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The Decision to Run:
The Stories of Women in the Minnesota Legislature*

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Abstract

The underrepresented status of women in legislative positions is an entrenched flaw in the American political system. Although past research has investigated the obvious gender gap, the spotlight has recently shifted toward the preliminary factors affecting a candidate's political ambition. It has been noted that women have little aspiration to run for office, and are unlikely to even consider themselves as viable candidates. Encouragement offered by political parties and external supporters such as family, friends, coworkers, and community organizations plays a vital role in creating a female candidate. This paper evaluates the impact of outside forces on the female candidate image and how those factors influence women's final decisions to run for office. I interview female legislators in St. Paul, Minnesota, and uncover the motivations for and obstacles to their candidacies. I analyze the themes that emerge from their narratives and share their collective stories as women legislators. With the 2006 elections, Minnesota now boasts the third highest proportion of female legislators in the nation, comprising 34.8% of the legislature. The personal experiences of these women may serve as a recipe to future gender parity in state legislatures and Congress.

The underrepresented status of women in political office poses a threat to the American ideal of equal representation. Particularly at the state level, however, women have advanced in legislative positions; nonetheless, they still occupy a subordinate role at both the state and federal levels of government. Women currently hold 23.5% of state legislative seats and comprise 16.3% of the 110th U.S. Congress (CAWP, 2007). The gender disparity that prevails in American politics points to the stark inequalities that hinder the emergence of women into the political realm.

In recent years the gender gap in politics has received increased attention in academic studies and research. The literature on women in politics has evolved with the expansion of the academic field; in the late 1980s and early 1990s, for example, campaign literature focused on opportunities within the campaign cycle, including campaign finance opportunities and the perceptions of the electorate (Uhlener and Schlozman, 1986; Selzer, Newman, and Leighton, 1997; Darcy, Welch, and Clark, 1994). In contrast, the current research has shifted to address the preliminary decisions that inspire a woman's candidacy (Lawless and Fox, 2005; Fulton et al., 2006). The development of a candidate relies on a sense of political ambition; thus, political science scholars have proceeded to ask how such ambition originates. These explanations have centered on a multitude of social players, such as the political party, community organizations, and family and friends, as influential or causal in the decision to run for office.

In accordance with the latest academic findings, this purpose of this paper is to evaluate why women decide to run for legislative office. Utilizing the studies of Lawless and Fox and Fulton et al., I explore the external forces surrounding a woman's candidacy

to reveal sources of motivation and support. Through a qualitative analysis of nineteen female state legislators in Minnesota, I present the stories of the women in the Minnesota legislature to offer insight into the pivotal moments that inspire a female candidacy.

Women in Elective Office: Then and Now

When women were beginning to hold elective office in the 1970s and 1980s, academic studies focused on the election cycle, voter dispositions, and campaign finance opportunities. These findings pointed to seemingly equal opportunities of success once women had entered the political race. In the instances in which women run, they are just as likely as their male counterparts to win (Selzer, Newman, and Leighton, 1997; Darcy, Welch, and Clark, 1994). Actual election results have suggested that voter preconceptions on the legislative skills and abilities of women no longer serve as an influential barrier in electing female candidates (Sanbonmatsu, 2006). Voters are no longer the opposing force, and women do not need to exaggerate their qualifications; rather, it is understood that women are equally competent and worthy of support from the electorate. The burden is placed on women: in order to alleviate the gender gap, women need to run for political office.

Yet existing research professing the political opportunities of women does little to expose the stark reality of the underrepresented status of women in legislative positions. It is indisputable that state and federal legislatures are still predominately male, and women are not running for elective office. With the electorate seemingly willing to choose female candidates, the emphasis shifts toward the initial availability of resources to establish a candidacy and build a campaign.

Candidates face great pressure to raise large sums of money, and the inability to attract such resources could essentially ruin a political campaign (Jacobson, 1990). When differentiating female and male congressional candidates with respect to campaign finance, Uhlaner and Schlozman find there is no direct, gendered-based disadvantage in campaign receipts, noting that voters and donors do not discriminate on the basis of gender alone (1986). Gender does, however, affect the likelihood that he or she will possess the attributes that donors reward. Because more men are incumbents, for example, they are more apt to secure campaign funding. With legislative reelection rates lingering around 90%, the advantage of the incumbent is the most significant pull, which in turn impairs the emergence of new, potentially female candidates. A smaller proportion of women are incumbents, meaning that the majority of female candidates run as challengers. Once women become incumbents, their ability to receive further donations is determined by political characteristics other than gender, such as incumbency status, committee leadership positions, probability of victory, challenger attributes, and the incumbent's need for funding (Uhlaner and Schlozman, 1986). As a result, campaign strategists and political parties should be focused on keeping female incumbents as well as recruiting new candidates (Darcy and Choike, 1986).

