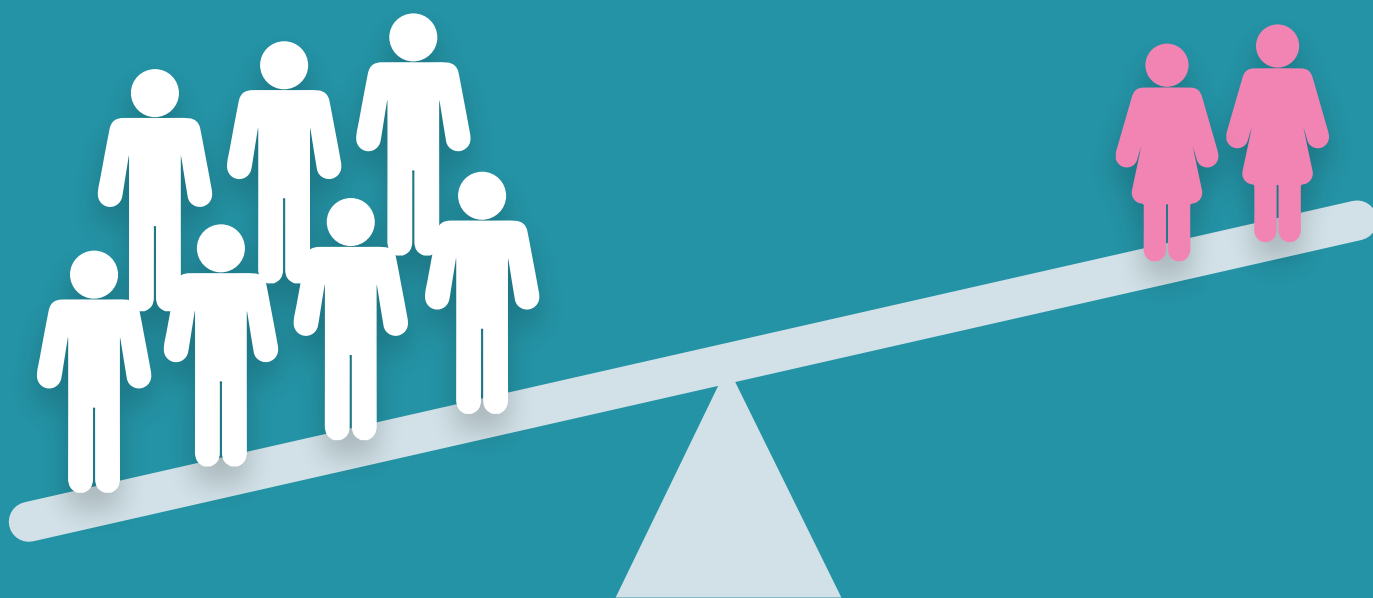




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The Gender Gap in Political Ambition:

Everything You Need to Know in 10 Charts



Jennifer L. Lawless
University of Virginia

Richard L. Fox
Loyola Marymount University

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Jennifer L. Lawless

Leone Reaves and George W. Spicer Professor of Politics
University of Virginia

Richard L. Fox

Professor of Political Science
Loyola Marymount University

Center for Effective Lawmaking

Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy
University of Virginia
Charlottesville, VA

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Politics remains a game for men.

At first glance, that claim might seem to fly in the face of reality. Women in politics are everywhere. The vice president and Speaker of the House are women. Republican Liz Cheney is the face of the congressional committee investigating January 6th. Conservative firebrands Marjorie Taylor Greene and Lauren Boebert are social media stars. AOC is a household acronym. And by March 2022, Ballotpedia had already identified 13 Democratic and seven Republican women as prospective presidential candidates for 2024.

It's not just these famous faces suggesting that the political arena is open to women. Academic studies find the same thing. When women run for office, they perform just as well as men – they raise just as much money, win just as many votes, and claim victory just as often.¹ Even the media coverage men and women receive has become indistinguishable.² That's not to say gender plays no role in the electoral arena, or that there aren't episodes of gender bias. Of course there are. But overall, there's no evidence of widespread, systematic discrimination against female candidates.

