men to have the freedom to reconcile work and family obligations with a political career. They are less likely than men to think they are qualified to run for office. And they are less likely than men to perceive a fair political environment.

In the end, this report documents how far from gender parity we remain, as well as the barriers and obstacles we must still overcome in order to achieve it. But our results also offer guidance to organizations and individuals seeking to increase the number of women in elected positions. Recruiting women candidates, disseminating information about the electoral environment, and working with women to quell their anxiety about campaigning can help narrow the gender gap in political ambition and increase women's numeric representation.

Still a Man’s World: The Under-Representation of Women in Elective Office

When we turn on the television, read the newspaper, listen to the radio, or scan the Internet, it is difficult not to see women in U.S. politics. Nancy Pelosi, a Democrat from California, is the Speaker of the House of Representatives. U.S. Senator Hillary Clinton is one of the leading candidates for the Democratic nomination for president. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is the veneer of U.S. foreign policy around the globe. But these famous faces obscure, at least in part, the dearth of women who hold elective office in the United States.

When the 110th Congress convened in January 2007, 84 percent of its members were men. The percentages of women office holders presented in Table 1 demonstrate that it is not only at the federal level that women are numerically under-represented. Large gender disparities are also evident at the state and local levels, where more than three-quarters of statewide elected officials and state legislators are men. Further, men occupy the governor’s mansion in 41 of the 50 states, and men run City Hall in 90 of the 100 largest cities across the country.

Table 1 – Women Office Holders in the United States

Office	% Women
Statewide Elective Officials	24.1
State Legislators	23.5
State Governors	18.0
Members of the U.S. House of Representatives	16.3
U.S. Senators	16.0
Mayors of the 100 Largest Cities	10.0

Source: Center for American Women and Politics, “Women Office Holders Fact Sheets and Summaries,” 2007.

The low numbers of women in politics are particularly glaring when we place them in context. Whereas the 1980s saw gradual, but steady increases in the percentage of women seeking elected office, and the early 1990s experienced a rather dramatic surge, the last several election cycles represent a plateau. The numbers of women seeking and winning positions of political power in 2008 are not markedly different than they were a decade ago.

Moreover, as many nations around the world make progress on this front, the United States lags behind; 83 nations surpass the U.S. in the percentage of women in the national legislature. Certainly, cultural and political components factor into the total number of women who hold seats in any nation’s legislature. But Table 2 demonstrates that the nations surpassing the U.S. vary with respect to their political system, electoral rules, geography, region, and culture.

Women’s numeric under-representation in American politics raises grave concerns over the quality of democratic governance and political legitimacy. A central criterion in evaluating the health of democracy is the degree to which all citizens – men and women – are encouraged and willing to engage the political system and run for public office. More women in positions of political power confer a greater sense of political legitimacy to the government, simply by virtue of the fact that it better reflects the gender breakdown of the national population.

The inclusion of women in electoral and legislative processes is also intertwined with fundamental issues of political representation. Electing more women increases the likelihood that policy debate and deliberation includes women’s views and experiences. Further, political theorists and practitioners alike often ascribe symbolic or role model benefits to a more diverse body of elected officials.

Table 2 – Worldwide Rankings of Women in the National Legislature

Rank and Country	% Women
1. Rwanda	48.8
2. Sweden	47.3
3. Finland	42.0
4. Costa Rica	38.6
5. Norway	37.9
6. Denmark	36.9
7. Netherlands	36.7
8. Cuba	36.0
Spain	36.0
10. Mozambique	34.8
11. Belgium	34.7
12. South Africa	32.8
13. Austria	32.2
New Zealand	32.2
15. Iceland	31.7
16. Germany	31.6
17. Burundi	30.5
18. Tanzania	30.4
19. Uganda	29.8
20. Switzerland	29.5
84. United States of America	16.3
International Average	17.5

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union, "Women in National Parliaments," as of October 31, 2007.

In light of the importance of women's presence in the political sphere, it is critical to understand why so few women hold public office in the United States. Somewhat surprisingly, it is not because of discrimination against women candidates. In fact, women perform as well as men when they do run for office. In terms of fundraising and vote totals, the consensus among researchers is the complete absence of overt gender bias. Based on a national study of voting patterns, for example, one group of political scientists concludes: "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."¹ In other words, when women run for office – regardless of the position they seek – they are just as likely as their male counterparts to win their races.

We argue that the fundamental reason for women's under-representation is that they do not run for office. There is a substantial gender

gap in political ambition; men tend to have it, and women don't.² Based on extensive surveys and interviews of thousands of men and women whom we consider potential candidates, this report provides clear and compelling evidence of the manner in which women are less likely than men to enter the electoral arena. In presenting our findings, we have four central goals:

- To provide an overview of the degree to which gender affects political ambition in 2008.
- To advance our understanding of women and men's perceptions of politics, as well as their willingness to participate in the process as candidates for public office.
- To identify clear steps that organizations and individuals can take to increase women's numeric and substantive representation.
- To assess the degree to which levels of political ambition and the factors that affect it have changed over time, and what we might expect in the years to come.

Addressing these key topics serves as a critical step in understanding where we are on the road to gender parity in U.S. electoral politics. In the end, this report documents how far from parity we remain and the barriers and obstacles we must still overcome in order to achieve it.

