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978-0-521-76749-1 - Becoming a Candidate: Political Ambition and the Decision to Run for Office

Jennifer L. Lawless

Excerpt

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I

Mudslinging, Money-Grubbing, and Mayhem*Who Would Ever Run for Office?*

Minneapolis FBI Agent Coleen Rowley rose to national prominence in 2002 when she exposed glaring gaps in pre-September 11 intelligence gathering and information sharing among U.S. law enforcement officials. Based on Rowley's iconic status (*Time* magazine named her one of its "Persons of the Year") and national security expertise, Democratic Party officials and members of Minnesota's congressional delegation encouraged her to throw her hat into the ring and challenge Congressman John Kline (R-MN) in 2004. Rowley turned down the invitation, explaining that she lacked the characteristics necessary to be a retail politician: "As a child, I only sold sixteen boxes of Girl Scout cookies. I was the lowest in the whole troop."¹ Yet two years later, something changed. Perhaps the Democrats' sustained recruitment efforts paid off. Maybe Rowley, who wanted to weigh in on issues of national security, was frustrated that President Bush did not name her to the Privacy and Civil Liberties Oversight Board.² Or it is possible that Rowley became more comfortable with the idea of being a candidate for public office. But with no additional experience or "skills" under her belt, and facing the same incumbent, Rowley announced her foray into electoral politics. The first-time candidate entered the 2006 congressional race and performed rather well; she garnered 40 percent of the vote.

¹ "FBI Whistleblower Says She Won't Run for Congress," Associated Press State and Local Wire, November 26, 2003.

² Beth Hawkins, "The Purity of Coleen Rowley," *Mother Jones*, March/April 2006. Accessed at <http://motherjones.com/politics/2006/03/purity-coleen-rowley> (March 6, 2011).

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Party leaders did not recruit James Crabtree to run for office, and he lacked name recognition and notoriety, but he also sought an elective position in 2006. While serving in Iraq, Crabtree was among approximately one hundred marines from Travis County, Texas, who did not receive an absentee ballot in time to vote in the 2004 elections. When he returned to the United States in 2005, Crabtree investigated the situation and determined that the blame lay with County Clerk Dana DeBeauvoir.³ Crabtree had never before considered a candidacy and admitted that “the last thing [he] expected to do was run for County Clerk.”⁴ But the anger he felt regarding his disenfranchisement, coupled with his belief that he was better suited for the job, propelled his decision to challenge DeBeauvoir when she sought reelection. Crabtree lost his first political bid, receiving 30 percent of the vote.

Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., also flirted with running for office in 2006, but unlike Coleen Rowley and James Crabtree, he ultimately decided against it. Eliot Spitzer’s decision to run for governor of New York created an open race for attorney general. Despite a competitive field of Democratic candidates, party insiders and political analysts agreed that Kennedy’s name recognition, political family ties, and reputation as an environmental crusader would have positioned him as the front-runner. Kennedy opted not to seek the Democratic nomination, though, explaining that he did not want to sacrifice time with his wife and six children.⁵ He left the door open for a future run, however, stating that his political ambition would likely grow as his family circumstances changed: “I feel certain that I will run for office one day. But I think I need to wait a few years until my younger children get a little older.”⁶

By virtue of even considering a run for public office, Coleen Rowley, James Crabtree, and Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., did something that never even crosses the minds of most citizens. Although the United States has 500,000 elective offices – most of which are situated at the local and state levels and meet only on a part-time basis – relatively limited

³ “20 Year County Clerk Gets a GOP Challenge,” *The Austin Chronicle*, October 20, 2006. Accessed at <http://www.austinchronicle.com/gyrobase/Issue/print.html?oid=oid:412276> (March 6, 2011).

⁴ Elizabeth Dunbar, “Amputee Iraq Veteran Seeks to Continue Service by Winning Election to Kentucky County Board,” Associated Press, September 7, 2006.

⁵ “RFK Jr. Rules Out Run for N.Y. Attorney General,” *AllPolitics*, January 25, 2005. Accessed at <http://www.cnn.com/2005/ALLPOLITICS/01/25/kennedy.newyork.ap/index.html> (March 6, 2011).

⁶ Jonathan Hicks, “Robert Kennedy Won’t Run for State Attorney General,” *New York Times*, January 25, 2005, page B1.

