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The "Ideal" Female Candidate

Why are there so few women elected to positions in both gubernatorial and senatorial contests? Since the ratification of the nineteenth amendment in 1920—through which women obtained the right to vote and the right to full political participation—few women have actually held elective office. While women have increased their political participation by means of voting and activism, they are still vastly underrepresented in terms of elected positions (Clark, 1991: 64). Women make up over 50 percent of the United States population; however, they only comprise about 10 percent of the U.S. Congress (McGlen, 1995: 77). The problems women encounter are not only found on a domestic level, but on a global level as well. A 1986 study of women legislators in Western democracies determined that only three countries, Greece, Japan, and Australia, had smaller percentages of women in their national legislatures than the United States (McGlen, 1995: 85). In any given year from 1917 to 1970, women never constituted more than five percent of the U.S. Congress or state legislatures (McGlen, 1995: 76). In the past ten years, of the seventy-six midterm and election-year contests involving women in both Senate and gubernatorial positions, only twelve were successful in their Senate races and nine in their gubernatorial bids.

After overcoming the first hurdle of deciding whether or not to run for political office, women face yet another obstacle: when they win, they only win by a small margin. In the past ten years, successful women have won their contests by an average of 13.5%. In contrast, women losers lost by an average of 21.6%. Based on these statistics, women appear to have a difficult time securing a large margin of victory. This raises the question: What does it take for a woman to be elected into office?

I provided an answer to this question by testing the effect several independent variables have on the chances of female candidates. The candidates tested are only those receiving major-party nominations for either the United States Senate or gubernatorial positions from 1986 to 1996. The variables used in this project include region, party identification, the state-by-state percentage of the vote given to the 1988 Democratic Presidential nominee, incumbency, open seat races, and age. By looking at the women who have already been elected to office, I will determine what demographic characteristics the "ideal" female candidate would possess.

Research Design

I employed a cross-sectional design which includes all women candidates between 1986 and 1996 who received a major-party nomination for either the U.S. Senate or the position of governor. All individual candidate data was collected through *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Reports* election issues from 1986 to 1996, except "Percentage of Democratic Vote in 1988," which was collected from *America Votes*. The problem with assessing female contests alone is the relatively small number of contests involving a female candidate. Because only seventy-six contests involved women in the past ten years, there is a chance that the data may be statistically unreliable. In addition to the small sample size, my collection of the data from CQ caused a problem with the age variable. Over the years, CQ changed its format and did not report the ages for all candidates; this, in turn, led to a smaller sample size for that variable.

Data Presentation

Party Identification

The first group of relationships involves the party identification of the candidates. The hypothesis for this set of variables is that women who run on the Democratic ticket will have a higher chance of being elected than women who run on the Republican ticket. Rebekah Herrick has found that female candidates and Democrats share similar stereotypes. Both groups have been labeled as more liberal and stronger on compassion issues than their Republican male counterparts. Democratic women are therefore more likely to have an advantage during election time when voters find these issues important (Heerick, 1996: 71).

Table 1.1

Party Identification and Its Effect on the Success of Female Candidates

Democrat	Republican	Total
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Won	15 (36%)	5 (15%)	20 (26%)
Lost	27 (64%)	29 (85%)	56 (74%)
Total	42	34	76

X²= 4.09

Degrees of Freedom = 1

According to Table 1.1, Democratic women have had a slightly higher rate of success in their contests than their Republican counterparts. Of all the women who have won, 75% have been Democrats. Of the women who have lost, the ratio between Democrats and Republicans has been split at 48-52. Within each party, Democrats have an increased chance of successfully completing their bid for political office. The data in Table 1.1 are significant at a .05 significance level, with a chi square value of 4.09. Therefore, it can be assumed that the political party which women candidates choose may have an effect on whether they win or lose their bids for office.

The next group of variables measures the effect of party identification on the success of female candidates, while controlling for the type of office in order to determine whether or not political party identification actually has a significant impact on the degree of success for women candidates. Arguably, voters may perceive women to be better suited as a senator than a governor. Governors are perceived as "leading" a state, and leadership has been dominated by males in our society. Traditionally, men are expected to play the role of dominant leader in the family and society, whereas women are expected to play a supportive, passive role (McGlen, 1991: 85). Therefore, the hypothesis is that more women will be elected as Democratic senators than as Democratic governors or Republican senators or governors.

Table 1.2

Party Identification and Its Effect on the Success of Female Senate Candidates

	Democrat	Republican	Totals
Won	8 (33%)	4 (20%)	12 (27%)
Lost	16 (67%)	16 (80%)	32 (73%)
Totals	24	20	44

X²= .86

Degrees of Freedom = 1

Table 1.3

Party Identification and Its Effect on the Success of Female Gubernatorial Candidates

	Democrat	Republican	Totals
Won	7 (39%)	1 (7%)	8 (25%)
Lost	11 (61%)	13 (93%)	24 (75%)
Totals	18	14	32

X²= 4.21

Degrees of Freedom = 1

In assessing each table, it can be concluded that Democratic women running in either type of contest fare better than their Republican counterparts, with Democratic governors winning 39% of the contests, and 33% for Democratic senators. The high loss rates of Republican women seem to support the previous literature which argues that women will have more success running as Democrats (Herrick, 1996: 71). The data do not, however, conclusively support the purposed hypothesis since Democratic governors, rather than Democratic senators, have had the highest success rating. The statistical significance levels play a notable role, for the data for the Senate races were insignificant while the data for the gubernatorial races were significant at the .05 level.