While this research may reflect the increasing acceptance of women in the political sphere, there are elements that undermine this seemingly equal opportunity. Similar fundraising opportunities may not be enough to push gender parity, as the incumbency factor places women at a disadvantage. An equal proportion of campaign receipts would not be sufficient, as greater financial resources may be necessary to establish a challenger's electoral position (Jacobson, 1990). Furthermore, women may

still perceive themselves as disadvantaged in raising money and attracting votes, which may have adverse effects on igniting a candidacy (Uhlener and Schlozman, 1986).

The question now focuses on the woman as an individual: why do women not seek public office? If women are expected to be the catalyst in political change, we must look at why they are reluctant to become legislative candidates. Several theoretical approaches refer to sociological, institutional, environmental, and psychological barriers as explanations to the lack of women in legislative offices (Conway, 2001). Although the distinctions between the various models may not be easily identified and certain commonalities may overlap, some of the previous cases have been recently disputed and rejected, while others have gained an increased standing in feminist research.

Sociological theory points toward a cultural assignment of traditional roles and social norms, which obstruct the educational and professional opportunities admitted to women. Because of their time demands as wife and mother (Constantini, 1991), women receive little support and encouragement to seek a job outside the home, and are thus even more unlikely to consider a potential position in politics (Conway, 2001).

Fulton et al. expands further on traditional gender norms to include political strategy of the environment, finding that women's decisions are more sensitive to the favorable combination of political ambition and electoral opportunity (2005). By overemphasizing the importance of ambition alone, gender is not integrated into a broader theory of candidate emergence. When ambition and opportunity combine, women are more likely to run for office, making them more "strategic" politicians than their male counterparts (Fulton et al., 2006). Lawless and Fox reject this argument on its presumption that political ambition previously existed in the individual (2005). By

conceptualizing ambition as a strategic response to a “political opportunity,” the root of the problem is left untouched (Lawless and Fox, 2005). Thus, the analysis of initial, preliminary political ambition is the key to understanding the emergence of women in legislative positions.

Based on the Citizen Political Ambition Study, Fox and Lawless find that women are more likely to see themselves as unqualified, and are thus less likely to consider a candidacy (2004). Though this negative perception can be alleviated by external support, the gender gap in self-perceived qualifications may serve as the most persuasive explanation in disparities in political ambition. Women base their political qualifications on the extent of their past experiences, while men are more likely to believe they can succeed without having a substantial political background. This perception that women’s standards are set higher can be daunting, but the odds change dramatically when a woman considers herself highly qualified, which increases the likelihood of initiating a candidacy (Lawless and Fox, 2005).

Women appear to need more external support to enter the male-dominated political arena (Sanbonmatsu, 2006), but they are significantly less likely to receive encouragement to run for office from party leaders, activists, and elected officials (Rule, 1981; Lawless and Fox, 2005; Fulton et al., 2006). Suspicions that male party leaders prefer male candidates are not without merit; believing that males are more likely to succeed due to past patterns of success, party gatekeepers may be reluctant to expanding recruitment efforts (Conway, 2001). Nevertheless, the significance of party leaders lies in the increased credibility that a political party offers (Lawless and Fox, 2005); a party is a professional network, a support system that may plant the seed of ambition in potential

candidates (Fulton et al., 2006). Suggestions and encouragement received from the political party remain the most influential factor, but not independently causal in the development of political ambition (Lawless and Fox, 2005).

The influence of a work environment relies on the broad assumption that a woman has an occupation outside of the home, possibly in the “pipeline professions” of law, business, or education. However, women are underrepresented within the legal and business careers, and gender socialization impels fewer women to seek such careers (Thomas, 1998; Lawless and Fox, 2005). Research conducted by the National Women’s Political Caucus finds that even within these pipeline occupations, women are still much less likely than men to consider running for office. Although the analogy implies that as more women occupy careers that produce politicians, more women will then run for office, in fact, most female candidates are less likely to have backgrounds in legal careers, and more likely to have entered politics through women’s groups and community volunteering (Thomas, 1998). While the pipeline professions may produce male politicians, their effects on candidate emergence among women may need to be reevaluated.

Social integration and community anchorage prove to be independently predictive of political ambition. Affiliation with religious and community groups and activity in voluntary nonparty organizations offers an expanded network of encouragement and accessibility to resources. Women may even belong to such organizations to build political skills necessary for office, as civic activism fosters an increased self-confidence that may progress into political ambition (Constantini, 1991).

