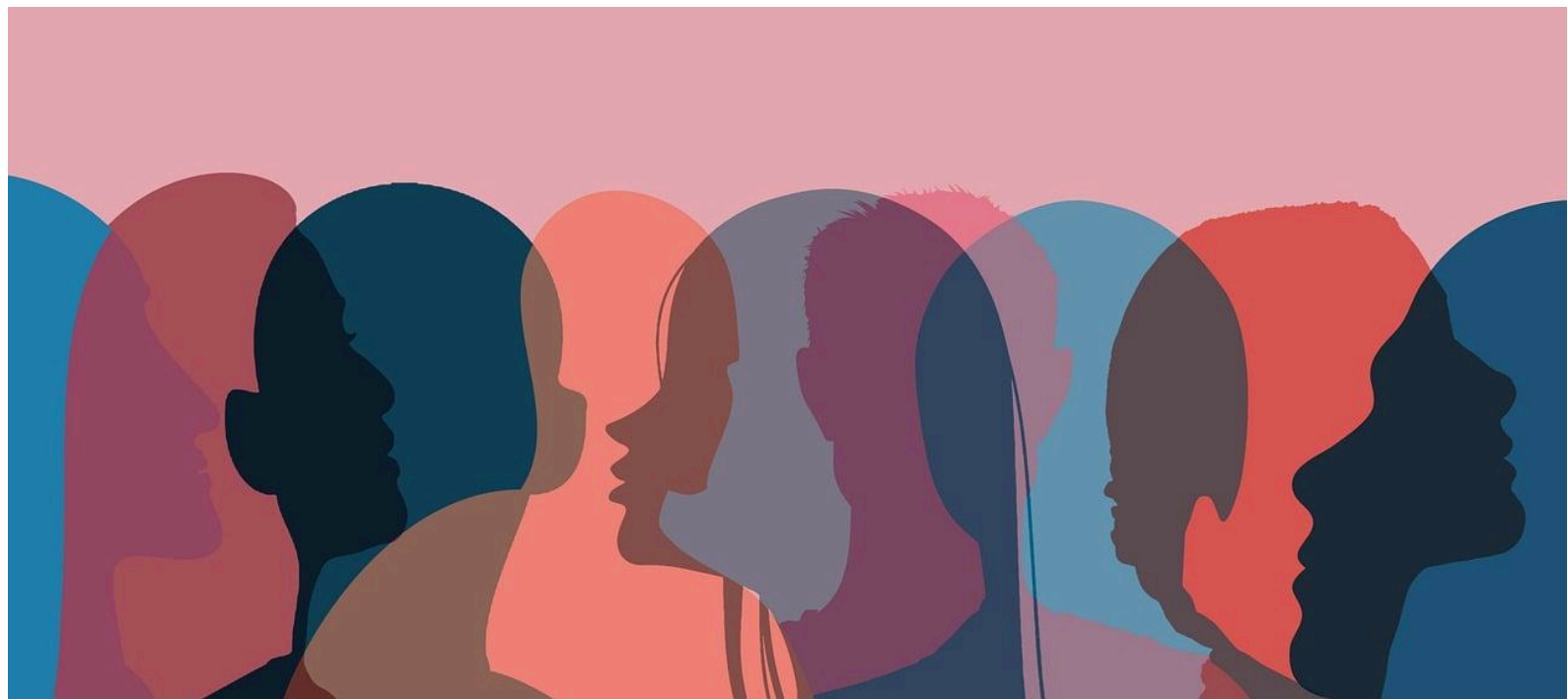


Gendered Politics

Why Women are Less Likely Than Men to Run for Election

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Women's Rights Team – August 12th, 2024



