1

Still a Man's World?

Cheryl Perry made partner at a prestigious law firm in Hartford, Connecticut, when she was only thirty-three years old. She is active professionally, holding positions with the city's bar association and the Connecticut Trial Lawyers' Association. In addition, Ms. Perry served on the coordinating committee for the Atlanta Olympics. Several of her peers in the legal community have repeatedly urged her to consider running for elective office. But when we interviewed her in the summer of 2003 and asked if she considered herself qualified to run, Ms. Perry replied, "Absolutely not. I'd never run."[1]

Kevin Kendall also seems to fit the bill for entering the electoral arena. He lives outside of Seattle, Washington, and began practicing law in 1990. Since then, he has become a partner in his law firm. In addition to working as a full-time litigator, Mr. Kendall is active in several professional associations and nonprofit community organizations in and around Seattle. When we asked him – also in the summer of 2003 – whether he felt qualified to pursue an elective position, Mr. Kendall immediately responded, "I am a quick study. People tell me I should run all the time … I've thought about it a lot and, one day, probably will."

Fast-forward twenty years and our conversations with women and men who seemed as if they'd be excellent candidates sounded eerily similar. Take Barbara Gilmour. She began following politics in high school,

[1] To protect anonymity, we changed the names and modified identifying references of the men and women we interviewed for this book. The backgrounds and credentials we describe, as well as the specific quotes we use, are taken directly from the interviews we conducted.

became a social studies teacher, stays on top of the news, and regularly attends political meetings about local issues, such as taxes and education. Although she "cares about the community" and considers herself "very bright," she doubts that she's qualified to run for office. In addition to noting that she doesn't have "previous government experience," Ms. Gilmour told us in the summer of 2023 that she doesn't have the "thick skin" required for public life.

John Whitten is also a teacher. He can't remember a time when he hasn't thought about running for office. Growing up close to Washington, DC, he explained that he "ate, slept, and breathed politics." He has dabbled in community organizing and political fundraising. Although he's not sure when he'll run, or for what office, Mr. Whitten has no doubt that he's qualified for most local, state, and even national positions. "You bet I'm qualified," he said when we interviewed him in the summer of 2023. "The foundation of a qualified candidate is honesty, truthfulness, and transparency. I have all those things."

The sentiments of these four people exemplify the dramatic and enduring gender gap we have uncovered throughout the course of investigating potential candidates' ambition to seek public office. These four women and men all possess excellent qualifications and credentials to run for office. They are well educated, have risen to the top of their professions, serve as active members in their communities, and express high levels of political interest. Despite these similarities, the two women express little willingness to move into the electoral arena. The two men confidently assert that they could occupy almost any elective position. Although the factors that lead an individual to consider running for office are complex and multifaceted, gender continues to exert one of the strongest influences on who ultimately launches a political candidacy.

As fundamental as political ambition is to understanding gender dynamics in electoral politics, when we began studying it in the early 2000s, very little empirical research focused on gender and the decision to run for office.[2] After all, relatively few women had run for high-level elective office throughout US history, and scholarly inquiries emphasized that reality. It's not surprising, therefore, that at the time we wrote the first edition of this book, none of the sixteen published

[2] Consistent with its traditional use in most political science research, our definition of "political ambition" is the desire to acquire and hold political power through electoral means.

academic books that concentrated predominantly on political ambition paid much attention to gender.[3] A search of scholarly journals in the disciplines of political science, sociology, and psychology revealed a similar pattern.[4]

The first two editions of this book went a long way in exploring the role gender plays in the candidate emergence process. And during the last twenty years, numerous political scientists have assessed and contextualized the gender gap in ambition.[5] Some focus on gendered traits and behaviors contributing to women's election aversion.[6] Others address structural and partisan dynamics.[7] Still others experiment with interventions to identify factors that might increase women's interest in a candidacy.[8] A growing body of research also offers an intersectional perspective on the gender gap in political ambition.[9] It's certainly no longer accurate to argue that political scientists have ignored the role gender plays in the candidate emergence process.

