Becoming a Candidate

Political Ambition and the Decision to Run for Office

Why does anyone make the move from politically minded citizen to candidate for public office? What factors contribute to the initial decision to run for office? What circumstances trigger and suppress political ambition over time? Becoming a Candidate: Political Ambition and the Decision to Run for Office explores the factors that drive political ambition at the earliest stages. Using data from a comprehensive survey of thousands of eligible candidates, Jennifer L. Lawless systematically investigates what compels certain citizens to pursue elective positions and others to recoil at the notion. She assesses personal factors, such as race, gender, and family dynamics, as well as professional circumstances and attitudes toward the political system to shed new light on the candidate emergence process. By developing a broader conception of political ambition, Lawless speaks to fundamental questions of electoral competition, political representation, and democratic legitimacy.

Jennifer L. Lawless is an Associate Professor of Government at American University, where she is also the Director of the Women & Politics Institute. She is the current editor of Politics & Gender. Her research focuses on political ambition, public opinion, and women and politics. Her articles have appeared in the American Journal of Political Science, Journal of Politics, Perspectives on Politics, Political Research Quarterly, Legislative Studies Quarterly, Politics & Gender, and Women & Politics. She is also the coauthor of It Takes A Candidate: Why Women Don’t Run for Office (Cambridge 2005) and It Still Takes A Candidate: Why Women Don’t Run for Office (Cambridge 2010) with Richard L. Fox. She is a recognized speaker on the subject of electoral politics, frequently discussing these issues on national and local television and radio. Her scholarly analysis and political commentary have been quoted in the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post, and USA Today, among numerous other newspapers, as well as on the websites of CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News. In 2006, she sought the Democratic nomination for the U.S. House of Representatives in Rhode Island’s 2nd congressional district.
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American University
For Marjorie and John Lawless,
who always encouraged me to be a candidate,
and
for Adam Deitch and Nick Goldberg,
who helped me become one.
# Contents

List of Tables  
List of Figures  
Acknowledgments  

## 1  
Mudslinging, Money-Grubbing, and Mayhem: Who Would Ever Run for Office?  
The Importance of Studying the Initial Decision to Run for Office  
Organization of the Book  

## 2  
The Decision to Run for Office: The Theoretical and Methodological Approach  
The Initial Decision to Run for Office: Developing a More Complete Theory of Political Ambition  
The Citizen Political Ambition Panel Study  

## 3  
Political Ambition in the Candidate Eligibility Pool  
Candidate Emergence from the Eligibility Pool  
Who Runs for Office? Eligible Candidates’ Expressive Ambition  
Predicting Nascent Ambition: The Null Effects of the Political Opportunity Structure  
Dynamic Ambition in the Candidate Eligibility Pool  
Conclusion  

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>xi</th>
<th>Contents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Barack Obama and 18 Million Cracks in the Glass Ceiling: Sex, Race, and Political Ambition 49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Politics of Exclusion: Sex, Race, and the Conventional Explanations for Numeric Underrepresentation 53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sex, Race, and Political Ambition: Existing Literature and Competing Expectations 57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Similarities in Political Participation, Proximity, and Interest: An Overview by Sex and Race 60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sex, Race, and Interest in Running for Office 66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sex, Race, and Changes in Interest in Running for Office: Predicting Dynamic Ambition 73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion 74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>You Could Be President Someday! Early Socialization, the Role of Family, and Political Ambition 77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In the Genes: The Lifelong Effects of a Politicized Upbringing 78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Influence of Family Structures and Roles on Political Ambition 86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Changes in Family Circumstances: Predicting Dynamic Ambition 99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion 102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>On-the-Job Training: Professional Circumstances and the Decision to Run for Office 104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professional Differences and Political Ambition in the Candidate Eligibility Pool: A Bivariate Analysis 106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Role of Income and Financial Success 110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Role of Professionally Conferred Political Proximity 114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Role of Professional Credentials and Qualifications 117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A Side Note on the Gender Gap in Perceptions of Qualifications 121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Impact of Professional Circumstances on Political Ambition: Multivariate Results 124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Changes in Professional Circumstances: Predicting Dynamic Ambition 129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion 133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>You Think I Should Run for Office? Political Parties, Political Recruitment, and Political Ambition 135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Eligible Candidates’ Political Attitudes and Partisanship 137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Who Gets Asked to Run for Office? 142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Political Recruitment and Considering a Candidacy 150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Changes in Relationships With and About the Political Parties: Predicting Dynamic Ambition 155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion 161</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Contents