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electoral competition pervades our political system. In 2010, thirty members of the U.S. House of Representatives faced no major-party challenger in the general election; more than fifty members found themselves with this luxury in 2006 and 2008. The lack of electoral competition in congressional primaries is even more striking. Since 1958, more than one-third of congressional incumbents have faced no primary opponent whatsoever (Lawless and Pearson 2008); an overwhelming majority of the others combat only nominal challengers. Roughly one-third of seats in all of the state legislatures across the country have gone uncontested since the 1990s.⁷ The low level of competition is actually now so commonplace that, when she learned that only 29 percent of Connecticut's state legislators were running unopposed in 2010, Connecticut Secretary of State Susan Bysiewicz lauded her state's citizens for demonstrating "interest in the electoral process and running for office."⁸ The lack of systematic election data at the local level makes it difficult to provide exact rates of electoral competition, but the number of uncontested seats on school boards and city councils is likely much higher (see Schleicher 2007).⁹

These dynamics are hardly surprising. For many people, running for office involves too much risk for too little reward. Considering a candidacy, after all, requires contemplating the courageous step of going before an electorate and opening oneself up to potential examination, scrutiny, loss of privacy, possible rejection, and disruption from regular routines and pursuits. It involves mulling over how to raise (sometimes

⁷ For more information pertaining to state legislative competition in the 1990s, see Squire 2000. For levels of competition in the 2000s, see "Many State Legislative Races Are Uncontested," Associated Press, October 30, 2006. Accessed at <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/15446775/> (July 3, 2010).

⁸ Keith M. Phaneuf, "Competition for State Legislative Seats Reaches All-Time High," *Connecticut Mirror*, June 28, 2010. Accessed at <http://www.ctmirror.org/story/6592/competition-state-legislative-seats-reaches-12-year-high> (July 3, 2010).

⁹ A Lexis-Nexis search of "uncontested local elections" provides a litany of cases from across the country in which no more than one candidate sought the local public office in question. In 2003, for example, 13 of the 19 races for the Onondaga County Legislature in New York went uncontested ("Forums to Address Voter Apathy," *The Post Standard*, April 1, 2004, page 6). In another example, Central County, California saw uncontested races for the Lafayette City Council, the Pleasant Hill Recreation and Park District, the Central Contra Costa Sanitary District, and the Mt. Diablo and Walnut Creek school boards. In addition, there were no candidates to file for the two open seats on the Canyon District school board (Cassandra Braun, "Some Regional Election Races Draw Little Candidate Interest," *Contra Costa Times*, October 21, 2004, page W01). Although there are certainly notable exceptions, these patterns are generally indicative of local electoral competition throughout the United States.

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exorbitant) sums of money, navigate the media, and strike unappealing compromises. For high-level positions, candidates often need to engage in months of full-time campaigning, and success may mean indefinitely suspending one's career. At the local level, the political stakes may not be as high, but the decision to enter even a city council or school board race can involve holding oneself up before neighbors and community members (Shaw 2004; Golden 1996). And in many cases, the end does not justify the means, as the majority of Americans do not hold a favorable view of politicians and elected officials.¹⁰ This position is summarized well by one of the eligible candidates I interviewed for this book – someone who decided unequivocally that he would never run for office: “No degree of civic duty or sense of obligation would lead a sane person to enter the trenches.” Another put it a bit more colorfully: “Mudslinging, money-grubbing, mayhem. That’s all it is. Why would anyone ever decide to get involved in that?”

Indeed, how can we explain the initial decision to run for office? What factors drive political ambition at the earliest stages and lead women and men to move from politically minded citizens to candidates for public office?¹¹ Why do accomplished, professional women and men consider entering the electoral arena, even when politics is often so poorly regarded? What personal and professional characteristics and traits foster a sense of political ambition? What circumstances serve to encourage and suppress that interest in running for office over time?

Despite the normative importance of understanding the process by which citizens become candidates and elected officials, and despite sixty years of research pertaining to political ambition and the candidate emergence process, we know very little about the initial decision to run, or not to run, for office. Certainly, case studies and historical analyses chronicle

¹⁰ Pew Research Center for People and the Press, “Fewer Want Spending to Grow, But Most Cuts Remain Unpopular,” February 10, 2011. Accessed at <http://people-press.org/report/?pageid=1899> (March 7, 2011).

¹¹ Consistent with its traditional use in most political science research, my definition of *political ambition* is synonymous with the desire to acquire and hold political power through electoral means. Some scholars offer a broader conception of political ambition; it can manifest itself in forms other than running for office, such as serving as a community activist, organizing letter-writing campaigns and protests, or volunteering for candidates or issue advocacy groups (e.g., Burrell 1996). Because running for office is necessary to affect levels of electoral competition, political representation, and democratic legitimacy, I focus on the conventional definition of the term and examine the reasons that some citizens consider throwing their hats into the ring, whereas others do not.

