



The Impact of Family Obligations on Women's Willingness to Seek Election and to Serve in U.S. Legislatures

Rachel Silbermann, Connecticut Voices for Children

Half a century after the start of the modern feminist movement, American women make up only 19% of the U.S. Congress and just 24% of all state legislators. Many factors help to explain such severe underrepresentation – and one of the key issues is that political careers are particularly lacking in job flexibility. Elected officials work long hours, travel extensively, and cannot easily interrupt work obligations to care for children. Because women still do most of the housework and child care, challenges in balancing their obligations dissuade many from running for public offices, in the same way that women often avoid other inflexible careers like business leadership.

When women forego legislative careers, it matters not only for the individuals involved, but for states and the nation, because female politicians are more likely to raise issues and vote for policies that matter to women. With women underrepresented in the halls of government, our democracy not only misses out on vital talent; it cannot fully address everyone's concerns.

My research offers evidence that concerns about balancing paid work and family obligations do indeed factor into women's decisions to forego political careers. I also describe a new step the state of Alaska is taking to ease conflicts for parents serving in its legislature.

Evidence That Family Dilemmas Can Dissuade Potential Female Legislators

In a new research paper, I present two different kinds of data – from a geospatial analysis and from a national survey experiment – both of which suggest that expectations about conflicting work obligations may indeed affect the supply of potential women legislators. Time spent traveling to and from work is the common thread in my analyses – an issue known to be particularly important to parents who divide time between paid posts and care for children. Because mothers are usually the primary caregivers for children, elected offices that require a politician to travel a long distance should be less attractive to many women.

- My geospatial analysis measures how far state legislative districts are from state capitals. After controlling for other important explanatory factors, I found that state legislative districts located further from capitals are less likely to have women running as candidates or serving in legislative office. Specifically, as a district's distance from the state capital increases by one hour, that district is about two percentage points less likely to have a female candidate or representative. Tellingly, farther-away districts are not any less likely to have women serving in local offices, so there is no reason to think that such districts lack women interested in public service.

- My survey experiment involved a nationally representative sample of undergraduates in the midst of choosing their own careers. Participants were asked to imagine that they are deciding between serving as a state legislator or as a member of Congress. All were told that the national capital is five hours from home, but some participants were assigned to a subgroup told that the *state* capital is five hours from home, while others were told that it is just 15 minutes from home. When the state capital was said to be close to home, women were, on average, twice as likely to forgo a possible career in Congress and opt instead for a career in the close-by state legislature.

My results and other studies suggest that concerns about balancing work and family obligations are one important reason that American women run for public office less readily than men. This means that even if political parties recruit women and men with equal fervor and give them the same resources and support, many women will still hold back from careers in this time-pressured line of work. Nor will it be enough to inspire individual women and men to become equally confident about their qualifications and prospects for elective public office. Even if all other factors are equalized, in short, the sorts of barriers scholars call “structural” would still matter – chief among them the persistently different obligations men and women have in their families. Absent an equal distribution of housework and childcare, women will remain underrepresented in government – unless extra steps are taken to help them manage dual obligations.

These issues have broader import. If even relatively privileged upper-middle-class mothers are reluctant to run for office due to family responsibilities, others may be equally or more impeded – including some fathers with child care responsibilities and virtually all working-class women who lack extra resources to buy help. The basic point is that, even with formal equality in law and institutional rules, service in governing institutions is more readily possible for some groups of people compared to others, undermining ideals of equal representation in U.S. democracy.

Alaska’s Experiment in Childcare for Legislators

Distances are especially vast in America’s northernmost state of Alaska. Because the capital in Juneau is so far from many districts and lacking in available childcare, state legislators with small children could face unusually acute challenges in balancing work and family obligations. After some debate, Alaska moved to become the only state that provides childcare for its legislators and their staffers. Daycare is not subsidized, but it is available when the legislature is in session, conveniently located next door to the capitol building.

Initially, the idea of a childcare center generated significant controversy and was only begrudgingly approved by the Legislative Council. One legislator recalled constituents deriding the proposed facility as a fluff issue, proclaiming that “a tanning salon and a nail salon would be next.” By now, however, the Alaska state legislators and staffers I surveyed agreed that the childcare center can help in recruiting parents of young children, especially women, to run for and serve in office. As one legislator put it, the near-by facility allows “for a broader spectrum of Alaskans to participate in the public process. Otherwise, only people who don’t have kids, or who are grandparents, can participate.” If this Alaska experiment helps that state’s legislature become more truly representative, perhaps making the idea of convenient childcare for public servants will spread across the United States – ideally, with subsidies for those who need financial help.

Read more in Rachel Silbermann, “Gender Roles, Work-Life Balance, and Running for Office.” *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* (forthcoming).