

It Takes More Than a Candidate

Third Edition

It Takes More Than a Candidate is the only systematic account of the gender gap in political ambition over time. Based on national surveys of more than 10,000 potential candidates in 2001, 2011, and 2021, the book shows that women, even in the highest tiers of professional accomplishment, are substantially less likely than men to demonstrate ambition to seek elective office. The gender gap in political ambition persists across generations and over time. Women remain less likely to be recruited to run for office, less likely to think they are qualified to run, and less likely to express a willingness to run for office in the future. Twenty years after the publication of *It Takes a Candidate*, this book remains timely and eye-opening, highlighting the challenges women face in navigating the candidate emergence process and providing insight into the persistent gender gap in political ambition.

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It Takes More Than a Candidate

Why Women Don't Run for Office

Third Edition

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
 978-1-009-59823-1 — It Takes More Than a Candidate
 Jennifer L. Lawless, Richard L. Fox
 Frontmatter
[More Information](#)



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom
 One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
 314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
 New Delhi – 110025, India
 103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment,
 a department of the University of Cambridge.

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 education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
 Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781009598231

DOI: 10.1017/9781009598248

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When citing this work, please include a reference to the DOI
 10.1017/9781009598248

First published 2005
 Second edition 2010
 Third edition 2025

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

NAMES: Lawless, Jennifer L., 1975– author. | Fox, Richard L., author.

TITLE: It takes more than a candidate : why women don't run for office /
 Jennifer L. Lawless, Richard L. Fox.

DESCRIPTION: Third edition. | Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY :
 Cambridge University Press, 2025. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2024050131 | ISBN 9781009598231 (hardback) |

ISBN 9781009598262 (paperback) | ISBN 9781009598248 (ebook)

SUBJECTS: LCSH: Women – Political activity – United States. | Political
 participation – United States. | Women political candidates – United
 States. | Women – United States – Attitudes. | Sex role – United States.

CLASSIFICATION: LCC HQ1236.5.U6 L38 2025 | DDC 320.082–dc23/eng/20250102

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024050131>

ISBN 978-1-009-59823-1 Hardback
 ISBN 978-1-009-59826-2 Paperback

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Acknowledgments

Nearly twenty-five years ago, in a Las Vegas conference room at the annual meeting of the Western Political Science Association, we finalized our plan to conduct the Citizen Political Ambition Study. It was 2001, women had made substantial progress entering the professions that tend to lead to political careers, and many studies reported that when women ran for office, they fared just as well as men. Yet women occupied only 13 percent of the seats in Congress and 22 percent of the seats in state legislatures across the country. Sensing greater roadblocks to women's full political integration into electoral politics than many scholars and analysts identified, we wanted to study gender's role in the candidate emergence process on a much larger scale than had previously been attempted.

That summer, we compiled a national sample and surveyed nearly 4,000 "potential candidates" – women and men who work in the professions that often precede political candidacies. We asked whether they'd ever considered running for office, whether anyone ever suggested they run, whether they thought they were qualified to run, and whether they had any interest in running in the future. We asked about their upbringing, family structures and roles, political attitudes, and perceptions of the electoral arena. And we asked about their political participation, interest, knowledge, and efficacy. Those results, which served as the basis for *It Takes a Candidate: Why Women Don't Run for Office*, exposed a significant gender gap in political ambition. Women and men with similar educational, professional, and political backgrounds were not similar when it came to their interest in running for office.

A decade later, the political environment looked quite different. Nancy Pelosi had been elected Speaker of the House. Hillary Clinton

received 18 million votes when she sought the Democratic nomination for president in 2008. And in 2011, polls repeatedly placed former vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin in the top tier of potential candidates for the 2012 Republican presidential nomination. Against this backdrop, we conducted the second wave of the Citizen Political Ambition Study, expecting to find that the gender gap in political ambition had begun to close. We were wrong. Survey data from a new sample of roughly 4,000 potential candidates revealed that it held steady.

A decade after that – in the fall of 2021 – we decided to do it all again. It had been twenty years since our initial study and the political environment had undergone remarkable changes. Most important for our purposes were the dramatic increase in the number of women seeking and winning elective office, the emergence of several serious and competitive female presidential candidates, the election of the first female vice president, and the #MeToo movement. This time, the data would surely reveal that women were just as likely as men to consider running for office. We were wrong again. In 2001, we uncovered a sixteen percentage point gender gap. In 2021, among a sample of more than 5,000 potential candidates, the gap was an almost identical fifteen points.