The Citizen Political Ambition Study

In order to reconcile the seeming contradiction between a political system that elects few women and an electoral environment that is unbiased against women candidates, we developed and conducted the Citizen Political Ambition Study, a series of mail surveys and interviews with men and women in the pool of potential candidates. Our goal was to conduct a nuanced investigation of how women and men initially decide to run for all levels and types of political office, either now or in the future, an endeavor to which virtually no research had been devoted.³

We drew our national sample from the four professions that most often yield political candidates for state legislative and congressional offices: law, business, education, and politics. In assembling the sample, we

created two equal sized pools of potential candidates – one female and one male – that held the same professional credentials. No demographic or geographic differences distinguished the samples of men from women. Thus, we were well-positioned to answer our fundamental question: If women win elections at equal rates as men, then why do there remain so few women in politics?

The initial survey, carried out in 2001, served as the first and only broad, national study of the initial decision to run for office. Based on mail survey responses from 1,969 men and 1,796 women lawyers, business leaders, educators, and political activists, we concluded that well-qualified women were less likely than their male counterparts to consider running for office. We linked women's lower levels of political ambition to their lower levels of encouragement and recruitment to launch a candidacy, their more demanding household obligations, and their self-perceptions that they are not qualified to run or likely to win. Across generations, men expressed more comfort and felt greater freedom than women when thinking about seeking office. The results of the first wave of the study were presented and widely disseminated in a 2004 policy report.⁴

But a lot has happened in the seven years since we carried out the initial survey. The events of September 11, 2001, the war in Iraq, striking levels of animosity toward the Bush Administration, frustration with the Democratic majority in Congress, and the ascension of prominent female politicians on the national scene are only among the many recent developments that might affect the evolution of political ambition. For some people, the current political climate might motivate them to take action. For others, the effect might be increased cynicism and disengagement from the electoral process. In either case, the altered political landscape, coupled with the continuing need to understand why women are less likely than men to run for office, merited conducting a second wave of the Citizen Political Ambition Study.

In early 2008, we completed re-contacting and

surveying the original members of our sample, 2,036 of whom completed a new questionnaire (see Appendix for a detailed description of sampling procedures and response rates). Responses from these 1,110 men and 926 women provide the basis for this report and allow us to shed new light on the gender gap in political ambition.

The Gender Gap in Political Ambition

Do men and women have equal interest in seeking elective office? In the 2001 survey, we found strong evidence that gender plays a substantial role in the candidate emergence process. Among our pool of potential office holders, women were less likely than men to consider running for office and less likely than men to take any of the steps required to mount a political campaign.

The political environment may have changed throughout the last decade, but the gender gap in political ambition in 2008 remains striking. Overall, more than half of the respondents (51 percent) state that the idea of running for an elective position has at least “crossed their mind.” Turning to the gender breakdown of the respondents who considered a candidacy, though, a significant gender gap emerges: 56 percent of the men, compared to 42 percent of the women, have considered running for office. Put somewhat differently, men are nearly 35 percent more likely than women to think of themselves as potential political candidates.⁵ Notably, this gender gap in considering a candidacy persists across political party, income level, age, race, profession, and region.⁶

Women are not only less likely than men to consider a candidacy, but they are also less likely than men to take any of the steps required to launch an actual political campaign. Table 3 reveals that men are significantly more likely than women to have investigated how to place their name on the ballot, discussed running with party or community leaders, or spoken with family members, friends, and potential supporters about a possible candidacy and campaign contributions.

Table 3 – The Gender Gap in Political Ambition

	Women	Men
Have you ever considered running for any political office?	42 % *	56 %
Have you ever . . .		
Discussed running with friends and family?	25 *	32
Discussed running with community leaders?	12 *	16
Investigated how to place your name on the ballot?	9 *	13
Discussed running with party leaders?	10 *	15
Discussed financial contributions with potential supporters?	6 †	8
Sample Size	908	1,094

Notes: Entries indicate percentage of respondents who answered affirmatively for each activity. Significance levels of the gender gap: * $p < .05$ or better; † $p < .10$.

Turning more specifically to the offices in which respondents express interest, we uncover additional gender differences in political ambition (see Table 4). When prompted to consider running for office, women and men do not express comparable levels of interest in all positions. Although there are few statistical differences at the local level, women are more likely than men to express interest in a school board position. But men are nearly twice as likely as women to express interest in any federal position (13 percent of women, compared to 25 percent of men); and roughly 50 percent more likely to consider running at the state level (30 percent of women,

compared to 43 percent of men). These results mirror those of researchers who find that women are more likely to focus their political involvement at the local level or in positions that match their stereotypic strengths.

The gender gap in political ambition – based on a variety of measures – is, therefore, roughly the same magnitude as it was in 2001. It is, however, important to note two changes. First, although women are substantially less likely than men to engage in the concrete steps that tend to precede running for office, the gaps we uncovered in 2008 are somewhat smaller than they were seven years ago. Some progress, therefore, seems to have occurred.

Table 4 – Gender Differences in Office Preferences

	Women	Men
Local or Community Office		
School Board	39 % *	33 %
City Council	42	42
Mayor	11 *	14
District Attorney	6	4
State Level Office		
State Legislator	26 *	40
Statewide Office (i.e., State Treasurer)	6	8
Governor	3 *	8
Federal Office		
House of Representatives	11 *	22
Senate	8 *	15
President	2 *	4
Sample Size	913	1,094

Notes: Entries indicate percentage of respondents who would ever consider running for each position. Percentages do not add up to 100 percent because respondents often expressed interest in more than one position. Significance levels of the gender gap: * $p < .05$ or better.

Second, among the men and women who have considered running for office, women are just as likely as men to report that entering the electoral arena is “always in the back of their mind” (11 percent of women, compared to 10 percent of men). Similarly, we uncover no gender differences at the other end of the spectrum. Twenty-nine percent of the women and 32 percent of the men who have considered running say that “it has been many years” since they last thought about a candidacy. The key question, therefore, is, Why are women so much less likely than men to consider running for office in the first place? The remainder of this report attempts to answer this question.

