



To Win Elections, Do Women Candidates Have to be Better Qualified than Men?

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More than 98 percent of the individuals who have served in the U.S. Congress have been men. Although women have made tremendous strides over the past several decades, they continue to be underrepresented in Congress as in virtually every other national, state, and local-level office.

Voter discrimination could be a straightforward possible explanation for this underrepresentation, but decades of scholarship on women in politics has failed to find evidence that voters penalize female candidates. Instead, researchers consistently find that women win as often as men. This finding surprises many people, because it runs counter to everyday experience – where women seem to be treated inequitably in the workplace, at home, and by the media.

How could it be that women in politics escape the inequity many women confront elsewhere? One explanation is that they don't. My research challenges the longstanding claim that male and female candidates have equal chances of winning elections. In actuality, female candidates end up doing as well as men only because women who choose to run are more qualified on key attributes important to voters. When women are merely equally qualified, they face a measurable penalty – especially with male independent voters.

The Paradoxical Forces Shaping Women's Chances at the Ballot Box

My research shows that the appearance of electoral parity for men and women is in fact illusory, because women are more likely than men to possess qualities that voters value, and these differences in quality are not adequately taken into account in previous research. Women who actually run for office are more likely than men to possess qualities that voters intrinsically value – qualities such as experience, competence, integrity or problem-solving skills. Gender gaps in qualities that voters intrinsically value, my research shows, turn out to be a result of gender differences in decisions to run for office.

- Compared to men, women are less likely to run for higher office until they are assured good prospects of victory. One way to improve the prospects of victory is to make investments in qualities that voters value, such as experience. Indeed, women who run for office tend to have more office-holding experience than men who run for office. A gender gap in qualifications happens because women hold back from running until they gather enough experience to improve their electoral chances, whereas inexperienced men are more willing to bid for office.
- Beyond differences in office-holding experience, women who decide to run are also more likely than men to possess other qualities that voters intrinsically value, such as competence, integrity and problem-solving skills.

Crucially, my research shows gender gaps in candidate qualities mask overall gender discrimination at the ballot box. Women who are more qualified to run end up doing as well as male candidates on Election Day. However, when male and female candidates are equally qualified, women confront a three-percent vote-penalty – that is, they get three percent less support from voters than would otherwise be expected. What is the substantive impact of a three-percent vote deficit for women? In the election year that I studied, 1998, there were five women running for Congress who lost by a margin of three-percent or less. If they had fared the same as men with comparable qualifications, they would probably have won.

Which Voters Favor Male Candidates?

To gauge generalizability, I replicated my previous study with new data from the 2006 election – featuring different issues, candidates, and voters. Similar to my earlier study, I found a consistent three-percent vote deficit for women candidates once their stronger qualifications were taken into account. However, in this study I also extended my research to the micro-level to find out *who* within the electorate was causing this disparity. That is, which voters respond to variations in candidate sex and quality?

I find that male independent voters – exactly the voters who often swing elections – are equally supportive of women candidates who have stronger qualifications. But when quality is held constant, male independents are 23 percent less likely to vote for female than male candidates.

In 2006, there were nine women congressional candidates who lost by a margin of three percent or less – and thus, might have won if they had been men. These individual-level effects validate my previous work and show that voters who lack a strong partisan attachment evaluate female candidates differently from males.

Larger Implications

Previous research has tended to find that, once women actually decide to run for office, they fare equally with male candidates. In essence, this earlier research suggests that election outcomes are gender-neutral. But my work comes to very different conclusions and offers a different explanation for the apparent gender parity in election outcomes. Women who run for office do as well as men, I find, not because voters are gender-blind, but because women actually choose to run only when they are very well qualified. Such unusually well-qualified women win as often as men because they are more appealing to voters on key qualities of experience, problem-solving skills, and personal integrity.

The obvious implication of my research demonstrating a qualifications gap between male and female candidates is that the United States has a ways to go to ensure that election outcomes are truly equitable. Researchers, in turn, have more to learn about how certain groups of voters perceive and evaluate male and female candidates. Across the board in American public life, women are still more reluctant than men to run for office – perhaps because they perceive, correctly, that to have a chance to win, they must not only be equally qualified, but must actually be better qualified than their male competitors.

Read more in Sarah A. Fulton, **“When Gender Matters: Macro-Dynamics and Micro-Mechanisms.”** *Political Behavior* 36 (2014): 605-630; Sarah A. Fulton, **“Running Backwards and in High Heels: The Gendered Quality Gap and Incumbent Electoral Success.”** *Political Research Quarterly* 65, no. 2 (2012): 303-14; and Sarah A. Fulton, Cherie D. Maestas, L. Sandy Maisel, and Walter J. Stone, **“The Sense of a Woman: Gender, Ambition and the Decision to Run for Congress.”** *Political Research Quarterly* 59, no. 2 (2006): 235-48.