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What the 123rd Congress Will Look Like: Examining the Gender Gap in Political Ambition of College Students

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The 117th Congress, which began in 2021, has a historic number of women serving; however, women still only make up 27% of the representatives. This is far below their 51% share of the population (Blazina & DeSilver, 2021). Even with such a great increase in female politicians at every level of government, there is not a single office where women have proportional representation. The highest percentage of female elected officials are state legislators, which were 29.3% female in 2020, again nowhere close to their share of the whole population (Center for American Women and Politics, 2021). Clearly, there is a large gender gap in elected officials that is found at every level of the government.

The goal of this project is to examine the gender gap in political ambition among college students. This study would extend upon the work done by Fox and Lawless (2012 & 2013), by seeing if there are differences between men's and women's political interest at a younger age, since that is when political opinions and career aspirations are at a crucial point. Starting with the 2012 report "Men Rule", which looked at men and women in careers that often yield politicians, such as law, business, education, and political activism, and their political ambition. They found that men were 16% more likely to be interested in running for office than women. Through that, they identified seven key factors that were restricting women from running for office - Perceptions of the Electoral Field, Gender Bias in Previous Elections, Perceived Qualifications, Personality Traits, Aspects of Modern Campaigning, Recommendations to Run for Office, and Familial/Personal Responsibilities. In each of these areas, they found significant gender gaps that explain the lack of female elected officials (Fox & Lawless, 2012). This was followed up by an

examination of college students in the 2013 report "Girls Just Don't Want to Run". Again, they found a significant gender gap, 20%, in the desire to run for office in the future, showing that this is not an issue that will be going away any time soon. Similarly, they focused on five reasons that could attempt to explain this gap – Socialization, Media Habits, Playing Organized Sports, Encouragement to Run for Office, and Perceived Qualifications (Fox & Lawless, 2013).

There have been several important changes regarding women in politics over the past couple of years that warranted another look to see if there is a change in political ambition among female college students. First, the monumental moves forward for female politicians in recent years, most notably Hillary Clinton becoming the first female candidate for president from a major political party in 2016 and Kamala Harris being elected as the first female Vice President in 2020. These moments have been impactful on women around the country, who now see people who look like them in the political arena; as it has been shown that when women see competitive female elected officials and candidates in their areas, become more politically engaged (Atkeson, 2003). Second is the shift in the political climate in the past five years. Following the 2016 election of Donald Trump as President, there have been historical levels of women running for office, known as the "Trump Effect" (Lawless & Fox, 2018). The roots of female involvement and engagement in this climate come primarily from the #MeToo movement, the 2017 Women's March, and the Trump administration's proposed legislation and policies. In the following midterm election in 2018, a record-breaking 118 women held voting positions in the House of Representatives and Senate (Gaudiano, 2018). More recently, there has been a very positive light shown on female politicians in their handling of the coronavirus pandemic. Researchers have found that states with female governors who took measures had fewer deaths due to the pandemic and in general handled the crisis better (Sergent & Stajkovic, 2020). These types of extraordinary circumstances and

events, particularly where women are shown as successful leaders, tend to increase female candidates and improve their electoral prospects (Piazza & Diaz, 2020). To truly understand political ambition and the factors that impact it, it is necessary to re-examine the college students with these new considerations in mind. Leading to the overarching question leading this research: *Is there a difference in the political ambition to run for office in college-aged men and women?* (RQ1).

Literature Review

Gendered Political Ambition

There has been a great deal of research into the gender gap in political ambition and elected officials, particularly in the past ten to fifteen years. However, very little of that has focused on people under the age of 30 and even less on college students. What has been found is that traditional reasoning for the lack of women in elected office – familial obligations, socialization, career paths, and voter bias – no longer have a strong impact on women's decision to run for office (Fox & Lawless, 2004). Women today are more likely to focus on their qualifications, the electoral climate in their district, outside encouragement (such as recommendations and support from party leaders or other political authorities), and the actual components of running a campaign (Fox & Lawless, 2010; Smith, 2006; Fox & Lawless, 2012). As female candidates have become more common, the conversation around this gender gap has changed drastically. This shift from institutional explanations to personal explanations does not remove gender from the conversation about political ambition. However, it should encourage deeper research and investigation. Fox and Oxley put it this way "the beliefs of earlier decades that women are not suited for politics have been replaced by more subtle stereotypes whereby men and women are perceived to have specific

personality traits and policy competencies" (Fox & Oxley, 2003, pg. 847). This means there must be a more specific and nuanced look at not only if, but why, women are not running for office as often as similarly situated men.

Therefore, I argue that *women will have less desire to run for office, no matter which level of government* (H1). Even after the current changes in the system, there still seems to be enough barriers to women entering the electoral field, particularly those higher federal-level positions, and it does not seem that college women will have any differing opinions, compared to other women. Speaking of barriers, many barriers have been theorized to be central to the idea that women don't run for office. From family to career to personal attacks to financial risk to simply not wanting to be a politician, individuals might have certain concerns that restrict them from running for office, often stemming from gendered socialization. This leads to the next hypothesis that *men and women will have different reasons for not wanting to pursue political offices* (H2). If their reasons for not running are significantly different, this could explain the gender gap for this group and could add to the understanding of the gap in general.