Explaining the Gender Gap in Political Ambition

A great deal of prior research provides insight into why women might continue to be less interested than men in seeking elective office. Much of that research, however, is based on the assessments and evaluations of women who have already sought and/or held elective positions. In this section, we turn to our unique sample of potential candidates, the overwhelming majority of whom have not yet entered the political process as candidates. We offer five explanations for women’s lower levels of interest in office holding:

- Attitudes about campaigning
- Levels of encouragement and recruitment to become a candidate
- Traditional family dynamics

- Self-perceptions of electoral viability
- Perceptions of the political environment

Together, these factors culminate in a political process that is more complicated and complex for women than men, even those who are equally matched demographically, professionally, and socio-economically. Considering a candidacy is beyond the realm of possibility for many well-credentialed, politically interested women.

Not Interested in the Game: Attitudes Toward Campaigning

To understand women and men’s different levels of interest in and willingness to enter the electoral arena, perhaps the most obvious place to begin is with their attitudes about taking part in the different aspects of a campaign. We provided respondents with a list of eight activities typically associated with any election. Five of these activities pertain to the mechanics of a campaign, while three focus more on the personal toll a campaign might take. We asked respondents the extent to which they would feel comfortable undertaking each activity. The data, presented in Table 5, reveal that women are statistically more likely than men to view all eight of these activities so negatively that they would serve as deterrents to running for office. Overall, 54 percent of men, compared to 67 percent of women, were deterred by at least one typical campaign activity (difference significant at $p < .05$).

Table 5 – Attitudes about Engaging in Campaign Activities

	Percent Responding “So Negative, It would Deter Me from Running for Office”	
	Women	Men
Mechanics of the Campaign		
Soliciting Campaign Contributions	29 *	21
Dealing with Party Officials	15 *	11
Going Door-to-Door to Meet Constituents	19 *	14
Dealing with Members of the Press	15 *	10
Potentially Having to Engage in a Negative Campaign		
Personal Aspects of the Campaign		
Potentially Hindering Professional Goals	19 *	15
Spending Less Time with Your Family	33 *	25
Loss of Privacy	46 *	37
Sample Size	866	1,029
Significance levels of the gender gap: * $p < .05$ or better.		

Notably, the overwhelming majority of respondents – men and women alike – would be more likely to express interest in a political position if they did not have to campaign at all. In fact, 73 percent of women and 69 percent of men report that they would be more likely to seek a position of political power if they could do so without engaging in campaign activities. Despite the general disinclination toward the mechanics and personal trade-offs involved in running for office, women are significantly more likely than men to allow their negative feelings toward the various aspects of a campaign to prevent them from entering the electoral arena.⁸

No One Ever Asked: Electoral Gatekeepers and Political Recruitment

Recruitment and encouragement lead many individuals who otherwise may never have run for public office to become candidates. Seven years ago, women were far less likely than men to receive support for a candidacy. Even with heightened and relatively recent recruitment efforts across the board to fill the 500,000 elective positions in this country, are women still disadvantaged?

To compare men and women’s political recruitment experiences, we asked respondents if anyone ever suggested that they run for office. We broke the possible sources of political recruitment into two categories. First, we asked respondents whether they ever received the suggestion to run for office from a “political actor”: party officials, elected officials, and non-elected political activists. Then, we asked whether they ever received encouragement to run from a “non-political actor”: colleagues, friends, spouses, family members, and religious connections.

Table 6 reveals that women remain less likely than men to have received the suggestion to run for office, regardless of the source. At first glance, some of these gender differences might not appear that striking. But consider these differences in light of the fact that the women and men have the same levels of income, professional status, political interest, age, and education. The data show that women who exist in the same tier of professional accomplishment as men are less likely to receive the suggestion to run for office from both political and non-political actors.

Table 6 – Encouragement to Run for Office
Have you ever received the suggestion to run for office from a . . . ?

	Women	Men
Political Actors		
Party Official	23 % *	29 %
Elected Official	32 *	38
Non-Elected Political Activist	33 *	38
Non-Political Actors		
Co-Worker	54 *	61
Friend	64 *	71
Spouse / Partner	33 *	39
Family Member	44 *	49
Religious Connection	13 *	19
Sample Size	916	1,102

Notes: Entries indicate percentage of respondents who answered affirmatively. Significance levels of the gender gap: * $p < .05$ or better.

The lack of recruitment appears to be a particularly powerful explanation for why women are less likely than men to consider running for office. A respondent who receives external support to run from both a political and non-political actor more than doubles his or her likelihood of considering a candidacy. Women are just as likely as men to respond favorably to the suggestion of a candidacy, but they are less likely than men to receive it. These results corroborate the conclusions of scholars who suggest that vestiges of patterns of traditional gender socialization in candidate recruitment hinder the selection of women candidates.

Party leaders, elected officials, and activists serve as formal electoral gatekeepers who groom eligible candidates to run for office. Over the course of the last decade, though, women’s organizations – non-partisan and those associated with one of the major political parties – have begun to play a more active role in recruiting candidates. So, we asked the respondents whether they had ever received the suggestion or encouragement to run for office from such an organization. More than one in four women (26 percent) report having been recruited to run for office by a women’s organization. These numbers demonstrate the powerful impact women’s organizations can exert

on closing the gender gap in political ambition. Not only have these organizations made their presence felt in a relatively short period of time, but they also helped narrow the gender differences in political recruitment since 2001.

