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Opening the Gates

Clearing the Way for More Women to Hold Political Office

By Judith Warner   May 2017

Center for American Progress

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Introduction and summary

The 2016 elections were a historic disappointment for advocates of women's political parity in the United States. Not only did the first female major party candidate for the White House fail to win the highest office in the land, but around the nation, political representation by women continued its now nearly two-decades-long stall as well.

Women comprise 50.8 percent of the U.S. population.[1] Yet as January 2017 began:

- Women made up just 19.4 percent of incoming members of the House[2] and held just 21 percent of the seats in the U.S. Senate[3]

- They were 24.8 percent of state legislators, 10 percent of governors, and only 18.8 percent of mayors of all U.S. cities with more than 30,000 residents[4]

- They were down one governorship since 2016,[5] had lost one seat in the U.S. House of Representatives, and had gained just one seat in the U.S. Senate[6]

- Overall, they occupied less than 25 percent of elected offices at all levels of government in the United States[7]

The gloomy statistics on women's political fortunes coexist, oddly enough, with solid signs that, in recent years, American attitudes toward women in public office have significantly changed for the better. In June 2015, 92 percent of Americans said that they were ready to elect a female president[8]—and in November 2016, Americans did just that, choosing Hillary Clinton in the popular vote by a margin of nearly 3 million.[9] A considerable body of polling and academic research has shown that Americans have overwhelmingly moved past many of the traditional sexist attitudes that held female would-be politicians back in the past.[10] Americans no longer believe that women are constitutionally unfit for elected office. In fact, a sizable minority believes that, in some respects, women are even better suited for office than men.[11]

In other words, these days, if women run, they can win[12]—particularly if they're Democrats. According to new research from the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University, women were 28 percent of Democratic candidates for the U.S. House of Representatives in the 2016 general election—and 32 percent of Democratic winners; they were 11 percent of Republican candidates for the House and 9 percent of Republican winners. On the Senate side, women were 31 percent of Democratic candidates in the November election and 42 percent of winners, while Republican women were 12 percent of candidates and 5 percent of winners.[13]

Democrat or Republican, however, women are not running for elected office at anywhere near the rate they need to in order to achieve something even close to parity. In the 2014 campaign season, the last year for which a full set of numbers is available, women were only 28 percent of candidates for federal, state, and local office in the United States. That same spring, women made up 29 percent of elected officials at the federal, state, and local levels, according to the Reflective Democracy Campaign, which compiled both sets of numbers.[14]

The near-parallelism of these percentages is compelling, particularly when viewed in light of earlier research showing that women are about as likely as men to win congressional elections in comparable races[15]—if they get on the ballot—and more recent research showing that they're almost as likely as men to succeed in mayoral races, if they get on the ballot.[16] Further research shows that if they make it onto the ballot and run in comparable races, women do as well as men in fundraising too.[17]

Women of color provide a glimmer of hope in gloomy 2016 congressional election results

The one bright spot in the otherwise bleak electoral landscape of November 2016 was the news that nine new women of color were elected to the U.S. Congress, bringing the total number of women of color in the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate to 38—the highest level in our nation's history.[18]

Despite this happy development, however, the level of political representation for women of color overall remains unacceptably low: Although they make up 19 percent of the U.S. population, women of color represent only 7.1 percent of the total number of members of Congress, 4 percent of governors, and 5.4 percent of state legislators.[19]

As the dust settles from the 2016 campaign year and as advocates of women's political parity turn to contemplating next steps, a few basics are clear:

- As Hillary Clinton's decisive, nearly 3-million-vote win of the U.S. popular vote indicates, Americans do see women as viable political leaders.

- This willingness to vote for women, however, is not translating into steadily increasing numbers of women in political office.

- To figure out why—and then prevent this disconnect from continuing—it's time to move on from old analyses that focus uniquely on voter bias and look instead at what's preventing voters from having the chance to express their support for women candidates in the first place.

- Doing so requires a detailed look at the structural impediments to women's political participation—the whole constellation of forces having to do with recruitment, fundraising, and the support of political power brokers, or so-called gatekeepers—that keep women off ballots and out of office.