Qualifications and Personality

Since the research has shifted away from the more general, society-based explanations of the gender gap, it has moved towards individual-based explanations based on their qualifications, or perceptions of those qualifications, and personality traits. Men are more likely to believe they are "very qualified" for office, twice as likely as similarly situated women (Fox & Lawless, 2010). Even women who are highly successful in their professional careers are not confident that they have the qualifications for office, which is likely a large contributor to the gender gap. A majority of the research looking at qualifications focuses on careers that are pipelines to politics, like

business or law, but there has been some study on more ordinary Americans and their ideas about running for office. They found the same gender gaps in beliefs about qualifications, and men's tendency to think they are more qualified than women (Crowder-Meyer, 2018).

However, qualifications are not the only part of running for office, there are also the campaign duties. People's comfort with these duties and activities will play a large part in whether they want to run for office. Since previous cases have shown that men who believe they are qualified for office were also comfortable and confident in their abilities to run a successful political campaign, it is proposed that *men will consider themselves to be more comfortable with the aspects related to running for office* (H3). The gender gap could be a result of women's dislike or discomfort with the aspects of modern campaigning which will be tested through this hypothesis on college students.

Beyond qualifications and comfort with campaign duties, there is also considerable study around personality traits and how that can translate to political ambition. Within those who ran and were elected to local offices, there were certain types of personality traits that were common among these officials. These officials were more likely to be extraverted, less focused on social harmony or being agreeable, and more open to new experiences (Dynes et al, 2018). These are traits that are more often associated with men than with women, and even if women have these traits, may be looked down upon for attempting to be more masculine. These personality traits can also impact what individuals might think about running a campaign at all. Campaigns are huge risks, not just financially, but also professionally, personally, and can have a large impact on the candidate's image. Since men and women tend to have different aversions to risk, this can be an element that adds to the gap in running for office (Sweet-Cushman, 2016). The high competitiveness of elections also impacts men and women differently, acting as a strong negative

factor for women while having no impact on men (Preece & Stoddard, 2015). Women also tend to avoid social comparison and have negative opinions and a dislike of the actual elements required of a political campaign (Kanthak & Woon, 2014), as found by previous research.

Overall, what can be shown is men and women have different journeys to running for office, never mind actually winning the positions. Men tend to believe they are more qualified, both professionally and personally, and women tend to rely on relational connections and encouragement. Smith said it well when they said "women are motivated to consider running for office by the potential that they may bring something different to the table by participating", while men are simply concerned over whether they are capable and well-suited to the office (Smith, 2006, pg. 20). These studies were done on adults, and mainly older, educated, politically active adults, so looking at college students could change that conversation. Seeing how they view their qualifications, personalities, and hesitancy towards risk in connection with political roles, as well as their overall opinions of the aspects of campaigning, will give more insight into what is sustaining this gender gap.

Political Activity and Social Media

Political activity, also known as political participation or engagement, is crucial to understanding the gender gap in politics and much of the research surrounding the ambition gap looks at all the steps leading up to running for office. From interest in politics, to what their current activity is, to how recruitment efforts can help, each step is vital to understanding where that gender gap appears and what can be done to fix it. There are many levels of political activity, from low involvement like putting a sign in a yard, signing a petition, or posting political material on social media to higher involvement acts like working on a campaign or running for office yourself. Since

running for office is often considered the highest form of political activity, it would make sense that *students who have more political knowledge and are more politically active will be more likely to run for office in the future* (H4).

While social media may be a newer piece to the political activity puzzle, its influence should not be underestimated. In the United States alone, there are over 223 million social media users, which is nearly two-thirds of the people in the country (Tankovska, 2021). Political social media has often been thought of as "slacktivism", the idea that just consuming information on and posting about issues counts as activism and therefore removes any further offline activity. However, this has been debunked by much of the new research (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020; Kwak et al. 2018) and there is even research showing there is a positive correlation between social media and offline political activity (Boulianne, 2015). Current social media trends demonstrate that social media is its own type of political activity (Bode, 2017; Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020). It often goes further than just suggesting that it is a valid type of political activity, but that "those who engage in low-threshold acts of political expression on social media are more likely to subsequently take part in higher-threshold offline political activity" (Kwak et al. 2018, pg. 214). Online political activity is a gateway to larger offline political activity, which is a change from what had been seen in the past and could drastically impact how our politics are shaped. Additionally, online support for candidates can translate to offline support for them, predicting support even better than some polling methods (DiGrazia et al, 2013). All of this leads to the hypothesis that *those participants who are active on social media regarding politics will be more likely to run for office in the future* (H5).

Looking at how this impacts the gender gap yields some unclear results. While much of the social media based political activity shows no gender difference at all (Bode, 2017), that does

not hold in traditional types of political activity. According to the Center for Women and Politics (CAWP), women have higher levels of political activity, particularly in their turnout rates to vote and their attendance at demonstrations and protests (Gothreau, 2020). This makes the gap in running for office even more interesting, as women tend to be more politically active than men until except for at the highest level. This study attempts to see if there are differences in this trend in younger generations and if social media plays an important role in their political activity.