Women’s Work Is Never Done: The Persistence of Traditional Family Dynamics

In many cases, the women in our sample have already overcome traditional barriers; they are partners in law firms, business executives, professors and college administrators, and political activists. The growing body of research on the role of gender in the electoral process, however, suggests that traditional gender socialization continues to play an important role in electoral politics. In other words, the degree to which traditional gender socialization still influences how men and women in the candidate eligibility pool view politics is unclear. Do greater family obligations continue to hinder women from considering running for office?

Table 7 provides a breakdown of the respondents’ family arrangements and distribution of household and childcare responsibilities. Women in the sample are significantly less likely than men to be married and have children. This suggests that some women who choose to become top-level

professionals de-emphasize a traditional family life and traditional family structures. But when we consider the household division of labor, we see that women who do live with a spouse or partner are nearly seven times more likely than men to be responsible for more of the household tasks and fifteen times more likely to shoulder (or to have shouldered) the majority of the childcare responsibilities. Overall, women spend approximately 50 percent more time each week than men on household work and childcare.

While the degree to which traditional family dynamics continue to prevail in American culture is, in and of itself, striking, an additional important issue to address is whether these dynamics affect interest in running for office. The data suggest that as women’s responsibilities for household tasks decrease, their interest in considering running for office increases, albeit only slightly. Whereas 40 percent of the women who are responsible for the majority of household tasks have considered running for office, 46 percent of the women whose partner is responsible for the majority of the household labor have considered a candidacy. Household division of labor does not correlate with men’s likelihood of considering a run for office.

Table 7 – Potential Candidates’ Family Structures and Responsibilities

	Women	Men
Marital Status		
Single	13 % *	5 %
Married or Living with Partner	69 *	86
Separated or Divorced	11 *	6
Parental Status		
Have Children	72 *	88
Children Living at Home	37 †	41
Children Under Age 6 Living at Home	11	10
Childcare Responsibilities		
Responsible for Majority of Childcare	60 *	4
Equal Division of Childcare	29 *	35
Spouse / Partner Responsible for Majority of Childcare	5 *	60
Household Responsibilities		
Responsible for Majority of Household Tasks	44 *	7
Equal Division of Labor	43 *	36
Spouse / Partner Responsible for Majority of Household Tasks	10 *	56
Average Number of Hours Spent Weekly on Household Tasks	12.3 *	8.4
Sample Size	910	1,095

Notes: Household responsibilities figures are based on respondents who are married or living with a partner. Childcare arrangements figures are based on respondents who have children. Significance levels of the gender gap: * p < .05 or better; † p < .10.

The fact that women’s disproportionate levels of household and familial responsibilities do not dramatically affect whether they have ever considered running for office is not altogether surprising. From a statistical standpoint, our empirical measures and survey questions may not be sufficiently subtle to capture the full effects of family dynamics. The women we surveyed are all educated citizens who operate professionally in the public sphere. It is plausible to posit that women were as likely as men to have considered running for office in the early stages of their careers, well before they assumed many household and childcare responsibilities. Without a more specific pinpointing of the stage in life when a candidacy crossed a potential candidate’s mind, it is not possible to assess whether marital and parental status affect women’s political ambition, at least with our empirical measures.

We should also consider the possibility that even if family structures and arrangements do not preclude women from thinking about a full range of lifetime career options and possibilities, the circumstances under which such thoughts cross potential candidates’ minds might differ for women and men. As one gender politics scholar so aptly characterized political ambition in the contemporary environment, “Women may now think about running for office, but they probably think about it while they are making the bed.”⁹

What clearly emerges from this analysis is the fact that women, across generations, face a more complex set of choices. Our findings suggest that we remain in a period where women must continue to disentangle work and family life. As a result, for many women in the pool of eligible candidates, entering the electoral arena would simply be a third job, which is quite unappealing since they already have two.

Qualified, But Not Feeling That Way: Self-Perceptions of Electoral Viability

One of the biggest barriers we uncovered in 2001 pertaining to why women do not run for office dealt with self-perceptions of electoral qualifications and viability. Consistent with the

findings from seven years ago, the entries in Table 8 indicate that men are approximately 65 percent more likely than women to assess themselves as “very qualified” to run for office. Women in the sample are twice as likely as men to rate themselves as “not at all qualified.” Similar gender gaps appear when we consider women and men’s assessments of whether they are qualified to perform the job of an elected official. Whereas more than 80 percent of the men in the sample contend that they could do the job of an office holder, fewer than two thirds of the women self-assess this way. Women are more than twice as likely as men (9 percent, compared to 4 percent) to rate themselves as “not at all qualified” to perform the job (differences significant at $p < .01$). Further, women’s self-doubts play nearly twice as large a role as do men’s in depressing their likelihood of considering a candidacy.

Table 8 – Self Assessment of Qualifications to Run for Public Office

How qualified are you to run for public office?

	Women	Men
Very Qualified	20 % *	33 %
Qualified	35 *	40
Somewhat Qualified	33 *	20
Not at all Qualified	12 *	6
Sample Size	894	1,060
Significance levels of the gender gap: * $p < .05$ or better.		

The gender gaps in perceptions of qualifications to run for and hold office do not stem from gender differences in direct political experiences or proximity to the political arena. Nearly two-thirds of the women and men in the sample have attended political meetings and events. More than half have observed legislative proceedings. And roughly three-quarters have interacted with elected officials, or served on the boards of non-profit organizations and foundations.

Women’s tendency to underestimate their political qualifications also does not reflect their actual concrete credentials, on which they are well-matched with the men in the

sample. As we see in Table 9, roughly one-third of women and men in the candidate eligibility pool have conducted significant policy research. Two-thirds of women and men engage in regular public speaking. When we turn to the three remaining campaign activities, women have a statistical edge on two of them: soliciting funds and organizing events for large groups. Only in terms of running a business, organization, or foundation do men report more experience than women.