So why take up the question once again? Because a lot has changed since we published the first book. During the first two decades of the twenty-first century, the toxicity of the electoral environment skyrocketed, party polarization reached new heights, money pouring

[3] Of the sixteen books, one included a case study of a woman's decision to run for office (Fowler and McClure 1989), one included a chapter that addresses the role race and gender might play in the candidate emergence process (Moncrief, Squire, and Jewell 2001), and one included a chapter that elaborates on how the scholarship had not sufficiently addressed the intersection between gender and political ambition (Williams and Lascher 1993). We conducted this search in 2004 with Worldcat and included all books cataloged in the Library of Congress. We used "political ambition," "candidate emergence," and "decision to run for office" as the initial search terms and then narrowed the list to include only those books that focused on interest in pursuing elective office. We excluded single-person political biographies.

[4] The only national study of the interaction between gender and political ambition was Virginia Sapiro's (1982) study of delegates to the 1972 national party conventions. In the two decades that followed, eight articles investigated gender and the candidate emergence process, although most were studies of actual candidates and office holders, all of whom, by definition, had exhibited political ambition (see Lawless and Fox 2005).

[5] More than 1,850 books and articles cite the first two editions of this book. More broadly, since the publication of the second edition in 2010, a Google Scholar search in October 2024 turned up 645 hits for "gender gap in political ambition," 2,670 hits for "gender gap" and "political ambition," and 1,240 hits for "gender" and "candidate emergence."

[6] Fox and Pate 2023; Kanthak and Woon 2015; Preece and Stoddard 2015.

[7] Castle et al. 2020; Crowder-Meyer and Lauderdale 2014; Lawless and Fox 2019; Thomsen 2015.

[8] Broockman 2014; Karpowitz, Monson, and Preece 2017; Ladam, Harden, and Windett 2018; Wolbrecht and Campell 2017.

[9] Brown 2014; Gershon and Monforti 2021; Scott et al. 2021; Silva and Skulley 2019.

into national elections more than quadrupled, and social media facilitated the spread of misinformation, personal attacks, and an even greater loss of privacy for candidates. In fact, more than 40 percent of the people we surveyed for this book believe that even local elections are nasty affairs. Thirty percent think local elected officials regularly receive death threats. Asking whether someone is interested in running for office today likely conjures up different images, costs, and benefits than it did in the early 2000s.

Moreover, although US political institutions remain far from gender-balanced, women's numeric representation has improved markedly in recent decades. Even amid the increasingly toxic and combative electoral environment, women's presence in state legislatures has increased by almost 50 percent since 2001; in Congress, it has doubled. Several viable female presidential candidates have emerged. Hillary Clinton won the popular vote in 2016. Voters elected Kamala Harris the first female vice president in 2020. And in 2024, Nikki Haley was the last candidate standing to challenge Donald Trump for the Republican presidential nomination, and Democrats quickly coalesced behind Kamala Harris as their nominee when Joe Biden decided not to seek reelection. The political climate – at least in terms of the numbers – seems far more inclusive of women than was the case a generation ago.

We may be tempted to assume, then, that the gender gap in political ambition has begun to close. This book demonstrates otherwise. Among thousands of potential candidates – women and men who work in the professions from which candidates are most likely to emerge – the gender gap in political ambition in 2021 was just as large as it was ten and twenty years earlier (see Figure 1.1).

Relying on the newest wave of the Citizen Political Ambition Study – our national surveys and interviews with thousands of potential candidates – this book documents the deeply entrenched gender gap in political ambition. We examine the factors that lead women and men to make the move from politically engaged citizen to candidate for public office. We shed light on why accomplished, professional women like Cheryl Perry and Barbara Gilmour view themselves as unsuited for holding elective office, while men like Kevin Kendall and John Whitten voice no such hesitation. At its core, this book is about political ambition: why so many men have it, and why so many women don't.

