

URGENCY, AMBITION AND AUTHENTICITY:

Exploring the experiences of women running for office post-2016

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What are the lived experiences of women who have run for state and local office in the years following the 2016 presidential election?
How did they become candidates and shape their campaigns?

ABSTRACT

Despite gains in recent decades and a record number of women running for office in 2018, a gender disparity exists at all levels of government, a gap that increases when considering additional identities such as race/ethnicity, age, religion, LGBTQ+ identity and partisan affiliation. This study aims to understand how women come to run for local and state office, which traditionally has been a pipeline to higher office, along with their decisions about strategy and self-presentation, and the help, encouragement and challenges they face along the way. Comparing the recent experiences shared by 37 candidates to prior literature reveals an urgency that propelled women often in the busiest times of their lives to seek office, a desire to present themselves and their campaign issues in a more authentic way, and to pursue political change on issues inherently important to their experiences as women and belonging to other social and identity groups.

BACKGROUND

This study builds on previous research on local and state election campaigns and women running for office, especially concerning recruitment, campaign strategy and perceived barriers or challenges, to detail the process and experiences for women at this unique time. Surveys found that a portion of women running for U.S. Congress in 2018 were spurred in part by negative emotions, such as urgency, anger and threat, to the 2016 presidential election outcome (Lawless & Fox, 2018). The cost of not running for office was perceived as too high (Dittmar, 2020). Intersectional analyses have found that women of different backgrounds and identities face varying levels of structural and individual barriers and challenges in political participation (Brown, 2014).

METHOD AND SAMPLE

- Semi-structured interviews of 37 people identifying as women who, within the past four years, have run for office at various local and state levels: from county boards up to statewide positions.
- Areas of inquiry
 - Political origin story and/or recruitment
 - Campaign strategy, including support, self-presentation, focus
 - Perception of media coverage and opponent strategy
- Intersectional approach analyzing the differences and similarities in the way candidates with differing identities and positions in life experience running for office.
- Participants ranged in age from their 20s to 70s, and included 7 LGBTQ+ participants and 3 naturalized citizens. They identified as white (59%), Black (24%), Asian (11%), Latina (5%), Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and not religious.
- 78% are Democrats, 16% Republican, 8% unaffiliated but lean left, which fits with the surge of Democratic female candidates post-2016.
- More than half ran in a district or county with an opposing partisan leaning.
- All but one of the 65% who had children were raising school-aged or younger children at the time of the election.

PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS

- **Self-recruitment** Nearly half of participants stepped forward to run without any formal or informal recruitment network. Others were tapped in traditional venues, by organization, precinct or elected leaders.
- **Influence of 2016 election** Close to 70 percent of the women were prompted to run for office (or a higher office if they had already been in office) by the 2016 presidential election outcome. They described fear and anxiety based on their identities as women or other identities of race, ethnicity, religion, immigration origin or LGBTQ+ status.
- **State and local party leadership** Most women of both parties expressed frustration with the lack of support offered to women, especially women of color.
- **Outside organizations** Nonpartisan but ideologically left groups had an outsized influence on recruitment and campaign strategy through trainings, intern assignment, networking and support. Republican women did not benefit from such groups and instead found support in female mentors who had served in office or gender-specific party organizations.
- **Campaign funding** Raising money was especially difficult for women of color and for women without access to high-resourced networks.

NEXT STEPS

Analysis continues to take a closer look at differences and similarities in experiences among and within groups with the goal that these findings can help answer normative questions of how political parties can better recruit and support women running for office, especially those with intersecting identities, and what structures need to be in place for a democracy that is more representative, especially at the local and state level, an area that is enormously influential in daily life but under-studied in political communication.