While encouragement from a spouse/partner, family member, friend, or colleague is crucial, it may lack the seriousness and professionalism that a political party would provide. When women receive external support from multiple, influential sources, they are more likely to consider themselves to be viable candidates. It is important to emphasize that the two conditions for candidate emergence, a positive self-perception of political qualifications and the presence of outside support, are not mutually exclusive; rather, they fuel off the success of each other. With these two key ingredients set forward, women can begin to conceptualize themselves as candidates and then proceed to enter the preliminary race.

As the latest research is lending its attention to the first steps in the recruitment of women in legislative positions, future studies will respond to these recent findings. Consequently, an analysis of women representatives at the Congressional level would not be as effective, as most national representatives have held prior public office. Congresswomen have used state legislatures as a springboard to Congress, and an analysis at the state level may offer an additional explanation of the current and future representation of women in Congress (Lawless and Fox, 2005). To uphold this framework, I explore the candidacies of female representatives and senators in the Minnesota State Legislature.

I expect the research findings to expand on the studies of Lawless and Fox and Fulton et al., while noting their drawbacks and limitations. Lawless and Fox provide a pioneering approach that shifts the entire emphasis to the development of political ambition, but in effect, create an oversimplification that may be a shortcoming in the research. Fulton et al. also points to this problematic element in the political ambition

research, arguing that it overlooks a strategic evaluation of the political environment (2006). As both of these studies rely primarily or entirely on quantitative survey data, they lack the individual perspective that can be reached through qualitative analysis and face-to-face interviews. When asking multifaceted questions surrounding life-changing professional decisions, a numerical survey may not capture the emotion, feeling, or perception of the individual.

I intend to build on the advancements achieved by the previous scholars, which particularly is reflected in the themes I have chosen to research, code, and put forward. Recent studies, including the two presented here, have renovated past theories on the roles of women in politics, looking deeper into the problem and positing new theories and ideas. The research presented by Lawless and Fox and Fulton et al., proposes significant explanations that better describe the contemporary women emerging in legislative positions. I seek to uphold these assets through the topics addressed in the data findings but to examine their characteristics on a separate footing. Through the incorporation of a qualitative approach, I seek to expand this existing knowledge by formulating a more comprehensive analysis on the decision to run for elective office.

In this study, I intend to capture the phenomenon that surrounds women's legislative representation in Minnesota. By interviewing women who not only took the plunge to run for office but also assembled successful campaigns, the degree and impact of external supporters can be measured in relation to candidate ambition. The presence of these personal and professional actors must also be placed into a broader context of the candidate's perception of the environment, as political ambition alone is not guaranteed to develop into a candidacy. Through the combined studies of Lawless and Fox and

Fulton et al., I evaluate the sources of political ambition of women in Minnesota and explore the current environment from which these female legislators have emerged.

Methodology

To better understand why women legislators initially decide to run for office, I adopt a qualitative approach for a variety of reasons. Before establishing the qualitative method as the best fit in this study, a brief overview of its characteristics needs prior attention. First, qualitative research often takes place on site; in visiting the location firsthand, the researcher develops a greater level of detail about the participant and the place. Second, qualitative research encourages flexibility that enables new elements to emerge during the study. Third, the qualitative form of inquiry grants the researcher with an interpretative role; the descriptions of the participants, the setting, and the themes are presented by the researcher, and filtered through a personal lens shaped by social, political, and cultural forces. Finally, a qualitative researcher establishes a holistic picture, explaining why qualitative studies appear as broad, complex, interactive, and encompassing (Creswell, 2003).

The qualitative method is an inductive, open-ended strategy that focuses on specific situations and people, deriving its value through their words and experiences. The purpose of the research is to capture the meaning of the participants' perspectives and the context in which they are presented. Qualitative studies seek to analyze the process through which events take place, allowing for a broader explanation of what has led to particular outcomes (Maxwell, 1996). In accordance with these objectives, a quantitative method would not be as effective in this case.

Qualitative research has not traditionally been associated with the development of causal explanations, but this perception is being challenged by both quantitative and qualitative researchers. This dispute lies in the type of causality that is sought; instead of posing quantitative questions of whether and to what extent x influences y , qualitative researchers look at the processes that connect x and y . Through a description of a sequence of events, qualitative studies assert causation by relating an earlier event and a subsequent event (Maxwell, 1996).

Within the qualitative approach the distinct types of strategies for conducting social science research have become more apparent during the 1990s. Among these forms is the phenomenological method, which is marked by the “lived experiences” that participants share. The researcher identifies the “essence” of personal experiences in connection with a phenomenon, as expressed by the participants. Phenomenology involves studying a small number of subjects through open and extensive interaction to formulate patterns and relationships of meaning. Thus, the authority is placed in the hands of the subjects, while the researcher restricts his or her experiences in order to grasp the phenomenon through the participants’ perspective (Creswell, 2003).