But the book does more than identify a large gender gap in political ambition. It also documents the intractable nature of the gap and

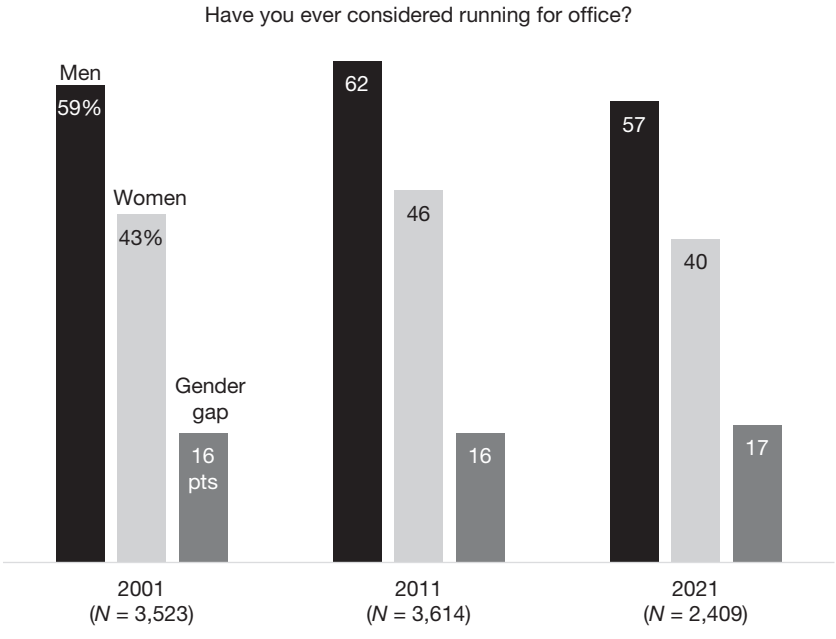

FIGURE 1.1 The unchanging gender gap in political ambition
Notes: Bars represent the percentages of potential candidates who reported that they had ever considered running for office, as well as the gender gap (in percentage points) at each point in time. The sample includes women and men who work in law, business, education, and politics. The gender gap is significant at $p < 0.05$ in all comparisons.

assesses why it seems impervious to change. This static gap, after all, contravenes many scholars and analysts' expectations that gender differences in political ambition would recede as more women ran for and served in public office. In fact, it's the reason we added "more" to the book's title. In 2005, when we published our first book on political ambition, the title – *It Takes a Candidate* – conveyed the idea that if more women ran for office, more women would win, women's numeric representation would improve, and the United States would be on the path to gender parity in politics. (The same remained true in 2010, when we updated the book and published *It Still Takes a Candidate*.)

Twenty years later, that's only part of the story. The number of women seeking and winning public office has increased markedly, but the gender gap in political ambition has not closed. It turns out that it's possible to improve women's numeric representation without making progress when it comes to creating a culture in which women

are as likely as men to view themselves, and be viewed by others, as political leaders. It takes a candidate to achieve gender parity in elective office. It takes more than a candidate to transform society so that running for office isn't a more elusive endeavor for women than men. Until then, women's full political inclusion will remain nothing but a distant goal.

TRADITIONAL GENDER SOCIALIZATION IN THE CONTEXT OF US POLITICS

The original edition of this book provided the first broad-based empirical documentation that women are less politically ambitious than men to seek elective office. Though today we know much more about gender and political ambition than we did then, our central argument endures: The gender gap in political ambition results from long-standing patterns of traditional socialization that persist in US culture. According to gender politics scholars Pamela Conover and Virginia Gray, we can think about traditional gender socialization as a "division of activities into the public extra-familial jobs done by the male and the private intra-familial ones performed by the female."[10]

These different roles and social expectations for women and men have permeated the landscape of human civilization throughout time. Historian Gerda Lerner persuasively links the origins of the gendered division of labor to tribal hunter-gatherer societies.[11] She explains that the division was necessary because women had to produce enough children (many of whom died in infancy) to maintain the very existence of the tribe. Political theorist Jean Bethke Elshtain attributes the first enunciation of separate spheres for men and women to Aristotle, who delineated between the public world of the *polis* and the nonpublic world of the *oikos*.[12]

Not surprisingly, the gendered division of labor has historically resulted in men's entry into, and dominance of, the public world of politics, and women's almost total exclusion from the political sphere. By harkening back to tribal societies and age-old philosophical concepts, we don't mean to diminish dramatic social and cultural change, especially during the last fifty years in the US. But centuries – or even

