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978-1-107-11558-3 - Women on the Run: Gender, Media, and Political Campaigns in a Polarized Era

Danny Hayes and Jennifer L. Lawless

Excerpt

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I

Gender, myth, and reality on the campaign trail

To be a woman running for office in the United States is to face bias, sexism, and discrimination at seemingly every turn. That, at least, is the impression that anyone paying attention to American politics in recent years would come away with.

In February 2014, then-U.S. Representative Michele Bachmann told an interviewer that many voters “aren’t ready” for a female president.¹ Bachmann’s comments were at least in part a thinly veiled attempt to undermine Democrat Hillary Clinton’s second bid for the White House. But claims of sexism cross party lines. When Nancy Pelosi was asked in 2008 about Clinton’s loss to Barack Obama in that year’s presidential primaries, the Democratic Speaker of the House replied that it was partly because Clinton is a woman. “Of course there is sexism,” Pelosi said. “We all know that, but it’s a given.”² Allyson Schwartz, who lost the 2014 Democratic primary for governor of Pennsylvania, also blamed her defeat on discrimination: “The political pundits, the media, the Harrisburg establishment couldn’t believe a woman could serve as governor – couldn’t even imagine it.”³

Schwartz’s swipe at the press is a popular move – even by journalists themselves. Following Clinton’s 2008 loss, then-CBS *Evening News* anchor Katie Couric told viewers that “one of the lessons of that campaign is the continued and accepted role of sexism in American life, particularly in the

¹ Cal Thomas, “Michele Bachmann: Undeterred and Undiminished,” *TownHall.com*, February 18, 2014. Accessed at: <http://townhall.com/columnists/calthomas/2014/02/18/michele-bachmann-undeterred-and-undiminished-n1796375> (June 10, 2015).

² Austin Bogues, “Pelosi: Clinton Did Face Sexism,” *New York Times (The Caucus Blog)*, June 24, 2008. Accessed at: <http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/06/24/pelosi-clinton-did-face-sexism> (June 10, 2015).

³ Larry Mendte, “Is Pennsylvania Not Ready for a Female Governor? Or Just Not Ready for Allyson Schwartz?” *Philadelphia Magazine*, May 21, 2014. Accessed at: www.phillymag.com/news/2014/05/21/allyson-schwartz-pennsylvania-female-governor/ (June 10, 2015).

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media.”⁴ Couric saw the tables turned in May 2015 when she asked Carly Fiorina if her uphill battle for the GOP presidential nomination was really just an attempt to grab the vice presidential spot. “Oh, Katie,” Fiorina responded, “would you ask a male candidate that question?”⁵ (Couric replied that she would, but more on that later.) Meanwhile, activist Jamia Wilson said in April 2015 that “sexist and misogynist coverage of women candidates is still a sad reality in our media culture.”⁶ The advocacy group “Name It. Change It.” noted in a recent report that “Widespread sexism in the media is one of the top problems facing women.”⁷

The root of the problem, according to these arguments, is that portrayals and assessments of female politicians are unfair – starkly and systematically different than what men experience. Julia Louis-Dreyfus, who plays one of the country’s most recognizable female politicians – *Veep*’s Selina Meyer – said that her HBO character’s new hairdo was a case of art imitating life. “I was fascinated by how people are so judgmental about how women look, and male politicians don’t get that shit,” she told *Entertainment Weekly*. “A change of hairstyle often gets more attention than legislation they’re trying to put forth.”⁸ Clinton, for her part, has said that because female politicians are held to a “totally different” standard than men,⁹ women in public life need to “grow a skin as thick as the hide of a rhinoceros.”¹⁰

It’s not just politicians, journalists, and celebrities who take this view. Ordinary Americans believe the same thing. In a 2008 Pew Research Center survey, 79 percent of the public said one reason there aren’t more women in political office is that voters aren’t ready to elect them. Seventy-five percent said that women active in party politics are held back by men, and 71 percent blamed

⁴ Katharine Q. Seelye and Julie Bosman, “Media Charged with Sexism in Clinton Coverage,” *New York Times*, June 13, 2008. Accessed at: www.nytimes.com/2008/06/13/us/politics/13women.html?pagewanted=print&_r=0 (June 10, 2015).

