

# Who Me? What We Know About Why Women Don't Run for Political Office

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**One fundamental conclusion I've reached is that women won't get elected to anything unless they run for it. If your name isn't on the ballot, you can't get votes. So there's no point in complaining about representation of women.**

**Ruth Bachhuber Doyle**  
quoted in the Wisconsin State Journal in 1952

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## INTRODUCTION

The scholarly literature is full of information about the barriers women face to seeking elected office and why many women simply do not run. As more women make the leap toward holding elected office and more organizations seek to recruit women to run, it is essential to recognize and overcome the barriers to success.

This paper provides a summary of research on gender and the decision to run (or not to run) for elective office. This review is not intended to be scholarly or comprehensive, but offers a representative and practical selection of findings from leading researchers. This paper is intended to serve as a resource in moving beyond stereotypes that hold women back and toward the promise of greater political diversity and representation in Wisconsin's state and local governments.

## WHERE WE ARE TODAY

**Women and Elected Office.** Women hold some of Wisconsin's most visible state and federal elected offices—from Lieutenant Governor to Chief Justice of the Wisconsin Supreme Court to Congresswoman. A report by the Wisconsin Women's Council, however, revealed that women made up only about 20 percent of elected local government offices and 10 percent of elected leadership positions in local governments. Nearly 1,100 units of local government—31 cities (including Milwaukee), 112 villages, 930 towns and 25 school districts—were without any women on the elected governing boards (e.g., city council, county board, school board, etc.).

**Women as Voters.** Wisconsin women are among the most likely in the country to vote, ranking Wisconsin 5<sup>th</sup> among all states. Wisconsin women are also more likely than men to vote—69% of women turned out to vote versus 66% of men in the November 2000 elections. (IWPR 2004)

**Women in the Labor Force.** Women are big contributors to family budgets and major players in Wisconsin's economic health. Wisconsin women are among the most likely in the nation to work. Wisconsin ranks 5<sup>th</sup> among all states, with 66% of women in the workforce compared to 56% of women nationally. Mothers with young children, in particular, have very high labor force participation in Wisconsin compared to other states. In Wisconsin, nearly three-quarters of women with children under 18, and 70 percent of women with children under age 6, are in the labor force. (IWPR 2004)

**Women's Impact on the Economy.** Nationally, 55 percent of married women in the labor force earn half or more of their family income. Women are responsible for 85 percent of all consumer purchases, account for 47 percent of all investors and own 46 percent of all privately held companies. Combined, American women's economic impact adds up to more than \$5 trillion annually—a sum equal to half of the U.S. Gross Domestic Product (see Milwaukee Women inc., 2004).

## NOT ENOUGH WOMEN RUN

Historically, women have made up a small percentage of general election candidates for higher office. Between 1972 and 1992, women

made up only 7 percent of candidates for the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate and only 6 percent of gubernatorial candidates (NWPC, 1994).

It is only recently that the number of candidates nationally for state legislative seats exceeded the 1992 record.. In 2006, 2,429 women were general election candidates for state legislative seats, up from the previous high of 2,375 women candidates in 1992 (CAWP Information Bank). In 2007, CAWP calculates that women hold 1,734, or 23.5%, of seats in U.S. state legislatures.

There is little, if any, data on women as a share of candidates for elected offices in local government in Wisconsin, or nationally.

### WHY WOMEN DON'T RUN

Societal attitudes about electing women have changed dramatically in the last 25 years. Gender bias, once a huge barrier to active participation in elected political life, has decreased markedly. Some researchers have gone so far as to claim that “winning an election is no longer tied to the sex of a candidate” (see, Seltzer, 1997).

Research tells us, however, that gender socialization plays perhaps the greatest role in whether women and men self-identify with politics and express ambition to seek elected office—referred to in academic research as the "candidate emergence process" (see, Lawless and Fox, 2004).

### WHO ME?

A Citizen Political Ambition Study (Lawless and Fox, 2004 and 2005) was used to survey and interview more than 3,700 lawyers, business leaders, executives, educators and political activists—women and men who work in professions that typically precede candidacy. The study looked nationwide at potential candidates, self-perception and motivation regarding political office.

Lawless and Fox found that women who share the same personal characteristics and professional credentials as men express significantly lower levels of political ambition to hold elective office.