The advantages in phenomenological qualitative research simultaneously point to its weaknesses. The primary concern is not with generalization, but with forming an adequate description, interpretation, and theory of the phenomenon (Maxwell, 1996). All inquiry is shaped by personal values; the personal-self is joined with the researcher-self. An entire separation of these is neither possible nor desirable, but it requires the continual reflection and acknowledgement of biases, principles, and interests held by the researcher (Creswell, 2003). In fact, a researcher may be more inclined to explore a topic because

of a personal affiliation or attraction. A progressive-postmodernist perspective establishes the research and the researcher as partial and situated, as the point of view of the researcher is embodied in a historical and cultural context (Richardson, 1990).

Though phenomenology relies on the ability of the researcher to “bracket” his or her own experiences (Creswell, 2003), it does not imply the removal of the researcher and his or her angle of perception. In this way, a practical compromise can be reached: the researcher can not evaluate an event through a perfectly objective lens, but he or she has the responsibility to examine this outlook and its implications, strengths, and impact on the research.

Alongside the phenomenological approach, I use elements of the collective story narrative. The compatibility of these research strategies lies in what they seek to explain, in this case, the experiences of a social category to which the individual belongs. While the phenomenological approach explores the spirit of the participants, the collective story gives a voice to a group that is silenced or marginalized on a cultural level. The collective story displays the individual as a part of the whole, not by simply telling a particular individual’s story, but instead through the experiences of the larger social category. Adding the collective story offers transformative possibilities for individuals as well as society, as new stories help to develop similarities within a previously isolated and alienated community. This linkage into a “shared consciousness” presents an opportunity of societal transformation (Richardson, 1990).

Although these approaches may seem conflicting, as one emphasizes the individual’s personal experiences and the other underlines a group affiliation, I have combined the phenomenological approach with the collective story for two reasons.

First, the representation of women in legislative positions in Minnesota ranks third highest in the nation (CAWP, 2007), suggesting that the phenomenon transpiring in this state warrants additional analysis and may serve as a model for future legislatures and United States Congress. Female politicians in Minnesota perhaps possess certain attributes, or more likely, they are surrounded by favorable forces that encourage their increased numbers in state elective offices. Second, the women that hold a substantial proportion of legislative seats in Minnesota still fall into a larger national and international social category that continue to be underrepresented in political offices. While women in Minnesota occupy 35% of the legislative seats, the average proportion of women in state legislatures is 23%, and Congress falls further behind with 13% (CAWP, 2007). Thus, the emergence of women in legislative positions is not a widespread, cultural expectation that is upheld by the status quo. Women legislators continue to fill a marginalized role in both state and federal offices, if not as apparent in the state of Minnesota, then through the collective story of women in elective office.

The procedural details of the research involved a random sampling of women legislators through a cover letter emailed to all of the female representatives and senators in the Minnesota State Legislature. I arranged 30-minute face-to-face interviews at the State Capitol in St. Paul, Minnesota, with the twenty-one legislators who responded to the email. Due to schedule conflicts, I was able to interview nineteen of these women, comprising 27% of the female legislators in Minnesota. Within this sample, fifteen are Democrats and four are Republicans, 79% and 21% respectively, with twelve representatives and seven senators. This proportion closely corresponds with the party

identification of women legislators in Minnesota as a whole, which is 76% Democratic and 24% Republican.

To maintain ethical standards and practice, I provided the participant with a Consent Form at the beginning of each interview, which permitted the participant's interview to be tape recorded and then transcribed. Following the transcription process, I coded the interviews to find similar overarching themes as well as unique personal experiences. I divided the coding into four areas: past political experience, external recruitment to run for office, influence of political parties, and barriers and obstacles prior to running for office. Not surprisingly, some of the topics overlapped; for example, if a political party recruited a female candidate, then it was coded as external recruitment by the political party.

The perspective from which the data is interpreted is shaped by the open-ended format of the questions and the flexibility allotted to the participant. Thus, the themes addressed by each woman differ, as the interview took the form of an "unfolding drama," where I followed the lead of the participant in order to encourage free dialogue and self-expression. By presenting the data through personal quotations, the collective story acknowledges the individuality of the participants while capturing the spirit of women legislators to fit with the phenomenological approach.

The interviews produced a wide range of information, but the coded themes were narrowed to correspond with the leading research presented in the literature review. The research findings are divided into four segments, and the data is separated according to the major themes discussed in the literature review through coded variables. Outlining the four categories requires an initial distinction for purposes of description and

exploration; they have been identified as 1) past political experience, 2) external political recruitment, 3) influence of political parties, and 4) barriers and obstacles. They have been ordered in a sequential form to assist in the presentation of a process that qualitative research seeks to convey.