Media Representation of Women in Politics

The gender gap is the strongest when looking at how the media portrays women, particularly female candidates. This was apparent with Sarah Palin in 2008 and Hillary Clinton in 2008 and 2016, but it was demonstrated best with the six women who were candidates for president in 2020. While women were getting the most media attention, it was significantly more likely to be negative and based on their identity or character, rather than on their candidacy. There was more focus on their scandals and electability, even if their male counterparts had just as many concerns (Haynes, 2019). This type of negative media is much harder for women to overcome than men, as it activates stereotypes and sexist beliefs in viewers (Schlehofer et al. 2011; Hayes et al, 2014). These superficial considerations have a large impact on voter's opinions, even in today's political climate. There is also more of a focus on their families, fashion, and private life, far more than with male candidates, that objectifies them (Holtz-Bacha, 2013). It is not always blatant acts, like asking who will be watching their children, but even subtle ones, that can cause this effect. Looking at the 2020 Democratic primary there are a lot of examples of the more subtle gendered acts, like calling Senator Kamala Harris by only her first name but calling Senator Bernie Sanders by his title and name, even though Harris was also a senator. This repeated objectification affects the perceived credibility of female candidates and makes the public believe that the electoral

system is more hostile for women (Funk & Coker, 2016). All of this research leads to the hypothesis that *both men and women will consider the political arena hostile to women* (H6). The media can be a powerful influence on people and this can cause people to have a perception that the field is biased, competitive, and hostile to women. Which can be a huge barrier to women running for office, and be a way to explain the gender gap in ambition.

However, female candidates often run into a double bind with this media coverage. If they act feminine, they will receive more coverage on their familial responsibilities and appearances and therefore be rejected as not for the political sphere. If they act masculine, they will be rejected as trying too hard to be like the male candidates and will raise questions about their viability as a candidate (Holtz-Bacha, 2013). As Senator Elizabeth Warren said during the 2020 primaries "if you complain about it, then you are whining… And if you don't complain about it, the rest of the women think, 'what planet are you living on?' And so, you get caught in between the two" (Hunt, 2020). There is much more pressure for women to get positive coverage in general, much less coverage that is focused on their policies. This negative type of coverage also does not come from candidates and their campaign teams, but from the media companies themselves and tends to paint women as 'out of touch' with politics no matter how they represent themselves (Niven & Zilber, 2001). Getting media coverage is a vital part of campaigns and getting more women elected into office, but when other women see the treatment female candidates are receiving it could make them reconsider whether they want to run at all. Ultimately, this is adding to that gender gap and could be a significant barrier that needs to be overcome in the journey towards political equality. The research being conducted here seeks to determine if college students still see these gendered media coverages and whether it impacts how they see the political races in their own districts. The effects and depth were examined through a series of factors, such as the competitiveness of races,

if students see people like them running for office, whether women receive similar attention as men, and how the media treated male and female candidates.

Method

Participants

This study had 349 participants (188 women and 161 men). In addition, there were 34 surveys that were partially completed and therefore excluded from analysis. The recruitment took place in the introductory communication course, COMM 1000, which fulfills a General Education requirement and draws broadly from the University of Connecticut's undergraduate population, typically enrolling students in their first or second year. Students self-selected to take part in the research and those who participated were awarded course credit for their participation in this study.

Their ages ranged from 18 to 27 with a mean age of 19. When asked what year they were in school, 43.4% said they were first-year students, 35.4% were second-years, 9.4% were third-years, and 11.7% were seniors. Looking at the racial background, the majority were white (64.3%) and Asian (22%), with the remaining participants reporting being Hispanic or Latinx (5.7%), black (4.9%), Pacific Islander (.3%), and 2.9% identified as another race.

The participants did tend to lean more liberal (16.9% very liberal, 28% slightly liberal) than conservative (18.3% slightly conservative, 3.4% very conservative) while 21.7% reported being moderate, and 11% were unsure. A majority of the participants, 41.8%, aligned most with the Democratic party, with an additional 25.5% identifying as Independent, 17.4% aligned with the Republican party, 2.3% identified with another party, and 13% were unsure of their party alignment.

Procedure

The survey was administered online through the University's Qualtrics site. Participants were informed that this research was investigating "your perceptions of running for political office, your understanding of the campaign process, your personal political activity, and your likelihood to run for political office in the future" and would take about fifteen minutes of their time. After obtaining consent from the participants, they completed the survey. It consisted of 66 questions, seven of which were demographic questions. The rest of the questions were broken down into the categories of Current Political Activity (10 questions), Social Media (6 questions), Perceptions of the Electoral Field (15 questions), Personality Traits and Qualifications (22 questions), and Running for Office (6 questions).

