



Why Don't Women Run for Office?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is based on the results of the Citizen Political Ambition Study, a research project we have been conducting over the course of the last two years. We surveyed and spoke to more than 3,700 lawyers, business leaders and executives, educators, and political activists. These are the women and men who work in professions that most typically precede a political candidacy.

The initial decision to run for office is particularly important for women. Extensive research shows that when women run for office – at any level – they perform just as well as men. Yet women remain severely under-represented in our political institutions. Thus, the question that merits investigation is why so few women decide to run. Our research represents one of the first comprehensive attempts to understand the process by which women and men decide to enter the electoral arena.

Ultimately, we find that women, regardless of their age, partisan affiliation, income, and profession, are significantly less likely than men to express interest in seeking public office. We link this persistent gender gap in political ambition to two factors. First, we find that women are significantly less likely than men to view themselves as qualified to run for office. In addition, women are less likely than men to receive encouragement to run for office from party leaders, elected officials, and political activists. Together, these findings shed light on reasons for women's continued under-representation in politics.

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When the 108th Congress convened, 86 percent of its members were male. This places the United States 60th worldwide in terms of the number of women serving in the national legislature. These large gender disparities are also evident at the state and local levels: 86 percent of state governors, 88 percent of big city mayors, and 78 percent of state legislators are men.

This gender gap in office-holding is somewhat surprising when we consider the fact that 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 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 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 believe that we must turn to the initial decision to run for office, an endeavor to which virtually no research has been devoted.² Put simply, if women win elections at equal rates as men, why do there remain so few women candidates? Are professionally accomplished women and men equally likely to consider a run for elective office? If not, are differences in political ambition between men and women generational? Does the support network or encouragement to run for office influence men and women differently? Do vestiges of traditional gender roles and expectations continue to inhibit some women from thinking they should seek elective office?

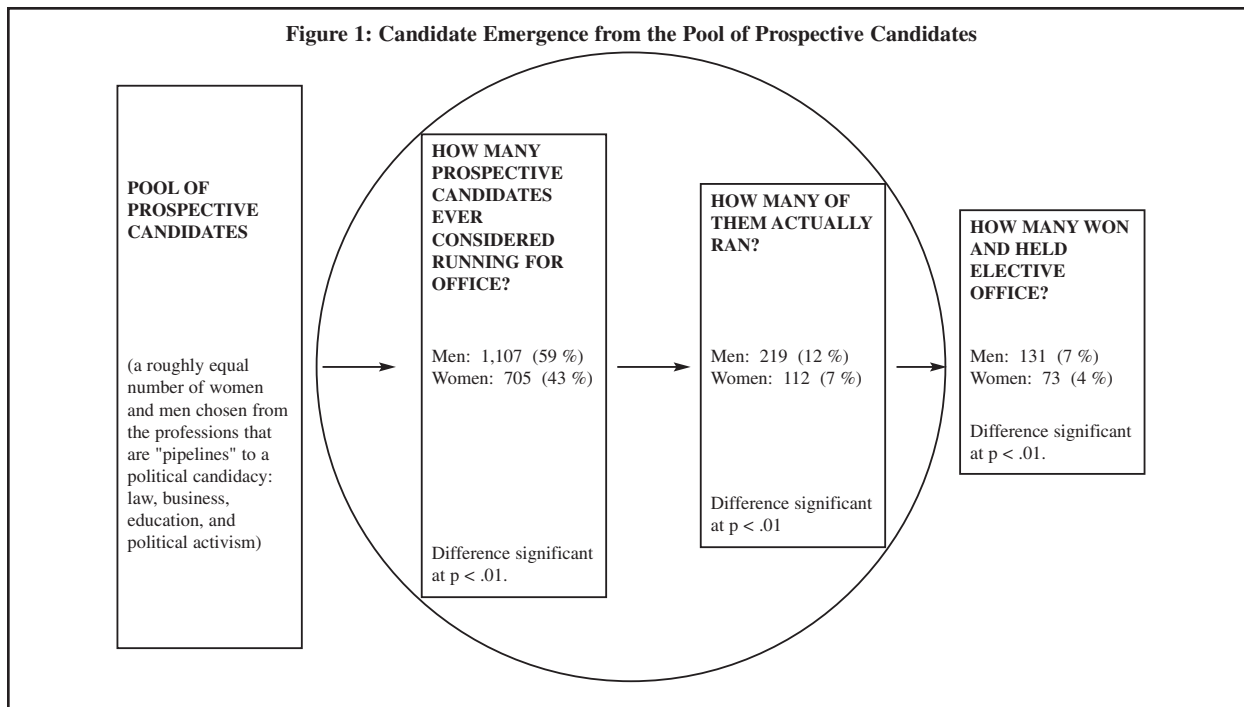
This report presents the results of the Citizen Political Ambition Study, the first broad-based national sample of potential candidates (see Appendix for a description of the research meth-

ods). Our analysis is based on mail survey responses from 1,969 men and 1,796 women. This represents a 60 percent response rate. No demographic, geographic, or professional differences distinguish the samples of men from women. Thus, we can 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.

