

# New research debunks the family myth as primary reason for gender gap in politics

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Female candidates for elected office do as well as male candidates in terms of raising money and winning votes, so why do women only occupy 19 percent of congressional seats and approximately 25 percent of statewide offices and hold fewer governorships and mayorships? The traditional wisdom has been family obligations and responsibilities prevent women from running for office.

"But in none of the [scholarly research](#) where scholars attempt to establish a link between [family](#) roles and political ambition did traditional family arrangements prevent women from eventually running for office," says American University's professor of government and director of the Women & Politics Institute Jennifer Lawless. In her new Brookings Institution report, *It's the Family, Stupid? Not Quite. . . How Traditional Gender Roles Do Not Affect Women's Political Ambition*, Lawless debunks the widely touted myth that traditional family structures and roles contribute to women's lower political ambition.

## Impediments for Women Running for Office

Lawless found in her research that the significant impediments women face are a lack of political recruitment and lower self-perceptions of their qualifications. With Richard Fox (Loyola Marymount University), she conducted a national survey of a random sample of nearly 4,000 equally credentialed men and women who are well positioned to serve as future candidates for all elected office.

The results revealed that women are:

- less likely than similarly situated men to consider running for elected office,
- less likely to actually run for office,
- less likely to receive encouragement to run for office, and
- less likely to believe they are qualified to seek elective office.

The data revealed a 17 percentage point gender gap in political ambition. "In other words, men are 40 percent more likely than women ever to have considered running for office," says Lawless. "The ambition gap is all the more striking," says Lawless, "given that the women and men in the sample are similarly situated professionally and have comparable educational credentials, incomes, and levels of political interest."

But Lawless' research revealed that women and mothers are no less likely than single women or those without children to have considered running for office. Therefore, childcare, household tasks and other domestic burdens do not serve as the linchpins on whether to run for elected office. What are the key factors preventing women from running for elected office?

## **Political Gatekeepers**

Lawless found political recruitment to be a significant factor. Party leaders, elected officials, and non-elected political activists are far more likely to tap men to run as opposed to women. More specifically, 49 percent of men receive the suggestion to run for office from electoral gatekeepers versus 39 percent of women.

## **Self-Perception**

Self-perception also plays a critical determining factor. Men in the sample were 60 percent more likely than women to consider themselves "very qualified" to seek elected office. Women on the other hand were twice as likely as men to say they are not at all qualified to run for office.

## **Women Who Run for Office, Manage Work and Family Responsibilities**

Women who have bridged the gender gap in winning political office acknowledge the balancing act between career, family, and political ambition. Lawless' national surveys show that, among potential candidates, women are roughly six times more likely than men to bear responsibility for the majority of household tasks and about 10 times more likely than men to be the primary child care provider. "The work-life balance has become such a regular part of their daily routine that women's family dynamics do not discourage them from thinking about or embarking on a political career."

The struggle to balance family roles with professional responsibility has become part of the bargain says Lawless. "Women have substantial professional demands that they must balance with family considerations, but they have become accustomed to doing so."

Further research needs to be done on why women are not more actively recruited to run for political office in addition to what can be done to correct the negative perceptions women have of their qualifications to run for office. Lawless says, "Putting the family myth to bed is an important step to correcting the real reasons for the imbalance in representation of [women](#) in politics."

Provided by American University

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