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officeholders' decisions to enter the electoral arena (e.g., Gaddie 2004; Witt, Paget, and Matthews 1994; Fowler and McClure 1989). Political biographies written by candidates and elected officials also shed light on the process by which they came to enter the political fray (e.g., Thompson 2010; Kennedy 2009; Palin 2009; Kunin 2008; Clinton 2003). But aside from a study focusing on potential candidates for Congress (Stone and Maisel 2003) and an investigation into gender differences in political ambition (Lawless and Fox 2010, 2005), no broad empirical work explores the dynamics underlying the initial decision to run for office.¹² Instead, and as I discuss more fully in Chapter 2, political scientists tend to focus on candidates and office holders – all of whom have already decided to run – and explore, retrospectively, the strategic nature of their political ambition. These studies provide insight into how a given political opportunity structure – such as an open seat, the partisan composition of the constituency, or term limits – affects individuals' decisions to enter specific races, seek higher office, or retire from politics altogether. But they are limited in the extent to which they aid in our understanding of whether or why certain people pursue elective positions in the first place, whereas others recoil at the notion. When we turn to the question of the process by which people gain or lose interest in running for office over time, we know even less.

This book offers the first broad, systematic exploration of the initial decision to run for office and how it evolves over time. I advance the central argument that if we are to understand fully the candidate emergence process, then we must broaden both our conception of political ambition and our examination of the factors that affect it. More specifically, it is essential to focus on *nascent political ambition* – the embryonic or potential interest in office seeking that precedes facing a particular political opportunity structure and deciding whether to enter a specific political contest. After all, if the notion of a candidacy has never even crossed an individual's mind, then he or she will never exhibit *expressive ambition* and actually run for office, regardless of the political opportunity structure he or she may face. It is vital also to consider and incorporate explicitly into our understanding of candidate emergence the concept of

¹² One exception is the 2005 article that Richard L. Fox and I published in the *American Journal of Political Science*. Although the arguments we put forward in that article are consistent with the central premises of this book, the article represents a far less nuanced account of the decision to run for office.

dynamic ambition – the process by which an individual gains or loses interest over time in running for office.

The central findings of this book reveal that substantial dividends yield from the study of political ambition when we do not limit our analyses to the decision making of political actors who are already fully immersed in electoral politics. Indeed, nascent ambition is influenced by factors such as minority status (both with regard to sex and race), family dynamics, professional circumstances, and a general sense of efficacy as a candidate, all of which fall outside the political opportunity structure on which most political ambition theory relies. Moreover, the data indicate that political ambition at the individual level fluctuates widely over time, long before eligible candidates face a political opportunity structure and well in advance of the realization of an actual candidacy. Achieving a full understanding of who will ultimately emerge as a candidate demands turning our attention to the earliest stages of the candidate emergence process and recognizing its dynamic nature.

To develop this broader conception of political ambition, I rely on data from the Citizen Political Ambition Panel Study. The panel consists of national surveys that Richard L. Fox and I conducted in 2001 and 2008 with “eligible candidates” – successful women and men who occupy the four professions that most often precede a career in politics. In-depth interviews with the eligible candidates complement the empirical analysis and add nuance to the findings. This study provides a significant methodological advance in exploring candidate emergence and presents the first opportunity to examine broadly the process by which women and men decide to run, or not to run, for office. At its core, this book is about political ambition – who has it, how it is fostered, and how it evolves.

The Importance of Studying the Initial Decision to Run for Office

Because political scientists who study candidate emergence tend to focus on candidates and officeholders – all of whom have already demonstrated political ambition – we know relatively little about whether or why certain people pursue elective positions in the first place. Yet understanding this aspect of candidate emergence is of central importance for a number of reasons.

Foremost, electoral accountability is predicated on the notion that a large engaged group of citizens will develop and sustain an interest in seeking elective office. Indeed, democracy cannot function as intended if competent, politically interested citizens do not exhibit a sincere, sustained interest in running for office and a willingness to present a battle of ideas

to the voters. This is particularly true in the candidate-centered electoral arena of the United States. As Gary Jacobson (2001, 57) notes, “Congressional election campaigns . . . are best understood as ventures undertaken by individual political entrepreneurs in a decentralized political marketplace.” Competitive elections draw larger voter turnouts, encourage greater citizen political engagement, and heighten elected officials’ responsiveness to their constituents (Barreto and Streb 2007). Because competition is a central criterion for evaluating the quality of elections, the viability of our electoral system and representative democracy is degraded when a broad group of citizens is not willing to enter the electoral arena, whether at the local, state, or federal level.