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INTRODUCTION

It is an empirical fact that women are under-represented in politics. It is also a fact that women are no less likely to win an election when they decide to stand, and when elected, women perform as well as, if not better, than men in political office (e.g. Anzia and Berry, 2012; Ashworth, Berry and de Mesquita, 2020; Cahn, 2020; Corbett et al., 2022; Holman and Mahoney, 2023; Kanthak and Woon, 2015; Sevi and Blais, 2023). In trying to understand the substantive lack of women in politics, scholars typically focus on the women already in office and the gendered contextual factors surrounding them. They examine the effectiveness of quotas, the re-election of (female) incumbents, and voter bias or reactions towards female candidates (e.g. Ashworth, Berry and de Mesquita, 2020; Bagues and Campa, 2021; Lawless, 2015; Schwindt-Bayer, 2005). In recent years, however, a cultural shift has been observed, particularly in Western countries, suggesting an increasing voter preference for female politicians (e.g. Bridgewater and Nagel, 2020; Cella and Manzoni, 2023; Stadelmann, Portman and Eichenberger, 2014). In addition, many countries have introduced quotas to increase women's representation in politics (International IDEA, n.d.).

However, despite these efforts and social progress, women remain underrepresented in politics in almost all countries (UN Women, n.d.). This article argues that a more in-depth examination is warranted - one that looks at the underlying factors that influence the decision-making process of women considering political candidacy. **The under-representation of women in politics is particularly due to the multitude of obstacles they have to overcome when considering running for office.** The decisions and considerations women make before running for office require a significant amount of strategic behaviour and come at a much higher cost than is the case of their male counterparts. Consequently, the focus should be shifted from the question of why there are fewer women in politics to an even earlier point in time. It is this question of why women run for office less often than men that is the focus of this article. It will begin by examining the relational assessment that women use in their decision-making processes. It will then explore the financial costs and barriers that women face when running for political office, followed by an examination of the challenging and hostile environment within the political sphere for female candidates. The analysis then looks at the complex interplay between confidence and ambition and attempts to understand its impact on women considering to stand for election. Finally, the article concludes that women's decision to run for political office depends on the various costs they would face if they did so. It also becomes clear that men do not face these costs and barriers to the same extent, which can explain why men run for political office more often than women.

1. GENDERED SOCIALISATION AND RELATIONAL ASSESSMENT

The roots of why women are less inclined to stand for election than men can be traced back to socialisation in childhood. Early in life, children are exposed to traditional gender roles that are entrenched in our societies. These gender roles have historically been demarcated by the separation of spheres, where domestic tasks were seen as fundamentally feminine, while public activities were seen as the domain of men. In this way, a subconscious gender hierarchy has taken root in our society, characterising women as inherently unsuitable for, among other things, economic or political matters (Miller and Borgida, 2016). In traditional family structures, children therefore witness their fathers going to work every day and returning to the home maintained by the wife, regardless of whether the wife herself has an additional paid job (Burns, Schlozman and Verba, 2001; Miller, 2022; Raz-Yurovich and Marx, 2019). As a result, children grow up watching their mothers devote a significant portion of their time to family caregiving, while everyone else in the family is taken care of. This caregiving role assumed by mothers is observed by their children and eventually becomes ingrained, educating both boys and girls to see it as an integral aspect of womanhood (Schneider and Bos, 2019). This means that from a young age, girls are conditioned to prioritise and consider the needs of others over their own. **This ingrained socialisation, and the resulting expectation that women should “[...] play the socially prescribed nurturing roles of mothers [or wives]” (Shvedova, 2005, p. 36) emerges as a critical factor influencing women’s strategic behaviour when considering political candidacy.**

Furthermore, there are still persistent gender differences in the way children are raised, particularly in terms of what traits are considered ‘appropriate’ for boys and girls (Schneider and Bos, 2019). While boys are raised to be assertive leaders, girls, in line with the caregiving role, are more likely to be considerate of others, with an emphasis on interpersonal skills (Beauregard, Holman and Sheppard, 2022; Eagly and Koenig, 2006). Women’s upbringing to prioritise consideration for others is manifested in their deliberations when considering to run for public office. Studies suggest that men often take a more self-centred approach to standing in elections, evaluating candidacy in terms of their life plans and current circumstances, with limited consideration of external factors such as family or political environment. Conversely, women, who are raised to be more considerate of others, tend to base their decision to run for office on the needs of people in their immediate environment rather than personal preferences (Ondercin, 2022). For example, they are more likely to consider the potential impact of running for office on their children and spouses and place more emphasis on assessing their ability to balance family and career (Fulton et al., 2006; Teele, Kalla and Rosenblut, 2018). Moreover, women are more likely to consider the needs of their constituency and the wider community they would represent, and whether their vote would bring the greatest overall benefit to all concerned. They also consider the potential impact of their candidacy on their party’s general election prospects and reputation

(Burrell 1994; Conway, Steuernagel and Ahern, 1997; Fowler and McClure 1989; Ondercin, 2022; Teele, Kalla and Rosenblut, 2018).