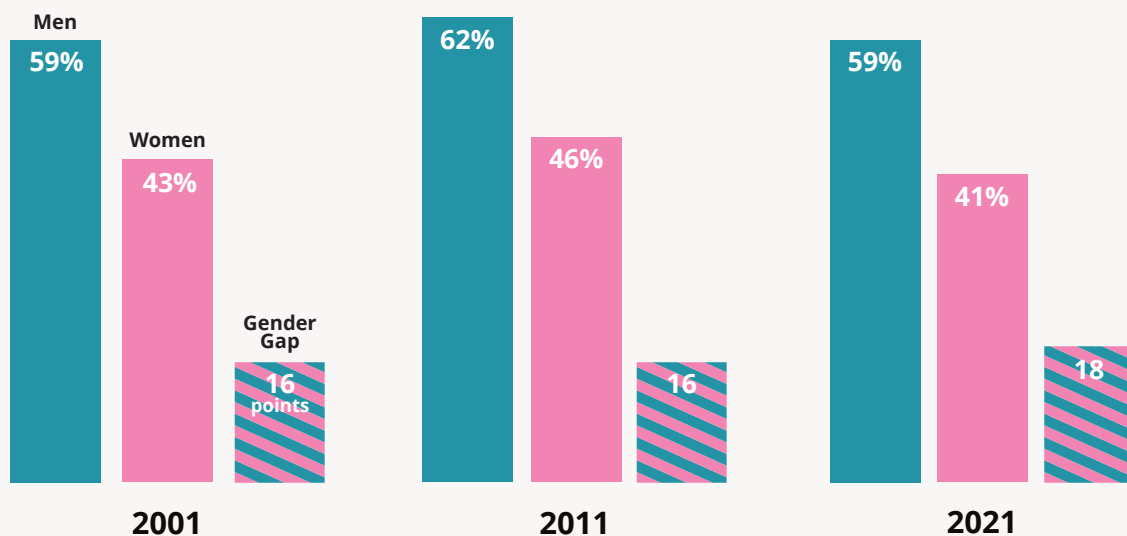
So how can we possibly conclude that politics is a man's game? Look no further than the large and enduring gender gap in "political ambition." Even when matched in terms of profession, income, education, and political engagement, men continue to be much more interested than women in running for elective office.

The following 10 charts highlight this story.

The gender gap in political ambition is just as big today as it was 20 years ago.

We started tracking people's interest in running for office in 2001, when we launched the first wave of the Citizen Political Ambition Study. The study focuses primarily on "potential candidates" – people with the four professional backgrounds most common among elected officials (law, business, education, and politics). We asked a very straightforward question: "Have you ever thought about running for office?" In 2001, 59% of men had considered running for some elective position, compared to just 43% of women.³ Ten years later, we conducted another wave of the study. The gender gap was just as large – 16 percentage points.⁴ The same remains true today. In 2021, we uncovered a gender gap in political ambition of virtually the same size as 20 years ago.⁵ Over time, roughly half the potential candidates we surveyed have considered running for office, but women have consistently been dramatically less likely than men to fall into this category.

Potential Candidates Who Ever Considered Running for Office



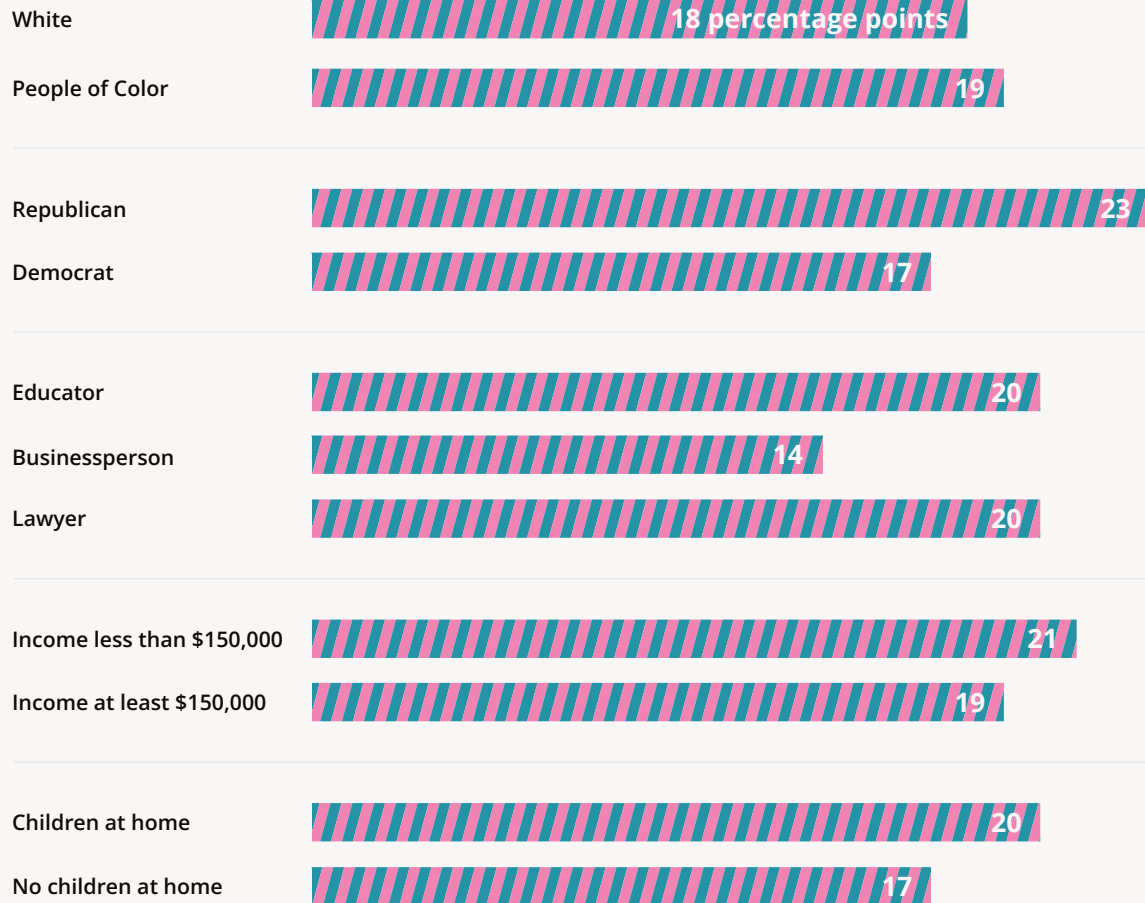
Note: Bars represent the percentages of lawyers, business leaders, educators, and political activists who reported that they ever considered running for office, as well as the gender gap (in percentage points) at each point in time. The gender gap is significant at $p < .05$ in all three comparisons. Data are from the authors' Citizen Political Ambition Studies and include 3,523 potential candidates in 2001, 3,614 in 2011, and 2,139 in 2021.