[10] Conover and Gray 1983, 2–3.
[11] Lerner 1986.
[12] Elshtain 1981.

millennia – of socialized norms die hard. It wasn't until 1975, for instance, that the US Supreme Court discarded state laws that excused women from jury service on the grounds that it would interfere with their domestic duties.[13]

Throughout this book, we employ the term "traditional gender socialization" within the context of US politics as a theoretical framework that embodies the greater complexities of women's lives, both in terms of how society perceives them, and how they perceive themselves, as potential candidates. More specifically, we articulate three ways that traditional gender socialization contributes to the gender gap in political ambition.

Traditional Family Role Orientations – Gender-specific family roles and responsibilities serve as perhaps the most obvious manifestation of traditional gender socialization. Up through the mid twentieth century, the notion of women serving in positions of high political power was anathema, in large part because of the expectation that women should prioritize housework and childcare. By the 1960s, though, the social construction of gendered public and private spheres began to crumble, and private sphere issues, such as childcare and domestic abuse, became part of public sphere policy debates. Moreover, women began to seize professional opportunities previously reserved for men.

Yet the promise of egalitarian household and parenting dynamics never fully materialized. A 1995 United Nations study of two career families in developed countries, for example, found that women continued to perform almost three times as much of the unpaid household labor as men.[14] Even in the current era, the primary institutions of social and cultural life in the United States continue to impress upon many women and men that traditional gender roles constitute a "normal," "appropriate," and desirable set of life circumstances. As recently as 2023, data confirmed that even when women are the primary breadwinners, they still spend more time on household tasks and childcare than their male partners.[15]

Not only do women continue to bear more family responsibilities, but they also face a more complicated balancing of these responsibilities with their professional lives than men do. For some women, this

[13] Kerber 1998.
[14] Freedman 2002.
[15] Richard Fry, Carolina Aragão, Kiley Hurst, and Kim Parker, "In a Growing Share of U.S. Marriages, Husbands and Wives Earn about the Same," Pew Research Center, April 2023.

means "opting out" of their careers to fulfill traditional gender roles.[16] Debates about whether women can and/or should attempt to balance their careers with their families, as well as the steps workplaces can take to facilitate women's professional success amid these circumstances, will likely continue into the foreseeable future.[17] Indeed, many women who "opted out" have since come to express regret; reentering the workforce was harder than they expected.[18] But in the meantime, women's dual roles carry important implications for their involvement in politics. The traditional division of household labor and family responsibilities means that, for many women, a political career would be a "third job." Because men tend not to be equal partners on the home front, entering politics does not interfere as directly with their ability to fulfill their personal and professional obligations.

Masculinized Ethos – When individuals consider running for office and launching successful campaigns, they must rely on the support of numerous political institutions. Most of these institutions are dominated by men and ultimately embody a perpetually ingrained ethos of masculinity. Political theorist Cynthia Enloe explains:

> Patriarchy is the structural and ideological system that perpetuates the privileging of masculinity … legislatures, political parties, museums, newspapers, theater companies, television networks, religious organizations, corporations, and courts … derive from the presumption that what is masculine is most deserving of reward, promotion, admiration, [and] emulation.[19]

Analyses of the United States' central political institutions confirm Enloe's claim. Scholars have identified, to varying degrees, a type of masculinized ethos within the various components of the government – from examples of sexism on Capitol Hill, to an Oval Office that has never seen a female occupant, to a Supreme Court shrouded in secrecy that until 2023 did not have a code of conduct. Only three women have served as chair or cochair of the two national party organizations in the last fifty years combined. And when we turn to television media, national survey data on news viewing habits reveal that just two

[16] See Stone 2007.
[17] Eagly and Carli 2007. For a somewhat controversial account of whether women benefit from leaving the workforce and staying home with their children, see Linda Hirshman's (2006) *Get to Work: A Manifesto for Women of the World*. For a response to Hirshman, see Katha Pollitt, "Mommy Wars, Round 587," *The Nation*, July 17, 2006.
[18] Judith Warner, "The Op-Out Generation Wants Back In," *New York Times Magazine*, August 7, 2013.
[19] Enloe 2004, 4–5.