- Correcting the problem will require a set of concrete and structural solutions to open up the political universe to the most diverse range of newcomers, including women of all races and socio-economic backgrounds.

This report explores in detail how institutional forces having to do with candidate selection and support operate, and why they tend to keep women out. It also proposes a set of structural solutions to address this problem through both voluntary measures and public policy. Notably, the report recommends that:

- Our political parties should change how they recruit and groom candidates, and they should set voluntary numerical goals to encourage a rapid rise in the percentage of women on ballots

- Cities, states, and the U.S. Congress should enact legislation to reduce the role of big money in elections and adopt systems of small-donor public financing

- States should pay officeholders a living wage to permit those without independent means or highly flexible careers to pursue careers in public service, and they should make sure that their legislative bodies adopt the same sorts of family-friendly workplace policies that private-sector employers now use to attract and retain women

- Individual donors and political action committees should set voluntary goals to increase funding for women candidates, particularly in open-seat elections, which offer the best opportunities for outsiders

Shifting the public conversation on women's political progress from a discussion of attitudes—among voters, the media, and the so-called ambition gap among potential women candidates themselves—to the structural factors that block women's progress will require a major change, not just in tactics but also in mentalities.

Americans tend to view running for office through an up-by-the-bootstraps, "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" storyline and to downplay the structural factors that have historically expanded the choices and enhanced the political opportunities of some at the expense of others. The belief that the political path is equally open to all people with enough gumption to follow it, however, is naive. In the long term, real structural factors have created a permanent political class of white, male—and in recent decades, increasingly wealthy—Mr. Smiths.

For our political leaders to be so unrepresentative of modern-day America is toxic for our democracy. It reinforces the now-pervasive belief that our government is divorced from and unresponsive to the concerns of everyday people. And as we have recently seen, this belief reinforces the sort of political nihilism that allows destructive extremism to grow.

Women make up just more than half of the U.S. population.[20] They account for 47 percent of the U.S. labor force[21] and 49 percent of the college-educated workforce,[22] while at the same time they perform the lion's share of caregiving for children and other relatives.[23] This means that their grounding in the day-to-day challenges that most Americans face could not be more complete—and that the need for their leadership could not be more pressing.

Voters are ready—but women aren't running

In the latter decades of the 20th century, it seemed that as women moved up in the professions, and as public attitudes toward women's responsibilities and capabilities gradually improved, political parity would follow. Unfortunately, this has not been the case.

The 1970s and 1980s saw slow but steady increases in women's representation in the U.S. House and Senate, accelerated dramatically by the surge of new female members following the 1992 congressional elections—termed the "Year of the Woman"—that brought 28 new women to Congress.[24] But recent decades have brought much more uneven progress. The percentage of women in Congress actually dropped in 2010,[25] before rising again in 2014 and then staying flat in 2016. At 23.7 percent, women's representation in statewide elected offices as governors, lieutenant governors, state comptrollers, and the like is also down from a high point of 28.5 percent in 2000.[26] There were nine female governors in 2004 and 2007; there are only four today—one fewer than postelection, now that South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley (R) has been confirmed as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations.[27] And the percentage of women who serve as state legislators, which stands today at 25 percent, has essentially remained flat since 2009.[28]

This persistent underrepresentation of women at all levels of elected office, from city councils on up, means that they aren't taking their place in the political pipeline that will produce America's future leaders. In fact, the Institute for Women's Policy Research has calculated that if the pace of women's progress continues at the same rate it has since 1960, political parity will not be reached in the United States until the year 2117.[29]

What explains this glacial rate of change? For a long time, the perceived culprit was voter sexism—with good reason. As recently as the 1970s, deep-seated prejudice against female politicians still held sway in a wide portion of the electorate. In 1977, fully 47 percent of respondents to the General Social Survey, a nationally representative sampling of Americans conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, expressed agreement with the belief

that "most men are better suited emotionally for politics than most women."[30] That number had dropped to 17 percent by 2014, the most recent year for which results are available[31]—and polling by the Pew Research Center in 2015 found that 75 percent of Americans said women and men make "equally good political leaders." Pew also discovered that significant and consistent majorities of Americans now believe there are no meaningful differences between men and women when it comes to leadership traits such as decisiveness, ambition, and intelligence.[32]

In fact, rather than being viewed as a handicap, being female can now work to candidates' advantage. In the past decade, female senators' well-publicized bipartisan dinners, co-sponsorship of legislation, and—most famously—ability to lead their fractious colleagues to the budget deal that ended the 2013 government shutdown have led to the widespread belief that female politicians are more skilled than men in the art of compromise—a view shared by 34 percent of Americans, according to Pew.[33]

Baby bust—or boon?