Identifying and theorizing about the persistent gender gap in political ambition is vitally important – it's why we undertook this project in the first place. But we soon discovered that compiling a national sample of potential candidates was a more mundane endeavor than we had fully conceptualized. We executed the first two waves of the study through an old-school, multiwave, national mail survey. To get responses from nearly 8,000 potential candidates, we reached out to close to 15,000 people. That meant signing, folding, sealing, and stamping more than 50,000 pieces of mail. To give the survey that important personal touch, we fed every single envelope into the printer, handwrote a note on each letter and follow-up postcard urging recipients to complete the questionnaire, and placed actual stamps on each piece of mail. The papercuts were many, one of us seemed to develop a taste for envelope adhesive (sealer sticks are too messy), and we became obsessed with monitoring the mail. Of course, this endless procession of mind-numbing tasks in the early days proved our shared mania – the basis of any healthy friendship.

By the time we conducted the third wave of the study, we were fortunate enough to have reached a point in our careers where we could afford to outsource the data collection. We contracted with YouGov and assembled a comparable sample that required far less clerical work. Gone were the days of stuffing envelopes and affixing stamps. Although we didn't

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wake up from nightmares associated with lost mail, we still managed to fixate on the many aspects of the project that could go awry. Just imagine all the potential programming and coding errors! This wave, like the others, somehow went off without a hitch.

Despite changes to the political and survey environments throughout the last twenty years, every part of the Citizen Political Ambition Study required lots of feedback, help, and assistance. We thank Walt Stone, Linda Fowler, and Kathy Dolan, all of whom early on offered extensive and insightful comments that allowed us to develop a decades-long research agenda. Many others took the time to provide critical feedback on the survey instruments and various manuscripts that became articles and books: Dave Brady, Dick Brody, Cliff Brown, Barbara Burrell, Mo Fiorina, Brian Frederick, Amy Gangl, Danny Hayes, Simon Jackman, Kent Jennings, Cherie Maestas, Monika McDermott, Jane Mansbridge, Lori Marso, Sid Milkis, Terry Moe, Zoe Oxley, Kathryn Pearson, Kira Sanbonmatsu, Wendy Schiller, Eric R. A. N. Smith, Sue Tolleson Rinehart, Adam Thal, Sean Theriault, Terry Weiner, and Harriet Woods. We also thank our editor at Cambridge University Press, Rachel Blaifeder, who helped produce this book (as well as Ed Parsons, who served as our editor for the two previous books on the subject).

Numerous organizations disseminated our results and offered suggestions for future research. In this vein, we're grateful to Marya Stark and Andrea Dew Steele (Emerge), Marcia Cone (Women's Fund of Rhode Island), Ilana Goldman (Women's Campaign Forum), Stephanie Schriock and Emily Cain (Emily's List), Erin Loos Cutraro (She Should Run), Mary Hughes, Swanee Hunt, Barbara Lee, and various chapters of the League of Women Voters. Darrell West, as the Director of the Taubman Center for Public Policy at Brown University, helped issue a report based on our first survey; he then did the same for the second wave as Vice President of Governmental Studies at the Brookings Institution. Craig Volden and the Center for Effective Lawmaking at the University of Virginia's Batten School of Public Policy helped us produce and disseminate a report based on the third wave. Politicians and practitioners rely on all three to encourage more women to run for office.

From a practical standpoint, our endeavor would have been impossible without Jonathan Ma and Eliana Vasquez, who helped administer the first wave of the study at Stanford University; My-Lien Le, who was instrumental in managing the second wave at American University; and Sam Luks, Marissa Shih, and the YouGov team who fielded the third wave of the study while we were at the University of Virginia and Loyola

Marymount University. We also thank Mackenzie Dobson, who spent much of the summer of 2023 conducting phone interviews with potential candidates, many of whom would have preferred to do just about anything other than speak to her!

We could not have conducted the study without financial support from the University of Virginia, Loyola Marymount University, Brown University, Cal State Fullerton, Stanford University, Union College, the Carrie Chapman Catt Center at Iowa State University, Hunt Alternatives Fund, the Barbara Lee Foundation, the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University, the Women & Politics Institute at American University, and the Stanford Institute for the Quantitative Study of Society.

Finally, many thanks to our friends and colleagues for their laughter, support, and sustained willingness to hear about the gender gap in political ambition. And once again, we must thank our families, who put up with endless interruptions and numerous complaint sessions about the progress of the book and the coauthor. Thank you to Margie, John, Viola, Dominique, Lila, and Miles. Here's to hoping that in 2031, when we carry out the fourth wave of the study, the gender gap will have substantially dissipated.