Do Women Think About Running for Office?

Do men and women have equal interest in seeking elective office? Prior research finds that women tend to demonstrate lower levels of ambition for seeking political office. Almost all of this research, however, considers women and men who have *already* entered politics. While this may provide some guidance, research on those who have already chosen to enter politics does not speak directly to questions concerning the initial decision to run. The little that we do know about potential candidates has produced conflicting results. A National Women's Political Caucus poll (1994), for example, found that women lawyers and political activists had less interest than men in seeking office. But a study of potential candidates in New York found roughly equal interest in office holding between women and men.

Results from our study provide the first nationwide, systematic investigation of the dynamics underlying potential candidates' initial decisions to run for office. And we uncover solid support for the notion that gender plays a substantial role in the candidate emergence process. Figure 1 depicts the process by which qualified potential candidates move into actual positions of political power. The leftmost box contains roughly equal samples of men and women who comprise the pool of potential office holders: lawyers, business leaders and executives, educators, and political activists.



The second and third boxes in the figure shed light on the gender dynamics of the decision making process potential candidates undergo. The second box from the left is comprised of those individuals who “considered” running for any political office. More than half of the respondents (51 percent) stated that the idea of running for an elective position at least “crossed their mind.” Turning to the gender breakdown of the respondents who considered a candidacy, though, a significant gender difference emerges: 59 percent of the men, compared to 43 percent of the women, considered running for office.³

Women are not only less likely than men to consider a candidacy, but they are also less likely to take any of the steps required to mount a political campaign. Table 1 reveals that, across professions, men are always at least 50 percent more likely than women to have investigated how to place their name on the ballot, or to have discussed running with potential donors, party or community leaders, family members, or friends.

When we turn more specifically to the offices in which respondents expressed interest, we

uncover additional gender differences in political ambition. As indicated in Table 2, women and men who have considered running for

Table 1 – Interest in Running for Elective Office

	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>
Considered running for any political office	43%	59%
Discussed running with friends and family	22	33
Discussed running with community leaders	9	15
Investigated how to place name on the ballot	6	13
Discussed running with party leaders	6	12
Discussed financial contributions with potential supporters	3	7
N	1,653	1,870

For each item, the Chi Square test comparing women and men is significant at p < .01

Table 2 – Gender Differences in Office Preferences

	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>
Local Office		
School Board	41 % *	37 %
City Council	36	37
Mayor	11 *	17
State-Level Office		
State Legislator	27 *	36
State-Wide Office (i.e., State Treasurer)	11	10
Governor	6 *	13
Federal Office		
House of Representatives	15 *	28
Senate	12 *	21
President	3 *	5
N	1,653	1,870

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: * gender gap in interest is significant at $p < .05$ or better.

office do not express comparable levels of interest in holding high-level positions.

If we focus on the first office for which men and women might run, we find that 45 percent of women and 41 percent of men select a local level office. The gender gap in interest gradually increases as we move from local to high-level office. Men are significantly more likely than women to identify a state office (17 percent of men, compared to 11 percent of women) or national office (10 percent of men, compared to only 3 percent of women) as their first choice (differences significant at $p < .01$). These results mirror those 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.

When we move to the third box in Figure 1 and examine those members of the sample who actually ran for elective office, gender differences again emerge. Twelve percent of the men from the initial pool of prospective candidates actually threw their hats into the ring and sought elective positions; only 7 percent of the women did so (difference significant at $p < .01$). At first glance, this might seem like a small difference, but, in reality, it reflects the fact that men are 71 percent more likely than women to run for office.

The figure's final box illustrates the likelihood that a potential candidate holds a position of political power (i.e., won his/her race). As we would expect from the wide body of literature on gender and elections, there is no statistically significant gender difference between men and women's likelihood of winning political contests: 63 percent of the women and 59 percent of the men in the eligibility pool who ran for office launched successful campaigns. But we know that women are much less likely than men to run. As a result, we wind up with nearly twice as many men than women (7 percent of the men, compared to less than 4 percent of the women), from the initial pool of potential candidates holding elected office.