The presence of young children was a major, often fatal, stumbling block for female candidates for decades. When Patricia Schroeder, a Democrat from Colorado, first ran for the U.S. House of Representatives in 1972, she fielded constant, reproachful questions about the whereabouts of her two children, then ages 2 and 6. In an interview with the author, she recalled how this led her, on her first day in Congress, to finally snap, "I have a brain. I have a uterus. They both work."[34]

Assumptions and expectations regarding motherhood remained highly problematic through the early 1990s. "When I ran for the first time often I was asked, 'well, what are you going to do with your kids?'" recalled Sen. Patty Murray (D-WA), who was elected into office during the so-called Year of the Woman in 1992. "That question is not asked anymore today. It's not an anomaly. It's what so many women and men have to do. It's not a barrier. It's something expected."[35]

Voter sexism, and outright misogyny, do, of course, still exist; the 2016 presidential election provided countless examples, generated by both candidates and voters. And while data on how women fare as candidates for state-level executive office are very limited, one 2015 study[36] conducted for the Barbara Lee Family Foundation by Kelly Dittmar, a scholar at the Center for American Women and Politics, did yield some troubling results.

Dittmar studied the nine gubernatorial campaigns in 2014 in which women were on the ballot—looking at press coverage, polls, debates, social media, and campaign output—and interviewed candidates and members of their campaign staffs. She found, consistent with previous research, that women candidates had to prove their qualifications for executive office while also meeting voters' higher "likeability" demands upon them as candidates. What this appears to mean is that in order to win, women campaigning for executive office must perform gender in just the right way to hit the sweet spot in voter attitudes—conforming to positive stereotypes while countering negative ones.

In an interview for this report, Dittmar, the author of a 2015 book on gender in statewide races,[37] observed that there were "different rules" and "different expectations" for the female gubernatorial candidates she studied. "Winning could be, for women, evidence that they navigate this terrain successfully," she said.[38]

When it comes to legislative elections, however, a solid body of research has emerged to make the case that gender bias on the part of voters does not play a meaningful role at the ballot box. For example, Barbara Burrell, professor emerita of political science at Northern Illinois University, studied the role of gender in election campaigns for Congress spanning 1968 to 2010 for her 2014 book, *Gender in Campaigns for the U.S. House of Representatives*. Her conclusion: "Not only do women win when they run, they run in the same ways and face the same obstacles as male candidates."[39]

More recently, for their 2016 book *Women on the Run: Gender, Media, and Political Campaigns in a Polarized Era,* Danny Hayes and Jennifer Lawless, political scientists at George Washington University and American University, respectively, examined voter attitudes, voting behavior, and media coverage in every congressional district in the United States during the 2010 and 2014 midterm elections. They concluded that the "vast majority" of women candidates were treated "no differently" than men by voters and the media.[40]

Academic researchers such as Burrell, Dittmar, Hayes, and Lawless do not argue that all sexism is gone from the American political scene. On the contrary, experimental studies conducted in laboratory settings, in which subjects are tested on their views of hypothetical male and female candidates, still show the presence of some forms of classic gender bias. But what the new research shows is that, when people are called upon to make voting decisions in real-life settings, those abstract beliefs about men and women don't have much meaning. What really matters, in our increasingly divided times, is a candidate's party and ideology.

