

It's the Family, Stupid? Not Quite . . .

How Traditional Gender Roles Do Not Affect Women's Political Ambition

INTRODUCTION



Jennifer L. Lawless

is a nonresident senior fellow in Governance Studies at Brookings. She is also professor of government at American University, where she is also the Director of the Women & Politics Institute. Professor Lawless received her Ph.D. in Political Science from Stanford University in 2003 and her B.A. from Union College in 1997. Her research, which has been supported by the National Science Foundation, focuses on representation, political ambition, and gender in the electoral process.

On April 17, 2014, Chelsea Clinton told an audience at a Clinton Foundation event that she and her husband Marc Mezvinsky were expecting their first child in the fall. The news of Clinton's pregnancy set off a firestorm of political speculation. Reporters could not stop themselves from prognosticating as to whether news of a grandchild would influence Hillary Clinton's decision to run for president in 2016. ABC News asked on its homepage, "Will Clinton Baby Affect 2016, and Is It Sexist to Ask?"¹ *The Washington Times* wondered, "What Will a Grandchild Mean for Hillary Clinton?"² And although the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Chicago Tribune* ran headlines that simply "announced" the pregnancy, each included in its coverage quotes from pundits and insiders about how the news might thwart Hillary Clinton's presidential aspirations.

As much fun as it might be for political junkies, pundits, and operatives to wonder whether and how a grandchild will factor into Clinton's decision calculus, the truth of the matter is that it is highly unlikely to matter. The evidence I present in this paper indicates that family roles and responsibilities exert no impact on potential candidates' decisions to run for office—and that is the case for both women and men. If having a child and being its primary caretaker does not stunt women's political ambition, then it is hard to imagine how being a grandmother would.

***The complete paper is available at the Women & Politics Institute.**

1 Liz Kruetz, "Will Clinton Baby Affect 2016, and Is It Sexist To Ask?" *ABC News*, April 18, 2014. Accessed at: <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2014/04/will-clinton-baby-affect-2016-and-is-it-sexist-to-ask/> (May 26, 2014).

2 Ben Wolfgang, "What Will a Grandchild Mean for Hillary Clinton?" *Washington Times*, April 20, 2014. Accessed at: <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/apr/20/what-will-a-grandchild-mean-for-hillary-clinton/?page=all> (May 26, 2014).

THE CONVENTIONAL WISDOM: FAMILY AS AN IMPEDIMENT TO WOMEN'S POLITICAL AMBITION

Women's numeric under-representation in politics is glaring, regardless of the level of office we examine. In Congress, women occupy just 19% of the seats. They serve as governor in only five of the 50 states, and they run City Hall in only a dozen of the 100 largest cities across the country. Their representation in state legislatures and in statewide offices has hovered at 25% for nearly two decades. These numbers are striking because, in the contemporary electoral environment, female candidates tend to fare at least as well as their male counterparts, both in terms of vote totals and dollars raised (e.g., Fox 2010; Lawless and Pearson 2008; Seltzer, Newman, and Leighton 1997). This paradox has led scholars to identify the candidate emergence process as one the biggest obstacles to women's numeric representation. Indeed, data from the Citizen Political Ambition Studies—three national surveys Richard L. Fox and I conducted of women and men who work in the professions from which most candidates for elective office emerge—reveal a striking gender gap in political ambition. Women are less likely than similarly situated men to consider running for office; less likely to run for office; less likely to receive encouragement to run for office; and less like to believe they are qualified to seek office (Lawless and Fox 2010).

Female candidates tend to fare at least as well as their male counterparts, both in terms of vote totals and dollars raised.

Although the reasons for the gender gap in political ambition are many, a broad, systemic dynamic assumed to undergird it has to do with the power and tenacity of traditional family arrangements. After all, among elected officials, women often mention the balancing act involved in reconciling a career, a family, and political ambition (Gaddie 2004). Female state legislators continue to be primarily responsible for housework and childcare even after they are elected to public office (Thomas 2002). Evidence from in-depth studies of congressional candidates points to women being more likely than men to express concern with family responsibilities when making decisions about pursuing elective office (Fox 1997). And our national surveys of potential candidates reveal that women are roughly six times more likely than men to bear responsibility for the majority of household tasks, and about ten times more likely than men to be the primary childcare provider (Fox and Lawless 2014). This is the case even among women and men who work the same number of hours each day in similar high-level career fields.