⁵ Tessa Berenson, “Carly Fiorina Calls Foul on Vice President Question,” *Time*, May 4, 2015. Accessed at: <http://time.com/3845983/carly-fiorina-vice-president/?xid=emailshare> (June 10, 2015).

⁶ Tom Watson, “Sexism and the Media: As Election Heats Up, Are We Nearer to Tipping Point for Equality?” *Medium.com*, April 28, 2015. Accessed at: <https://medium.com/@tomwatson/sexism-and-the-media-as-election-heats-up-are-we-nearer-to-tipping-point-for-equality-a7d94d9a1280> (June 10, 2015).

⁷ “About Name It. Change It.” Accessed at: www.nameitchangeit.org/pages/about (June 10, 2015).

⁸ Nina Terrero, “Julia Louis-Dreyfus Dishes about Her New *Veep* Hairdo,” *Entertainment Weekly*, March 27, 2015. Accessed at: www.ew.com/article/2015/03/27/julia-louis-dreyfus-veep-hair (June 10, 2015).

⁹ Ruby Cramer, “Hillary Clinton on the Demands of Campaigning: ‘It’s Not Easy,’” *Buzzfeed*, October 11, 2015. Accessed at: www.buzzfeed.com/rubycramer/hillary-clinton-on-the-demands-of-campaigning-its-not-easy#.ymNODwqz9 (October 17, 2015).

¹⁰ Francesca Trianni, “Hillary Clinton Advises Women to Grow Skin like a Rhinoceros,” *Time*, February 15, 2014. Accessed at: <http://swampland.time.com/2014/02/15/hillary-clinton-advises-women-to-grow-skin-like-a-rhinoceros/> (June 10, 2015).

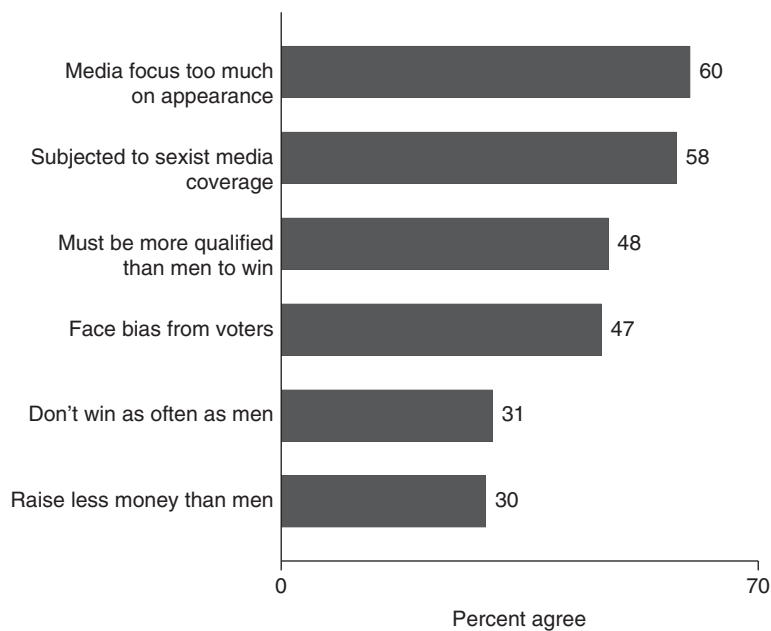


FIGURE 1.1. Public perceptions of female candidates' experiences.
Note: N ranges from 1,973 to 1,982. Bars represent the percentage of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with each statement. Data come from a module we designed for the 2014 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, a collaborative survey among dozens of academic institutions, conducted by YouGov. Details about the survey design, sampling, and other technical information is available at <http://projects.iq.harvard.edu/cces/>.

discrimination.¹¹ By 2014, things hadn't gotten much better. In a national survey conducted just before the midterm elections, six in ten Americans adopted the Louis-Dreyfusian view that the media focus too much on the appearance of female candidates (see Figure 1.1). Nearly the same proportion said that women are subjected to sexist media coverage. Roughly half the country believed that women have to be more qualified than men to win office, and that they face bias from voters. It's no surprise then that nearly one-third said that women who run for office don't win as often as men do, and that they aren't as successful at raising money.