This relationship evaluation, which is characteristic of women, may lead them to refrain from running for office, even if they would like to do so. In contrast, men, who are primarily influenced by personal considerations, are more likely to stand for election if it is in line with their circumstances.

2. SUBJECTION TO HARASSMENT AND HOSTILE SEXISM

The previous section established the social understanding of gender roles and the socially prescribed nurturing, communal traits that women are expected to embody (Shvedova, 2005). It also outlined how men are expected to embody agentic traits, such as assertiveness and leadership (Schneider and Bos, 2019; Fox and Lawless, 2023), and how such gendered expectations are automatically and unconsciously internalised by all children.

From this arises another reason for women not to run for office: **the potential exposure to gendered harassment that women are likely to face during an election and the campaign leading to it** (Krook and Sanín, 2020). To better understand this, it is necessary to consider the theory of role congruity (Eagly and Karau, 2002). This states that the socially “perceived incongruity between the female gender role and leadership roles” leads to negative attitudes towards women in politics (Eagly & Karau, 2002, p. 573). This implies that when men run for political office and embody typical leadership traits such as determination, ruthlessness, and self-confidence, they conform to societal expectations and are thus socially accepted. However, when women seek political office, they are often forced to navigate between emphasising traditional leadership qualities and adhering to stereotypically feminine traits, as there is no viable way to authentically combine the two (Catalyst, 2018; De Geus, Ralph–Morrow and Shorrocks, 2022). If a woman presents herself as assertive and confident- traits conventionally associated with male leadership- in order to be perceived as a potential leader, she risks deviating from societal expectations of women. Conversely, she must avoid displaying stereotypically feminine traits, as this may undermine societal perceptions of her leadership abilities (Miller and Borgida, 2016; Rudman et al., 2012). The challenge of balancing these conflicting expectations can be enough to deter women from running for office.

If they do decide to run, these societal expectations can have additional negative consequences. **According to congruity theory, deviations from social norms are often met with rejection, as the public tends to react negatively to anything that deviates from the established norm** (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Shvedova, 2005). Non-conforming women are perceived as a direct threat to the established social gender hierarchy (Rudman et al., 2012),

and this aversion is often expressed through various forms of harassment. While some scholars have subsumed various forms of sexism under the term ambivalent sexism (Glick and Fiske, 1997, 2001), this article adopts the distinction between benevolent and hostile sexism (Winter, 2023), focusing primarily on the latter for pragmatic reasons.

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Nearly 5 in 10 Americans (48 percent) say having young children at home hurts a woman's chances of getting elected, while only about 7 percent would say it hurts a man's chances (Horowitz and Goddard, 2023)

Research on female candidates in the UK suggests that **“about three in every four [women] experienced [...] fear”** during the campaign, stemming from different forms and intensities of harassment (Collignon, Campbell and Rüdiger, 2022, p. 37). Carlson’s (2019) analysis of misogynistic hate speech during the 2016 US election highlights the creation of a hostile political environment for women, which subsequently discouraged them from pursuing election bids. Haraldsson and Wängnerud's (2019) findings further show that social media exacerbates this hostile environment, demonstrating a significant negative correlation between high media sexism and low female political ambition. The research highlights the existence of a generally masculinised and hostile electoral atmosphere, which is reinforced by sexist narratives and harassment of women competing against men in elections, resulting in lower female ambition (e.g., Carlson, 2019; Fox and Lawless, 2023; Krook and Sanín, 2020; Schneider and Bos, 2019).