Results

Hypothesis 1

Looking at whether women were less likely to want to run for office in the future, there were some surprising results. This study found that women were more likely than men to want to run for office in the future, rejecting the hypothesis (H1) and going against much of the previous research. Of the female participants 81% said that they plan on running for office at some point, while only 69.6% of the male participants had those same plans. In addition, 9.6% of women said maybe they would run for office and 15.5% of men responded with maybe. That means that nearly 90% of the women were open to running for office at some point in their lives, which is a very exciting statistic that shows hope for the eventual end of the gender gap (see figure 1). Even looking generally at both men and women, 87.7% of participants said they were interested in running for office in the future. Again, this is a staggering percentage that shows hope for the

electoral system as a whole having energized and passionate individuals who want to run for office. While running for office may be something that is far off for college students, these participants, in particular the women, seem to have already thought about it and put it in their plans for the future.
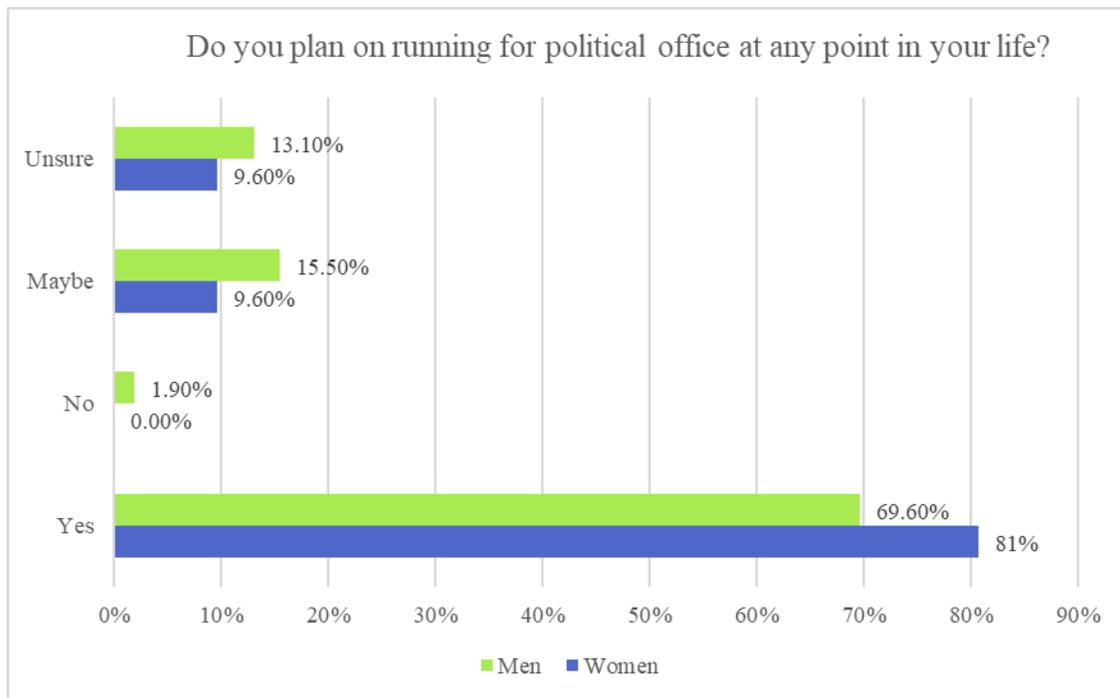

Figure 1. Bar graph showing answers to if students planned on running for office (Question 38).

In order to test the hypothesis that, at each individual level of elected office, women would be less likely to run, *t*-tests were performed. At the local level, this was found to be false and there was little difference $t(345) = -1.43$, $p = .154$ between men (M = 2.16, SD = .93) and women (M = 2.03, SD = .88). At the state level, this was found to be true and there was a significant difference between how men (M = 1.86, SD = .96) and women (M = 1.65, SD = .89) ran for offices, $t(347) = -2.16$, $p = .031$. When examining the federal level, it was also found to be true $t(346) = -3.65$, $p < .001$, showing the difference in running for men (M = 1.89, SD = 1.59) and women (M = 1.53, SD = .78).
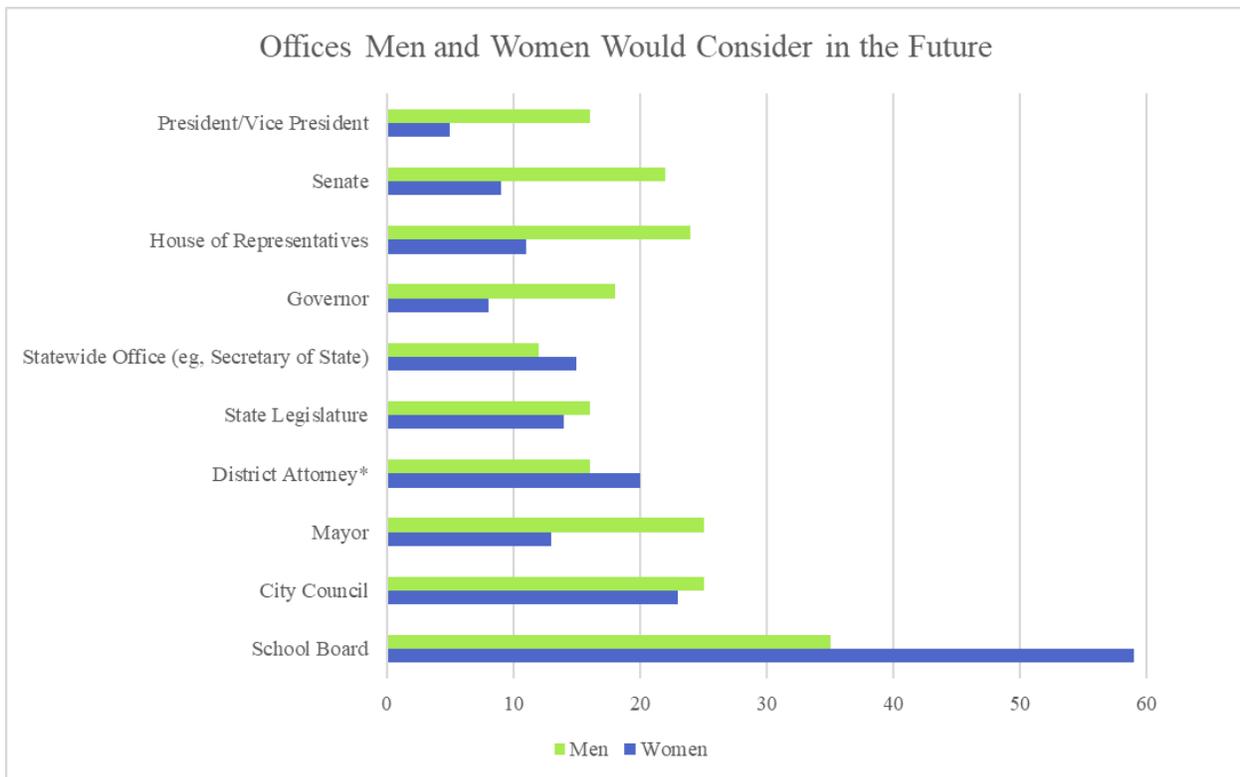
Figure 2. Bar Graph showing offices men and women would consider running for in the future. (Questions 40-42) *District Attorney requires a JD degree, so that office is not available to everyone and may affect the number of participants who selected it.