These perceptions don't stem merely from a general view that women in professional life face obstacles that men don't. People view politics as *more* difficult for women than other fields – even industries that have

¹¹ "Men or Women: Who's the Better Leader? A Paradox in Public Attitudes," Pew Research Center, August 25, 2008. Accessed at: www.pewsocialtrends.org/2008/08/25/men-or-women-whos-the-better-leader/ (June 16, 2015).

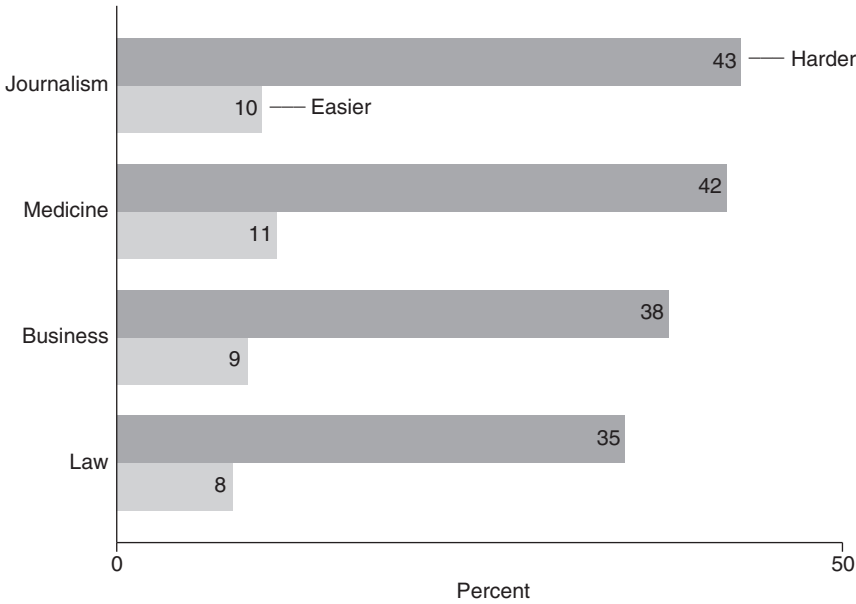


FIGURE 1.2. Perceptions of whether politics is harder or easier for women compared to other professions.
Note: N ranges from 1,971 to 1,983. Data come from a module we designed for the 2014 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, a collaborative survey among dozens of academic institutions, conducted by YouGov.

recently been the subject of headline-grabbing allegations of sexism. For instance, just months after Jill Abramson’s sudden firing as editor of the *New York Times*, 43 percent of Americans said that women in politics have it harder than women in journalism (see Figure 1.2). Between 35 percent and 42 percent said the same about medicine, business, and law. Just one in ten thought any of these other professions was easier for women than politics.¹² In the public’s mind, politics is uniquely inhospitable to women.

The state of women’s representation only reinforces these views. After all, the United States is hardly a leader when it comes to the number of women in political office. And it isn’t just that all U.S. presidents have been men. As of 2016, women hold only 20 percent of U.S. Senate seats, and just 19 percent of seats in the U.S. House of Representatives (see Figure 1.3). This places the United States ninety-sixth worldwide in the share of women in the national legislature, well behind countries like Rwanda (64 percent), Namibia (41 percent),

¹² The remainder said they thought women in politics have it “about the same” as women in the other fields.

