

SHATTERING THE GLASS CEILING FOR WOMEN IN POLITICS

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The United States is a country of astonishing diversity, yet public offices continue to be overwhelmingly dominated by white men. Women are 51% of the population, but make up only 24% of state legislatures, 18% of Congress and big-city mayors, and 10% of state governors. Progress toward increasing women’s share of public offices has been slow and at times reversed. Women’s underrepresentation raises questions of justice and, according to available research, undermines the optimal functioning of democratic government. Female officeholders raise different issues, forge compromises more readily, and give voice to the needs of families and vulnerable groups in our society. Girls and women also yearn to see people like them in office, and underrepresentation of any group can make government and its actions seem less legitimate or “out of touch.” This brief draws on available research to suggest ways to boost women’s presence at all levels of government.

Slow Progress and Gender Gaps in Political Ambition

State legislative seats are a crucial place to look to chart women’s progress, because campaigns for national offices are often launched by such legislators. Since the mid-1990s, women have increased their share of state legislative seats by only three percentage points, going from 21% of state legislative seats in 1994 to 24% now. In 2010, moreover, women lost ground in state legislatures for the first time in decades. Term limits, once believed to give women more opportunity, ended up forcing previously elected women out of office. And additional women legislators were not elected in equal or greater numbers – in significant part because not so many women ran for office that year. The picture was brighter in 2012, with a record number of women elected to political office nationwide. Even so, at the current growth rate, gender parity in Congress will not be achieved for 500 years.

Some scholars point to a gender gap in political ambition as the most significant barrier to increasing the number of women in office. When equally qualified women and men are surveyed, women are much more unlikely to report wanting to run for office – even though when women do run, they win election at the same rates as male candidates. Overall, **the main problem is that not enough women are running. Based on what is known, there are three promising strategies to help turn that around.**

Ask Females to Run Early and Often

The earlier a candidate begins to run for office, the better are his or her chances of climbing the political ladder. Twelve of the last nineteen U.S. presidents started their political careers before age 35. When the path to achieve significant political influence and chair a committee is based on seniority, a candidate benefits from being elected when young. Additionally, over forty percent of the women who currently serve in Congress served in student government in their youth. However, one of us (Shauna Shames) finds that even those women who dominated

student government in high school turn away from politics in college; men also show more political ambition during graduate school. Girls and young women need to learn at a young age that politics is a good place for them to change the world. As Elizabeth Warren repeatedly told girls during her campaign, “I’m running for Senate, because that’s what girls do!”

As girls become women, they have to be encouraged repeatedly to run for office. On average, researchers have found, women need to be asked to run seven times before they seriously consider launching candidacies. Fortunately, many nonprofits are getting involved in helping girls and young women learn to lead and training them to run effective election campaigns.

A Presidential Commission on Gender and Inclusive Democracy

In no country have women reached equality without the help from the government. In our country, President John F. Kennedy’s Commission on the Status of Women in the 1960s helped spur the modern feminist movement and identified governmental actions that could alleviate discrimination against women. We suggest the same approach now, concentrating on women in elective and appointed politics.

A new presidential commission could take seriously the global rallying cry that democracy without women is not democracy. In our international dealings, we push governments to ensure participation by women, yet the United States ranks 81st in percentage of women serving in the national legislature. The racially and politically diverse membership of a new commission should include elected leaders and representatives of an array of organized groups seeking to increase the number of women in office. Drawing on growing bodies of research, the commission could document trends, opportunities, and obstacles and recommend new ways to encourage participation and office holding by women, people of color, and others currently under-represented at the city, county, state, and federal levels.

Stronger Action by Political Parties

Both major U.S. political parties already ensure that 50% of convention delegates are women, and both parties would gain by taking further steps to recruit and support women as candidates. Of course, it is far easier for the Democratic and Republican National Committees to mandate gender balance for delegates than for candidates and nominees in elections. But parties could still encourage and recruit women far more actively than they currently do.

National party officials could create target deadlines; for example, committing to have at least 30% of their candidates for national offices be women by 2020. Similarly, the national political parties could create funds to be dispersed to state and local parties that do a better job of recruiting and nominating diverse candidates. In Norway, for example, no more than 60% of corporate board members can come from one gender. U.S. political parties could use financial rewards to prod state and local parties toward similar patterns of candidate balance.

If more women are urged to run for office, we know that more will win and serve, making American democracy more representative and more effective. It is time for stronger efforts to break the gender glass ceiling in politics.

Research and data for this brief were drawn from ongoing research and publications by Marie Wilson, Georgia Duerst-Lahti, Jennifer Lawless and Richard Fox at the Center for American Women in Politics, and Sue Carroll, Jane Mansbridge, Swanee Hunt, Anne Phillips, and Sue Thomas.