



How Local Political Party Leaders Perpetuate the Underrepresentation of Minorities in U.S. Government

David Doherty, Loyola University Chicago

Conor M. Dowling, University at Buffalo

Michael G. Miller, Barnard College

Although the 115th Congress is one of the most diverse in U.S. history, less than a fifth of its seats are filled by women or racial and ethnic minorities – and America’s state legislatures do little better. Do women and minority candidates have a harder time winning elections? There is surprisingly little evidence for this – all else equal, such candidates perform about as well as white men do. This suggests that the best way to diversify American legislatures is to encourage more women and minorities to run for office. Local party leaders play a key role in recruiting candidates, and our research suggests that they view men and women as equally appealing to their party’s voters. But the same cannot be said for potential black and Latinx candidates. Local party leaders tend to see them as less viable. Consequently, one reason for the continued underrepresentation of racial and ethnic minorities in office may be that, unless they view a minority candidate as a sufficiently attractive on other dimensions, parties are less likely to recruit them.

The Gatekeeping Role of Party Chairs

Both major American political parties are organized within each state, usually down to the county or local level. Some of the most important partisans are the elected leaders of the local party unit, usually called “chairpersons” or simply “chairs.” These local party leaders have numerous responsibilities, one of which is to identify people in their community who would make good candidates, recruit those people, and support their campaigns. Because they have strong community ties, local party chairs are on the front lines of candidate recruitment and election support. Not only can they connect candidates to donors or interest groups, but they also have information and resources to draw candidates into the process and increase their chances of winning. Chairs are key gatekeepers in the nomination and election process, and their decisions can potentially make or break candidates and political campaigns.

How Party Chairs Affect Elections

If party chairs play such an important role, then it stands to reason that their beliefs about candidates will matter. Despite evidence to the contrary, many Americans believe that minority and women candidates face substantial disadvantages at the ballot box. If chairs share such assumptions, they will also feel that candidates with certain traits will be less likely to win – and we might therefore expect them to be less likely to recruit or support minority candidates. These decisions could impact the fortunes of would-be candidates – to the detriment of those whose minority status makes them seem less likely to win.

Do chairs perceive minority and women candidates to be less viable? To find out, we fielded a national survey of Democratic and Republican chairs that featured an experiment designed to uncover the extent to which chairs believe candidates with particular traits face an uphill battle with voters from their party. We found two important things about how party chairs view prospective candidates.

- **There is no evidence that chairs from either party view women candidates as less viable than men.** In fact, chairs from the two parties viewed women as slightly more viable candidates than their male counterparts. We are unsure of why this is the case, but it could be that women are viewed as harder working, higher quality candidates – because women who might run are understood as prepared to work harder in order to overcome perceived gender bias among voters.
- **Chairs from both parties view black and Latinx candidates as significantly less viable than white candidates** – and the minority disadvantage is quite large. On average, chairs are about 10 percentage points less likely to see a candidate who is black or Latinx as the more likely of a pair of candidates to win a primary election, compared to their expectations for white candidates. By way of comparison, political scientists often define candidates as a being “high-quality contenders” if they have previously been elected to some other office. Experience is a highly desirable trait for a would-be candidate. Yet the “penalty” we found for a potential black or Latinx candidate is equal to about half the “bonus” assigned for political experience. In short, party chairs from both parties view black and Latinx candidates as substantially less appealing to their base – which may affect their willingness to recruit them. This substantial effect we found means that the perception that voters harbor non-trivial racial and ethnic biases are pervasive among chairs of both parties, not confined to only a few of those we included in our research.

We found no other readily apparent explanation for party chairs to downgrade the prospects of black or Latinx candidates. And we find little support for the notion that chairs use minority racial identity as a cue that potential candidates are more liberal or less likely to have desirable political experience or professional credentials. We do, however, find some evidence that the perceptions of Democratic chairs vary by context. For Republicans, the type of county they serve does not make any difference; but for Democratic county chairs, worries about potential minority candidates become less severe as the proportion of minority residents in the area increases. Nevertheless, potential minority candidates still face negative expectations among Democratic chairs in the vast majority of counties.

Although we cannot rule it out, we want to stress that our results do not show that party chairs or their voters *actually* harbor racial and ethnic biases. But we do find strong evidence that chairs from both parties believe their voters bases are less inclined to support minority than white candidates. Regardless of whether this perception is true, it probably influences the choices chairs make about recruitment and resource allocations. Given the key roles chairs play in attracting candidates, our results point to an important obstacle to increasing minority representation in the United States.

What Can be Done?

Unless party chairs are motivated to go beyond fielding the kinds of candidates they think can win right now, they may be reluctant to recruit and support more than token numbers of minority candidates. Corrective

reforms might be possible, however, such as programs to educate all chairs about the equal potential of minority candidates. If chairs learn to set aside biases, often unconsciously held, they may more actively recruit black and Latinx candidates – putting America on the road to more equal representation as such candidates win their share of electoral