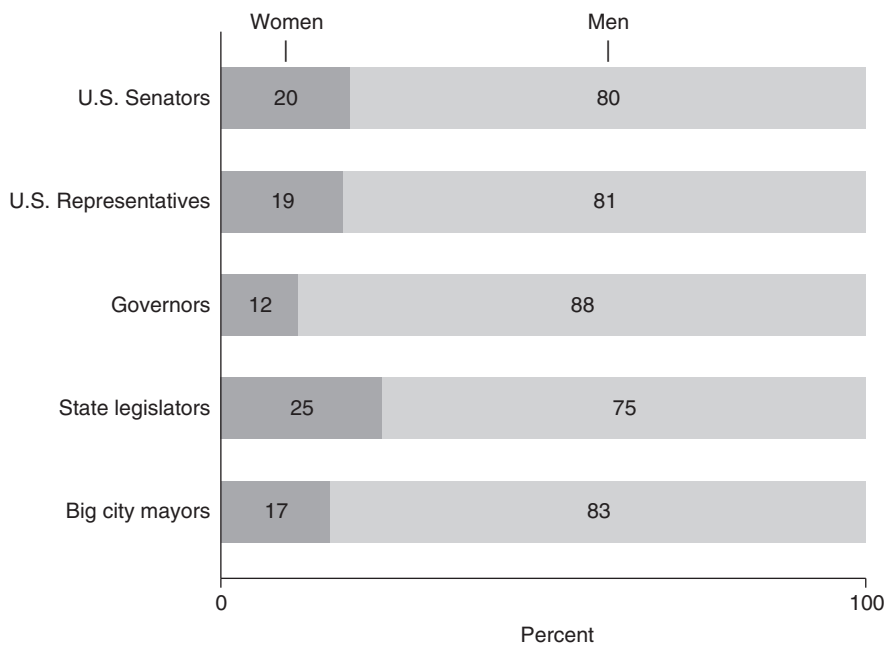


FIGURE 1.3. Women’s representation in the United States, 2015.
Source: “Current Numbers,” Center for American Women and Politics. Current and historic levels of women’s numeric representation are available from the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University. Accessed at: www.cawp.rutgers.edu/current-numbers (October 19, 2015).

Afghanistan (28 percent), and dozens of others.¹³ The story is much the same when we go down the ballot to state legislatures, where women occupy one-quarter of the seats. The proportion of female governors and mayors is worse. If you look around, it would seem obvious that women have a tough time getting elected, and that the voters and the media are to blame. But as understandable as that conclusion is, the reality – as we will show throughout this book – is very different.

REVISITING THE CONVENTIONAL WISDOM: WHY FEMALE CANDIDATES DON’T FACE BIAS ON THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL

Women’s representation presents a major paradox in American politics. On the one hand, women are numerically under-represented at all levels of elective office. And from election to election, the number of women in office increases

¹³ “Women in National Parliaments,” Inter-Parliamentary Union, September 1, 2015. Accessed at: www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm (October 27, 2015).

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only incrementally. On the other hand, when they do run, female candidates do just as well as men. In federal and state races, they raise just as much money, garner just as many votes, and are just as likely to win (e.g., Cook 1998; Fox 2013; Seltzer, Newman, and Leighton 1997; Smith and Fox 2001). This is true not only in general elections, but also in congressional primaries (Burrell 1992; Lawless and Pearson 2008).¹⁴ The best evidence to resolve this seeming contradiction suggests that women are under-represented in the United States primarily because they are less likely than men to run for political office in the first place, not that they don't win when they do.¹⁵

But the conventional wisdom – that media coverage and voter attitudes put women at a disadvantage – has proved strikingly sticky. Even if bias and discrimination don't lead to electoral defeat, many political scientists argue that female candidates face a more difficult campaign environment than men do. “There is a growing consensus,” Sarah Fulton (2012: 304) writes, “that voters hold preferences for male officeholders and rely on gender stereotypes to infer candidate traits, issue competencies, and ideologies.” Because voters expect female candidates to be both feminine and tough, Kelly Dittmar (2015b: 1) concludes that “women confront extra challenges in fulfilling voter expectations about proper feminine behavior at the same time they meet standards for strong election candidates.” These challenges are exacerbated by media attention that, for a female candidate, is often “more negative, more focused on her appearance, and more sexist” than the coverage a male candidate receives (Conroy *et al.* 2015: abstract).