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the conventional wisdom has converged on the premise that traditional family role orientations serve as significant impediments to women's candidate emergence. In fact, gender and politics textbooks regularly conclude that women's absence from high-level electoral politics is linked to their family roles (e.g., Dolan, Deckman, and Swers 2010; Conway, Ahern, and Steuernagel 2004). Although little research examines this

assumption rigorously, how could it not be true? As such, we can hardly blame journalists for homing in on the political implications of Chelsea Clinton's pregnancy.

REVISITING THE CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

Despite its intuitive appeal, it is time to revisit the conventional wisdom for two central reasons. First, throughout the past 30 years, women have emerged as trail blazers whose professional success was contingent on learning how to balance high-level careers with traditional gender roles. To assume that family arrangements stunt women's political ambition is to ignore the reality that the difficult balancing act women face has evolved into a norm for high-level professional women. Although women's full integration into the pipeline professions, especially at the highest echelons, will take decades, recent data on career patterns indicate that women are moving swiftly into the professions from which most candidates yield.³ Given that divisions in family roles and household responsibilities remain strikingly gendered, women who embark on careers in law, business, and education have become accustomed to the challenges of the balancing act. In other words, women in the political pipeline have learned to balance these dual roles and reconcile being the primary caretaker of the home and children with their ambition to become lawyers, executives, school principals, professors, and heads of political organizations. If family roles were going to hold them back professionally, then women in the political pipeline would have already been stymied.⁴

Second, the evidence on which scholars rely to establish a link between family roles and political ambition tends to come from candidates and elected officials, all of whom, by virtue of the fact that they decided to run for office, did not perceive family arrangements as a barrier sufficient to preclude an eventual candidacy (e.g., Fulton et al. 2006; Gaddie 2004; Fox 1997). This is not to diminish the findings from these studies; many female candidates and elected officials reference their family roles as making their political careers more difficult and complex, or affecting the timing with which they pursued a candidacy. But in none of these cases did traditional family arrangements prevent women's eventual candidate emergence. Traditional gender roles might not be fair, and they may make women's lives more challenging, but that does not mean that family roles impede female potential candidates from expressing interest in running for office.

3 Almost 35% of practicing lawyers are women. More than 50% of those working in managerial and professional specialty occupations in business are women. Similar trends are evident as women move into top positions in secondary education, the professoriate, and college and university administrations.

4 A substantial, multidisciplinary literature assesses the challenges of the work/family balance for professional women and draws conclusions about the best ways for women with families to succeed (for a meta-analysis, see Kelly et al. 2008). The mere existence of this burgeoning literature is a testament to the fact that these dual roles are a regular aspect of women's participation in the workforce.

TESTING THE CONVENTIONAL WISDOM: THE 2011 CITIZEN POLITICAL AMBITION STUDY

To investigate the extent to which traditional family structures and roles affect political ambition, I rely on data from the 2011 Citizen Political Ambition Study—a national survey of a random sample of equally credentialed women and men who are well-positioned to serve as future candidates for all elective offices. Richard L. Fox and I drew our “candidate eligibility pool” from the professions that yield the highest proportion of male and female congressional and state legislative candidates: law, business, education, and politics. We disproportionately stratified by sex so that the sample would include roughly equal numbers of women and men.⁵

The results presented here are based on survey responses from 3,768 potential candidates (1,925 men and 1,843 women). After taking into account undeliverable surveys, this represents a 51% response rate. No remarkable socio-demographic or professional differences distinguish the men from the women. We uncovered no gender differences in race, income, education, or region. Women and men also hold similar employment roles, degrees of professional success, and levels of political interest and participation. And women and men were equally likely to complete the survey and took nearly identical amounts of time to return it, so it is unlikely that family roles and responsibilities affected women’s propensity to respond to the questionnaire.⁶ Overall, the “eligibility pool approach” and sample allow for a detailed examination of the manner in which family affects political ambition.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS: IT’S NOT THE FAMILY

Put simply, family structures and roles do not affect potential candidates’ political ambition, either directly or indirectly. And this is the case for both women and men. The first row of data in Table 1 presents the percentages of women and men, overall, who have ever considered

Men are about 40% more likely than women ever to have considered running for office.

running for office. As we would expect, there is a 17 percentage point gender gap that favors men. This translates to mean that men are about 40% more likely than women ever to have considered running for office. Given that the women and men in the sample are similarly situated professionally and have comparable educational credentials, incomes, and levels of political interest, the ambition gap is all the more striking.