They identified two key factors explain this gender gap: first, women are far less likely than men to be encouraged to run for office; and second, women are significantly less likely than men to view themselves as qualified to run.

<b>Question: Have you ever thought about running for office?</b>		
	Women	Men
Yes, I have seriously considered it.	10%	19%
Yes, it has crossed my mind.	33%	40%
No, I have never thought about it.	57%	41%

Lawless and Fox (2005), Table 3.2, p. 44 (excerpt)

- Across occupations such as lawyers, business leaders and executives and educators, men were twice as likely as women to have "seriously considered" running for office.
- Despite success in often male-dominated professions, women were still twice as likely as men to rate themselves "not at all qualified" to run for office; while men were about two-thirds more likely than women to consider themselves "qualified" or "very qualified".
- Women were less likely than men to think they would win their first race. Only 25 percent of female potential candidates, compared to 37 percent of males, thought that an electoral victory would be "likely" or "very likely."
- Women received less encouragement to run than men. Thirty-two percent of women, compared to 43 percent of men, received the suggestion to run for office from either someone involved in the political arena or within their personal life. Such encouragement often more than doubled the likelihood of considering a candidacy.

**Did You Know: When comparing men running as incumbents to women running as incumbents, men running for open seats to women running for open seats and men running as challengers to women running as challengers, men had no advantage over women—women won as high a percentage of their races as men. (NWPC, 1994)**

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***"As a college intern in the Governor's office working on pay equity ... I was asked to monitor meetings of all sorts -- city council meetings, county board meetings, committee meetings, and the like. By attending all of these meetings, watching and listening to the proceedings over a period of time, I came to understand the political process. It was de-mystified for me. What had previously seemed so complicated was now understandable and I gradually began to think, "Hey, I can do that!"***

***U.S. Representative Tammy Baldwin***

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- Contrary to stereotypes, however, women likely to consider candidacy, viewed the activities associated with campaigning as positively as did men, including attending fundraisers, dealing with party officials, going door-to-door to meet constituents, press/media, and devoting time to running for office.

A study of elected leaders age 35 and younger, male and female, in municipal, state, and national offices, found that they "exhibited a striking sense of personal efficacy, a "can do" attitude rooted in the belief that they have what it takes to get things done." (Mandel, 2002)

By comparison, however, Lawless and Fox's found that across all demographic factors—age party affiliation, income and profession—women in typical feeder occupations to elected office were less likely than men to express interest in seeking public office. Among women, however, there were some interesting differences:

- Women with higher incomes were more likely to consider a candidacy than women with lower incomes. Men were as likely to consider running for office across all income levels.
- Women with more responsibilities for household tasks were less interested in holding office. There was no difference for men.

- When women did think of running, they were more likely to be interested in local politics. Among possible local offices, however, only school board attracted substantially more interest from women than men.

Despite research that finds women perform as well as men once elected, "women are less likely to express an interest in running for political office, less likely than men to view themselves as qualified and less likely to receive encouragement from party leaders, elected officials and political activists" (Lawless and Fox, 2005). On the bright side, they found that when women receive external support from both political and non-political sources, they are twice as likely to run.

#### **SUGAR & SPICE & EVERYTHING NICE ....**

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***A married young elected leader said she was portrayed during the election as about to have children (thereby neglecting her constituents) and another said she was asked, "Who is going to watch the baby?" ... The female young elected leaders who were single said they faced gossip, even slanderous comments, about their sexual habits. Male candidates did not mention this as a problem for them.***

***Ruth Mandel, 2004  
Director, Eagleton Institute  
of Politics at Rutgers***

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The Lawless and Fox study concludes that the gender gap in political ambition is the result of longstanding patterns of traditional gender socialization persistent in American culture.

They argue that the decision to run for public office is not a spontaneous one, but "a culmination of a long, personal evolution that stretches back to early family life." One of the most complex barriers to a woman's decision to run for office is her greater sense of self-doubt about her abilities and qualifications.

Additionally, they posit that the gendered division of labor of women in the private/family sphere and men in the public sphere has resulted in male dominance in the political arena to the exclusion of women. As a result, domestic and family responsibilities weigh heavily as women consider whether to emerge as a candidate.