We argue in this book that this long-standing conventional wisdom is rooted in an outdated conception of the electoral environment. While female candidates in decades past may have faced stereotypes, skepticism, and bias that impeded their quests for office or presented them with additional challenges, the twenty-first-century political landscape is far more equitable. This is not to suggest that sexism and discrimination are altogether absent from

¹⁴ This is not to suggest that election outcomes are as “gender neutral” as commonly described. If the women who run for office are more qualified than the men against whom they compete, then the apparent absence of bias against female candidates might reflect their higher average quality (see Lawless and Fox 2010; Pearson and McGhee 2013). In a similar vein, women may fare as well as men when they run for office because they are more effective legislators. Women in Congress, after all, deliver more federal spending to their districts and sponsor more legislation than their male colleagues (Anzia and Berry 2011). And minority party women in the U.S. House of Representatives are better able than minority party men to keep their sponsored bills alive through later stages of the legislative process (Volden, Wiseman, and Wittmer 2013). What matters for our purposes, though, is that in terms of objective indicators of electoral success – votes and dollars – women and men perform comparably. Further consideration of the influence of candidate quality appears in Chapters 3–5.

¹⁵ In addition to the gender gap in political ambition, other factors, like the incumbency advantage in male-dominated political institutions, as well as women's historical under-representation in the professions that tend to lead to political candidacies, can also slow the ascent of women to high office. For a discussion of the central explanations for women's under-representation, see Lawless (2015).

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electoral politics, or that women never face bias on the campaign trail. But our central claim is that two features of contemporary American politics – the declining “novelty” of female politicians and the polarization of the parties – have significantly leveled the electoral playing field. Today, male and female candidates have few reasons to campaign differently, the media have little incentive to cover them differently, and voters have no reason to evaluate them differently. As a result, candidate sex plays a minimal role in the vast majority of U.S. elections.

We develop this argument fully in Chapter 2, but here we can lay out the logic briefly, beginning with the strategies of candidates themselves. In an era in which female politicians have become a common part of American politics, there are few incentives for men and women to conduct substantively different campaigns. All candidates, regardless of sex, want voters to regard them as credible on a wide range of issues and to be perceived as possessing the best personal qualities. These imperatives lead candidates to emphasize the issues and character traits they believe citizens care most about, not themes tailored to their gender. And because the Republican and Democratic parties have staked out divergent positions on most issues, the content of campaigns tends to divide along party, not gender, lines. Only under very unusual circumstances do candidates have a reason to make their sex or the sex of their opponent relevant.

In part because candidates rarely emphasize gender, journalists are unlikely to do so either. News coverage of elections tends to reflect the candidates’ messages. And since the issues and traits that male and female candidates talk about in their campaigns don’t differ, neither does the resulting media coverage. Moreover, journalistic norms encourage reporters to focus on what is most newsworthy. Partisan conflict between candidates, the horse race, and other features of campaigns are more dramatic and interesting than is the fact that a candidate happens to be a woman. News outlets are also unlikely to portray candidates in plainly gender stereotypical ways, such as focusing on their appearance, because doing so would violate professional norms of balance and fairness. That’s why Carly Fiorina was in fact in good company when she got the vice presidency question: Martin O’Malley, Bernie Sanders, and Marco Rubio had all been asked the same thing.¹⁶

Finally, voters’ views of candidates are shaped almost entirely by long-standing party attachments, leaving little room for sex to matter. At a moment in which the divisions between the parties are as large as they

¹⁶ Goldie Taylor, “Is Martin O’Malley Running to Be Vice President? *Blue State Review*, April 18, 2015. Accessed at: <http://bluenationreview.com/is-martin-omalley-running-to-be-vice-president/> (June 20, 2015); Dylan Stableford, “Bernie Sanders on Hillary Clinton: Would She Be Interested in being my Vice President?” *Yahoo! Politics*, June 1, 2015. Accessed at: www.yahoo.com/politics/bernie-sanders-talks-to-katie-couric-bernie-120458581061.html (June 20, 2015); “Is Rubio Really Running for Vice President?” *The Last Word with Lawrence O’Donnell*, April 13, 2015. Accessed at: www.msnbc.com/the-last-word/watch/is-rubio-really-running-for-vice-president-427567683514 (June 20, 2015).