As the rest of the entries in the table make clear, though, family arrangements do not account for the substantial gender difference in political ambition. Women—across categories—are

⁵ For a detailed description of the research design, as well as information about the demographics of the sample, see Fox and Lawless 2014.

⁶ It is important to note two statistically significant gender differences, though. Women are more likely to be Democrats, while men are more likely to be Republicans and independents. Further, women in the sample are, on average, three years younger than men, a probable result of women’s relatively recent entry into the fields of law and business. The empirical analyses summarized in this paper are sensitive to these differences and control for them.

consistently less likely than men ever to have considered running for office. Moreover, there is virtually no variation in women’s political ambition across family structures or roles. Married women and mothers, for example, are no less likely than single women or those without children to have considered running for office. Women who are responsible for the majority of the household tasks are just as likely—or, more aptly put, just as unlikely—as women who do not shoulder the bulk of the household burdens to consider a candidacy. The same is true for childcare responsibilities.⁷

THE (LACK OF A) RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FAMILY ARRANGEMENTS AND POLITICAL AMBITION		
	CONSIDERED RUNNING FOR OFFICE	
	MEN	WOMEN
Overall	62%	45%
Family Structures		
Married / Living with a Partner	62	46
Not Married / Living with a Partner	60	43
Has Children	62	45
No Children	59	46
Has Children Living at Home	64	43
Does Not Have Children Living at Home	60	46
Has Children Under Age 7 Living at Home	70	49
Does Not Have Children Under Age 7 Living at Home	60	45
Family Roles		
Responsible for the Majority of the Household Tasks	61	45
Not Responsible for the Majority of the Household Tasks	62	45
Responsible for the Majority of the Childcare	60	47
Not Responsible for the Majority of the Childcare	62	44
Responsible for the Majority of the Household Tasks and Childcare	62	46
Not Responsible for the Majority of the Household Tasks and Childcare	62	44
Sample Size	1,848	1,766

Notes: The household tasks data do not include respondents who are not married or living with a partner; and the childcare arrangements data do not include respondents who do not have children. All of the gender differences are statistically significant at $p < .05$. None of the differences within the men or women's columns is statistically significant, with the exception of "Has Children Under Age 7 Living at Home" for the men, which is significant at $p < .05$.

7 These results hold in multivariate regression analyses that include the different family structures and roles separately and together, as well as in models that include the total number of hours per week respondents report engaging in these tasks. The results are also the same when the models include interactions between the sex of the respondent and the family structure and role variables. In general, female and male potential candidates are equally likely *not* to factor family arrangements into the calculus by which they consider a candidacy. The absence of a direct, negative relationship between family arrangements and political ambition also persists in models that control for a series of socio-demographic and political measures that are important predictors of the initial decision to run for office (see Fox and Lawless 2014 for the full series of equations).

The lack of explanatory power conferred by family structures and roles extends beyond whether a potential candidate ever considered running for office. The results are the same when we turn to whether a potential candidate ever considered seeking high-level (statewide or federal) office, whether he/she ever took any concrete steps that typically precede a candidacy (like talking about a candidacy with family and friends, contemplating the cost of a campaign, or investigating how to get on the ballot), and whether he/she ever actually ran for office. Once again, women, on each measure, are less politically ambitious than similarly situated men. But traditional family structures and roles do not account for the gender gaps that emerge.⁸ Neither marital and parental status, nor household and childcare responsibilities, provides any explanatory power when predicting these attitudinal or behavioral measures of ambition.⁹