Women aren't only less likely than men to have considered running for office. They are also less likely to express any interest in a candidacy at some point down the road. Only a small ratio of potential candidates is definitely interested in running for office in the future. But men are nearly twice as likely as women (9% compared to 5%) to fall into this small segment of people. At the other end of the continuum, a 19 percentage point gender gap emerges, with 49% of women we surveyed reporting that running for office – any office – is something they would absolutely never do. Only 30% of men feel that way.

The gender gap in political ambition affects all types of women and men.

The gender gap in ambition persists across various demographic groups. Among White potential candidates, for example, women are 18 percentage points less likely than men to have considered running for office. That's virtually indistinguishable from potential candidates of color, for whom the gender gap is 19 points. (We combined people of color because the subsamples of Black, Latino, and Asian American respondents are too small to make meaningful statistical comparisons.) The story is the same on other key demographics. Regardless of political party affiliation, profession, annual household income, or parental status, the gender gap in political ambition is striking.

The Gender Gap in Political Ambition among Key Demographic Groups



Note: Bars represent the size of the gender gap in political ambition in each demographic category. The gender gap is significant at $p < .05$ for every demographic group. Data are from the 2021 Citizen Political Ambition Study and include 1,037 men and 1,107 women.

The gender gap in political ambition persists across all levels of elected office.

Regardless of their interest in running for office, we asked potential candidates which positions they would consider if prompted to run. Of the nine offices we listed, women are significantly less likely than men to express interest in running for eight of them. More than twice as many men than women said they might be interested in being a mayor, governor, or member of Congress someday. The only position with no gender gap is school board. The gender gap in political ambition, it's fair to say, permeates all levels of government.

Potential Candidates' Interest in Various Elective Offices

| Local Offices | Women | Men |
|--|------------|------------|
| School Board | 32% | 35% |
| City Council | 40% | 51% |
| Mayor | 7% | 14% |
| Interested in at least one local office | 54% | 62% |
| State Offices | | |
| State Legislature | 20% | 37% |
| Secretary of State | 3% | 5% |
| Governor | 3% | 9% |
| Interested in at least one state office | 22% | 40% |
| Federal Offices | | |
| U.S. House | 10% | 23% |
| U.S. Senate | 7% | 15% |
| President | 2% | 5% |
| Interested in at least one federal office | 13% | 26% |

Note: Entries indicate the percentage of respondents who would ever consider running for each position. Percentages do not add up to 100% because respondents could express interest in more than one position. The gender gap is significant at $p < .05$ in each comparison except school board. Data are from the 2021 Citizen Political Ambition Study and include 1,037 men and 1,107 women.

4 Women are less likely than men to have taken any of the steps that precede running for office.

Women are less likely than men to do any of the things usually required to launch a political campaign. Far more men than women have had the conversations – with family members, friends, previous candidates, party leaders, and potential donors – that typically accompany a decision to run for office. A greater share of men than women has also figured out how to get on the ballot, an obvious prerequisite for entering a race. Given the steps they've taken, it's no surprise that men are twice as likely as women to report that they've "seriously considered" a candidacy.