Generally speaking, then, men and women in our sample of potential candidates are well-matched in their proximity to the political sphere and the practical skills that would not only qualify, but also facilitate, their entrance into the political arena. If this is the case, then how can we explain the large gender gap in self-assessed qualifications to seek and hold elective office? Women may be more likely than men to doubt their qualifications to run because they do not transfer their professional success and political exposure to their own potential candidacies.

We asked respondents to consider a list of six professional characteristics and five personal traits that might be relevant for a future campaign. As the data presented in Table 10 make clear, women, on every single professional characteristic, are significantly less

Table 9 – Relevant Experience For an Electoral Campaign

Percent with Experience for Each Activity:

	Women	Men
Conducted Significant Policy Research	33	35
Solicited Funds	69 *	64
Run a Business, Organization, or Foundation	59 *	67
Organized an Event for a Large Group	76 *	67
Engaged in Regular Public Speaking	65	69
Sample Size	915	1,101

Significance levels of the gender gap: * p < .05 or better.

likely than men to self-assess as “qualified.” They are also more likely than men to eschew political compromise and determine that they lack the thick skin required to succeed in politics. Somewhat surprisingly, men are more likely than women to express concern over the manner in which a political campaign might affect their families. Yet at the end of the day, on 8 of the 11 measures of subjective qualifications to run for office, women face a disadvantage.

Table 10 – Self-Assessment of Specific Qualifications to Run for Public Office

In thinking about your qualifications to run for office, which of the following apply to you?

	Women	Men
Professional Characteristics		
I know a lot about public policy issues	46 % *	59 %
I have relevant professional experience	65 *	74
I am a good public speaker	57 *	65
I have connections to the political system	22 *	28
I have or could raise enough money	13 *	21
I am a good self-promoter	17 *	21
Personal Evaluations		
My politics are too far out of the mainstream	16	16
I don't like to make deals to get things done	32 *	25
I don't have thick enough skin	48 *	29
I have a lot of skeletons in my closet	9	11
I worry about how a campaign would affect my family	40 *	47
Sample Size	913	1,095

Notes: Entries indicate percentage of respondents who answered affirmatively. Significance levels of the gender gap: * p < .05 or better.

The results suggest that, as far as political ambition is concerned, perceptions of qualifications to run for office and serve in positions of political power are more closely linked to subjective assessments about how an individual thinks he or she might handle a campaign than to the objective performance and experienced-based measures on which women and men are similarly situated.¹⁰

Bias in the Electoral Arena: Assessments of the Political Environment

The exact source of women and men's different beliefs about their own qualifications to run for office is difficult to pinpoint. But women's self-doubts and tendency to underestimate their qualifications may be a response to perceptions of a competitive electoral environment that is biased against them. As we mentioned at the outset of this report, when women run for office, they are just as likely as men to win their races. The lack of gender bias in fundraising receipts and election outcomes, however, is only as good as the dissemination of the message. That is, if women think that election outcomes are biased against them, then the empirical reality of a playing field on which women can succeed is almost meaningless.

To shed light on any gender differences in perceptions of the electoral system, we asked respondents the extent to which they regard their local and congressional election landscapes competitive. Because the women and men are geographically matched, differences in responses reflect perceptions, not actual differences in levels of competition.

The data presented in Table 11 reveal that women are approximately 25 percent more likely than men to judge their local and congressional elections as "highly competitive." Women are nearly twice as likely as men to contend that it is more difficult for women to raise money for a political campaign, and only half as likely to believe that women and men face an equal chance of being elected to high level office (13 percent of women, compared to 24 percent of men). Indeed, 12 percent of women state outright that they are not qualified to run for office simply because they are the "wrong" sex.

These abstract perceptions of bias in the electoral environment affect respondents' assessments of their own electoral prospects as well. Women are significantly less likely than men to think they would win their first campaign. Only 28 percent of women potential candidates, compared to 39 percent of men, think that an electoral victory would be "likely" or "very likely." Alternatively, 29 percent of women, but only 17 percent of men, think the odds of winning their first race would be "very unlikely" (gender differences significant at $p < .05$).

The perceptual differences we identified translate into an additional hurdle women must overcome when behaving as strategic politicians and navigating the candidate emergence process. There may be no bias against women candidates on Election Day, but the aggregate percentages of women and men who perceive a biased system are remarkable. And as far as considering a candidacy is concerned, perceptions trump reality.

Table 11 – Gender Differences in Perceptions of the Electoral System

	Women	Men
In the area I live, local elections are highly competitive.	57 % *	47 %
In the area I live, congressional elections are highly competitive.	61 *	48
It is more difficult for a woman to be elected to high level public office as a man.	87 *	76
It is harder for a woman to raise money for a campaign than a man.	64 *	38
Sample Size	914	1,097

Notes: Entries indicate percentage of respondents who answered affirmatively. Significance levels of the gender gap: * $p < .05$ or better.