Findings

Past Political Experience

The political backgrounds of these women varied with their age, childhood upbringings, educational experiences, and prior political offices held. Because the participants range from 25 to 70 years old, it is expected that their political experiences vary through different stages of life. This key factor affects not only the extent and type of their political involvement, but also the context through which their knowledge has been shaped. For example, current family structures and educational opportunities can not be equated to those of the 1960s. This diversity offers an interesting dynamic to the general social category of women legislators.

The first component of previous political experience is to establish its existence or absence, and then to analyze various forms and degrees of participation. For many of these women, the state legislative position is their first elective office, but they all alluded to a prior engagement with politics on an individual, community, or partisan level. The commonplace of politics in the home and family created an understanding of its impact and effects: "It's something we always talked about. You were involved in politics, and that's just the way it was." Some remember getting involved in high school, due to an issue affecting their families or a social movement that changed the political climate of

the nation. Others had relatives that ran for office or helped on campaigns, which prompted their interest and association with politics.

While youth involvement in politics represents one part of the equation, it is best understood as a beginning stage in the development of political efficacy. Most of the women, with or without the presence of politics during their childhood or adolescent years, describe a process that created a sense of political obligation. They had previously established connections with community and religious organizations or politically directed groups, such as the Women's Political Caucus and the League of Women Voters. As community activists, women are put in an "authoritative role to help people get the things that they need."

In addition to community organizations, a few of the participants emerged through the traditional avenue of the party and the caucus. One woman went to her first precinct caucus as a senior in high school, while another first attended the local caucus when she moved to the community. The participants did not discuss the role of the party at length, especially in terms of a relationship at a younger age, except with regard to building a network in a new community or expanding social connections.

Almost half of the participants, however, had held prior elective office, as local officials on the city council and school board, president of a teacher's union, and member of a planning commission. One woman had been the student council president, another an executive board member of a health care union. The process of building political involvement can be noted at this level, as one woman credits her appointment to local office from her work with the League of Women Voters: "That was the triggering thing. Just because I was in League, then I did get appointed to the city park commission. Once

you start doing something, there's always somebody else that gets you into something else."

In examining why these women ran for local or statewide elective office prior to the state legislature, the participants' decision was impacted by a personal obligation to the community, an outcome of an individual situation, and external political recruitment. One legislator reflects, "I ran for city council simply out of the idea that public service would be interesting and a good thing." Another reinforces these feelings of personal responsibility: "I saw myself as somebody who wanted to impact change, and this is just one way to do it." Frustration with the status quo can also lead to a candidacy; a former school board member ran because of the financial cuts affecting her son's public high school and his quality of education. Finally, personal and professional encouragement plays a significant role in women's decision to run for office. However, due to the increased academic attention on the impact of political recruitment, this last theme has been separately coded for further analysis.

External Political Recruitment

Sixteen out of the nineteen participants recalled at least one actual event involving an individual or a group of people that influenced, or perhaps even determined, their decision to enter a political race. The women that held prior public office established a clear separation between political recruitment at the local and state levels, but this pertains more to the people and organizations involved than to the initial question of recruitment. In fact, there were only two women who were recruited for lower elective office but not the state legislature; nearly all of the women express a direct correlation

between external encouragement and their candidacy or an indirect reference through “consultation” received by a small group of people. Some candidates even conveyed a causal relationship between the political recruitment they received and their candidacies that ensued: “It never occurred to me to run for school board until somebody invited me to do that, and it never occurred to me that I would ever run for higher office until somebody invited me then.” When asked if she had thought of seeking a legislative position prior to receiving suggestions from community members, another woman replied, “Not running for state office, no. But I don’t think I thought of even running for city council until people said, „You should do this, and I’ll help you.“” These statements assign a critical value to the advantages and implications of political recruitment by parties and other influential players.

External recruitment and encouragement received by the participants came from community members, family, political organizations, current incumbents or officeholders, and party leaders. The outside players oftentimes overlap, creating a higher level of perceived credibility and increasing the likeliness to initiate a candidacy.

A repeatedly recruited candidate shares her experience:

“My husband came home and said, „How would you like to run for state house against the present representative?” I said, „Why?” He said, „Well, because they were all talking. The police and firefighters want you to run.””

A day or two later, she was again approached by a coworker to run for office. Many years before, this woman had been encouraged to run for the state legislature by her friend, United States Senator Paul Wellstone: “he asked me to consider running... and I didn’t even give it a thought. I just thought, „Oh, he’s just trying to get me involved in something else,” and there would be no way.” While she credits her previous union

involvement in developing political experience and qualifications, the support she received from a party activist, her spouse, and a community member helped to “plant the seed” that later aided in her decision to run for the state legislature.