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have been since Reconstruction, partisanship and ideology dominate the way the public evaluates candidates. Combined with the fact that female candidates today only rarely present themselves to voters “as women,” candidate sex has little opportunity to shape citizens’ assessments.

We test our argument in Chapters 3 through 5 with an in-depth study of hundreds of U.S. House races from the 2010 and 2014 midterm elections. Combined, these contests involve more than 1,500 candidates, nearly 300 of them women. Drawing on an analysis of more than 400,000 campaign ads and 50,000 social media messages, we show that men and women run virtually identical campaigns – from the issues they talk about, to the language they use, to the personal traits they tell voters they possess. The similarities of these campaigns are reflected in the media coverage that candidates receive. Our comprehensive analysis of more than 10,000 local newspaper articles reveals that not only do male and female candidates get the same amount of coverage, but also that the substance of that coverage is similar. Stories about female candidates are no more likely to focus on their appearance, on “feminine” traits, or on “women’s” issues than are articles about men. And our analysis of surveys of 3,000 citizens across the country reveals that candidate sex plays virtually no role in shaping the way that voters evaluate candidates’ issue competencies or personal traits, nor does it affect who they support on Election Day. These assessments and decisions arise, instead, primarily from partisanship.

The evidence strongly supports our contention that female candidates do not face bias, but we want to be clear about what we are not arguing. We are not suggesting that the entire electoral process is “gender neutral.” Structural and institutional conditions make it more difficult for women to enter politics in the first place, as do gender inequities in patterns of candidate recruitment. Nor are we contending that sexism in politics is a thing of days gone by. Women undoubtedly encounter sexism on the campaign trail – whether in the form of a voter yelling “Iron my shirt” at a 2008 Clinton campaign rally or Republican Joni Ernst having to endure comments about being “as good looking as Taylor Swift” during her 2014 U.S. Senate race in Iowa.¹⁷ We probably don’t even need to mention Donald Trump’s presence in the 2016 Republican presidential race.¹⁸ There is a distinction, however, between examples of sexist behavior and systematic gender bias in campaigns. Structural forces in the contemporary environment – especially party polarization and journalists’ adherence to

¹⁷ Sarah Wheaton, “Iron my Shirt,” *New York Times*, January 7, 2008. Accessed at: http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/01/07/iron-my-shirt/?_r=0 (June 19, 2015); and Nia-Malika Henderson, “Tom Harkin Compares Joni Ernst to Taylor Swift, because Sexism. Then He Apologizes,” *Washington Post*, November 3, 2014. Accessed at: www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2014/11/03/tom-harkin-compares-joni-ernst-to-taylor-swift-because-sexism/ (June 19, 2015).

¹⁸ Paul Solotaroff, “Trump Seriously: On the Trail with the GOP’s Tough Guy,” *Rolling Stone*, September 9, 2015. Accessed at: www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/trump-seriously-20150909?page=13 (September 27, 2015).

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professional norms – serve to limit gender bias when it comes to media coverage and voters' attitudes. Thus, these two facts of modern political life – sexism sometimes happens *and* women do not face a systematically biased campaign environment – can coexist.

We also do not claim to explain the dynamics of every political campaign for every level of office. We focus on U.S. House races because they are far more similar to the vast majority of American elections than presidential or statewide contests. This makes our results significantly more generalizable to the elections where most women (and men) run than the campaigns that scholars and commentators often emphasize. We are clear, however, that under particular circumstances gender can work its way into a campaign. Our interviews with more than seventy campaign professionals and political reporters, which we detail throughout the book, show that when charges of sexism arise or when campaigns are explicitly gendered, candidate sex can play a more influential role. This occasionally happens when candidates or the press emphasize issues like access to contraception or pay equity, or when electing a woman in a district would break a glass ceiling. In those cases, gender is novel, interesting, strategically relevant, and newsworthy – and thus likely to become part of a campaign storyline. The reality, however, is that in an era in which female candidates are not unusual and polarization has made partisanship the dominant consideration for voters, few contemporary contests reflect the kind of gender dynamics that the conventional wisdom implies.