Where Do We Go From Here? Summary and Discussion

In analyzing and summarizing the key findings from this report, several important points require emphasis:

- In 2008, the profound gender gap in interest in seeking elective office persists. Despite the historic events of the last seven years, women of all professions, political parties, ages, and income levels remain less likely than their male counterparts to express interest in seeking any political office. The gender gap in political ambition grows as we move from local, to state, to federal office.
- The gender gap in political ambition is driven largely by women's greater aversion to campaigning, lower levels of political recruitment, and traditional family arrangements and responsibilities. Many of these explanations carry over from our 2001 analysis. But the 2008 data also offer a more nuanced and detailed explication of the manner in which women's perceptions of a biased and competitive electoral arena, as well as their self-assessments that they are less qualified to seek and hold elective office, impede their political ambition.
- When we compare the 2008 results to the 2001 data, some subtle progress has occurred. Women in 2008 are still less likely than men to take concrete steps that precede running for office. And they are more likely than men to face a deficit in terms of political recruitment. But these gaps have narrowed slightly. Not only are women more likely now than before to have been recruited to run for office, but they are also significantly more likely than they were seven years ago to engage in many of the activities that serve as precursors to launching a campaign. Granted, this progress has not yet translated into heightened levels of interest in running for office, but it does suggest that the women who have considered a candidacy are thinking very seriously about throwing their hats into the ring.

These findings from the Citizen Political Ambition Study carry broad implications both for the academic study of gender politics and for practical politics. In terms of academic research, we must continue to focus on the decision to run for office. Women's full inclusion in our political institutions depends on closing the gender gap in political ambition. Moreover, the findings presented in this report point to the importance of further investigating candidate recruitment processes and the manner in which women and men in contemporary society come to be socialized about politics, the acquisition of political power, and the characteristics that qualify one to seek it.

Clearly, 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. At a practical level, though, our findings offer some direction for people interested in increasing the numbers of women serving in office.

- First, the data reveal that while women have been less likely than men ever to have considered running for office, they are just as likely as men to respond positively to instances of political recruitment. Recruiting early and recruiting often can work to close the gender gap in political ambition.
- Second, the gendered division of labor we uncovered demonstrates that women and men who are similarly situated professionally are not similarly situated at home. Because the disparities, at least in part, hinder women's freedom to consider running for office, any move toward a more family friendly work environment and campaign arena would confer disproportional benefits to women. Organizations and individuals dedicated to closing the gender gap in political ambition, therefore, might develop and advocate for childcare and elder assistance programs and policies.
- Third, a substantial barrier to entry for many female potential candidates is the perception that women are not as likely as

men to win elections or as able to raise sufficient funds. Spreading the word about women's electoral success and fundraising prowess can work to change potential candidates' perceptions.

- Fourth, women view the campaign process and the activities involved in running for office much more negatively than do men. Accordingly, those seeking to recruit and encourage women candidates must work to dispel women's anxiety and negative views about the mechanics of a campaign. Moreover, they must attempt to work with women candidates to determine the best ways to minimize the personal trade-offs involved in seeking office. Training programs and technical assistance cannot be under-estimated in closing the ambition gap. These resources can also go a long way in combating women's tendency to identify themselves as less qualified than their male counterparts to run for office, despite equal or superior resumes and accomplishments.

These findings should offer some guidance (and hope) to organizations seeking to increase the number of women in elective positions. After all, these organizations recruit women candidates, disseminate information about the electoral environment, and work with individual women to quell their anxiety about campaigning. These organizations can also begin to work to ensure that, from an early age, politics appears on women and girls' radar screens.

Moreover, women are very interested in accessing resources about how to run for office. We asked respondents whether they would be more inclined to consider a candidacy if they had access to reading materials, experts, webcasts, and training programs. Across the board, women were at least as likely as men to respond positively to each resource. In fact, as we see in Table 12, one out of every four women in the sample would be more likely to think about running for office if she had the opportunity to attend a training program sponsored by a political organization. Women, therefore, are approximately 40 percent more likely than men to respond favorably to the notion of working with a political organization to develop the skills and connections to run for office at some point in the future.

Thus, women's organizations, political leaders, and concerned individuals can continue to play a major role in closing the political ambition gender gap. They can continue to reach out to their constituencies and to women across the country. They can continue to identify and disseminate the kind of information women want to obtain before considering a candidacy. They can continue to create mentoring networks and forge relationships between and among politically active citizens, candidates, and elected officials. In short, they can continue to work to ensure that seven years from now, we see real progress not only in the number of women running for and holding elective office, but also in the freedom with which all men and women consider entering the electoral arena.

Table 12 – Resources to Encourage Office Seeking

	Women	Men
Would any of the following resources make you more likely to consider running for office?		
Manuals and Articles on Campaigns and Elections	14 %	13 %
Interviews with Political Operatives and Elected Officials	17	17
Webcasts on Organizing, Fundraising, and Media Skills	13 *	10
Training Programs Sponsored by Political Organizations	25 *	18
Sample Size	914	1,095

Notes: Entries indicate percentage of respondents who answered affirmatively. Significance levels of the gender gap: * $p < .05$ or better.

Concluding Comments

Democratic legitimacy in the United States demands that we continue to move toward gender parity in electoral office. The Citizen Political Ambition Study, which serves as the basis for this report, represents the most thorough, in-depth tool we have for evaluating the long-term prospects for women's full inclusion in our political institutions. The large gender gap in political ambition we identify, coupled with the stagnation in the number of women serving in elected offices in the last decade, makes the road ahead look quite challenging. Indeed, many barriers to women's interest in running for office will only be ameliorated with major cultural and political changes.

Although gender parity across the political spectrum still appears a long way off, some positive change is slowly occurring, and women have begun to compete quite seriously for elective offices at every level.

It is also important to note that as an increasing number of women seek and win elective office, women in the candidate eligibility pool may be more likely to consider

throwing their own hats into the arena. The women we surveyed are significantly more likely than the men to report feeling inspired by other women in politics. And these feelings transcend party. For example, among Democrats, 59 percent of women, as opposed to 38 percent of men, consider Hillary Clinton "inspirational." Republicans are obviously less likely to view Senator Clinton this way, but female Republicans are still much more likely than their male counterparts to offer this assessment (17 percent of women, compared to 4 percent of men). We uncover similar patterns when we turn to Nancy Pelosi and Condoleezza Rice. It may take time for the presence of women in such high levels of political power to trickle down to the candidate eligibility pool and inspire future candidacies.