Other women were approached in a more formal manner through an actual proposal or offering of support by the resigning incumbent, party leaders, or members of the caucus. A current state representative contacted one woman over the phone; a sitting city council member threw in his support to another, saying he would retire if she was willing to run. Also worthy to note in the recruitment by parties is a previous connection to the party, usually as campaign managers and volunteers:

“I was the campaign manager for the legislator in my area. Then she decided to retire, so she turned to me and said, „Well, you’ve been helping me so now I want to help you get elected.””

Campaign work, similar to community activism, places women in an operational role, but that energy is often directed to another person:

“I worked on lots of campaigns, and always enjoyed the campaign work while shoving some other fool up to say, „Here, say this. Here’s the answer to that question, go answer it. Go do this, you need to do that.””

Another participant had designed city council brochures and campaign literature and campaigned extensively for previous House and Senate candidates, who later gave back in suggesting another’s decision to run for office. A cycle of back-patting and peer support generated from their past commitment to electing fellow candidates: “Those people that I helped get elected then encouraged me.”

The support offered by local party activists can be differentiated from the influence of the state party recruiters and leaders of the state party caucus. In this area the interviews revealed a striking partisan difference. Republican women were more

likely to point out a specific moment of recruitment and to use the names of caucus leaders who were responsible for candidate recruitment. The recruiters talked to these women, answered questions, and finally asked them if they would be willing to run. As a result, the formal proposition of a top party official added a layer of credibility and seriousness. Perhaps they had been previously contacted by community members and political organizations, but the fact that these women were able to narrow the scope of their political recruitment to this specific incident proves the immense weight that status and reputation can have on the perceptions of potential candidates.

Through these passages it is evident that political recruitment comes through a multitude of avenues in the community, the party, or both, but its effects on initiating a candidacy increase with persistence, either by the same individual or another organization. When approached to run for a local position, one woman recalls, “I said no the first two or three times. And then they kept coming back, saying we really need you. So I said, „Okay.“” As a former union board member, this woman also received constant reinforcement from the organization: “They kept bugging me, kept calling and saying, „Are you going to run? Are you going to run?“” Another woman was repeatedly “pestered” by her predecessor. In short, the decision to run for office is most likely to emerge through political recruitment by numerous players with frequent reinforcement.

Political Parties

The existing literature points to the intricate party workings that hinder the emergence of female candidates, characterizing the party as a “gatekeeper” that grooms its own candidates. In these interviews, I find additional elements of the institutional role

of the political party in the caucus and the endorsement process. At this point, the candidates have already decided to run for office and use the political party for resources, financial support, and name recognition. Thus, the most significant way the parties can affect which candidates enter office is to direct the recruitment process. Although political recruitment has been discussed, more detail can be given to the accessibility to local and state party organizations and the structural implications of the political party in attracting new female candidates.

For many of these women, getting the party endorsement was the most important step to take. This is especially true in predominately Republican or Democratic districts where the winner of the primary is expected to win the general election with minimal competition. For the women who had been activists in the party, attended the caucuses, and worked on campaigns, receiving the local endorsement is attainable and practical. If these legislators were involved in party politics, there was a tendency to be active locally at the grassroots level. For example, one had done volunteer work with the party, so she had already interacted with most of the party members. Another legislator noted the cooperation in the county caucus: “I knew a lot of people there, and at least you get a fair shot. There is opportunity for people, for various opinions to advance there...it’s not just a winner-take-all type thing.”

In urban districts with more continuity between community activists and party members, party politics are more visible and perhaps easier to access. When community peers, colleagues, and party leaders are indistinguishable, it makes “for a nice overlap”, in terms of contacting the party and knowing the ways of entry. Even to get elected in the non-partisan city council and school board offices in urban areas, “it’s clearly a party

issue.” Yet in rural communities, the situation can not be examined through the same lens, since the parties do not play a substantial role at the municipal level. One participant had turned away from the partisan politics for her position on the city council:

“I was the [district] chair when I was younger, but then I ran for the city council, and that’s a non-partisan seat. I did not want to get into a position where I was identified as a DFL member on the city council. I really wanted that; I think it’s helpful to have a non-partisan race there. So I stepped away from my activism.”

Because many of these women had built their political experience through a non-partisan municipal board, partisan politics was unfamiliar and undesirable. A separation from the individual and party appeared when participants professed, “I hadn’t been a party activist,” “I’m not a typical party animal,” and “I’m not that heavily involved in party politics.”