women (Rachel Maddow and Laura Ingraham) make the top ten list of journalists and political pundits people pay most attention to in the United States.[20]

Even if the vast majority of men who occupy positions in these institutions no longer exhibit overt signs of gender bias, years of traditional conceptions about candidate quality, electability, and background persist.[21] Political scientist Monika McDermott observes that politics at all levels is imbued with masculinity, and that the values of "toughness" and "competitiveness" often create the perception that people with masculine personalities should occupy most high-level elected positions.[22] As a result, women and men often have different experiences and develop different impressions when thinking about various aspects of the political process. Whereas political institutions overtly and subtly facilitate and encourage men's emergence into politics, they often suppress women's willingness to launch political careers.

Gendered Psyche – The presence of traditional gender role expectations and the dominance of a masculinized ethos sustain the gendered psyche, a deeply embedded imprint that propels men into politics, but relegates women to the electoral arena's periphery. Cynthia Enloe's discussion of patriarchy suggests that part of the reason traditional systems endure is because they lead women to overlook their own marginalization from the public sphere and its institutions.[23] The most dramatic political consequence of the gendered psyche, therefore, is that politics seems like a reasonable career possibility for many men but doesn't even appear on the radar screen for many women.

The gendered psyche's imprint can also be more subtle. When women operate outside of their traditional and "appropriate" realms, they tend to express less comfort than men. Contemporary studies that assess psychological development uncover gender differences in confidence, self-promotion, and the desire for achievement. Salary negotiations serve as a good example. Several studies find that when negotiating for a starting salary or a raise, women downplay their achievements and men prop up theirs. As a result, women often wind up with significantly lower salaries than equally credentialed men.[24]

[20] Craig T. Roberston and Nic Newman, "Which Journalists Do People Pay Most Attention to and Why? A Study of Six Countries," Reuters Institute, June 15, 2022.
[21] Bjarnegård and Kenny 2015.
[22] McDermott 2016, 1.
[23] Enloe 2004, 6.
[24] Babcock and Laschever 2021; Bowles, Babcock, and McGinn 2005.

Similar dynamics apply to politics. Whereas men are often taught to be confident, assertive, and self-promoting, cultural attitudes toward women as political leaders continue to leave an imprint suggesting to women – if even only indirectly – that it is inappropriate or undesirable to possess these characteristics. In some cases, women conclude that they do not possess, or will be penalized for exhibiting, the qualities the electoral arena demands of candidates.[25] In others, they believe they must be better than men to succeed.[26] Perhaps that's why female members of Congress, at least on some dimensions, perform more effectively than their male colleagues.[27]

These sociocultural, institutional, and psychological manifestations of traditional gender socialization culminate in a substantial gender gap in political ambition. It is essential to recognize, however, that while traditional gender socialization makes it difficult for many women to envision themselves as candidates for public office, the broader dimensions of electoral politics in the United States perpetuate and reinforce women's perceptions and reluctance. After all, women have made significant gains entering the formerly male-dominated professions of law, business, and medicine. Yet politics continues to lag far behind. Why does politics remain such a difficult arena for women to enter? Why do patterns of traditional gender socialization exert so powerful an impact on political ambition and candidate emergence? At least part of the answer lies in the structural barriers and electoral rules that define the US political system.

Electoral competition in the United States is unique because it is dominated by candidates, as opposed to political parties. A weak party system exerts little control over who is nominated to run for office and provides only a fraction of the financial and logistical support to candidates for most elective positions. Candidates, therefore, must be entrepreneurs. To compete for almost all top offices, candidates must raise money, build coalitions of support, create campaign organizations, and develop campaign strategies. In most cases, they must engage in these endeavors twice – in the primary and the general election. It's up to candidates to develop relationships with political party organizations and other support and donor networks. This system of competition, because of patterns of traditional gender socialization, makes running for public office a much more remote possibility for women than men.

[25] Guillen 2018.
[26] Bauer 2020.
[27] Anzia and Berry 2011.