Therefore, the hypothesis that women are less likely to run no matter what level of office is incorrect. While the majority of offices men were more likely to want to run, there were exceptions, proving that the level of office is important in examining the gender gap. Women more likely to consider running for School Board, District Attorney, and Statewide Executive Offices (like Secretary of State) (see figure 2). They were also slightly more likely to want to run for local offices than men, but men still were much more likely to say they want to run for state and federal offices. As well as the fact that overall, women were more likely to want to run for office in general. Recent trends have shown that the offices with the best gender parity are local positions and state offices, so this data supports that trend.

Hypothesis 2

To test the hypothesis that men and women have different barriers to running for office, several t-tests were completed, as seen in table 1 below. This data shows that men and women do have different barriers to running for office (H2), which means that the hypothesis is accepted.

Table 1

Question	Women	Men	df	t	p
I have no interest in politics	M = 2.66 SD = 1.54	M = 2.89 SD = 1.49	347	-1.40	.162
I have other career aspirations	M = 1.62 SD = .93	M = 1.84 SD = 1.07	347	-2.08	.038*
I have familial responsibilities	M = 2.32 SD = 1.25	M = 2.72 SD = 1.25	345	-2.91	.004*
I am not (and will not be) qualified	M = 2.29 SD = 1.26	M = 2.85 SD = 1.34	347	-4.04	<.001*
The political arena is too competitive	M = 2.32 SD = 1.15	M = 2.76 SD = 1.31	345	-3.39	.001*
I do not want to be exposed to political criticism	M = 2.14 SD = 1.17	M = 2.91 SD = 1.29	347	-5.87	<.001*
I do not want to be exposed to personal criticism	M = 1.91 SD = 1.02	M = 2.78 SD = 1.31	347	-6.89	<.001*
I do not believe that I could make a change	M = 3.37 SD = 1.35	M = 3.50 SD = 1.19	347	-0.91	.366
It is too large of a financial risk	M = 2.56 SD = 1.27	M = 2.72 SD = 1.23	346	-1.15	.250
I do not understand the electoral system well enough	M = 2.41 SD = 1.36	M = 3.15 SD = 1.33	346	-5.07	<.001*
If I ran, I do not think I would be able to win	M = 2.53 SD = 1.27	M = 2.95 SD = 1.27	346	-3.04	.003*
The aspects of modern elections are unappealing	M = 2.30 SD = 1.18	M = 2.55 SD = 1.21	346	-1.93	.055
My friends and family would not approve of me running for office	M = 3.66 SD = 1.36	M = 3.72 SD = 1.26	347	-0.39	.694