Further, the data indicate that traditional family roles exert no influence on the central predictors of political ambition: political recruitment, self-perceived qualifications, and political participation. Turning first to political recruitment, women are significantly less likely than men to receive the suggestion to run for office from a party leader, elected official, or non-elected political activist. Whereas 49% of men in the sample report receiving the suggestion to run for office from one of these electoral gatekeepers, only 39% of women do so (difference significant at $p < .05$). But even though women are less likely than men to be recruited, adherence to traditional family roles and responsibilities does not explain the disparity. Indeed, the data presented in Figure 1 indicate that women are roughly 10 percentage points less likely than men to receive the suggestion to run for office, regardless of their family roles and responsibilities.¹⁰

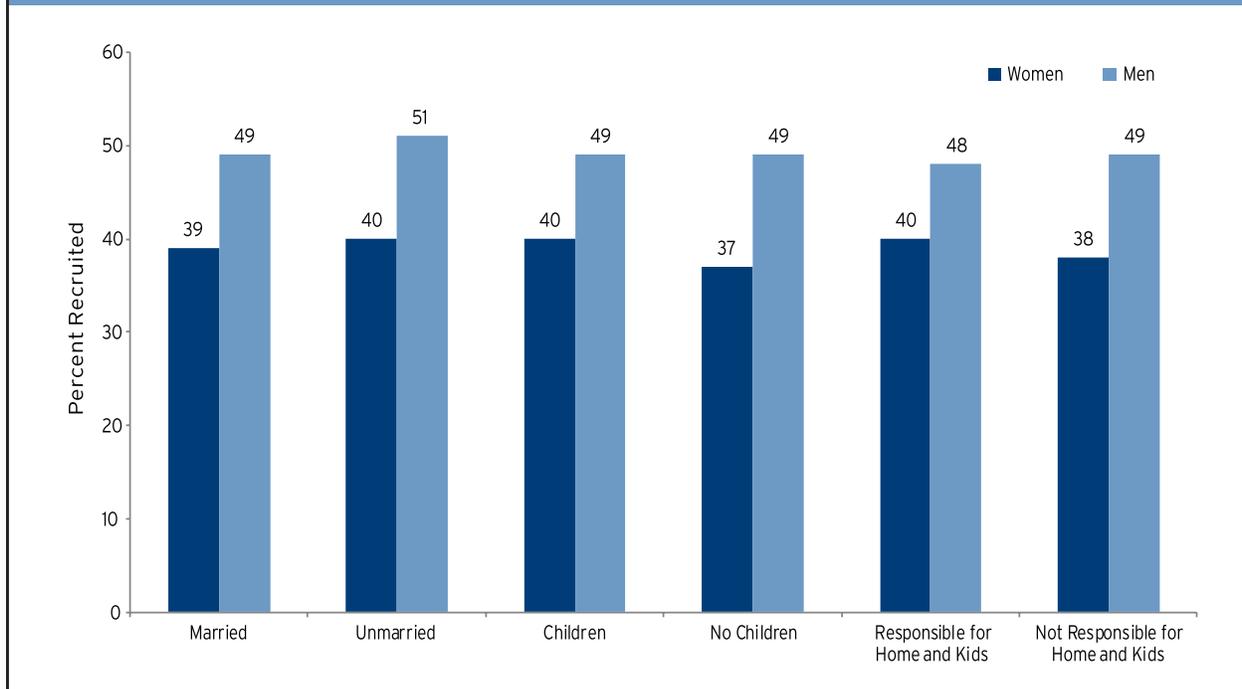
Women are significantly less likely than men to receive the suggestion to run for office from a party leader, elected official, or non-elected political activist.

8 The multivariate analyses tell the same story. Controlling for political recruitment, perceptions of qualifications to run for office, and socio-demographic and political factors that are well known predictors of political ambition, there is a statistically significant gender gap on each measure. But family arrangements are not significant predictors, regardless of whether they are included in the equations one at a time or together. Moreover, when we split the sample by respondent sex, or interact sex with the family variables, the results do not change. Family structures and roles, both as principal components and when interacted with sex, never approach statistical significance or change the substantive results. See Fox and Lawless 2014 for the full models on which this summary of results is based.