As we continue this long term process of shifting expectations for women in politics, this report reveals a number of ways we can work to remedy the ambition gap in the short term. The challenge in front of us is to continue down these paths, to continue to raise awareness about the barriers women face, and to continue to advocate for a more inclusive electoral process.

Appendix: Sample Design and Data Collection

Our “candidate eligibility pool” is comprised of a national sample of women and men from the four professions that are most likely to yield political candidates for state legislative and congressional offices: law, business, education, and politics. In assembling the sample, we created two equal sized pools of candidates – one female and one male – that held the same professional credentials. Because we wanted to make comparisons within and between the sub-groups of men and women in each profession, we attempted to compile a sample of 900 men and 900 women from each.

Turning specifically to the four sub-samples, for lawyers and business leaders, we drew from national directories. We obtained a random sample of 1,800 lawyers from the 2001 edition of the Martindale Hubble Law Directory, which provides the addresses and names of practicing attorneys in all law firms across the country. We stratified the total number of lawyers by gender and in proportion to the total number of law firms listed for that state. For business leaders, we randomly selected 900 businessmen and 900 businesswomen from Dun and Bradstreet’s Million Dollar Directory, 2000 – 2001, which lists the top executive officers of more than 160,000 public and private companies in the United States. We ensured that men and women held comparable positions.

No national directories exist for our final two categories. To compile a sample of educators, we focused on college professors and administrative officials, and public school teachers and administrators. Turning first to the higher education sub-sample, we compiled a random selection of 600 colleges and universities from the roughly 4,000 schools listed in U.S. News and World Report’s “Best Colleges” guide (2000), from which we sampled 300 male and 300 female professors and administrative officials. We then compiled a national sample of 1,200 public school teachers and principals (through an Internet search of public school districts and individual school websites).¹¹

Our final eligibility pool profession – “political activists” – represents citizens who work in politics and public policy. We endeavored to survey 900 men and 900 women leaders from political interest groups and national organizations with state and/or local affiliates. The list was then further narrowed so as to strike a partisan and ideological balance. We randomly selected state branch and local chapter executive directors and officers of organizations that focus on the environment, abortion, consumer issues, race relations, civil liberties, taxes, guns, crime, social security, school choice, government reform, and “women’s issues.” This selection technique, which provided a range of activists, yielded 744 men and 656 women as potential candidates.

We employed standard mail survey protocol in conducting the study, which we initiated in August 2001. Potential candidates received an initial letter explaining the study and a copy of the questionnaire. Three days later, they received a follow-up postcard. Two weeks later, we sent another copy of the questionnaire and a follow-up letter. We supplemented this third piece of correspondence with an email message when possible (for roughly one half of the lawyers, educators, and political activists). Four months later, we sent all men and women from whom we did not receive a survey another copy of the questionnaire. The final contact was made the following month, when we sent, via email, a link to an on-line version of the survey.

From the original sample of 6,800, 554 surveys were either undeliverable or returned because the individual was no longer employed in the position. From the 6,246 remaining members of the sample, we received responses from 3,765 individuals (1,969 men and 1,796 women). After taking into account respondents who left the majority of the questionnaire incomplete, we were left with 3,614 completed surveys, for a usable response rate of 58 percent, which is higher than that of typical elite sample mail surveys, and substantially greater than the expected response rate of 40 percent.¹²

This year, we completed re-contacting the members of the candidate eligibility pool who

Table 13 – Sample Demographics

	2001 Sample		2008 Sample	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Party Affiliation				
Democrat	55 %*	37 %	53 % *	34 %
Republican	23 *	35	14 *	26
Independent	18 *	24	33 *	40
Political Ideology				
Liberal	41 *	24	46 *	28
Moderate	48 *	52	43 *	45
Conservative	11 *	24	11 *	27
Race				
White	84	82	85	84
Black	10	9	9	8
Latino / Hispanic	4	6	5	6
Other	2	3	2	2
Highest Level of Education				
No College Degree	8	7	6	5
Bachelor's Degree	21	20	16	17
Graduate Degree	71	73	77	78
Household Income				
Less than \$50,000	11 *	6	5	3
\$50,001 - \$75,000	12	12	9	8
\$75,001 - \$100,000	19	17	14	13
\$100,001 - \$200,000	33	35	34	33
More than \$200,000	25 *	29	38 *	42
Mean Age (Years)	47 *	50	53 *	56
Sample Size	1,704	1,910	900	1,090
Significance levels of the gender gap: * p < .05 or better.				

completed the 2001 survey. Through extensive Internet searches and phone calls, we managed to obtain current address information for 2,976 members (82 percent) of the original sample. Again, we employed standard mail survey protocol, beginning with an initial letter and copy of the questionnaire, following up with the postcard reminder, second survey, and email. The survey was a resounding success, as we heard from 2,060 men and women, 2,036 of whom completed the questionnaire. This represents a 75 percent response rate (205 surveys were returned to us as undeliverable).¹³

Our sample of the “eligibility pool,” 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, education level, and household income, Table 13 reveals two statistically significant differences between men and women that merit discussion.

Women in the sample, on average, are three 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. Further, women are more likely to be Democrats and liberal-leaning, while men are more likely to be Republicans and conservative, a finding consistent, albeit more pronounced, with recent polls showing a partisan gender gap among the general U.S. population.

