Why Women Don’t Run for Office (and How We Can Change That!)

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As of the 1970s, women occupied almost no major elective political positions in the United States. Ella Grasso, a Democrat from Connecticut, and Dixie Lee Ray, a Democrat from Washington, served as the only women elected governor during the decade. Not until 1978 did Kansas Republican Nancy Kassebaum become the first woman elected to the U.S. Senate in her own right. By 1979, women comprised fewer than five percent of the seats in the U.S. House of Representatives, and only about 10 percent of state legislative positions.

Today, if we glance at the television screen, peruse the newspaper, listen to the radio, or scan the Internet, we might be tempted to conclude that women have made remarkable gains. Nancy Pelosi currently serves as the minority leader in the U.S. House of Representatives. Secretary of State (and former U.S. Senator) Hillary Clinton not only received 18 million votes when she sought the Democratic nomination for president—she also has the highest favorability ratings of any member of the Obama administration. And in 2011, polls repeatedly placed former vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin in the top tier of potential candidates for the Republican presidential nomination.

But these famous faces obscure the dearth of women who hold elective office in the United States. When the 112th Congress convened in January 2011, 84 percent of its members were men. 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 44 of the 50 states, and men run city hall in 92 of the 100 largest cities across the country.

Why are so few women in politics, especially in light of the fact that women fare as well as men in terms of vote totals and fundraising receipts?

During the past decade, Richard L. Fox, PhD, MA, and I have surveyed and interviewed more than 7,500 “eligible candidates”—highly successful individuals who occupy the professions most likely to precede a career in politics. Although about 50 percent of the people we spoke to had considered running for office, women were more than one-third less likely than men to have considered a candidacy. And they were only half as likely as men to have taken any of the actions that usually precede a campaign—like investigating how to place their name on the ballot, or discussing running with potential donors, party or community leaders, or even mentioning the idea to family members or friends. If we focus only on the 50 percent of people who had thought about running, women were one-third less likely than men to throw their hats into the ring and enter actual races. The good news is that women were just as likely as men to win their races. The bad news is that—because of this winnowing process—they were far less likely than men to make it to Election Day.

Because we cannot really begin to determine how to minimize the gender gap in political ambition if we do not understand its roots, I’d like to begin a conversation about political ambition, why men have it, and why women don’t.

Impediment 1: Perceptions of Qualifications

Despite comparable resumes, the men we surveyed and interviewed are nearly 60 percent more likely than women to assess themselves as “very qualified” to run for office. Women are more than twice as likely as men to rate themselves as “not at all qualified.” Importantly, the gender gap in perceptions of qualifications to run for office does not stem from gender differences in direct political experiences or exposure to, and familiarity with, the political arena (the women and men are similarly situated on these dimensions).

Women’s self-doubts are particularly important because they play a much larger role than do men’s in depressing the likelihood of considering a candidacy. More specifically, among women who self-assess as “not at all qualified” to run for office, only 39 percent have considered throwing their hats into the ring. Among men who do not think they are qualified to run for office, 55 percent have given the notion of a candidacy some thought.

Impediment 2: Recruitment

Women are less likely than men to have received the suggestion to run for office—from anyone. This gender gap in political recruitment exists at all levels of office. From local, to state, to federal positions, party leaders, elected officials, political activists, colleagues, family members, and friends, encourage far more men than women to enter the electoral arena.

The lack of recruitment is a powerful explanation for why women are less likely than men to consider a candidacy. Sixty-seven percent of respondents who have been encouraged to run by a party leader, elected official, or political activist, for example, have considered running, compared to 33 percent of respondents who report no such recruitment. The same pattern holds for non-political actors. Importantly, women are just as likely as men to respond favorably
to the suggestion of a candidacy. They are just less likely than men to receive it.

**Impediment 3: Family Roles**

Women working in the top tier of professional accomplishment still tend to exhibit traditional gender role orientations. In families where both adults are working (generally in high-level careers), women are roughly six times more likely than men to bear responsibility for the majority of household tasks, and they are about 10 times more likely to be the primary childcare provider. Notably, these differences in family responsibilities are not merely a matter of gendered perceptions. Both sexes fully recognize this organization of labor. More than 50 percent of men acknowledge that their spouses are responsible for a majority of household tasks and childcare, while only seven percent of women make the same claim. This division of labor is consistent across political party lines. For many women, even considering a candidacy might seem like a "third job."

**What Can We Do to Bring about Change?**

Given the persistent gender gap in political ambition, 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. The 2012 elections, which are already being heralded as another great year for female candidates, are likely to result in only incremental changes to the number of women serving in the U.S. Congress. Both parties have proudly announced that they are running more women in the 2012 cycle than in any previous election. But this record number still means that women—should they win their primary contests—will compete in less than one-third of the Senate races in 2012. Thus, even if 2012 turns out to be a "banner year" for female candidates, and even if the majority of these women win their races, their victories will amount to, at most, a one-to-two percentage point increase in the seats held by women in the U.S. Congress.

The problems that underlay women’s numeric under-representation are more fundamental than the occasional attention that political parties and the media pay to women’s candidate emergence might suggest. Our findings highlight the importance of deepening our understanding of the manner in which women and men in contemporary society are socialized about politics, the acquisition of political power, and the characteristics that qualify individuals to seek it.

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

- First, although women are less likely than men ever to have considered running for office, they are just as likely as men to respond positively to political recruitment. Recruiting early and recruiting often are vital ingredients for closing the gender gap in political ambition. Indeed, we need to go to high schools and colleges and encourage girls and women to engage in politics. Every time any of us runs across a woman who seems to fit the bill, we need to tell her—and we should tell her more than once—that she should consider running for office.

- Second, a substantial barrier for many female potential candidates is the perception of a biased and competitive electoral atmosphere in which women have to be twice as good to deem themselves “qualified.” Yet this perception is not consistent with the reality that women are just as likely as men to succeed in the electoral arena. Spreading the word about women’s electoral success and fund-raising prowess can work to change perceptions of a biased electoral arena.

- Third, the gendered division of labor we uncovered demonstrates that women and men who are similarly situated professionally are not similarly situated at home. Any move toward a more family-friendly work environment and campaign arena would likely confer disproportional benefits to women.

The large gender gap in political ambition, coupled with the stagnation in the number of women serving in elected offices in the last decade, makes the road ahead look quite daunting. Many barriers to women’s interest in running for office can be overcome only with major cultural and political changes. But in the meantime, recruiting female candidates and disseminating information about the electoral environment and women’s successes can help narrow the gender gap and increase women’s numeric representation. The challenges in front of us are to continue to raise awareness about the barriers women face, and to continue to advocate for a more inclusive electoral process.