## **BUMPING THE POLITICAL GLASS CEILING & THE POWER OF INCUMBENCY**

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**When my colleagues elect me as speaker, we will not just break through a glass ceiling, we will break through a marble ceiling. In more than 200 years of history, there was an established pecking order — and I cut in line.**

**U.S. Representative Nancy Pelosi  
Speaker of the House**

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Studies find that among high-level state and federal offices, re-election rates for incumbents average as much as 95 percent. A study by the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) found further that almost three-quarters of incumbents in Congressional races received more than 60 percent of the vote against a challenger.

It is no surprise then that most candidates that win Congressional seats do so in open seats rather than in battles with incumbents. As a result, access to these high level elected offices is slow. IWPR also found that "women's likelihood of winning influences their decisions to become candidates—even more so, it seems, than it does for men." (See Palmer, 2001)

## **STYLE OVER SUBSTANCE**

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***It doesn't matter what I say about an issue, if I have a run in my pantyhose, that is all anyone will talk about.***

***U.S. Senator Blanche Lincoln  
in Aday & Devitt, 2000***

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The White House Project analyzed media portrayals of gender on the campaign trail in six 1998 executive campaigns for offices of governor and attorney general, finding:

- Daily newspaper reporters treated female and male candidates equitably in terms of quantity of coverage.
- Journalists were more likely to focus on personal characteristics of female executive candidates.
- Journalists more frequently covered the age, marital status, family and presence of children of female candidates than of male candidates.
- Male candidates received more substantive coverage and their positions or records on the issues highlighted more often than those of female candidates.
- Male candidates were more often quoted backing their claims with evidence.
- Incumbency did not shield female candidates from this type of coverage.

***Which of the following headlines appeared in national and regional papers in January 2007?***

***a. Obama Announces Exploratory Committee in Powder Blue***

***b. Senator Brownback Cuts Hair Prior to Formal Declaration***

***c. Stylists Interpret Messages of Senator Clinton's Accoutrements***

***If you guessed c, you're right. The third headline comes courtesy of the New York Sun. Writer Christopher Faherty spoke to an interior designer and "a stylist who has worked with ambassadors and royal families" to review the fashion, jewelry, posture, and room décor represented in Senator Hillary Clinton's online presidential announcement.***

***from The White House Project web site***

The White House Project study also found associations between reporters' gender and how they covered candidates:

- Male reporters were more likely to highlight personal aspects of female candidates.
- Women journalists were more likely to report personal aspects of both female and male candidates.
- Female reporters were more likely to cover female candidates than were male reporters.
- Both female and male reporters were more likely to focus on a male candidate's issue positions or records.
- Both female and male reporters were less likely to quote female candidates supporting their claims with evidence.

**PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS: DO WOMEN GET THE BENEFIT OF THE DOUBT?**

The White House Project also analyzed how voters responded to images and messages of women running for state executive offices. The primary goal of the research was to address the most important problem facing women candidates running for executive offices: how to portray strength and effectiveness using 30 and 60 second television spots. They reported that:

- Women seeking executive office often do not get the "benefit of the doubt" from voters to the same degree as do men. This is especially true among older women voters.
- Voters, especially male voters, are more likely to question a woman candidate's use of personal biography in their campaigns.
- Women candidates must avoid appearing too casual or too glamorous, as those images undermine their credibility in voters' minds.
- Political endorsements do not appear to be as effective for women candidates.

- Demonstrating a proven record is critical for female candidates to show that they can be effective leaders.
- Women candidates gain credibility in voters' minds when they talk about crime, taxes, and the economy.
- Voters respond better to women candidates who appear in formal settings and wear formal attire.
- Talking in active language and using tough statements allows women to position themselves to take on a tough opponent or challenge.

**FILLING THE PIPELINE**

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***In the unpredictable world of politics, there may be a crystal ball in which to glimpse leaders of the future. Many of them are already in view, holding elective offices all across the country.***

***Ruth Mandel (2004)***

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A study by the Eagleton Institute of Politics found that among today's top elected officials, more than half were elected by age 35 (Mandel, 2002).