No significant demographic, professional, or political factors distinguish the 2001 and 2008 samples, except that a significant portion of respondents, men and women alike, have decreased their identification with the Republican party and now classify themselves as Independents. Considering that political ideology has remained fairly constant, the shift in party identification likely reflects disillusionment with the Republican party’s face and name, as opposed to its ideological underpinnings.

Notes

- 1 Seltzer, R.A., J. Newman and M. Voorhees Leighton. (1997) *Sex as a Political Variable*, Boulder: Lynne Reinner. More recent studies arrive at the same conclusion. Based on her analysis of a series of public opinion polls and election results, Kathleen Dolan (2004, 50) concludes, "Levels of bias are low enough to no longer provide significant impediments to women's chances of election" (*Voting for Women: How the Public Evaluates Women Candidates*. Boulder: Westview Press).
- 2 We also acknowledge the conventional wisdom explaining women's slow ascension into electoral politics. Structural barriers, most notably the incumbency advantage and the proportion of women in the "pipeline" professions that precede political careers, limit the number of electoral opportunities for women and other previously excluded groups. There is no question that, as more open seats emerge, and as women continue to increase their proportions in the fields that tend to lead to office holding, there will be an increase in the number of women candidates. But by demonstrating that the process by which qualified individuals become actual candidates differs for women and men, we challenge the very precarious assumption that equally credentialed women and men are equally likely to emerge from the candidate eligibility pool, run for office, and win their races.
- 3 When we embarked upon this project and conducted the first wave of our study, there were two exceptions: The National Women's Political Caucus' poll of potential candidates (National Women's Political Caucus. 1994. *Why Don't More Women Run?* A study prepared by Mellman, Lazarus, and Lake, Washington, DC: National Women's Political Caucus); and a mail survey of potential candidates in New York State, which served as a pilot for our national study (Fox, Richard L., Jennifer L. Lawless and Courtney Feeley. 2001. "Gender and the Decision to Run for Office." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 26(3):411-35).
- 4 See Jennifer L. Lawless and Richard L. Fox (2004), *Why Don't Women Run for Office?* (Providence: Taubman Center for Public Policy). The results of the first wave also served as the basis for a book: Jennifer L. Lawless and Richard L. Fox (2005), *It Takes a Candidate: Why Women Don't Run for Office* (New York: Cambridge University Press).
- 5 Women are not only less likely than men to consider running for office; they are also less likely actually to do it. Overall, 12 percent of the respondents have run for some elective position. Men, however, are 40 percent more likely than women to have done so (10 percent of women, compared to 14 percent of men; difference significant at $p < .05$). Although there was no statistically significant gender difference in election outcomes (6 percent of women and 8 percent of men won their races and have held some public office), women were less likely than men to reach this seemingly gender neutral "end-stage" of the electoral process.
- 6 All of the comparisons we present here and throughout the remainder of the report are based on the overall sample of potential candidates. When we break the data down into professional sub-samples (i.e., lawyers, business leaders, educators, political activists), in almost all cases, the magnitude of the gender gaps and levels of statistical significance remain unchanged.
- 7 Throughout the tables and text, the "significance levels" mean that we have at least 95 percent confidence that the gender gaps we identify are not statistical anomalies.
- 8 In 2001, we did not uncover these gender differences in attitudes toward campaigning. We reported no gender differences in attitudes about attending fundraisers or dealing with party officials. The three significant differences we did find regarding attitudes toward campaigning revealed that women were actually more positive than men about dealing with the press, meeting constituents, and enduring the time consuming nature of a campaign. The different results likely reflect question wording differences, as opposed to changes in attitudes. Asking whether a respondent feels "positively" about a campaign activity, which is how we asked the question, seems to have obscured the intensity behind attitudes. Women in the candidate eligibility pool remain

just as likely as men to state that the rigors of a campaign would not bother them – i.e., that they feel positively about engaging in them. But our new, more detailed investigation reveals that the women who do not embrace campaign activities hold much more intense negative views than do their male counterparts.

- 9 We thank Georgia Duerst-Lahti for this comment.
- 10 It is not only the political sphere in which scholars uncover a gender gap in self-perceived qualifications. Social psychologists find that, in general, men are more likely than women to express confidence in skills they do not possess and overconfidence in skills they do possess. Men tend to be more self-congratulatory, whereas women tend to be more modest about their achievements. Men tend to overestimate their intelligence, while women tend to underestimate theirs. Men often fail to incorporate criticism into their self-evaluations, whereas women tend to be strongly influenced by negative appraisals of their capabilities. These patterns emerge in studies of gender differences in academic abilities, salary negotiations, professional compensation, and even game show performance. For a review of this literature, see Lawless and Fox (2005), *It Takes A Candidate: Why Women Don't Run for Office*, Chapter 6.
- 11 We acknowledge that this might result in a bias toward schools that have websites, although a 2001 study by the U.S. Department of Education found that 98 percent of public schools had Internet access and 84 percent had a webpage (Cattagni, Anne and Elizabeth Farris Westat. 2001. "Internet Access in U.S. Public Schools and Classrooms: 1994-2000." Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education).
- 12 Response rates within the four sub-samples in 2001 were: lawyers – 68%; business leaders – 45%; educators – 61%; political activists – 68%. Non-response is probably inversely correlated with interest in running for political office, but does not differ across sex.
- 13 Response rates for the 2008 survey varied less by profession than was the case in 2001: lawyers – 77%; business leaders – 59%; educators – 71%; political activists – 73%. High response rates for the second wave are to be expected, since each respondent had already demonstrated a propensity to complete the questionnaire.

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