It Takes a Candidate
Why Women Don’t Run for Office

It Takes a Candidate: Why Women Don’t Run for Office serves as the first systematic, nationwide empirical account of the manner in which gender affects political ambition. Based on data from the Citizen Political Ambition Study, a national survey we conducted of almost 3,800 “eligible candidates,” we find that women, even in the highest tiers of professional accomplishment, are substantially less likely than men to demonstrate ambition to seek elected office. Women are less likely than men to be recruited to run for office. They are less likely than men to think they are “qualified” to run for office. And they are less likely than men to express a willingness to run for office in the future. This gender gap in political ambition persists across generations. Despite cultural evolution and society’s changing attitudes toward women in politics, running for public office remains a much less attractive and feasible endeavor for women than for men.

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Acknowledgments

We wrote this book because of our deep concern about women’s political underrepresentation in the United States. Perhaps we are just impatient, but it seemed that women’s broad inclusion in top elective offices was moving too slowly. And we sensed greater roadblocks to women’s full political integration than had previously been identified. So, in an effort to uncover the degree to which gender interacts with the process through which people emerge as candidates, we went to work, surveying and speaking with thousands of women and men who are well suited to run for office. We believe this book goes a long way in explicating the prominent role gender plays in the evolution of political ambition.

When we began the project, we really did not know what we were getting into. The ramifications of what it would entail to administer—by ourselves—a multiwave national mail survey of seven thousand “eligible candidates” had not dawned on us. At the conclusion of a year-long foray into data collection, we had signed, folded, sealed, and stamped almost twenty-five thousand pieces of mail. We fed every envelope into the printer, by hand. 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. If nothing else, this endless procession of mind-numbing tasks proved our shared mania.

Then, of course, there was the obsessive monitoring of the mail. On a bad day, when only a few completed surveys would arrive, our hopes for the project’s success would plunge. Our faith was almost always restored the following day when hundreds of surveys would pour in. (As a pointer for those administering a mail survey, we learned that Mondays and Fridays are good mail days, but Tuesdays and Wednesdays are not.)
Ultimately, the project was a great success: almost four thousand good-hearted souls violated the rational choice paradigm and took the time to fill out a lengthy survey with nothing to gain other than advancing social science (and getting us off their backs).

The completion of a project like this requires help and assistance from numerous people and we would like to thank them all. We are particularly grateful to Walt Stone and Linda Fowler, both of whom offered extensive and insightful comments at various stages of this project. Kathy Dolan, who expressed support for the work even in its earliest stages, provided helpful feedback on the manuscript as well. We would also like to thank Sean Theriault, who read numerous drafts of the manuscript and provided a constant and willing sounding board for all of our ideas. He even stuffed and sealed a few envelopes. Dominique Tauzin joined us on many occasions to help put out the mail. In addition, she made numerous phone calls to badger people to complete the survey (something we did not have the nerve to do).

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University helped issue a report based on our findings. Women’s organizations and public officials are using the report to encourage more women to run for office.

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