8 Biting the Bullet: Deciding to Run for Office
   - So Many Reasons Not to Run for Office: Negative Perceptions of the Electoral Environment and the Campaign Process
   - Fundraising as a Deterrent to Running for Office
   - Invasion of Privacy as a Deterrent to Running for Office
   - Negative Campaigning as a Deterrent to Running for Office
   - Expressing That Ambition: The Decision to Enter an Actual Race
   - The Role of the Political Opportunity Structure
   - Conclusion

9 Future Patterns of Candidate Emergence and Studies of Political Ambition
   - Summary of the Findings: Contemporary Patterns of Candidate Emergence
   - Implications for Candidate Emergence and the Study of Political Ambition

Appendix A: The Citizen Political Ambition Panel Study
Appendix B: The First Wave Survey (2001)
Appendix C: The Second Wave Survey (2008)
Appendix D: The First Wave Interview Questionnaire
Appendix E: The Second Wave Interview Questionnaire
Appendix F: Coding of Variables

Works Cited
Index
List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table Number</th>
<th>Table Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>Demographic and Political Profile of the Candidate Eligibility Pool (in 2001)</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>Comparison of Wave 1 and Wave 2 Respondents</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Governments in the United States</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Structure of State Legislatures in the United States, 2010</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>Offices Sought and Won by Eligible Candidates</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>Nascent Ambition in the Candidate Eligibility Pool</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>Eligible Candidates’ Elective Office Preferences</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>Predicting Nascent Ambition: The (Null) Baseline Model (Logistic Regression Coefficients and Standard Errors)</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>Dynamic Ambition in the Candidate Eligibility Pool</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>Widespread Shifts in Political Ambition Eligibility Pool Over Time: Cross-Tabulation Results of Interest in a Future Candidacy in 2001 and 2008</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>Predicting Dynamic Ambition: The (Null) Baseline Model</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Who Considers Running for Office? Effects of Race and Sex on Predicting Nascent Ambition (Logistic Regression Coefficients and Standard Errors)</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Differences in Eligible Candidates’ Elective Office Preferences, by Sex and Race</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Changing Interest in Running for Office: Effects of Race and Sex on Predicting Dynamic Ambition (Ordered Logistic Regression Coefficients and Standard Errors)</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Eligible Candidates’ Political Socialization Patterns</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>The Lasting Imprint of Early Encouragement to Run for Office</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.3 Impact of a Politicized Upbringing on Considering a Candidacy (Logistic Regression Coefficients, Standard Errors, and Change in Probabilities) 85
5.4 Bivariate Relationship Between Family Structures and Roles and Considering a Candidacy 90
5.5 Eligible Candidates’ Current Family Structures and Responsibilities 93
5.6 Impact of Family Structures and Roles on Political Ambition: Predicting Whether Respondent Ever Considered Running for Office (Logistic Regression Coefficients and Standard Errors) 95
5.7 Encouragement from Family Members to Run for Office 96
5.8 Impact of Familial Encouragement on Considering a Candidacy (Logistic Regression Coefficients, Standard Errors, and Change in Probabilities) 98
5.9 Changes in Eligible Candidates’ Family Structures and Responsibilities from 2001 to 2008 100
5.10 Changing Interest in Running for Office: Effects of Family Dynamics on Predicting Dynamic Ambition (Ordered Logistic Regression Coefficients and Standard Errors) 101
6.1 Eligible Candidates’ Elective Office Preferences, by Profession 108
6.2 Eligible Candidates’ Perceptions of Their Qualifications to Seek and Hold Office, by Profession 119
6.3 Eligible Candidates’ Politically Relevant Skills, by Profession 121
6.4 Impact of Professional Experiences and Qualifications on Considering a Candidacy (Logistic Regression Coefficients, Standard Errors, and Change in Probabilities) 125
6.5 Changes in Eligible Candidates’ Professional Circumstances from 2001 to 2008 131
6.6 Changing Interest in Running for Office: Effects of Professional Circumstances on Predicting Dynamic Ambition (Ordered Logistic Regression Coefficients and Standard Errors) 132
7.1 Eligible Candidates’ Policy Preferences and Issue Priorities 140
7.2 Bivariate Relationship Between Political Ideology, Issue Priorities, and Considering a Candidacy 142
7.3 Considering a Candidacy, by Party: Bivariate and Multivariate Comparisons 143
List of Tables