As a result, even when women believe their candidacy would be beneficial to the stakeholders around them, they may choose not to run due to the anticipated harassment they are likely to face and to which they do not want to expose themselves.

3. ACCESS TO RESOURCES

An election campaign is financially demanding. There is also the risk that the investment will not pay off if the election is not won. Many who consider running for office do not have the necessary financial resources. As a result, participation is highly dependent on access to resources, and politics is largely dominated by the rich (Murray, Muriaas and Wang, 2023; Shames et al., 2020). This leads to another crucial factor influencing the decision of women, especially working-class women, to run for office, as political participation is largely dependent on access to resources, with financial resources arguably being the most important (Culhane and Olchawski, 2018; Murray, 2023).

It is statistically proven that there is a gender pay gap in our society. The European Commission lists four overarching aspects of gender inequalities to explain this gap, which serves as the basis for this article (European Commission, n.d.b). In the academic context metaphorically referred to as the glass ceiling, the first aspect highlights an invisible barrier that prevents female candidates from advancing to certain professional levels (e.g., Momin, Singh, and Sharma, 2022; Murray, 2023; Singh et al., 2023). **This barrier, attributed to “gender inequality, discrimination, abuse, and gendered family roles”, limits women's access to management positions and other roles simply because of their gender** (Murray, Muriaas, and Wang 2023, p. 5).

Next, sectoral segregation is highlighted, whereby women are disproportionately represented in “low-paying sectors, such as care, health and education” (European Commission, n.d.b: n.p.). The unequal distribution of paid and unpaid work further exacerbates the gender pay gap, with women working more hours per week than men and spending an additional 2.3 hours per day on unpaid tasks such as childcare and housework (Azcona et al., 2023). This imbalance results in women losing years of work, reduced career opportunities, and financial savings. Finally, there is general pay discrimination, with women being paid less than men for equivalent work. The European Commission has highlighted the disparity in average gross hourly earnings between men and women by introducing Equal Pay Day, marking “the day of the year on which women symbolically stop on average to be paid compared to men” (European Commission, n.d.a.).

These inequalities are a result of our gendered socialisation, as mentioned above, which has historically cast men as breadwinners and women as caregivers. Studies also show that women are less likely to receive financial support from their party and that the same fundraising efforts result in fewer donations for women than for men (Barber, Butler and Preece, 2016; Swers and Thomson, 2020). Thus, the structurally limited access to financial resources that women experience alone serves as a potential answer to the underlying question of this article. However, this aspect needs to be taken even further, going back to the nurturing socialisation with which women are raised. Even among those with financial means, women remain less likely than men to stand for election. **Irrespective of how women acquire the financial means to afford a candidacy, they are less likely than men to spend these savings on career advancement** (Murray, 2023; WEDO, 2007). Again, this may be due to the socialisation of women, who learn from an early age to put others before themselves and therefore feel more obliged to invest the money in their family, for instance. Women who have a partner or a family feel less comfortable with spending money on themselves, which ultimately means that in many ways they have less money to spend on their election campaign and are therefore more likely than men to decide not to stand.

4. THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN CONFIDENCE AND AMBITION

Women's lower participation in political life is often attributed to a lack of self-confidence compared to men. However, this is not the case. To dispel this misconception, we return to the point made at the beginning of this article about the different ways in which children are socialised according to their gender. Girls, who are typically brought up to refrain from being too loud or bossy, are generally advised to be cautious and discouraged from taking risks. Conversely, boys are taught to be dominant, and assertive, and encouraged to 'go for it'. As we grow up, this internalised behaviour leads to what is commonly referred to as the **Confidence Gap**. Women, even when they perform as well as men, are more prone to self-doubt than men. They are more likely to underestimate their abilities and typically only consider themselves qualified for a job if they are sure they have 100 percent of the required qualifications. In contrast, men generally consider themselves qualified regardless of the actual extent of their qualifications (Ondercin, 2022; Fox and Lawless, 2004; Nekby, Thoursie and Vahtrik, 2008). Studies have shown that this false self-perception reinforces the risk aversion that women unconsciously apply to their decision-making, which is likely to prevent them from taking chances or exposing themselves to competitive environments (Kanthak and Woon, 2015; Pate and Fox, 2018; Sevi and Blais, 2023).