Nonetheless, to imply a total disengagement between local politicians and party activity would be misleading. The agendas of municipal officeholders may swing toward one direction and indicate a party affiliation, but the distinction lies in the regular participation in party events and meetings that local officials may try to avoid. One legislator notes,

“There’s a whole group of people outside of [formal government processes] that have an interest in service in public policy that may not want to be involved in the day-to-day activities of the party business. They’re the ones that may run into not knowing how to enter, or how to be considered as a candidate.”

The restrictive and private character of the parties may lead them to “grow” candidates favorable to their ideologies, and in effect, ignore the admission of new contenders.

This accusation of party leaders as “gatekeepers” is not without merit. One woman tells an interesting account of her first meeting with the local party leaders upon her announcement to run for office:

“I knew they wanted to have the authority to select the candidates. On one hand, they would say they’re open, but in this particular case, I think they had a candidate in mind. I went to introduce myself and declare myself as a candidate. I could feel the irritability of the people that were there. So there was a tension through the whole process about that.”

Clashes in the recruitment process also occur between the state party caucus and the local party organization. While this woman disrupted the party’s selection on her own initiative, other problems may arise if the candidate put forth by the caucus is different than the local candidate.

The complexity of the political party presents a challenge to researchers as well as potential candidates. In exploring the impact of parties on candidate recruitment, distinct, often conflicting, organizational categories emerge, which can distort the concept of the “political party.” The role of the party changes in rural and urban districts, at city and state levels of government, and through involvement with or detachment from party activities. The ins and outs of the party as a whole can best be understood as an institution guided by a formal set of rules and procedures. However, the difficulty faced by potential candidates in challenging historically-bound, discriminatory practices is what perpetuates their “gatekeeping” position. In order to overcome this deep-rooted flaw within the political party, current leaders must transform their role in the recruitment process and actively encourage a new demographic of women to enter elective office.

Barriers and Obstacles

The typical campaign concerns of raising money and developing an organization surfaced almost immediately in the data, alluding to the institutional barriers that hinder women from entering public office. More pertinent to the candidacies of women, however, is their consideration of the time commitment involved in a legislative position, the emotional and physical impact of a campaign, and the personal qualifications required for public office. Barriers, either perceived or actual, affect women differently than their male counterparts. American society is still bounded by gender norms entrenched in the political system. The process of launching a candidacy, though more favorable to women at the state legislative level, continues to reach outside the traditional social expectations of women. In light of this viewpoint, the obstacles that these women have experienced deserve a level of analysis through a feminist perspective.

Public campaign finance has received increased attention in political science research as well as through state and federal policy objectives. Minnesota has an option of partial public subsidized funding, but many participants expressed a concern for raising money that overshadowed the benefits offered by partial public funding. While the amount of money necessary to establish a viable campaign differs in each district, a competitive state legislative race may demand a considerable amount of money. The few thousand dollars needed to run for city council does not compare to these large figures: “It was frightening. I had to raise \$50,000. I didn’t make \$50,000 in a year. How am I going to raise \$50,000?” Challengers faced an increase in set up costs to in order to establish name recognition. One woman describes the essential dollars needed to build her first campaign: “Mine was a very expensive race. Because when you take on an

incumbent and you're starting from scratch like I did, you don't have signs, you don't have anything in place." Another woman stated her general disgust in raising money as "just the worst part of the campaign."

Challengers placed a greater importance on organizational strength to unseat an incumbent. Establishing a reliable and determined core group, what one woman called her "kitchen cabinet," provided a stable network that coordinated the day-to-day campaign activities. The incumbency factor was overlooked by nearly all of the legislators. One woman commented on her door knocking experiences: "[The constituents] didn't even need to know my name; they just needed to know that I was not the incumbent." When deciding between the open House and the occupied Senate seat, she ran against the incumbent, because she "really thought she had a better chance." In competitive districts, they believed a strong organization would be able to overcome the incumbency advantage.

The time commitment involved in holding public office requires bargaining in other areas of women's lives, especially the family and their careers. The citizen legislature "creates challenges in how you balance, juggle, and structure your life." While considering whether to run for office, one participant ranked the time constraint as her top concern. Once in session, the legislators' availability is expected to be responsive to legislative business:

"It's only a few months, but for those few months, I haven't seen my child all week. I'm not going to see her all week. Right now we have no control over our schedule. It can go to midnight; it can go Saturday; it can go Sunday. We have no control over how much time we're here in one day."

If a woman has a family, and if she has a career, they must both be flexible to her limited presence while in session. Familial obligations and motherhood requires an additional support network of a spouse, friends, or relatives to fulfill this role. In terms of personal obstacles, the constant attention given to the family and a career poses logical challenges to the time availability of women. In order to avoid possible scheduling conflicts, many of the women waited for an opportune time: “My career is underway, my children are well established.” Another woman claimed,

“Timing, I think, is everything. I’m at an age where I can devote all of my time to this, and it takes a great deal of time. My family is raised; they’re gone. This is exactly what I should be doing in my sixties, so here I am.”