Despite starting out with relatively equal proportions of similarly situated and equally credentialed women and men as potential candidates, and regardless of the fact that women are just as likely as men to win elections, what started out as a gender-balanced eligibility pool winnows to one that is dominated by men. These results suggest that simply increasing the number of women in the candidate eligibility pool is insufficient for generating eventual gender parity in our political institutions. Men and women are simply not equally likely to consider running for office. The origin of this political ambition gender gap is the investigation we pursue in the remainder of this report.

Explaining Gender Differences in Ambition for Office-Seeking

A great deal of prior research provides insight into why women might continue to be less interested than men in seeking elective office. In this section, we consider five possible explanations for women’s lower levels of interest in office holding: attitudes about campaigning, political and demographic factors, levels of external support, traditional family dynamics, and self-perceptions of electoral viability.

Attitudes about Campaigning

To understand women and men’s different levels of willingness to enter the electoral arena, we sought to understand whether men and women feel differently about taking part in the different aspects of an electoral campaign. Some research suggests that, while women and men may be equally interested in being policy-makers, women are less likely to be drawn to the rigors of an electoral contest. In fact, party recruiters in a number of states acknowledge a preference for “masculine” behavioral traits when thinking about potential candidates.

To assess possible gender differences, we asked the potential candidates how they would feel about engaging in five of the typical activities or aspects associated with being part of any election: attending fundraisers, dealing with party officials, meeting constituents, dealing with the press, and engaging in a time consuming campaign. The results, presented in Table 3, reveal that there is no gender difference in attitudes about attending fundraisers or dealing with party officials. And the three significant differences we do uncover reveal that women are actually *more* positive than men about dealing with the press, meeting constituents, and enduring the time consuming nature of a campaign. Our results lend no support to the expectation that women are more hesitant than men to engage in a combative campaign.

	Percent Responding “Positive” or “Very Positive”	
	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>
Attending Fundraisers	42 %	43 %
Dealing with Party Officials	40	37
Going Door-to-Door to Meet Constituents	39 *	31
Dealing with Members of the Press	43 *	34
The Time Consuming Nature of Running for Office	79 *	74
N	1,603	1,823

Notes: Significance levels of Chi-square test comparing men and women: *p < .01.

Age, Party Affiliation, and Income

The second set of explanations focuses on key demographic factors that may explain women’s differential interest in holding public office. One explanation for gender disparities in electoral office might relate to generational shifts. Traditional sex-role socialization likely affected previous generations of women, but younger professional women might not face the same obstacles. The findings presented in Table 4 simply do not support this expectation. While women under forty years of age are slightly more likely than older women to be interested in seeking office, younger men are also more interested than older men. The lack of any significant generational gap suggests that if vestiges of traditional socialization deter women from considering a candidacy, then these vestiges affect women of all generations.

Across all three party affiliations, men are also significantly more likely than women to have considered running for office. Table 5

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Table 4 – Interest in Running for Public Office, Across Generations

	Percent Who Have Considered Running for Any Political Office	
	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>
Under Age 40	45 % **	64 %
Ages 40 – 59	40 **	58
Age 60 and Over	49 *	60
N	1,605	1,838

Significance levels of Chi-square test: **p < .01, * p < .05.

indicates, however, that Democratic women are slightly more likely to think about seeking office than are their Republican and Independent counterparts. This can be generally explained by the fact that the Democratic party agenda embraces policy priorities more closely aligned with self-identified feminists. And women who self-identify as feminists are more likely than non-feminists to have considered running for office (41 percent compared to 30 percent). In terms of party affiliation and interest in office-seeking, there are no significant differences among men of different political parties.

Table 5 – Interest in Running for Office, by Partisan Affiliation

	Percent Who Have Considered Running for Any Political Office	
	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>
Democrat	46 % *	62 %
Republican	38 *	58
Independent	42 *	56
N	1,605	1,838

Significance levels of Chi-square test: * p < .01.

Turning to the last demographic category – annual income – Table 6 illustrates that women, across all income levels, are less likely than men to have considered running for office. Importantly, though, whereas men of all income levels are equally likely to consider running, higher incomes appear to provide women with greater latitude to consider a candidacy. This finding suggests that, as women continue to move into higher income positions, their interest in running for office might increase as well.