While it is true that girls are being educated accordingly, it is wrong to justify their underrepresentation and reluctance to seek higher office and elected positions as being simply because they are too self-conscious to try. That is where the **Ambition Gap** comes in. The reluctance of women to see themselves as suitable for certain positions is not just due to an upbringing characterised by a certain risk aversion and a systematic underestimation of their qualifications. Studies have shown that women are indeed interested in running for political office, but they receive less encouragement from their personal and professional environment (Fox and Lawless, 2004, Pate and Fox, 2018). Research shows that people are far more likely to consider running for office if they are consistently encouraged to do so (Lawless and Fox, 2004, 2023). Although family support plays a crucial role in this dynamic, it is typically party leaders or incumbents seeking a successor for their own or another vacant position who provide such encouragement. This is what ultimately works to the disadvantage of women. In behavioural science, it is known as the **Familiarity Bias** that people tend to prefer characteristics that are familiar to them (Chew et al., 2008; Fox and Tversky, 1995; Knudsen et al. 2018). Niven (1998) extends this bias to the political sphere and finds that party leaders show a preference for candidates who share similar characteristics with them. **As a result, the "prevalence of the 'masculine model'"** (Shvedova, 2005,p. 35) **is detrimental to potential female candidates**, as potential male candidates, who inherently share more characteristics with incumbents, are more likely to receive support from political actors (Lawless and Fox, 2023; Pate and Fox, 2018; Sevi and Blais, 2023).

The interplay between the self-confidence and ambition gap described here attempts to illustrate how women might be subconsciously discouraged from running for election. This is firstly due to differing risk propensities between women and men, which is a result of

socialisation from childhood, and secondly, the lack of encouragement women are likely to experience from higher-ranking party members or office holders, leading to a validation deficit of one's competence and ability to take on a corresponding office successfully. This interplay results in women being less likely to perceive themselves as capable and, consequently, less likely to decide to run for office. Furthermore, it creates a reinforcing pattern in which men, who are primarily the recipients of encouragement, feel validated in their assumption of qualification. Conversely, in the absence of similar encouragement, women experience increased self-doubt, leading to a perception of inadequacy for the job.

CONCLUSION

The persistence of male political dominance and the under-representation of women in elections, resulting from the fact that women run for office less often than men, is therefore not due to a lower level of interest or qualification on the part of female candidates. This article has highlighted a number of considerations and obstacles that women have to overcome when assessing their candidacy, which are either not as persistent or present at all for their male competitors. It has become clear that there is no simple answer to this question. Rather, it is an accumulation of external and internal factors rooted in a gendered socialisation. This leads to the relational evaluation of women described above, the “doomed if you do, doomed if you don’t” mentality that women are subjected to because of our society’s need for congruence, the financial barriers that are particularly evident in the gender pay gap, and the generally lower level of encouragement that women receive compared to their male competitors.

While this article has attempted to highlight the main reasons why women choose not to stand for election, it is important to note that many more reasons and aspects need to be considered in order to fully understand the structural complexity of this issue. For example, this article did not apply an intersectional approach to its analysis. However, women cannot be generalised. Depending on their social and geographical backgrounds, women face different starting points and different challenges. It therefore must be acknowledged that this essay mainly describes the reality of white, Western women. This is partly due to the existing literature on the subject, and also due to the limitations of this article, which did not allow for a more extensive discussion of the topic. This also explains the limited number of potential reasons included in this article. There is no denying that the decision-making process for a woman to stand for election is far more complex than has been outlined in the preceding pages. Nevertheless, it has become clear that the factors that make women less likely to stand for election than men are not, as is often assumed, a lack of interest in politics or office. Rather, it is the structural conditions of our patriarchal society that ultimately make running for office less attractive or feasible for women. To eliminate this problem, it is essential to intervene as early as childhood and to promote an education free of stereotypical gender roles. It is only through such measures that the gender inequalities embedded in our society can ultimately be eradicated.

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