*Statistical significance at the 5% level

While the top two reasons for not running for office are the same for both men and women, after that there is not much similarity (see figure 3). The two largest barriers to running for office are important to focus on since they are influential to over half of the participants. 57% of all

participants, 59% of women and 55% of men, are concerned about running for office because they believe their friends and family would not approve of them running. This is a huge barrier that must be addressed, not only to work towards narrowing the gender gap but keeping younger people interested in running for office in the future. The next largest barrier was the idea that participants did not believe they could make a change, even if elected, which 52% of participants agreed or strongly agreed with. This is concerning because if people are not passionate and excited about politics, they are less likely to want to run for office at all. When examining the gender differences, women are more likely to simply not be interested in politics or to be averse to the high financial risk of a campaign, whereas men are more likely to not understand the electoral system or to not believe that they could win. This information helps to shed light on what could be the reasons for
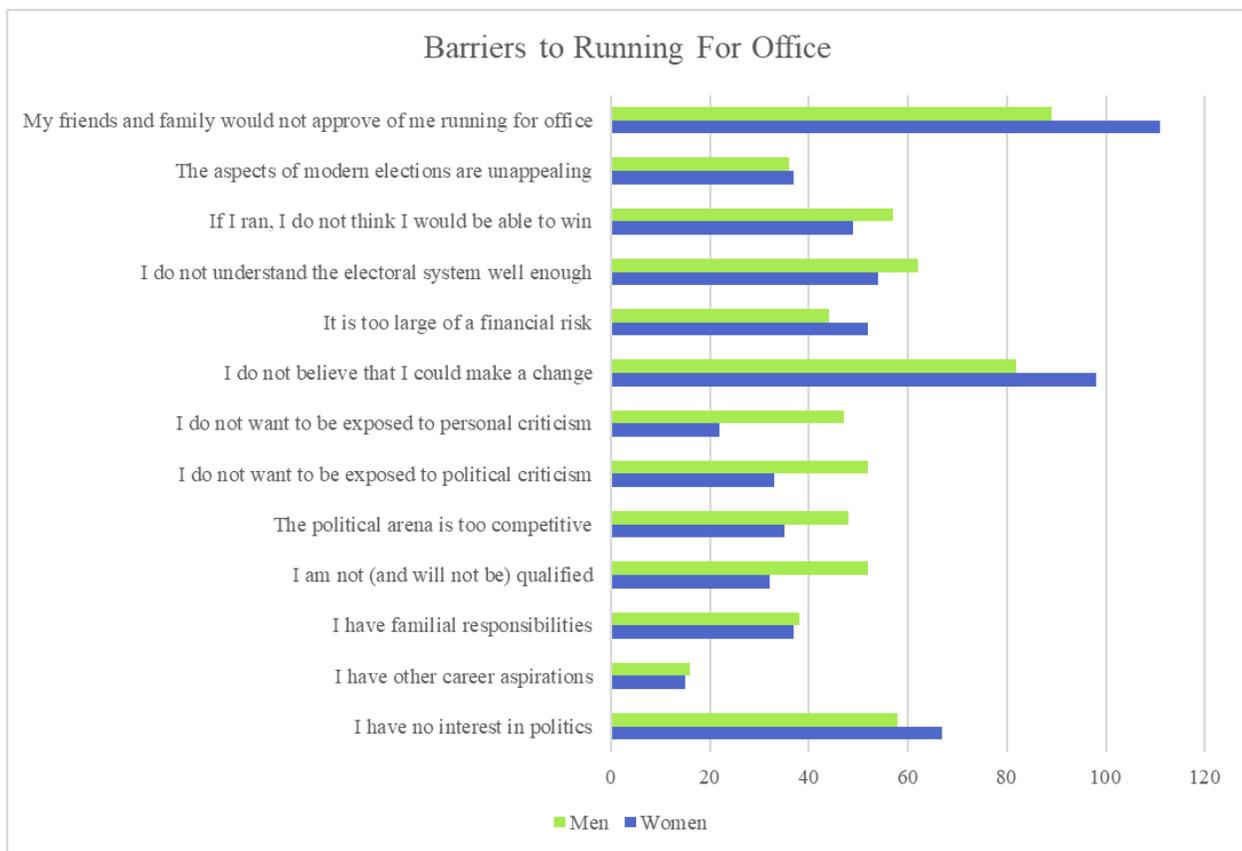

Figure 3. Bar graph showing the barriers to running for office for men and women (Question 39)

the gender gap in the future and therefore how it can be combated before it can affect the potential

candidates. Again, it is important to keep in mind that, as college students, these participants are

likely quite far off from running for office. So, while familial responsibilities and career aspirations

may not be large factors for them today, they may grow in importance as they begin families and

enter the workforce.

Hypothesis 3

The modern campaign looks drastically different than it did even just ten years ago, and it

can be challenging for even current elected officials to deal with. Therefore, it seemed important

to gauge whether college-aged students were turned off from running for office because of the

intense campaigning that is required. In order to look at this hypothesis (H3), which was ultimately

rejected, three areas were examined: types of activities required by campaigns, their comfort with

responsibilities given to both officeholders and candidates, and the personality qualities that might

make them more likely to run.

Looking first to the types of activities required by campaigns, a *t*-test was run to test if men

would be more comfortable in these activities. There was found to be a significant difference in

how men (M = 2.39, SD = .41) and women (M = 2.52, SD = .39) feel in these roles, $t(342) = 2.89$,

$p = .004$, however, it was not in the way expected. Women were actually the ones saying that these

activities would make them more likely to run for office, at higher rates than men. If women feel

interested and confident in doing these activities, that would be good news for the gender gap as a

whole, because that would mean they would be more likely to run in the future.