In 2014, Kathleen Dolan, a professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, published an innovative study that made this distinction clear. She surveyed 3,200 people in nine different states, first testing their abstract views of gender by evaluating their reactions to hypothetical male and female candidates, and then returning to see how they evaluated real candidates in their own local races for the U.S. House and Senate. Like Lawless and Hayes, Dolan found little evidence that gender stereotypes came into play in real-world political decisions—political party and accompanying ideology were what mattered the most.[41]

"There is a distinction between occasional, albeit high-profile, examples of sexist behavior and systematic gender bias in campaigns," Hayes and Lawless explained in an op-ed in *The Washington Post* in May 2016. "Women are under-represented not because of what happens on the campaign trail, but because they are much less likely to run in the first place."[42]

Indeed, from 1980 to 2012, women made up only 13 percent of all candidates in primaries for U.S. Congress.[43] In light of this, their 19 percent current representation in Congress could be seen as an outsized success.

What keeps women out of office

The privilege of incumbency

How are we to square the new research that tells us that women campaigning for public office are treated and thought of as well as men with the fact that women's political representation is still so woefully inadequate?

A big part of the answer lies in understanding that there's an essential caveat to many of the studies that show men and women doing equally well as candidates. Those studies are designed to isolate the effect of gender by comparing men's and women's chances at winning legislative office, all else being equal—that is, after factoring out real-life differences so that you can compare "apples to apples" such as incumbents to incumbents.

The problem is that the real-life trajectories of male and female candidates is rarely an apples-to-apples proposition. Take the issue of incumbency, which gives officeholders an enormous advantage at election time. Men were 81 percent of the incumbent members of the U.S. House of Representatives in 2016. Incumbents ran in 90 percent of House races that year. And 97 percent of those incumbents won their races.[44] The same general pattern holds at every level of elected office in the United States.

A gatekeeper system that helps insiders and limits ballot access

While women can be just as successful as men in raising money and winning elections, they still are competing in a game where the rules of engagement for them simply to get on the ballot are different. In order to break into the field at all, they have to get past the hurdles of a mostly male political establishment that protects its own and operates according to a set of rules that consistently keeps newcomers on the sidelines.

This political establishment—call it a system of gatekeepers—determines who is recruited and encouraged to run for office, who gets fundraising resources, and who wins endorsements—in other words, who gets on the ballot and in which races.

Gatekeepers are political power brokers—party leaders, big donors, and key advocacy groups such as unions and chambers of commerce—who identify, recruit, and groom candidates, rally support and funding for them, and confer upon them the blessing of "viability" that signals to other funders and power brokers that they're the ones to back. These decisions are generally made quickly, in advance of filing deadlines, and the names put forward are generally drawn from a small pool of long-term party faithful. Favored candidates tend to be familiar faces who will predictably uphold party interests and—above all—have easy access to money and the ability to devote considerable personal resources, including time, to their campaigns.[45]

Candidates without personal fortunes or ready access to wealthy donors are deemed not to be viable. Overlooked early on by the powers that be, their unviability often becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, as groups that fund candidates decide to devote their resources to races that seem easier to win. Not surprisingly, women—and women of color in particular, who generally have lower incomes, lower net worths, and far less social and professional access to big donors—tend to get short shrift in this early "wealth primary"[46] and are eliminated as players long before voters have a chance to encounter them. Making it through this first voterless primary has proven a particularly enduring problem for women of color, who tend to have the hardest time breaking into the social networks that will bring them the level of private donations they need to convince gatekeepers that their campaigns are viable investments. Even those who eventually rise to star status, such as newly elected Sen. Kamala Harris (D-CA), often find that they must work twice as hard at the start of their political careers to take on the gatekeeper establishment.[47]

Women of color face extra fundraising challenges

Campaigning while female—always a complicated game—takes on a whole new level of complexity once race is factored into the equation; the standards of viability are even higher, appearance is all the more scrutinized, and "relatability" is tougher to achieve. For Nina Turner, the former Ohio Senate minority whip, all this added up to major problems in convincing donors of her viability when she ran for the office of Ohio secretary of state in 2014, aiming to become the first African American from the Democratic Party to win a statewide office in Ohio.[48] Although Turner had a considerable public profile, was a media favorite, and had the statewide backing of unions and other grassroots organizations, her opponent, the Republican incumbent Jon Husted, out-fundraised her nearly three-to-one. In an interview with the author, she attributed her fundraising difficulties in part to the fact that donors typically calibrate how much money they will give a candidate to how they judge the candidate's ability to fundraise, holding off on giving their maximum support until a candidate has hit a fundraising threshold.