Steps Potential Candidates Have Taken toward an Eventual Campaign

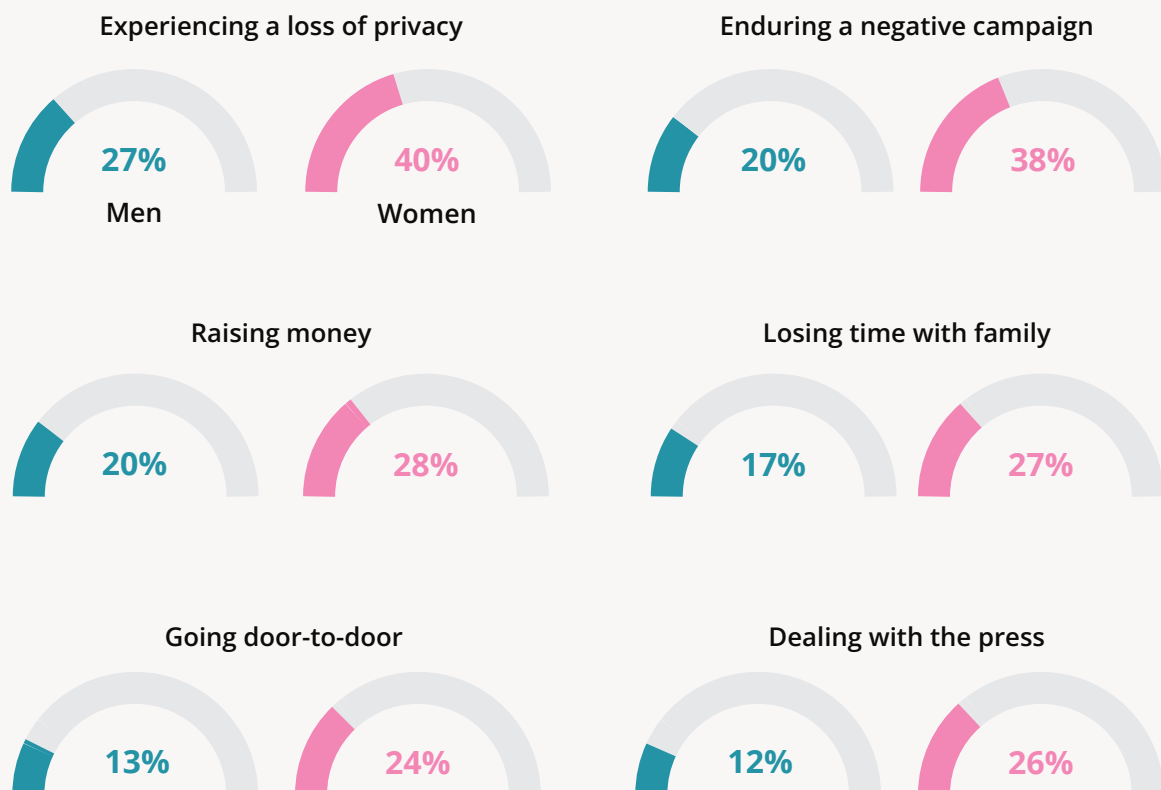
| | Women | Men | Advantage |
|---|------------|------------|----------------|
| Discussed running with friends or family | 15% | 24% | +9 men |
| Investigated how to get on the ballot | 9% | 17% | +8 men |
| Spoke to candidates about their experiences | 8% | 14% | +6 men |
| Spoke to party leaders | 6% | 11% | +5 men |
| Attended a candidate training | 4% | 7% | +3 men |
| Discussed fundraising with potential donors | 4% | 7% | +3 men |
| Took at least one step | 19% | 31% | +12 men |

Note: Entries represent the percentage of women and men who have engaged in each activity. The gender gap is significant at $p < .05$ in each comparison. Data are from the 2021 Citizen Political Ambition Study and include 1,037 men and 1,107 women.

Women are more put off by many aspects of running for office than men are.

Political campaigns often entail unappealing activities and challenging personal circumstances. We asked about six of them and, in every case, women hold a more negative view. Across the board, they are more likely than men to view various aspects of modern campaigns as deterrents to running for office. In some cases – such as enduring a negative campaign or dealing with the press – women are approximately twice as likely as men to be put off. Overall, 45% of men, compared to 59% of women, are deterred by at least one aspect of electoral politics. Women are nearly three times as likely as men to be deterred by all six.