7.4 Who Gets Recruited to Run for Office by Electoral Gatekeepers? (Logistic Regression Coefficients, Standard Errors, and Change in Probabilities) 149
7.5 Impact of Political Recruitment on Considering a Candidacy (Logistic Regression Coefficients, Standard Errors, and Change in Probabilities) 154
7.6 Increasing Levels of Cynicism, Since 2001 (Logistic Regression Coefficients, Standard Errors, and Change in Probabilities) 159
7.7 Changing Interest in Running for Office: Effects of Changes in Attitudes Toward and Support from the Political Environment (Ordered Logistic Regression Coefficients and Standard Errors) 161
8.1 Eligible Candidates’ Willingness to Engage in Campaign Activities 171
8.2 Comparison of Considering a Candidacy and Actually Running for Office, by Minority Status, Family Dynamics, Professional Circumstances, and Political Recruitment 178
8.3 Who Runs for Office? Expressive Ambition in the Candidate Eligibility Pool (Logistic Regression Coefficients, Standard Errors, and Change in Probabilities) 180
8.4 Factors That Might Encourage Eligible Candidates to Run for Office in the Future 183
9.1 Summary of Findings 192
List of Figures

2.1 Nascent political ambition and the candidate emergence process                                  page 19
4.1 Eligible candidates' levels of political participation, by sex                                      62
4.2 Eligible candidates’ levels of political participation, by race                                    63
4.3 Eligible candidates’ proximity to politics, by sex and race                                        65
4.4 Interest in running for office, by sex and race                                                   67
5.1 Encouragement to run for office by a family member or spouse                                      97
6.1 Interest in running for office, by profession                                                     107
6.2 Eligible candidates’ proximity to politics, by profession                                         116
6.3 The gender gap in eligible candidates’ perceptions that they are “not at all qualified” to run for office, by profession 123
6.4 Eligible candidates’ predicted probabilities of considering a candidacy, by profession           127
7.1 Eligible candidates’ political recruitment experiences, by party                                   145
7.2 Frequency and breadth of eligible candidates’ political recruitment experiences, by party         146
7.3 Changes in eligible candidates’ attitudes toward politics and politicians                         158
8.1 Eligible candidates’ preferred means of influencing the policy process                             169
Acknowledgments

In the spring of 2005, I entered the Democratic primary in Rhode Island’s 2nd congressional district. And for 16 months, I loved every minute of campaigning my heart out. Well, maybe not every minute. I did not adore the 30 hours a week I spent on the phone asking people I had never met for more money than they could comfortably give. I was not a huge fan of smiling politely when, on what seemed like a daily basis, I heard that my hair was too long, my neckline too low, my heels too high (odd, considering that I was also “too short”), and my makeup too subtle to enter the hallowed halls of the U.S. House of Representatives. It would be untrue to say that I enjoyed the 48 hours of perpetual nausea and nerves leading up to the two televised debates (although the debates, themselves, were undoubtedly a high point of the campaign). And I can think of few activities more unpleasant than making the dreaded concession call on election night. But overall, my congressional campaign was the most fulfilling, most important, most life-changing event I have ever had the privilege to enjoy. The opportunities to connect with voters, learn about the issues and challenges people face, articulate and advocate for clear positions on a host of policies, and hold an incumbent accountable are rewarding in ways I cannot put into words.