The game of fundraising is played with "a stacked deck," Turner said. "How do you create equity in funding African American and Latino women who have less access to fundraising money in the first place, if your standard for giving money is that the person has to hit a certain threshold?"[49]

Lack of recruitment and encouragement

All people—men and women alike—are more likely to run for office if asked. Yet as women are less likely than men to think they are qualified to run for office,[50] they especially need to be asked, often repeatedly. And they are less likely to get that encouragement.[51] None of the women interviewed for this paper reported having been actively recruited by the powers that be.

"Oh Lord, no. Not in the slightest," said Teresa Purcell, who managed Sen. Murray's first, long-shot race for the U.S Senate in 1992, when asked if party gatekeepers had sought Murray out and supported her early on in that campaign.

A 2014 report from the Institute for Women's Policy Research reached similar conclusions. After conducting 60 interviews with female candidates, officeholders, and congressional staff members, the researchers found that 51 percent of the female candidates and elected officials said they had never been encouraged

by party leaders to run for higher office, and 71 percent said they had never had such encouragement from other power brokers. In fact, a number of women interviewed for this report spoke of subtle dissuasion: for example, party officials telling women not to mount primary challenges to incumbents in their own party. And even when they were given the nod to run, women were often encouraged to compete in difficult races where their own party was more likely to lose.

The high personal and financial costs of a political career

Many local and state-level elected offices pay so poorly that it's very difficult for people without deep pockets—or a high-earning spouse—to consider a career in politics. Legislators in Texas earn just $7,200 per year, for example, plus a $190 per diem for expenses, while those in New Mexico earn no yearly salary and are provided a daily allowance of up to $163 for official expenses.[52]

In some states, the problem of low pay is mitigated by the fact that legislative office is considered a part-time job. But that is of little help for those whose jobs don't permit them much flexibility or who have caretaking responsibilities that make commuting to a statehouse far from home all but impossible. This again keeps candidates without personal wealth, support on the homefront, or career flexibility—disproportionately women—from running in state-level elections and eventually finding their place in the pipeline for higher office.

Combating the structural impediments to women's progress with structural solutions

Establishing alternative networks

States with long-entrenched and powerful gatekeeper networks, which retain some of the vestiges of the old so-called political machines, such as Pennsylvania, have tended historically to have considerably lower levels of female representation. On the other hand, states where traditional political machines have tended to be less entrenched, often in the West, have typically provided more opportunities for female politicians. In Oregon, for example, women have had their own support structures, in the form of a political action committee, or PAC, started in 1987 to fund female candidates and a nonprofit, the Oregon Women's Campaign School, founded in 1979 to train and encourage female candidates.[53] The results speak for themselves: In 2016, Oregon had a female governor, secretary of state, attorney general, and speaker of the state House.[54] Starting this year, a majority of the state legislature's Democrats will be women.[55]

The national organization EMILY's List, founded in 1985 to fund pro-choice Democratic women for elected office, was formed with the knowledge that early money is the key to both sustained fundraising and institutional support, and it is now the largest and best-known alternative network supporting women candidates. Since its inception, the organization has raised more than $500 million and trained more than 9,000 women, with more than 900 of them winning office.[56] In more recent years, Emerge America has become another leading organization training Democratic women to run for office and bringing strong potential female contenders to the attention of traditional gatekeepers. In 2016, Emerge fielded 213 women as candidates for office in 17 red and blue states—and 70 percent of them won their races.[57]

Working around gatekeepers, taking on the establishment

With training and support from Emerge America, Annissa Essaibi George, a public high school teacher and yarn store owner, first ran for the Boston City Council in 2013—and in 2015 she won an at-large seat, dislodging one of the council's longest-serving members, 18-year veteran Stephen J. Murphy. In doing so, she became the first Arab American to serve on Boston's traditionally white, male council. Having an alternative gatekeeper structure behind her was key.