Table 6 – Interest in Running for Office, by Annual Income

	Percent Who Have Considered Running for Any Political Office	
	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>
Less than \$50,000	29 % *	54 %
\$50,000 – \$100,000	36 *	56
More than \$100,000	41 *	55
N	1,620	1,838

Significance levels of Chi-square test: * p < .01.

Recruitment

Recruitment and encouragement lead many individuals who otherwise may have never run for public office to become candidates. Are women just as likely to receive support? To measure whether men and women receive the same levels of external support, we asked respondents whether anyone ever suggested that they launch a candidacy. More specifically, we presented respondents with a list of seven sources who might have suggested a candidacy: party officials, elected officials, and non-elected political activists (formal actors); and friends, spouses, family members, and co-workers (informal actors).

Table 7 reveals that women are less likely to have received the suggestion to run for office, regardless of the source. The differences are particularly stark in terms of formal political actors. This lack of recruitment appears to be a powerful explanation for why women have been less likely to consider running for office. After all, when we calculate the predicted probabilities of considering running for office (regression results not shown), we see that a woman who has never received encouragement to run for office, either from a political actor or a non-political source, has only a 0.20 likelihood of having considered it. Men’s likelihood is significantly higher (0.32), but still falls far below the mean level of considering a run. When a respondent receives external support to run from both a formal political actor and a non-political source, the likelihood of considering a candidacy more than doubles. Women’s likelihood of considering running increases to 0.75; and men’s probability of considering a run grows to 0.85. Despite the fact that external

support for a candidacy boosts both men and women’s likelihood of considering a run for office, 43 percent of men, compared to 32 percent of women, received encouragement to run from a party leader, elected official, or political activist (difference significant at $p < .01$). 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.

Family Circumstances

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

Table 8 provides a breakdown of the respondents’ family arrangements. Women respondents are significantly less likely to be married and have children. Clearly, some women who choose to become top-level professionals de-emphasize a traditional family life. When we consider the household division of labor, though, we see that women who live with a spouse or partner are nine times more likely than men to be responsible for more of the household tasks; the numbers are similar for childcare arrangements. Hence, from the outset, it is important to note that “being married” and “having children” carry different responsibilities for men and women.

While the degree to which traditional family dynamics continue to prevail in American

	Received the Suggestion to Run from a . . .	
	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>
Political Actors		
Party Official	16 % **	25 %
Elected Official	20 **	29
Non-Elected Political Activist	23 **	31
Non-Political Sources		
Co-Worker	41 **	49
Friend	53 **	61
Spouse / Partner	26	28
Family Member	33 *	37
N	1,647	1,851
Significance levels of Chi-square test comparing men and women: ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$		

culture is perhaps striking, the important question for our purposes is whether these dynamics affect men and women's likelihood to consider running for office. The data suggest that, as women's responsibilities for household tasks decrease, their interest in considering running

Perceptions of Electoral Prospects

Some recent research leads to the expectation that women may feel more hesitant than men about entering politics because they perceive themselves as less qualified. Having matched samples of men and women allows us to test more clearly whether women and men view themselves as equally viable candidates for elective office.

The first measure we can use to assess potential candidates' self-perceptions of electoral viability is their gauge of the degree to which they feel qualified to hold elective office. The entries in Table 9 indicate that men are roughly two thirds more likely than women to assess themselves as "qualified" or "very qualified" to run for office. Women in the sample are twice as likely as men to rate themselves "not at all qualified." These differences are extremely important because the impact of self-perceived qualifications on women's likelihood of considering a candidacy are nearly double that for men (regression results not shown).

Table 8 – Eligibility Pool Members' Family Structures and Responsibilities

	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>
Marital Status		
Single	15 % *	8 %
Married or Living with Partner	70 *	86
Separated or Divorced	12 *	6
Parental Status		
Have Children	66 *	84
Children Living at Home	38 *	49
Children Under Age 6 Living at Home	14	15
Household Responsibilities		
Responsible for majority of household tasks	48 *	4
Equal division of labor	40 *	33
Spouse / Partner responsible for majority of household tasks	11 *	61
Childcare Responsibilities		
Responsible for majority of childcare	42 *	4
Equal division of childcare	25 *	26
Spouse / Partner responsible for majority of childcare	6 *	46
N	1,659	1,875

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 (numbers do not total 100 percent because 26 percent of women and 24 percent of men had grown children, live-in help, day care providers, etc.). Significance levels of Chi-square test comparing men and women: *p < .01.

for office increases. Whereas only 33 percent of the women who are responsible for the majority of household tasks have considered running for office, 48 percent of the women whose partner is responsible for the majority of the household labor have considered running. Household division of labor does not correlate with men's likelihood of considering a candidacy.