Our findings, then, pose a puzzle: If female candidates don't routinely experience discrimination, sexism, or unique obstacles on the campaign trail, where do the widespread perceptions of gender bias come from? In the final part of the book (Chapter 6), we rely on original survey data to demonstrate that people's views about women's electoral experiences and fortunes do not arise from the campaigns they observe in their own districts. Instead, their views about gender bias in elections stem from a variety of factors – social identity, national media portrayals of sexism in politics, and exposure to gender bias in the workplace and society. Despite our evidence that bias on the campaign trail is rare indeed, few Americans see it that way. We conclude the book by considering the implications of these perceptions for the prospects of increasing women's representation.

WHY THIS BOOK MATTERS

Debunking the myths about what happens to most female candidates on the campaign trail is critical for women's representation. In the most immediate sense, demonstrating that women do not regularly face electoral bias may help lower a lingering barrier that has been shown to discourage them from running for office. Studies of potential candidates – people who have the professional backgrounds and credentials common among actual candidates – reveal that women are less likely than men to consider themselves qualified to run (see

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Lawless and Fox 2012; 2010). These self-doubts are driven in part by the belief that the political arena is rife with sexism and discrimination. Accordingly, many women think that they need, as the saying goes, to be twice as good to get half as far as men. To the extent that this book can begin to undermine the belief that voters and the media are holding women back, it can help close the gender gap in political ambition. Perhaps just as importantly, these findings can educate the party leaders, donors, and activists who play a key role in recruiting candidates. Female candidates will face no more difficulties on the campaign trail than will the men these political networks have traditionally encouraged to run.

Our findings augur favorably for the likely success of current and future generations of female candidates, and this has substantive and symbolic consequences. Electing more women, for example, is one way to ensure that politicians address a diverse array of policy concerns. Women who replace men in the same district are more likely to focus on “women’s” issues, such as child care, reproductive rights, pay equity, and poverty (Gerrity, Osborn, and Mendez 2007). Democratic and moderate Republican women in Congress are more likely than men to use their bill sponsorship and co-sponsorship activity to focus on women’s issues (Swers 2002; see also Dodson 1998; Paolino 1995). Women’s leadership styles can also affect legislative outcomes (e.g., Kathlene 1994; 1995; Tolleson-Rinehart 1991; Volden, Wiseman, and Wittmer 2013; Weikart *et al.* 2007). After all, it was women on both sides of the aisle who received credit for ultimately ending the federal government shutdown in 2013.¹⁹ To be sure, partisanship is a much more powerful force in shaping policy than is whether a legislator is a man or a woman (Frederick 2009; Osborn 2012; Schwindt-Bayer and Corbetta 2004; Swers 2013), but the policymaking process is no doubt affected by gender diversity among officeholders.

Women’s presence in politics can also affect citizens’ political attitudes and engagement in positive ways. Women who live in districts with female congressional candidates, for instance, have been shown to be more willing to discuss politics (Hansen 1997; see also Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001). As the percentage of female legislators increases, so do female citizens’ sense that government is responsive (Atkeson and Carrillo 2007; Wittmer 2011; see also Atkeson 2003). Female voters are more likely to be familiar with the records of their senators when they are represented by women (Fridkin and Kenney 2014; Jones 2014). In a cross-national study, the presence of highly visible female politicians correlated with adolescent girls’ expectations of political engagement (Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006).²⁰ And when women

¹⁹ Laura Bassett, “Men Got Us into this Shutdown, Women Got Us Out,” *Huffington Post*, October 16, 2013. Accessed at: www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/10/16/shutdown-women_n_4110268.html (June 11, 2015).

²⁰ As is the case with most research, the findings are not entirely uniform. Dolan (2006) and Lawless (2004a) uncover little empirical evidence – based on American National Elections