According to George, the city's traditional power brokers showed little interest in her candidacy—until her poll numbers showed her doing so well that they had no choice. "A number of people tried to talk me out of running. It was anything from 'You can't do it this year because you're not going to win' to 'It's too hard to beat incumbents' to 'Your children are too young; you have to wait another two years,'" she said. "The people who tried to talk me out of running were people who support the establishment. They sort of wished me well and sent me on my way, and in the final weeks they were saying they'd known I could do this and they'd known from the start I'd do well."[58]

Changing voting systems and electoral structures to help level the playing field for outsiders

The winner-take-all systems that govern how most elections work in the United States give enormous power to incumbents, who are primarily white men. Many of those advocating for a government that is more representative of American voters now argue that to open up more space for women and people of color, we need to change those winner-take-all systems in ways that create more opportunities for outsiders.

One such reform, currently adopted by more than a dozen cities,[59] is a process known as ranked-choice voting. In this system, also called instant runoff voting, voters select more than one candidate in order of preference. The candidate losing by the largest margin—the lowest vote-getter overall—is then eliminated, with that candidate's votes transferred to voters' second-choice candidate. The process repeats until a single winner remains. Ranked-choice voting was adopted by San

Francisco in 2002 and Oakland, California, in 2006. In June 2016, a study by the organization FairVote analyzed the effect of ranked-choice voting on local elections in the San Francisco Bay Area and found that the use of the system was associated with the election of more women, people of color, and women of color.[60]

Current Minneapolis Mayor Betsy Hodges (D) credits ranked-choice voting with helping her win office in 2013. Like other advocates of the system, she has argued that ranked-choice voting motivates candidates to appeal to larger swaths of voters, in order to win those who might designate them as their second choice. At the same time, the risk of offending voters creates a disincentive for engaging in highly negative attacks on opponents. All of this, proponents say, reduces the potential ugliness of campaigning—which, research shows, is a particular turnoff for women—and makes elections more hospitable. The 2013 Minneapolis mayoral race was so hospitable, in fact, that no fewer than 35 candidates crowded the ballot. To prevent a replay, in 2014, Minneapolis voters passed a measure increasing the $20 filing fee for would-be candidates for mayor to $500.[61]

In November, voters in Maine narrowly approved a ballot measure making it the first state to adopt ranked-choice voting to elect its U.S. senators and members of the House of Representatives, as well as future governors and state legislators.[62] The 2018 election will be the first using the new system.

Multiwinner legislative elections

Another method that has shown some success in increasing the number of women in elective office is the creation of multimember legislative districts, where several candidates compete for multiple seats in one district, instead of a single seat, as is currently the case in all U.S. House races and most state legislative elections. In single-winner districts, the inherent advantages of incumbency make it extremely challenging for newcomers to break in, and the winner-take-all nature of elections means that campaigns have a tendency to be hostile. However, in multiwinner legislative elections, voters choose a slate of candidates in their districts. In Maryland, for example, voters elect three state House members and one state senator from each of the 47 legislative districts.[63] The argument in favor of multimember legislative districts holds that such a system essentially requires candidates to try to appeal to a larger slice of the electorate and tends to lead to a somewhat more congenial campaign environment. Advocates point out that multiwinner legislative elections have a track record of leading to the election of more women, both

in the United States and abroad.[64] Skeptics note, however, that New Jersey is one notable state that uses multimember districts to elect all members of its state House but that also, until quite recently, has had a notably poor track record of electing women to office. Ten American states currently use such a system to elect representatives to at least one house of their state legislature.[65]

Ward- or district-based local elections

Yet another reform, which has been adopted by cities such as Austin, Texas, and Seattle, is a shift away from selecting city council members through at-large citywide elections toward selecting at least some council members through ward- or district-based elections. Such elections cost candidates less money and tend to encourage a more grassroots approach to campaigning. In addition, ward- or district-based elections have proven to greatly increase the field of candidates in city council elections and thus, directly or indirectly, can increase the representation of women.[66]

There is, however, a significant caveat concerning the efficacy of both of the above measures: Studies seeking to measure the representation of women overall have shown them to yield positive results, but when results are broken down by race, there are indications that they do not help the chances of women of color. A 2006 study by Becki Scola, a political scientist at Saint Joseph's University, analyzed the relationship among a number of state demographic, ideological, and structural factors and women's legislative representation. The study concluded that the factors that predict the presence or absence of women of color in state legislatures are not the same as those that predict the representation of white women or of women overall. In particular, Scola found that a state's use of multimember legislative districts did not lead to a greater political presence for women of color.[67] A 2008 study by Jessica Trounstine and Melody Valdini— political scientists at the University of California, Merced, and Portland State University, respectively—looked at city council races in more than 7,000 cities and showed that the use of ward- or district-based systems instead of at-large systems helped black men and white women win elections, but had no effect for African American women and Latinas.[68] The reason for these discrepancies was not clear in the studies and will require further research.