Percent of Democratic Vote Received in 1988 Presidential Election

The next variable tested involved the percentage of the vote Michael Dukakis, the Democratic presidential nominee for 1988, received in the states involving women’s contests. The reasoning is that most women run under the Democratic ticket, so the states that contain voters which largely vote Democratic in presidential races would presumably tend to vote Democratic for other contests as well. The 1988 contest was used because it was the last true two-party presidential race. The states were divided using Dukakis’s national average of 46%. I determined that 46% of the vote would indicate a significantly democratic state. The relationship involves the effect of the percentage of the democratic vote in the state on women’s success in those states. The hypothesis is that in states with a larger percentage of the Democratic presidential vote in 1988, women will be more likely to win.

Table 2

Percent of the Democratic Presidential Vote Received in 1988 and Its Effect on the Success of Female Candidates

	Less than 46%	More than 46%	Total
Won	11 (31%)	9 (23%)	20 (26%)
Lost	25 (69%)	31 (78%)	56 (74%)
Total	36	40	76

X2= .621

Degrees of Freedom = 1

In analyzing this set of variables, the opposite of the hypothesis has proven true. Women had the worst results where Dukakis received more than 46% of the vote. Women lost 78% of the contests in the states with the higher Democratic percentages, whereas in the states with the lower Democratic percentages, women did marginally better, only losing 69% of those contests.

Incumbency

The United States electoral system has always favored incumbents, which is one barrier women have faced in running for political office (McGlen, 1991: 76). For example, during the 1980s, it was common for at least 90 percent of all members of Congress to run for reelection, and for more than 90 percent of them to be returned to office (McGlen, 1991: 88). Although challengers can unseat incumbents, the incumbency advantage greatly diminishes the odds that a challenger will win in the general election (Herrick, 1995: 26). Presumably, this would hold true for female candidates as well. Therefore, the first hypothesis involving incumbency is that women who are incumbents are more likely to win their contests than women running against opponent incumbents.

Table 3

Incumbency and Its Effect on the Success of Candidates

	Woman- Incumbent Challenger	Woman-Non- Incumbent/Challenger Incumbent	Total
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Won	6 (75%)	2 (5%)	8 (19%)
Lost	2 (25%)	32 (94%)	34 (81%)
Totals	8	34	42

$\chi^2 = 20.089$

Degrees of Freedom = 1

First, these data are exceptionally significant at the .001 significance level. To be significant at this level, a chi square value of 10.827 is needed. The chi square score for this data set is 20.089, which means there is a less than one-tenth of 1% opportunity that relation occurred by chance. When women have been the incumbents, they have won 75% of the contests. However, when women are running against an incumbent opponent, they have lost 94% of the contests. Therefore, as expected, women incumbents fare notably better than women challengers trying to unseat an incumbent.

Open Seat

Since incumbency is a significant factor in determining female success in running for elected office, women candidates in open seat contests presumably have a better chance of winning than if they compete against incumbents. Rebekah Herrick offers several explanations for this hypothesis. First, the rationale is that open seat races involve two candidates that are relatively equal in terms of political expertise, since they are not incumbents. Incumbents also have advantages, such as name recognition and fund-raising efforts, which skew the votes toward the incumbent. Open seats, therefore, provide non-incumbents the greatest opportunity to win elections (Herrick, 1995: 26). Therefore, the hypothesis is women running in an open seat contest will have a greater chance of winning an election than women running against incumbents.

Table 4

Incumbency Versus Open Seat Contests and Their Effect on the Success of Female Candidates

	Open Seat	Incumbent	Total
Won	12 (35%)	8 (19%)	20 (26%)
Lost	22 (65%)	34 (81%)	56 (74%)
Total	34	42	76

$\chi^2 = 2.77$

Degrees of Freedom = 1

As predicted, women have a better chance at winning an open seat contest than against incumbents, although the split is not as large as anticipated at 35% to 19%. There is only a slight advantage for women running in open seat contests. However, if the data from Tables 3 and 4 are compared, women running against an opponent incumbent have only been successful 5% of the time, whereas women have won 35% of the open seat races in the past ten years. Still, three-fourths of the women who run in any type of contest lose.

Region

The next set of relationships tested involved the region in which women were nominated by a major party. Region was divided into southern and non-southern states because this possible correlation relies on traditional female stereotypes. The opposition of women running for any elected office is heavily influenced by public attitudes. Before the women's movement, women and men thought that women running for political office was "inappropriate" (McGlen, 1991: 78). Evidence of these stereotypes is still thriving in the South, where women are greatly underrepresented in state legislatures (McGlen, 1991: 78). The hypothesis for this group is women from southern states are less likely to be elected for governor or senator than women from non-southern states.