Studying the initial decision to run for office is particularly important for shedding light on questions of electoral accountability because career ladder politics tends to characterize candidate emergence in the United States. In most cases, the initial decision to run for office occurs at the local level; politicians often then opt to run for higher office (Jacobson 2001; Kazee 1994; Prinz 1993; Rohde 1979; Black 1972; Schlesinger 1966). Thus, the manner in which that initial ambition evolves sets the stage for climbing the political ladder and the quality of representation a public official provides. State legislators with ambition to seek higher office, for example, are more likely to monitor constituents’ opinions than are those with no interest in one day running for higher office (Maestas 2003). Moreover, highly professionalized state legislatures populated with ambitious politicians tend to be more representative of statewide policy preferences than are their nonprofessional counterparts (Maestas 2000). Establishing a better understanding of policy making at all levels, as well as the extent to which policy makers will substantively represent their constituents, requires that we first examine the initial decision to run for office and how that ambition emerges, sustains itself, or dissipates.

When evaluating the health of democracy, however, it is necessary to assess not only the degree to which people are willing to engage the political system and run for office, but also the extent to which a diverse array of citizens is aware of and interested in pursuing the opportunity. As Sue Thomas (1998, 1) argues, “A government that is democratically organized cannot be truly legitimate if all its citizens . . . do not have a potential interest in and opportunity for serving their community and nation.” Jane Mansbridge (1999, 651) elaborates:

Easier communication with one’s representative, awareness that one’s interests are being represented with sensitivity, and knowledge that certain features of one’s identity do not mark one as less able to govern all contribute

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to making one feel more included in the polity. This feeling of inclusion in turn makes the polity democratically more legitimate in one's eyes.

In fact, political theorists have long ascribed symbolic or role model benefits to a more diverse body of elected officials (Amundsen 1971; Pitkin 1967; Bachrach 1967). In the case of gender, Barbara Burrell (1996, 151) captures the argument well:

Women in public office stand as symbols for other women, both enhancing their identification with the system and their ability to have influence within it. This subjective sense of being involved and heard for women, in general, alone makes the election of women to public office important because, for so many years, they were excluded from power.¹³

Claudine Gay (2001, 589) summarizes a similar logic as applied to race:

At the core . . . is the presumption that political interest and engagement are as much a response to the political environment and the opportunities it is perceived to present as they are a function of individual resources, such as education. Black congressional representation, by contributing to new political optimism, could prime the pump of minority voter participation and pull the black community into the political process.¹⁴

The presence of traditionally marginalized groups in positions of political power, in other words, conveys the political system's level of inclusiveness. Thus, the extent to which sex, race, and ethnicity affect candidate emergence bears directly on the citizenry's sense of inclusion.

The initial decision to run for office is also important because it is intertwined with fundamental issues of political representation. A compelling body of evidence suggests that particular sociodemographic groups are best able to represent the policy preferences of that group. In terms of women's substantive representation, for instance, women's presence in

¹³ Several empirical studies corroborate this claim. Lonna Rae Atkeson and Nancy Carrillo (2007) find that as the percentage of a state's female legislators increases, so do female citizens' levels of external efficacy (see also Atkeson 2003). David Campbell and Christina Wolbrecht's (2006) cross-national study also uncovers a positive relationship between the presence of highly visible female politicians and adolescent girls' expectations of political engagement. On the other hand, Kathleen Dolan (2006) and Jennifer L. Lawless (2004a) find little empirical evidence – based on National Elections Studies data – to support the assumption that the presence of female candidates translates into any systematic change in women's political attitudes or behaviors. For a discussion of the difficulties involved in studying the potentially nuanced effects of symbolic representation, see Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler 2005.