The move from the private to the public sphere bears emotional and physical consequences on a candidate and her reputation. In a political race, a candidate opens herself to the public and puts herself out on the line:

“You work all your life to establish credibility; when you run for office, you are open to scrutiny.”

“Any time you put your face out there and stand up for something it is scary, and running for school board is nothing compared to running for a state seat.”

“You just don’t know. You don’t know if it’s going to be a nasty race or if it’s going to be a civil race. There are a lot of unknowns.”

Negative campaigns employed in the most competitive districts ignite a level of criticism that is upsetting to female candidates. One legislator who occupies a safe seat expressed concern for her colleagues, “For those people that run in [close] races, it’s horrendous what people do to each other. All that man-handling stuff ain’t my style.” Another

woman holding a highly competitive, sought-after seat attributed her declining interest in running for office due to the physical and emotion toll of the campaign:

“There was the amount of work and stress on you and your family to do this, when even if you win, you’ll be going through the same thing for years. You will never be safe. You will never be comfortable. You will never be able to rest. So this is what we’re dealing with; this was major hardball.”

These distinctions in district makeup have a profound impact on who is willing to enter the race. Female candidates understand the implications on their personal lives, their families, and their reputations; running for office may not be worth the looming consequences.

Women want to influence policy and make a difference in politics, but holding elective office carries a title of prestige that requires a high level of confidence and self-assurance. One woman claims, “You have to have a fairly healthy ego to run.” The perception of politicians as “really special, really smart people” sets a bar that some women may not feel qualified to meet: “I always thought you had to be super intelligent and really rich to be a legislator.” Another woman reflects on her personal doubts,

“I think it’s just kind of a self-esteem issue. Maybe some people have enough ego, or self-esteem, that they just know they’re going to make a difference. Not me. Why would I be picked for this? Why me? Why would I be the one to go and change things and make a difference?”

This is not to mark any female candidates as less qualified, nor to say that all women consider themselves less qualified. One legislator asserts, “I’m absolutely confident that I know more than most of the people that had been serving. That’s the easy part.” Compared to many of the other participants, however, this level of certainty and self-competence was uncommon.

A few of the participants have recruited for the party, and they each noted a stark difference among female and male prospects:

“[Women] don’t see the attributes in themselves that others might see in them. Most of them I have talked to have already been in a school board position, and I am encouraging them to run for higher office. They’re nervous; they’re scared. I have never had anybody say, „Yep, I’m ready. Let’s go!“ I did talk one man into it that way!”

“[It is] kind of typical of women, that they think they need to know everything about everything. But men hardly even know one or two issues, and they just jump right in. They think they can just figure it out as they go along.”

“It was definitely clear that many of the people that did step up to run were men in their early to mid-30s, who had two to three young children at home, and seem not to have a whole lot of hesitation about running for office. But of course, women in this similar situation never were thinking about running for office. In six years we couldn’t talk one woman into running for office.”

Perhaps a more realistic effect of party recruiters is to plant the seeds of a candidacy. If they do not run that year, they may consider it two or four years later. With women, usually the family comes more into play, and the right “timing” may or may not coincide with the political opportunities presented.

Barriers facing women arise at different stages of a candidacy, with some being more relevant than others. If a woman has initial doubts about her ability to contribute to the political process, the incumbency advantage and the campaign finance battle become obsolete. The range of obstacles presented reveals a vulnerable element in the decision to run for office. Depending on district composition, individual timing, and the external political environment, women may face significant challenges to entering the political arena.

Conclusion

The emergence of women in elective office depends upon the collaboration and support of external political players. Political parties, family and friends, and local organizations must actively include women in the electoral process. Historical and institutional gender roles continue to perpetuate the norms that benefit male candidacies, but proactive efforts to recruit women candidates can begin to alleviate gender barriers.

The personal stories of female legislators in Minnesota have revealed the impact of external forces on the initial decision to run for office. Some women share momentous experiences that caused and inspired their candidacies; others describe years of political experience as an incremental process that led to the legislature. I do not seek to homogenize female politicians; rather, I preserve their individuality through specific quotations and original accounts. Because the methodology of this research is explorative and descriptive, the spotlight falls on the women to tell their own stories and to encourage their voices to emerge through their perspectives.

Through an analysis of their words and narratives, I capture a personal element that acknowledges the individual behind the politician. By exploring the similar themes that appear in the interviews, I present a holistic and complex view of the social category of women legislators. In describing their journeys to state elective office, I seek to honor their political achievements and share their stories as women in the Minnesota Legislature.

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