Women are also significantly less likely than men to think they would win their first campaign. Only 25 percent of women potential candidates, compared to 37 percent of men, think that an electoral victory would be "likely" or "very likely." Alternatively, 31 percent of

Table 9 – Self-Perceptions of Qualifications to be a Candidate

Percent of Men and Women who Self-Assess as . . .

	Not at all Qualified	Somewhat Qualified	Qualified	Very Qualified
Men (N = 1,853)	12 %	27 %	34 %	26 %
Women (N = 1,640)	28	33	25	14

Note: Gender gap significant at $p < .01$ for all categories.

women, but only 20 percent of men, think the odds of winning their first race would be “very unlikely.”

Conclusion and Discussion

This report attempts to address two questions. First, are men and women in the eligibility pool of potential candidates equally likely to consider running for office? And second, if there are differences in levels of political ambition, what accounts for the gender gap? Turning to the first question, the evidence is clear: well-qualified women are less likely than their male counterparts to consider running for office. And when women do think of running, they are more likely to be interested in local level positions. As far as the second question is concerned, women’s lesser interest in office holding is linked to a number of factors: lower levels of annual income, less external support for a candidacy, more demanding household obligations, and self-perceptions that they are not qualified or likely to win. A clear finding that emerges across all of these results is that men in this eligibility pool have more comfort and greater freedom when thinking about seeking office.

These findings carry broad implications for both the academic study of gender politics and practical politics. In terms of academic research, we must reassess the general explanations for women’s under-representation. The explanations of incumbency and too few women in the pool of eligible candidates both assume that similarly situated men and women will be equally interested in running for office. The findings presented suggest that is not the case. Moreover, the findings presented in this report point to the importance of investigating candidate recruitment processes and the manner in which women and men in contemporary society come to be socialized about politics and the acquisition of political power.

At a practical level, these results suggest that 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. For political actors interested in increasing the numbers of women serving in office, though, these findings offer some direction. In a final measure of women and men's interest in office-holding, we asked respondents to assess their attitudes toward running in the future (Table 10). While women are still significantly more likely than men to say they would never run, the differences are small. And the number of women who say they would definitely be interested in running “someday” is equal to that of men.

These results suggest that while women have been less likely than men to have ever considered running for office, they are almost equally receptive to thinking about running in the future and they view the activities associated with campaigning at least as positively as do men. These findings should offer some guidance (and hope) to organizations seeking to increase the number of women in elective positions.

Table 10 – Gender Differences in Future Interest in Seeking Office

What is your attitude toward seeking office in the future?	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>
I would definitely like to run in the future.	3 %	4 %
I might run if the opportunity presented itself.	15 *	19
I would not rule it out forever, but I currently have no interest.	54	56
I would absolutely never run for office.	28 **	21
N	1,621	1,829

Significance levels of Chi-square test comparing men and women: **p < .01, *p < .05

Appendix: Research Design and Methods

In developing the “candidate eligibility pool,” we drew a national sample of women and men from the four professions that are most likely to yield political candidacies 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. Because we did not stratify by school size, the college and university portion of the sample yielded a higher number of educators from smaller schools, although there is little reason to expect this to affect levels of political ambition. 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). 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 web-page.⁴

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 par-

tisan 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. 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 online version of the survey. The survey was conducted from August 2001 to July 2002.⁵

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 (Johnson, Joslyn and Reynolds 2001).⁶

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, there are two statistically significant gender differences. Women are more likely to be Democrats, while men are more likely to be Republicans and Independents, a finding consistent with recent polls showing a partisan gender gap among the general U.S. population. Further, women in the sample, on average, are four 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.

NOTES

1. Seltzer, R.A., J. Newman and M. Voorhees Leighton. (1997) *Sex as a Political Variable*, Boulder: Lynne Reinner.

2. There are two exceptions: The National Women’s Political Caucus’ poll of potential candidates (National Women’s Political Caucus (NWPC). 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 (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).

3. Although the proportion of respondents who considered running for office differs by profession, with lawyers and political activists most likely to have considered a candidacy, the gender differential in each of the professions is remarkably similar; men in each of the professions are more than twice as likely as women to say that they have seriously considered running for office.

4. 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.

5. We uncovered no differences in responses when we compared surveys of individuals who returned the questionnaire before versus after September 11, 2001.

6. Response rates within the four sub-samples 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.

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