¹⁴ For a more elaborate discussion of symbolic representation regarding race and ethnicity, see Pantoja and Segura 2003; Gay 2002; Bobo and Gilliam 1990.

high-level elective office decreases the possibility that gender-salient issues will be overlooked. At both the national and state levels, male and female legislators' priorities and preferences differ. Based on an analysis of bill sponsorship and floor remarks in the 104th through 107th Congresses, Jessica C. Gerrity, Tracy Osborn, and Jeanette Morehouse Mendez (2007) find that women who replace men in the same district are more likely to focus on "women's issues," such as gender equity, day care, flextime, abortion, minimum wage increases, and the extension of the food stamp program (see also Burrell 1996).¹⁵ Further, both 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).¹⁶

In a similar vein, black and Latino representatives are most likely to represent the issue preferences of black and Latino constituents. Katrina Gamble's (2007) analysis of committee markup transcripts in the 107th Congress uncovers evidence that black members of Congress participate more in the markup process of "black-interest policies" – such as civil rights, urban development, unemployment, housing, and poverty – than do their white colleagues. These results withstand controls for the percentage of black constituents in the district, thereby suggesting that the race of the members, themselves, exerts an influence on the issues they prioritize. Michael Minta (2009) finds that legislator race and ethnicity also influence the propensity to intervene in agency policy making; black and Latino members of Congress are more likely than their white counterparts to attempt to affect agency oversight on policies that could

¹⁵ For competing evidence, see Leslie Schwindt-Bayer and Renato Corbetta (2004), who argue that, controlling for party and constituency influences, member sex does not predict the "liberalness" of representatives' roll call behavior in the 103rd through 105th Congresses.

¹⁶ Investigators have produced a wide array of empirical research that highlights the unique policy agenda women bring to elective office. For additional evidence of substantive representation at the congressional level, see Swers 1998; Paolino 1995. At the state level, see Thomas 1994; Berkman and O'Connor 1993; Carroll, Dodson, and Mandel 1991; Kathlene, Clarke, and Fox 1991; Thomas and Welch 1991; Saint-Germain 1989. And for a theoretical discussion of women's substantive representation, see Susan Moller Okin (1989), who argues that the presence of female legislators has finally allowed issues such as marital rape, domestic violence, and child custody – all of which have traditionally been deemed private matters – to receive public attention and debate. It is important to recognize, however, that with the growth of party polarization, fewer moderate Republican women serve in Congress. Accordingly, based on an analysis of roll call votes in the 108th and 109th Congresses, Brian Frederick (2009) finds that Republican women are ideologically indistinguishable from their male counterparts. This finding holds even when the analysis focuses strictly on "women's issues."

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benefit black and Latino constituents. More broadly, many scholars find that electing more black and Latino legislators can result in greater substantive representation to black and Latino constituents at both the federal (e.g., Griffin and Newman 2007; Grose 2005; Canon 1999; Kerr and Miller 1997; Lublin 1997) and state legislative levels (Preuhs 2006; Haynie 2001).¹⁷

Because concerns surrounding electoral accountability, democratic legitimacy, and political representation are so fundamental, I situate my analysis on this foundation. This is particularly important given the candidate-centered political system in the United States. Political parties, after all, exert little control over who is nominated to run for office and provide only minimal financial and logistical support to candidates for most elective positions. Candidates, therefore, must raise money, build coalitions of support, create campaign organizations, and develop campaign strategies. In competitive electoral races, they often must engage in these endeavors twice – both at the primary stage and in the general election. Explicit linkages to political party organizations and platforms, as well as other support networks, are entirely the candidates' responsibility to develop. If we are to gauge prospects for the health of democracy in the United States, then we must assess the factors that lead eligible candidates to consider throwing their hats into the ring, as well as the reasons that their political ambition waxes and wanes.

Organization of the Book

Who runs for office? The pages that follow answer this question by reporting and analyzing the results of the Citizen Political Ambition Panel Study, a unique nationwide survey of almost 3,800 eligible candidates in

¹⁷ Substantive representation applies beyond classifications of gender and race. Donald Haider-Markel's (2007) analysis of state legislative activities from 1992 through 2002, for example, reveals a similar pattern regarding gay and lesbian state legislators, who tend to be more likely to advocate for legislative outcomes that are favorable to the gay community. Researchers also find that openly gay legislators do relatively more to affect domestic partnership policies at the state level (Haider-Markel, Joslyn, and Kniss 2000). Similar findings also emerge from studies of representation among impoverished citizens. Greater political participation from the poor, for instance, has been associated with higher levels of welfare spending (Hill and Leighley 1992). Conversely, Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward (1997, 267) attribute "two decades of relative quiescence by the poor and working class" to one of the key reasons Congress managed to pass the 1996 welfare reform legislation that imposed time limits and work requirements on public assistance recipients.