Potential Candidates Who Are Deterred by Typical Campaign Activities

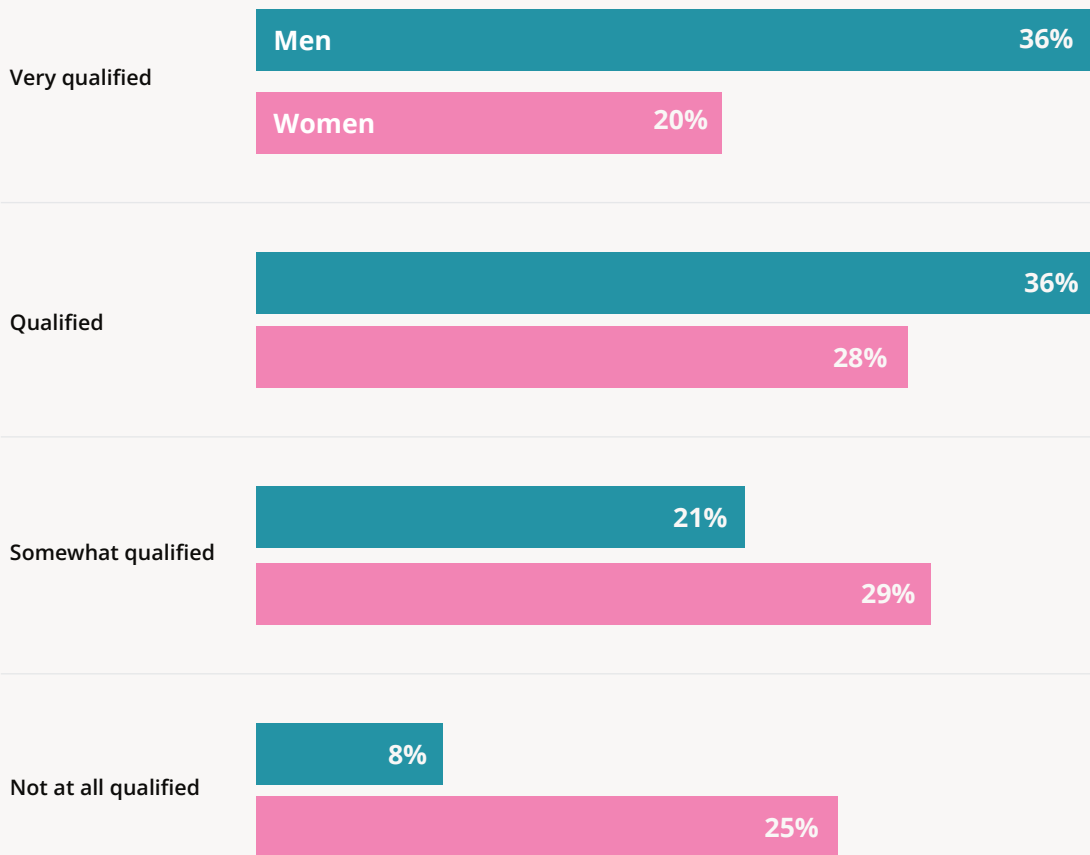


Note: Horseshoes represent the percentage of women and men who view each activity so negatively that it would deter them from running for office. The gender gap is significant at $p < .05$ in each comparison. Data are from the 2021 Citizen Political Ambition Study and include 1,037 men and 1,107 women.

Even when they have the same credentials and qualifications as men to run for office, women don't see it that way.

People tend not to do things they don't believe they're well-suited to do. And far fewer women than men view themselves as qualified to run for office. The women and men we surveyed are matched in their professional backgrounds and credentials. They also have comparable experiences raising money and organizing people in the community – two essential tasks for any candidate. Yet 72% of men, but only 48% of women, rate themselves as “qualified” or “very qualified” to run for office. Women are more than three times as likely as men to say they're “not at all qualified” to run.

Potential Candidates' Assessments of Their Qualifications to Run for Office



Note: Bars represent women and men's self-assessments of whether they're qualified to run for office. The gender gap is significant at $p < .05$ in each comparison. Data are from the 2021 Citizen Political Ambition Study and include 1,037 men and 1,107 women

Women are less likely than men to think they have the traits of a successful candidate.

Beyond being more likely than men to doubt their broad qualifications to run for office, women are also much more likely than men to doubt they possess several important candidate characteristics. We presented potential candidates with four pairs of statements and asked which better described them. In each pair, one statement was a positive assessment related to running for office and the other was a negative statement. The gender gaps are staggering. In terms of policy knowledge, for example, 80% of men, but only 54% of women, consider themselves very knowledgeable. On all four pairs of statements, men are substantially more likely than women to believe the positive statement about candidate traits applies to them.