I am always surprised, therefore, when people ask, “Why would you ever have run for office?” In fact, this question arose on the campaign trail quite frequently. “You seem like a nice person. Why would you ever want to go to Washington?” “You have great ideas. Why don’t you work for an organization that can actually do something to implement them?” “Politics is completely corrupt and politicians get nothing done. You want to waste your time doing that?” Indeed, at least at the beginning
of the campaign, the notion of a political science professor running for office because she cared about the issues, thought the incumbent was out of sync with his constituents, and believed she could win the race was so anathema to people’s predispositions that rumors began to circulate that I was running for office so that I could acquire raw material for my next book.

Well, here’s the book. It will become very apparent very early on that this book includes no personal stories, no anecdotes from my race, and no information I acquired on the campaign trail. As I said throughout the campaign, I ran for office because I believed that I would be a better voice in Congress. I had no interest in running to engage in participant observation that would bolster my research agenda or facilitate my tenure case. But even if the book sheds no light on my own experiences, I do hope that it provides some insight into the initial decision to run for office and the circumstances under which eligible candidates consider entering the electoral arena. After all, the past decade has been particularly tumultuous; we have seen the waging of two wars, acrimonious partisan rancor in Washington, one of the most unpopular and polarizing presidents in recent history, two shifts in congressional party control, and the government’s ineffective handling of the Hurricane Katrina disaster. We have seen not only the election of the first black president of the United States, but also the ascension of Nancy Pelosi as the first female Speaker of the House, the emergence of Hillary Clinton as the first serious female presidential contender (not to mention the recipient of 18 million votes), and the nomination of Sarah Palin as the first female Republican vice presidential candidate. It is hard to imagine a more important time to study questions pertaining to candidate emergence, political ambition, electoral competition, and political accountability.

Even though this book has nothing to do with my own campaign experiences, there is one similarity between writing a book and running for Congress. The author and candidate are responsible for all the errors and missteps, but because of an amazing group of people who provide help and support along the way, those errors and missteps are often far fewer and farther between than would otherwise be the case. Such is certainly true of this book, so the list of thank-yous is long.

Richard Fox deserves the largest share of my gratitude. Ten years ago, we decided to administer – by ourselves – a multiwave national mail survey to 7,000 “eligible candidates.” At the conclusion of a yearlong foray into data collection, we had signed, folded, sealed, and stamped almost 25,000 pieces of mail. We fed every envelope into the printer,
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We wrote a personal note on each letter, encouraging the recipient to complete the survey. We affixed an actual stamp to each piece of mail. And as proof of our insanity, we did it all over again seven years later so that we could have panel data. These national mail surveys serve as the basis not only for the two books Richard and I wrote together, but also for this book. It is not at all a stretch to say, therefore, that without Richard, there would be no book. But my appreciation extends far beyond the fact that he licks, seals, and stamps envelopes better than anyone I have ever met; is willing to travel across the country to engage in these endeavors; and can uncannily predict patterns of mail delivery. Richard has thoroughly read and insightfully commented on everything I have ever written, including this entire manuscript. He is an incredibly loyal friend despite also being the lucky target of more of my kvetching and melodrama than any person deserves. And he never makes me apologize for my tone.

I am also particularly grateful to Kathy Dolan, Walt Stone, and Linda Fowler, all of whom offered extensive and insightful comments from the inception of the 2001 Citizen Political Ambition Study through its completion. Scott Allard, Dave Brady, Dick Brody, Barbara Burrell, Mo Fiorina, Brian Frederick, Jim Gimpel, Sunshine Hilary, Kent Jennings, Frances Lee, Cherie Maestas, Jane Mansbridge, Terry Moe, Karen O’Connor, Zoe Oxley, Kathryn Pearson, Kira Sanbonmatsu, Wendy Schiller, Keith Shaw, Sean Theriault, Sue Tolleson-Rinehart, and Darrell West provided feedback on pieces of the various book manuscripts and journal articles to come out of the project as well. And several students made important contributions. Thanks to Jinhee Chung, Sara Gentile, Shana Gotlieb, Ben Gray, Erik Kindschi, Nathan Kohlenberg, Marne Lenox, AnneMarie MacPherson, Ben Mishkin, and Teresa Tanzi.

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It is no surprise, therefore, that it is my parents, as well as Adam and Nick, to whom I dedicate this book.