Recommendations

There are a number of concrete actions that can and should be taken to address the structural impediments to women's leadership in U.S. politics.

Change how political parties recruit and groom candidates

Our political parties need to fundamentally re-examine how they identify, recruit, and back candidates and put into place systems that hold party powers that be accountable for change. To get up to speed, the parties should set voluntary numerical goals for the recruitment of female candidates for primary elections in any given year.

To identify top-notch potential female candidates, party officials at both the national and state levels should work with groups that recruit and train women to run for office and make a long-term investment in grooming talented women who can ultimately emerge as leaders. These groups, in turn, must make determined good faith efforts to find a diverse pool of women and tailor their recruitment and training programs in ways that address the distinct needs of women of color, who face an additional set of challenges in breaking through gatekeeper barriers and acquiring the sort of social capital that leads to both name recognition and the ability to fundraise on a large scale.

The notion of setting voluntary numerical goals for recruitment implies a far more flexible practice than the gender quotas now used internally by the Democratic and Republican parties. (The membership of the Republican National Committee includes one man and one woman from every state and territory, and the Democratic Party's convention delegates are split evenly between men and women.[69]) It would be relatively easy to build on the parties' stated desire for gender equity through nonbinding candidate recruitment goals. It would be advisable as well for the parties to make concerted efforts to ensure much greater gender diversity in their leadership structures.

Reduce the role of big money in determining who runs for election

Once women are established candidates running in congressional-level races, they have the ability to fundraise as well as men. Yet a relative lack of personal wealth and lack of connections to donors with deep pockets pose a serious problem for would-be female candidates looking to get started in politics. Women tend to be less well-off than men and are less likely than men to have the networks to generate large donations. This means that women are less likely to get the attention of gatekeepers and, by extension, less likely to get the funds they need to run successful campaigns.

Campaign finance reform that reduces the importance of having access to big money is essential to promoting the chances of women candidates, and of women of color in particular. Although there are no public financing systems in place for elections to most federal offices, 13 states and a number of localities—including New York City; Los Angeles; Seattle; and Montgomery County, Maryland—have some form of voluntary public funding of some elections.[70] Public financing systems include block grants of public funding for candidates, vouchers or tax credits for small political contributions, and small-donor public financing, in which small individual donations are matched by public funds at a fixed rate.[71]

The five states with public funding for legislative elections—Arizona, Connecticut, Hawaii, Maine, and Minnesota—all have levels of female representation in their state legislatures that are higher than the national average.[72] In 2002, Arizona also elected its first woman governor—Janet Napolitano (D)—after adopting a system of public funding for statewide elections two years earlier.[73] Both Arizona, which uses a statewide block grant program, and New York City, which uses a system of small-donor public financing, saw increases in the number of women and people of color running for office once they established public financing systems.[74]

In New York City's small-donor public financing program, candidates who qualify by reaching a threshold level of very small donations receive matching funds at a 6-to-1 ratio for the funds they raise from individual donors.[75] The program has been so successful that more than 90 percent of the primary candidates in citywide elections opted into it in the past two election cycles.[76] Advocates credit the system with aiding the elections of Letitia James, public advocate for the City of New York and the first African American woman to hold citywide elected office, and Melissa Mark-Viverito (D), the first Puerto Rican and Latina to hold a citywide elected position, who currently serves as the speaker of the New York City Council.[77]

The Center for American Progress recommends that more cities and states adopt small-donor public financing of elections and has supported legislation at the federal level—the Fair Elections Now Act in the Senate and the Government By the People Act in the House—that would establish public funding for congressional elections. CAP has also previously argued strongly in favor of implementing robust small-donor public financing programs to counteract the corrupting role of big money in state judicial elections.[78]