9 The finding that traditional family structures and roles are not linked to interest in running for office is not an artifact of women having considered entering the electoral arena before they achieved professional success and acquired familial responsibilities. Among respondents who considered running for office, 38% of women, compared to 27% of men, report that the thought first occurred to them after they were established professionally and, often, after they had already begun their families. On the other hand, 52% of men, compared to 42% of women, who considered a candidacy first did so either as children or in college or graduate school. Further, women who considered running for office are just as likely as men to report that they most recently thought about it within the last three years (57% of women, compared to 56% of men). This is the case even for respondents with children under the age of seven.

10 Multivariate analyses reveal that sex remains statistically significant even after controlling for the variables that facilitate direct contact with political actors who might suggest a candidacy, but family arrangements play no role.

THE (LACK OF A) RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FAMILY ARRANGEMENTS AND POLITICAL RECRUITMENT



Notes: N = 1,848 for men and 1,766 for women. Bars indicate the percentage of respondents who received the suggestion to run for office from a party leader, elected official, or political activist. All of the gender differences are statistically significant at $p < .05$. None of the differences among women or among men is statistically significant.

The same is true when we turn to self-perceived qualifications to run for office. Overall, men in the sample are roughly 60% more likely than women to consider themselves “very qualified” to seek an elective position. Women are more than twice as likely as men to assert that they are “not at all qualified” to run. Beyond the sex of the respondent, potential candidates’ self-assessments are driven by demographic factors, as well as their involvement with the political system. But gender differences in family arrangements play no role in these self-assessments.

Traditional family arrangements also do not influence the degree to which respondents engage in political activities. Comparisons between levels of political participation for parents versus non-parents, respondents with children living at home versus those without, and individuals who are responsible for the majority of the household tasks and childcare versus those who are not, reveal no differences. The mean number of acts of political participation (on a 10 point scale) for respondents who are responsible for a majority of the household tasks and childcare is 5.61; the mean number of acts for respondents who do not shoulder the majority of these

responsibilities is 5.62. Burdens typically associated with a traditional division of labor in the household, therefore, do not limit potential candidates' political activism.

Overall, the data make it hard to argue that family roles and responsibilities affect potential candidates' political ambition, either directly or indirectly. In the candidate eligibility pool, women are less likely than men to exhibit political ambition, to be recruited to run, and to consider themselves qualified. But traditional family arrangements are hardly a culprit for explaining why.

IMPLICATIONS: HILLARY AND BEYOND

The data provide clear evidence that traditional family arrangements do not stunt female (or male) potential candidates' political ambition. As much as reporters and pundits want to speculate about whether being a grandmother will affect Hillary Clinton's decision to run for president, they would probably be better suited reading different tea leaves—ones that might be linked a bit more to the political climate, her approval ratings, and the traction the Republicans continue to get from keeping incidents like Benghazi in the news. Like the thousands of potential candidates included in the Citizen Political Ambition Study, it is unlikely that family arrangements will detract from the political aspirations of an already ambitious woman who has learned to reconcile her professional and personal roles and responsibilities.

Of course, this does not mean that family is irrelevant in the political arena. The results of this study are consistent with the normalization of the double burden many professional women face. The struggle to balance family roles with professional responsibilities has simply become part of the bargain for contemporary women. Women have substantial professional demands that they must balance with family considerations, but they have become accustomed to doing so. The work/life balance has become such a regular part of their daily routine that women's family dynamics do not discourage them from thinking about or embarking on a political career. But that certainly doesn't mean that it is fair or equitable.

Of course, it is also important to recognize that the perpetuation of traditional family arrangements can affect women's career choices before they enter the candidate eligibility pool. A survey of corporate women found that the majority are not satisfied with the balancing act, so many take off several years to raise a family or pursue more "family friendly" work (McKenzie 2004). Occupational trends in the fields of law, education, and business demonstrate that, for family reasons, many women "opt-out" of the professional pipeline from which most candidates emerge (Hirshman 2006; Belkin 2003). This decision may occur more often among conservative women. The lopsided ratio of Democratic to Republican female office holders, therefore, may have less to do with party differences in ambition among potential candidates and more to do with the partisan breakdown of women who sustain a presence in the pipeline professions.