Potential Candidates' Assessments of Their Politically-Relevant Traits

Positive Assessments: Agree that...

Someone like me would have a leg up running for office.



I am pretty unflappable when criticized.



I have the look of a successful candidate.



I am very knowledgeable about some areas of public policy.



Negative Assessments: Agree that...

Someone like me would have a hard time running for office.



I don't have thick enough skin to run for office.



My looks would be criticized if I ran for office.



I don't know enough about public policy to run for office.

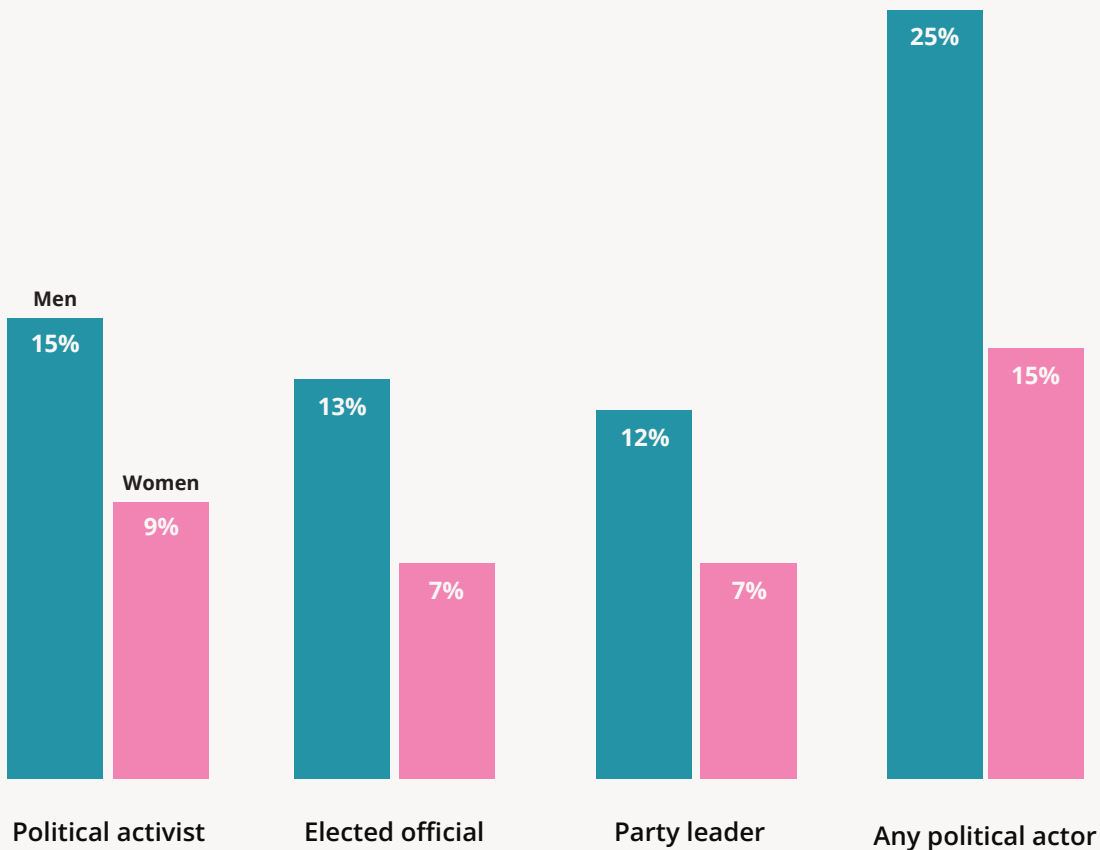


Note: Entries represent the percentage of women and men who said that each statement accurately described them. The gender gap is significant at $p < .05$ in each comparison. Data are from the 2021 Citizen Political Ambition Study and include 1,022 men and 1,091 women.

8 Political leaders are less likely to recruit women to run for office.

Recruitment to run for office is one of the most important predictors of whether someone becomes a candidate.⁶ That's among the reasons many political organizations promote recruiting female candidates. But political leaders have been slow to hear and heed the call. Political activists, elected officials, and party leaders encourage far more men than women to enter the electoral arena. Overall, one quarter of male potential candidates have been recruited to run for office by a political actor, compared to fewer than one in six women. Political leaders, however, are not actively discouraging women from throwing their hats into the ring. Only 2% of the women we surveyed report that a political actor ever dissuaded them from running for office.