Target more PAC spending to women, particularly in open-seat elections

By removing the hurdle of taking on an incumbent, open-seat races have historically been the best way for women and other historic outsiders to gain entry to legislative office. Two of the new women of color joining the U.S. Senate this year—Kamala Harris and Catherine Cortez-Masto (D-NV)—for example, won in open-seat races.[79] Yet new research from the Center for Responsive Politics shows that one key group of gatekeepers—institutional donors—isn't getting the message.[80] A November 2016 report, co-authored with Common Cause and Representation 2020, looked at political contributions to female candidates for the U.S. House and Senate in the 2010, 2012, 2014, and—when available—2016 election cycles and examined patterns of direct giving from individual donors, political action committees, and leadership PACs, as well as outside spending by party committees and super PACs, to women running in open-seat races.[81] The report found that PACs, membership PACs, and leadership PACs alike "systematically" underfunded women running in those open-seat races.[82]

If gatekeepers with financial power want to put their money where their mouth is on increasing the presence of women in office, they need to earmark more of their resources for women. Deep-pocketed individual donors, leadership PACs, and PACs in general should set voluntary numerical goals for the number of women they will support in each campaign cycle and prioritize funding women who run in open-seat races.

Women of color receive the lowest rate of funding, on average, of all congressional candidates. Their total contributions from donors giving more than $200 averaged $330,000 in 2014, compared with $450,000 for men of color and almost $700,000 for white candidates, both male and female.[83]

Pay state legislators a living wage and support them with work-family policies

Currently, only 12 states pay their legislators a salary that is at least as high as the state's median household income.[84] The low pay—and in some cases, no pay—provided by many state legislatures to their members means that only people who are able to forgo considerable time and income can afford to be on the ballot. This excludes anyone without a highly flexible schedule, considerable support at home, and significant personal wealth. Therefore, states should increase pay for legislators so that potential candidates with breadwinning responsibilities can devote themselves to public service.

Despite current voter hostility toward elected officials, this is not an impossible goal, even in conservative states. In 2015, for example, Arkansas raised state legislator base pay almost 150 percent, from $15,869 to $39,400 per year.[85]

The private sector has long known that workplace practices that help employees integrate their professional and personal responsibilities are key to recruiting and retaining talented women. Our legislative bodies need to catch up to this awareness and adopt practices aimed at easing the logistical hurdles faced by lawmakers with caretaking responsibilities, as well as those who live far from state capitals. This means that state legislatures must adopt scheduling practices that limit early morning meetings and evening floor debates and votes, as well as allow telecommuting—and proxy voting—when feasible.

Conclusion: Beyond the 'ambition gap'

The underrepresentation of women in U.S. politics does serious damage to the legitimacy of our democratic institutions. If significant numbers of Americans believe that our government is best described as an "old boys' club," as a plurality of likely 2016 voters polled by the Women Donors Network's Reflective Democracy Campaign in 2014 asserted,[86] then they clearly do not feel it is responsive to their needs. And as the anger and resentment expressed in the 2016 presidential election cycle showed, this feeling of alienation from government can lead to extremely destructive outcomes.

The lack of women in U.S. politics can no longer be blamed primarily on voter sexism, nor should it be blamed on a simplistic idea of a so-called female ambition gap. Political ambition does not exist in a vacuum; it stems from a sense of what's possible. That's why any discussion of political parity that focuses on women's internal processes regarding the decision to run without taking into account the external forces weighing upon that decision will necessarily miss the mark.

A truly meaningful approach to increasing women's representation must acknowledge that despite vast improvements in voter attitudes toward female leaders, men and women still encounter a very uneven playing field when they run for office. Moreover, the structural impediments that mark that field have very deep roots and represent a wide array of entrenched interests.

Decades of focus on voter bias and women's states of mind have not proven terribly effective in increasing women's political representation in the United States. But international examples of rapid change via quotas[87] and, increasingly, examples of successful, homegrown campaign finance and election system reform clearly indicate that structural solutions do work. Moving forward, the United States needs high-quality research to track the effects of measures such as small-donor public financing, voluntary recruitment and funding goals, and election system reform on increasing the representation of women in office, with special attention to the political fortunes of women of color.

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