At the end of the day, though, the “family explanation” does little to explain the gender disparity in interest in running for office once potential candidates find themselves well-situated in the pipeline professions. Yet the gender gap in political ambition among potential candidates is as large now as it was a decade ago. Narrowing the list of plausible explanations—especially ones that seem to have so much intuitive appeal—for women’s underrepresentation is a critical step to understanding the long term prospects for gender parity in U.S. political institutions. And the lack of explanatory power conferred by family arrangements highlights that other barriers to women’s emergence as candidates clearly merit investigation. This might not be the topic of a fun news story, but it remains an important one that needs to be told.

REFERENCES

- Belkin, Lisa. 2003. "Why Don't More Women Get to the Top?" *New York Times Magazine*, October 26, page 43.
- Conway, M. Margaret, David W. Ahern, and Gertrude A. Steuernagel. 2004. *Women and Political Participation: Cultural Change in the Political Arena*, 2nd edition. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, Inc.
- Dolan, Julie, Melissa M. Deckman, and Michele L. Swers. 2010. *Women and Politics: Paths to Power and Political Influence*, 2nd edition. New York: Pearson.
- Fox, Richard L. 2010. "Congressional Elections: Women's Candidacies and the Road to Gender Parity." In *Gender and Elections*, 2nd edition, eds. S. Carroll and R. Fox. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- _____. 1997. *Gender Dynamics in Congressional Elections*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Fox, Richard L. and Jennifer L. Lawless. 2014. "Reconciling Family Roles with Political Ambition: The New Normal for Women in 21st Century U.S. Politics." *Journal of Politics* 76(2):398-414.
- Fulton, Sarah A., Cherie D. Maestas, L. Sandy Maisel, and Walter J. Stone. 2006. "The Sense of a Woman: Gender, Ambition, and the Decision to Run for Congress." *Political Research Quarterly* 59(2):235-48.
- Gaddie, Ronald Keith. 2004. *Born to Run: Origins of the Political Career*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Hirshman, Linda. 2006. *Get to Work: A Manifesto for Women of the World*. New York: Viking.
- Kelly, Erin L., Ellen EmstKossek, Leslie B. Hammer, Mary Durham, Jeremy Bray, Kelly Chermack, Lauren A. Murphy, and Dan Kaskubar. 2008. "Chapter 7: Getting There from Here: Research on the Effects of Work-Family Initiatives on Work-Family Conflict and Business Outcomes." *The Academy of Management Annals* 2(1):305-49.
- Lawless, Jennifer L. and Richard L. Fox. 2010. *It Still Takes A Candidate: Why Women Don't Run for Office*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Lawless, Jennifer L. and Kathryn Pearson. 2008. "The Primary Reason for Women's Under-Representation: Re-Evaluating the Conventional Wisdom." *Journal of Politics* 70(1):67-82.
- McKenzie, Lisa. 2004. "Are Women Opting Out of Corporate Careers?" *PRWeb Wire Service*. <http://www.emediawire.com/releases/2004/6/prweb130800.htm> (August 13, 2004).
- Palmer, Barbara and Dennis Simon. 2008. *Breaking the Political Glass Ceiling: Women and Congressional Elections*, 2nd edition. New York: Routledge.
- Seltzer, R.A., J. Newman, and M. Voorhees Leighton. 1997. *Sex as a Political Variable*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.
- Thomas, Sue. 2002. "The Personal is the Political: Antecedents of Gendered Choices of Elected Representatives." *Sex Roles* 47(7-8):343-53.

Governance Studies

The Brookings Institution
1775 Massachusetts Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20036
Tel: 202.797.6090
Fax: 202.797.6144
brookings.edu/governance.aspx

Editors

Christine Jacobs
Beth Stone

Production & Layout

Beth Stone

EMAIL YOUR COMMENTS TO GSCOMMENTS@BROOKINGS.EDU

This paper is distributed in the expectation that it may elicit useful comments and is subject to subsequent revision. The views expressed in this piece are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the staff, officers or trustees of the Brookings Institution.