Potential Candidates' Recruitment to Run for Office by Political Actors

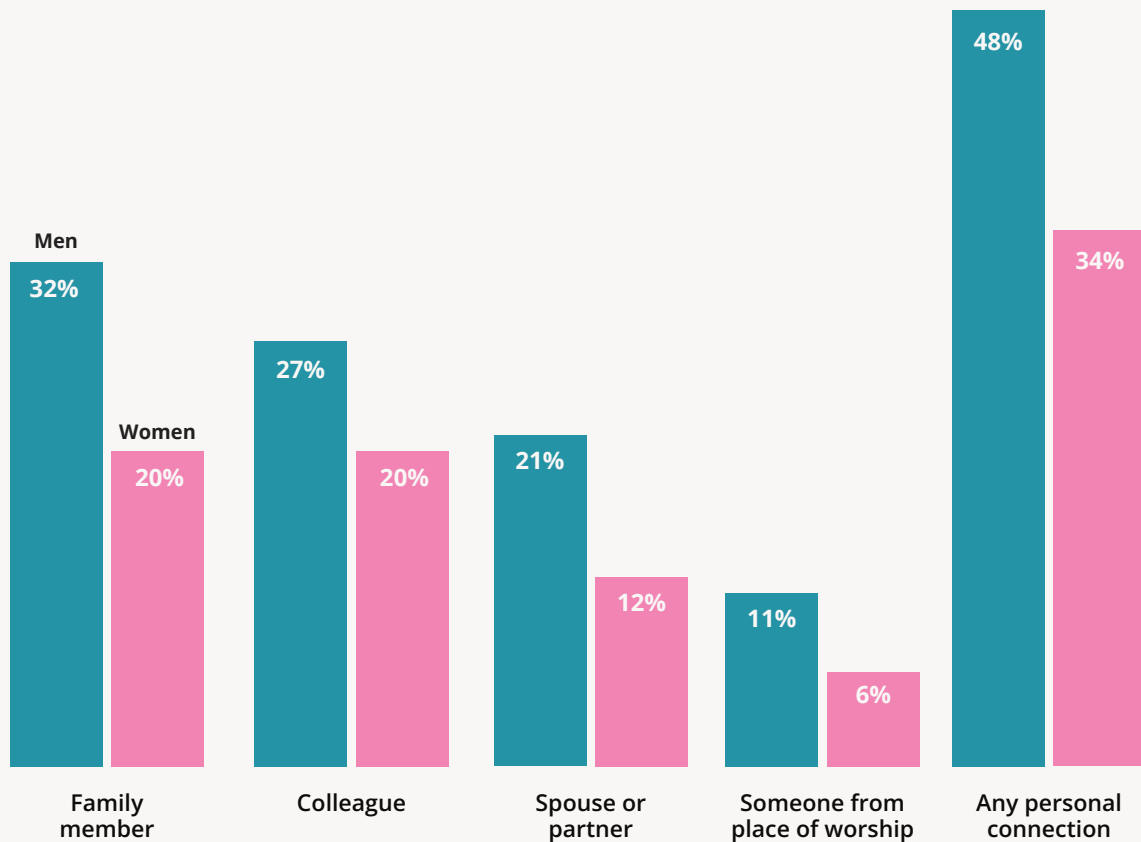


Note: Bars represent the percentage of women and men who ever received the suggestion to run for office from each source. The gender gap is significant at $p < .05$ in each comparison. Data are from the 2021 Citizen Political Ambition Study and include 1,037 men and 1,107 women.

The people who know them best are less likely to encourage women to run for office.

Encouragement to run for office from the people who know them best can help potential candidates take the plunge. The survey results reveal that men receive this kind of encouragement – from family members, colleagues, spouses, and people from their place of worship – more often than women do. In the end, almost 50% of men report that at least one personal connection has encouraged them to run for office. The same is true for barely one third of women.

Potential Candidates' Sources of Personal Encouragement for a Candidacy



Note: Bars represent the percentage of women and men who ever received the suggestion to run for office from each source. The gender gap is significant at $p < .05$ in each comparison. Data are from the 2021 Citizen Political Ambition Study and include 1,037 men and 1,107 women.

Direct appeals from political leaders and political organizations can help close the gender gap in political ambition.

We presented potential candidates with six scenarios and asked whether each would make them more likely to think about running for office. Women are less likely than men to be receptive to any of them – and sometimes by a lot. Women, for instance, are only about half as likely as men to report that they'd be more inclined to think about running if a party official encouraged them or if they learned from a political organization that someone submitted their name as an excellent potential candidate. Recruitment by party officials and political organizations, however, is still the most effective way to get women thinking about a candidacy. So if political leaders and organizations focus their efforts on women, then they can chip away at the gender gap in political ambition.