Next, looking at the comfort with the duties of a candidate and elected official, another *t*-

test was run. There was found to be no statistically significant difference in the comfort felt in

these roles by men (M = 2.74, SD = .84) and women (M = 2.89, SD = .89), $t(347) = 1.56$, $p = .118$. In general, men and women both did not feel comfortable with these activities, but there were some exceptions. For both men and women, more participants said they were somewhat comfortable or extremely comfortable with regular public speaking than said they were somewhat uncomfortable or extremely uncomfortable. By an even smaller margin, slightly more women were comfortable with having to solicit funds for their campaign than those who were uncomfortable. This could have to do with the fact that the participants are college students, younger students too, and therefore have not had much experience, particularly from work settings, with these activities or similar ones. They have an interest in doing these activities; however, so it is likely that with more experience, their comfort will increase. There did not seem to be any substantial gender differences though, and that again shows hope for narrowing gender gap.

Finally, examining how personality traits are factored into the decision to run for office, the hypothesis is also found to be incorrect. Between men (M = 3.79, SD = .69) and women (M = 3.68, SD = .59), there was no significant difference in the key personality traits that signal likelihood to run for office $t(345) = -1.577$, $p = .116$. For the most part, men and women reported these personality traits at nearly identical rates, with only one real exception. Of the women, 90% reported that they believed themselves to be competent, while only 77% of men did. This is a trait that will fluctuate often throughout life but, intriguingly, women believe they are competent at a much higher level than men.

Overall, this hypothesis (H3) that men will be more comfortable with campaigning has been rejected. Women and men were either nearly identical in their responses to these questions or women were more comfortable with the activities and reported having more of the traits. This shows even further great news for the gender gap, as women become more confident and

comfortable with themselves and their ability to be a candidate, combined with a desire to run for office, there is hope that those women will run for office.

Hypothesis 4

Seeing as running for office is often thought of as the highest form of political activity, it was predicted that participants who had higher levels would be more likely to run for office (H4). Several tests were done to test this, starting with a one-way ANOVA, using desire to run for office as the independent variable (No: $M = 2.17$, $SD = .28$; Yes: $M = 3.58$, $SD = .51$; Maybe: $M = 2.95$, $SD = .84$; Unsure: $M = 3.43$, $SD = .59$) and the dependent variable being likelihood to vote in the next local, state, and federal elections. It was found that there was not a significant effect of likelihood to vote in the next elections at the $p < .05$ level for the desire to run for office in the future [$F(3, 344) = 1.069$, $p = .362$]. Voting is a relatively low-level political activity, which has now been shown not to have large impacts on the likelihood to run for office in the future. In the past, there has been a large push towards getting potential candidates involved in political activity, but this has shown for younger people that may not necessarily increase their desire to run for office.

When looking at these results shown in table 2, two activities were found to be statistically significant. The first is volunteering for a campaign, $X^2(9, N = 348) = 51.19$, $p < .001$, and the second is donating to a campaign or Political Action Committee, PAC, $X^2(9, N = 348) = 59.46$, $p < .001$. These are much higher-level political activities, as it takes much more knowledge, interest, and commitment to donate your time and money to an organization or candidate than to register to vote. Likely, those participants who are doing those activities are already more politically involved and therefore have more of a desire to run for office but they may also find the desire to run through those activities as well. Many of the respondents said they were planning on running

for office without having done these activities, so these activities may not be the key to getting

people to run, as was previously thought.

Table 2

Questions	No	Yes	Maybe	Unsure	Total
Registered to vote					
No	2	227	31	29	289
Yes	1	33	11	9	54
Unsure	0	3	1	1	5
Total:	3	263	43	39	348
Voted in 2020					
No	3	207	30	27	267
Yes	0	55	13	12	80
Total:	3	262	43	39	347
Volunteered for a campaign					
No, and would not consider in the future	0	3	6	0	9
No, but would consider it in the future	1	11	3	2	17
Yes, but not in the last election	2	86	24	20	132
Yes, in the last election	0	163	10	17	190
Total:	3	263	43	39	348
Donated to campaign or PAC					
No, and would not consider in the future	2	4	6	2	14
No, but would consider it in the future	0	2	3	1	6
Yes, but not in the last election	1	90	18	12	121
Yes, in the last election	0	167	16	24	207
Total:	3	263	43	39	348
Know who *local* representatives are					
Yes	1	111	22	16	150
No	2	100	10	14	126
Unsure	0	52	11	9	72
Total:	3	263	43	39	348
Know who *state* representatives are					
Yes	0	113	23	15	151
No	2	105	15	11	133
Unsure	1	45	5	13	64
Total:	3	263	43	39	348
Know who *federal* representatives are					
Yes	3	158	28	24	213
No	0	79	9	9	97
Unsure	0	26	6	6	38
Total:	3	263	43	39	348

Hypothesis 5

After looking at general political activity, I narrowed the focus down to political social media activity. This hypothesis (H5) also asserted that those who are active politically on social media will be more likely to run for office in the future. Starting with examining the one-way ANOVA test that was performed, comparing how often the participants and others post politically on social media and the importance of that. The independent variable in this test was the desire to run for office (No: M = 3.33, SD = .00; Yes: M = 3.36, SD = .75; Maybe: M = 3.00 SD = .72; Unsure: M = 3.04, SD = .69) and the dependent variable was made up of three questions about the importance and frequency of social media posts ("How often do you share political posts", "How important is it to you that the politicians you support regularly use social media?", and "How often do the politicians you support post on social media?"). It was found to be significant at the $p < .05$ level on the desire to run for office in the future [F (3, 342) = 4.54, p = .004]. As the previous research had shown, political social media is political activity in its own right and this data shows how it may be even more important to those who might want to run for office than traditional types of activity, like voting.