Table 5.1**Region and Its Effect on the Type of Office**

	Non-South	South	Total
Senate	41 (57%)	3 (75%)	44 (58%)
Governor	31 (43%)	1 (25%)	32 (42%)
Total	72	4	76

X²= .514

Degrees of Freedom = 1

From the data collected, region does not appear to have an impact on women and office selection. However, the data prove the hypothesis true in that few women receive a major-party nomination for any office in the South, largely due to traditional stereotypes about women. In addition, women who do receive a major-party nomination disproportionately run for Senate positions in the South, presumably based on the same rationale that was provided in the original argument that women are more likely to be accepted as senators than governors.

The next characteristic tested was region's effect on female candidates' success rates. The hypothesis for this relationship is that women running in non-southern states will be more likely to win than women running in the southern states. The rationale is the same as for the first relationship, in that the South still holds many stereotypical gender roles for women than other areas of the country.

Table 5.2**Region and Its Effect on the Success of the Female Candidate**

	Non-South	South	Total
Won	17 (24%)	3 (75%)	20 (26%)
Lost	55 (76%)	1 (25%)	56 (74%)
Total	72	4	76

X²= 5.5

Degrees of Freedom = 1

The data support the inverse of this hypothesis. In the South, 75% of women candidates have been successful, whereas non-southern candidates have lost 76% of their contests. The data are statistically significant at a .05 significance level, with a chi square score of 5.5 with one degree of freedom. It must be taken into account that there have only been four southern women candidates in the past ten years, therefore possibly skewing the results of this relationship.

The third relationship tested involving region is its effect on party identification. Presumably, some states lean to one party or the other. Due to the traditional views of southern women, they presumably would have a difficult time receiving a Republican nomination and would be more likely to run on the Democratic ticket. Therefore, the hypothesis for this relationship is that women in the southern states are more likely to run on the democratic ticket than women running in the non-southern states.

Table 5.3**Region and Its Effect on the Party Identification of the Candidate**

	Non-Southern States	Southern States	Total
Democrat	40 (56%)	2 (50%)	42 (55%)
Republican	32 (44%)	2 (50%)	34 (45%)
Total	72	4	76

X2= .093

Degrees of Freedom = 1

In looking at both regional categories, it was a 50-50 split for Democrats and Republicans. Statistically speaking, region does not appear to have an effect on party identification of female candidates. The hypothesis has tested false, since there were about equal percentages for women running in both southern and non-southern states.

Age

The final variable tested was age. Presumably, the majority of the women elected would be older because traditional female stereotypes would not approve of younger women working outside of the home (McGlen, 1991: 80). This stereotype is heightened by public attitudes, which have been one of several barriers women have faced in running for elected office. It is younger women, though, who have enlightened views on the appropriateness of office-holding by women. Still, even though these younger women are working outside the home, becoming increasingly active in feminist organizations, and beginning to close the gap between men and women in terms of ambition, the public has reservations about younger women leaving their traditional place in the home (McGlen, 1991: 79).

The age of the woman candidate was divided into two categories: those under 50 years old and those 50 years old and older. The rationale is based on the traditional female stereotype that women of child-bearing years should remain in the home to take care of the family. Voters have traditionally looked negatively upon younger women running for a full-time elected position. Therefore, my hypothesis is that an older female candidate will have an increased chance of winning their contests than a younger women running in these contests.

Table 6

Age of the Candidate and Its Effect on the Success of the Candidate

	Women Candidates less than 50 years old	Women Candidates more than 50 years old	Total
Won	7 (26%)	11 (28%)	18 (27%)
Lost	20 (74%)	29 (72%)	49 (73%)
Total	27	40	67

X2=.161

Degrees of Freedom = 1

Based on this data, the age of the candidate appears to have little impact on the success or failure of a female candidate. As the table shows, the split of the women who won their contests is 2 percentage points in favor of the older female candidates. Therefore, the data support the hypothesis that older women have a greater chance of winning their contests than younger women do; however, the relationship is virtually nonexistent with a 50-50 split.

Conclusion

Based on the six variables tested, it can be inferred that incumbency and party identification have the most impact on the success of women who choose to run for an elected political office. Although discrepancies between female candidates who won and those who lost were not significant in many cases, there is still a relationship between several variables. In order for women's chances of being elected to be completely understood, future research should focus on directly comparing contests involving two male candidates and contests with one male and one female. This would help to determine if gender is truly a factor between male and female candidates and their chances for a successful bid for political office. In terms of incumbency, it would be beneficial to see the percentage of male challengers attempting to unseat a male incumbent and compare the results with Table 4. Based on this research, the "ideal" female candidate should be age 50 or older and an incumbent Democratic United States Senator from a non-southern state, which did not strongly support Dukakis in 1988.

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