Scenarios to Make Potential Candidates More Likely to Think about Running for Office

| | Women | Men |
|--|-------|-----|
| A representative from the Democratic or Republican Party encourages you to run. | 10% | 18% |
| An email from a political organization informs you that someone submitted your name as an excellent potential candidate. | 6% | 12% |
| A coworker tells you that we need more people in politics like you. | 5% | 9% |
| A group of friends at a dinner party tells you that you'd be a great candidate. | 4% | 9% |
| An elected official makes a speech encouraging everyday Americans to run for office. | 4% | 6% |
| After a conversation about politics with an acquaintance, the person tells you to run for office. | 3% | 7% |

Note: Entries represent the percentage of women and men who report that each interaction would "definitely" make them more likely to think about running for office. The gender gap is significant at $p < .05$ in each comparison. Data are from the 2021 Citizen Political Ambition Study. $N = 1,037$ men and 1,107 women.

Where does this leave us?

A lot has changed since we conducted the first wave of the Citizen Political Ambition Study in 2001. The number of women serving in Congress has doubled (to 28%). Women's organizations have made it a priority to recruit women to run for office. And famous female politicians, glass-shattering candidacies, increased attention to women's under-representation, women's marches, and #MeToo are features of the contemporary political environment.

These changes and efforts have helped propel a record number of women into office in recent elections, but they haven't been sufficient to change society's broader attitudes about women's place in electoral politics. They haven't been sufficient to close the gender gap in political ambition.

Still today, we operate in a world where people see men as candidates. And men see themselves that way. Women – even those who are highly educated, well-credentialed, and politically engaged – often do not. Until women are just as likely as men to consider running for office, then we really haven't achieved full inclusion in the political system.

Notes

¹ Dolan, Kathleen. 2014. *When Does Gender Matter? Women Candidates and Gender Stereotypes in American Elections*. New York: Oxford University Press; Fox, Richard L. 2021. "Congressional Elections: Women's Candidacies and the Road to Gender Parity." In *Gender and Elections*, 5th edition, Susan J. Carroll and Richard L. Fox (eds.). New York: Cambridge University Press; Teele, Dawn Langan, Joshua Kalla, and Frances Rosenbluth. 2018. "The Ties that Double Bind: Social Roles and Women's Under-representation in Politics." *American Political Science Review* 112(3):525-41.

² Hayes, Danny and Jennifer L. Lawless. 2016. *Women on the Run: Gender, Media, and Political Campaigns in a Polarized Era*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

³ Lawless, Jennifer L. and Richard L. Fox. 2005. *It Takes a Candidate: Why Women Don't Run for Office*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

⁴ Fox, Richard L. and Jennifer L. Lawless. 2014. "Reconciling Family Roles with Political Ambition: The New Normal for Women in 21st Century U.S. Politics." *Journal of Politics* 76(2):398-414; Lawless, Jennifer L. and Richard L. Fox. 2011. *Men Rule: The Continued Under-Representation of Women in U.S. Politics*. Washington, DC: Women & Politics Institute.

⁵ See Lawless and Fox (2005) for a discussion of the methodology involved in assembling and surveying samples of the candidate eligibility pool in the 2001 and 2011. The 2021 survey was fielded by YouGov in November - December 2021.

⁶ Lawless, Jennifer L. and Richard L. Fox. 2010. *It Still Takes a Candidate: Why Women Don't Run for Office*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

About the Authors



Jennifer L. Lawless is the Leone Reaves and George W. Spicer Professor of Politics at the University of Virginia. Her research focuses on political ambition, campaigns and elections, and media and politics. She is the author or co-author of seven books, including *Women on the Run: Gender, Media, and Political Campaigns in a Polarized Era* and *It Still Takes a Candidate: Why Women Don't Run for Office*. Her research, which has been supported by the National Science Foundation, has appeared in numerous academic journals, and is regularly cited in the popular press. She is the Co-Editor-in-Chief of the *American Journal of Political Science*. Many moons ago (in 2006), she sought the Democratic nomination for the U.S. House of Representatives in Rhode Island's second congressional district.



Richard L. Fox is professor of political science at Loyola Marymount University. His research examines how gender affects voting behavior, state executive elections, congressional elections, and political ambition. Most recently, he is co-editor of *Gender and Elections: Shaping the Future of American Politics*. He has also co-authored *Women, Men & U.S. Politics: Ten Big Questions*, *Running from Office: Why Young Americans Are Turned Off to Politics*, and *It Still Takes a Candidate: Why Women Don't Run for Office*. His articles have appeared in the *Journal of Politics*, *American Journal of Political Science*, *American Political Science Review*, *Political Psychology*, *PS*, *Women & Politics*, *Political Research Quarterly*, and *Public Administration Review*.



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