Next, a set of chi-square analyses were done looking at the type of social media accounts followed by the participants and how that impacted their desire to run for office. Looking at political, non-candidate social media accounts there was a significant relationship to the desire to run for office, X^2(6, N = 348) = 22.06, p = .001, meaning that those who follow this type of accounts differ significantly in their desire to run for office than those who do not. For political candidates' social media accounts there was also a significant relationship found X^2(6, N = 348) = 16.04, p = .014, therefore there is a difference in political ambition between those who do and do not follow these candidate accounts. Even when looking at their current elected official's social

media accounts, the significant relationship was found X^2(6, N = 347) = 31.82, *p* < .001, so those who do follow their current elected officials significantly differ in their political ambition. Overall, that goes to show the important role that social media plays in the political world today, not just to constituents and voters but also to those who are considering candidacy in the future. It could be a place where organizations can reach out to potential candidates, get them interested in running, or just promote the goal of gender parity in office in general.

Hypothesis 6

The perception of the electoral field plays a large role in many people's journey to running for office, and its influence spreads over the entire public as well. Looking at the hypothesis that both men and women will see the political arena as hostile towards women (H6), this was rejected. After running an independent *t*-test with men (M = 3.16, SD = .61) and women (M = 2.99, SD = .69) as the predictor variable and the outcome variable being their opinions on their own congressional district's candidates and competitiveness, there was a statistically significant difference in how men and women felt about their district, *t*(342) = -2.34, *p* = .020. While both men and women did perceive the electoral field as not particularly fair, women thought this at much higher levels. When asked if "women running for office win as often as similarly qualified men", 66% of women said they disagreed or strongly disagreed, as opposed to 46% of men. Even if the female candidates in their district are winning as often as similarly qualified men, the fact that women do not see that has an impact on the gender gap. These negative perceptions of the electoral field suppress potential female candidates and make it more difficult for women to gain gender parity in politics.

Another *t*-test was conducted with the outcome variable being their opinions on the Presidential election of 2020, the media coverage, and the candidates and the predictor variables as men (M= 2.97, SD = .54) and women (M = 3.28, SD = .47). The results again demonstrated a difference in opinion on this topic, $t(341) = 5.721$, $p < .001$, further proving the hypothesis to be incorrect. The 2020 election uncovered many strong differences in men's and women's perceptions of the electoral arena, with over twice as many women saying that too much focus was paid on the female candidate's appearance being the largest gap. Men were about half as likely to say that the female candidates received sexist media, were critiqued more harshly than the male candidates, and were asked gender-specific questions. 34% of women responded that female candidates received less media time than male candidates while 36% of men thought that men and women had equal media attention. These results shine a spotlight on what may be sustaining the gender gap, the negative perceptions from women and men but from women to a much stronger degree. When women are seeing a serious problem with the inequality of men and women in the electoral field, but men do not, this can feed further into gender stereotypes and activate more sexist beliefs. Which in turn, creates more negative media and perceptions and turns this into a vicious cycle keeping the political gender gap in place as it has been for the past few decades.

Conclusion

This study aimed to get a deeper understanding of the gender gap in political ambition for college-aged men and women, to see if it still exists and the other circumstances that might exist around it. I found some incredibly surprising results. Not only were women more likely to want to run for office, and local offices specifically, but they were also more likely to feel comfortable and interested in campaign duties. Women were more likely to see the electoral arena as hostile towards women, but clearly, that has not stopped them from wanting to run for office. That data is

promising news as we look to the future and hope to one day see the end of the gender gap. It is important to recognize that this was just a small sample of one university, so there could be great variation around the country but it is nonetheless an exciting addition to the current research. Looking more generally at how college students view the electoral system and politics, there were also unexpected results. Political activity did not have a significant relationship with the desire to run for office until you got into the more involved levels of activity. This was also thought to be a great predictor of who would want to run for office, but in this case, it just does not hold up. Social media, however, does have a significant relationship with wanting to run for office. Since this is such a new part of the political landscape, it absolutely deserves to be studied further and watched to see if that social media activity ends up being related to who actually runs for office in the future. All of these factors are just small parts of the actual act of running for office, so they may not be able to show the entire picture of political ambition, but it definitely does highlight what today's college students think about the political arena. Especially in 2021, after a long year of heated political discussion and debate, it is a good measure of what that does to motivate students to want to pursue office in the future. This research shows what the future of the gender gap could look like and how what we, as a society, do in the next decade, will determine what the 123rd Congress will look like.

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