This study also found that the vast majority of young elected officials work full-time in addition to holding office. For women aged 25 to 35, peak childbearing and child-rearing years, this presents

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Many officials holding high-levels offices won their first elective office at age 35 or younger:

U.S. Presidents during the 20 <sup>th</sup> /21 <sup>st</sup> centuries	12 of 19	63%
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Among officials serving in 2003:

U.S. Senators	57 of 100	53%
U.S. Representatives	215 of 435	49%
Governors	25 of 50	50%

*from Mandel, 2004*

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a kind of "double jeopardy" for carving out the time and motivation to take on another major commitment through elective office.

Night and weekend meetings, dinners, events, overnight trips, constituent services, requests to serve on volunteer boards and charitable events, lack of privacy, unpredictable schedules ... all the demands of public office that create barriers and conflicts particularly for women.

And yet, early entry into the political pipeline and exposure to political life is critical to advancing women's political participation.

"Women's historic exclusion from the professions that tend to lead to political careers also accounts for the gender disparities in office holding" (Lawless and Fox, 2005). They report that law, business, education and politics are the leading professions that precede congressional careers, with far more men than women in these positions.

While women account for more than half of graduates of colleges, universities and many advanced and professional degree programs, men overwhelmingly dominate the upper ranks in all these professions. This issue resonates particularly in Wisconsin which lags the nation for the share of women employed in managerial and professional occupations – with Wisconsin ranking 46<sup>th</sup> among all states (IWPR, 2006).

## **DOES GENDER MATTER?**

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**The fact that I'm a woman, the fact that I'm a mom, is part of who I am.**

***U.S. Senator Hillary Clinton***

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Studies on the impact of women in state legislatures found differences—a gender gap—between female and male office holders. (See, O'Connor; CAWP, 1988; and Caiazza, 2002.)

- Women placed higher priority and spent more time on equity issues related to the economically disadvantaged and rights for women and children.

- Female legislators gave higher priority to policies related to education, safety such as rape shield laws, domestic violence legislation and anti-drunk driving initiatives, as well as economic issues such as child care, family leave, child support and women's health.
- It was women state lawmakers who took the issue of family and medical leave and saw its passage in nearly all states (including Wisconsin) and ultimately into federal law.

O'Connor's research also found that female state legislators receive more constituent casework requests and are persistent in following through for the constituents they serve. O'Connor also reported that women introduce most legislation dealing with women's issues.

Issue identification is only part of the story. A study from the Center on American Women and Politics (CAWP, 1988) found that women and men operate differently inside government. Male and female legislators agreed that:

- Women officials were more likely to bring citizens into the political process. Women reported citizen engagement was very helpful in identifying, developing and working on their priority issues.
- Women were more likely to opt for government in public view rather than behind closed doors.
- Women were more responsive to groups previously denied full access to the policy-making process and increasing access of the economically disadvantaged into the legislative process.
- Parallel to findings in corporate America, women in positions of policy influence contribute to improved governance and stewardship and serve an important role as information gatherers and consensus builders.

Research from the private sector also suggests that corporations that embrace diversity are more open to thinking in a broad way about their mission, more connected to their customers and more open

to new approaches to how and why they operate. According to a study by Milwaukee Women, Inc, companies that recruit, retain and advance women have a demonstrated competitive advantage in the global marketplace and provide greater returns to stockholders.

Research in the corporate sector also shows that companies that excel in recognizing the benefits of women's leadership know that it is critical to represent the interests and views of a significant portion of their employees, customers and investors (Milwaukee Women Inc, 2004).

The same holds true in the public sector. Pressures on the public sector to streamline, cut taxes and continue to providing increasing levels of services have never been greater. Many of these tradeoffs will come in areas of education and health and human services as Wisconsin's population continues to age. Wisconsin is among the nation's older – and aging -- states.

## CHANGING THE FACE OF ELECTED OFFICE

We cannot afford to ignore the largely untapped pool of women leaders in seeking to fill our elected and appointed public offices. This not a social issue of parity or fairness, but an economic imperative for our state to reach out and tap the other half of the population—the large pool of women civic, business and community leaders.

The solution to this problem is not simple. The interplay of structural and social barriers to women's participation in the political arena require new methods of support, and new thinking by public sector officials at all levels of government about how to attract and retain diversity in their ranks. By bringing more qualified women to the political table, we make our government more representative of our population and we add diverse perspectives and insights to the decision-making process.

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***By filling the leadership pipeline with a richly diverse, critical mass of women, we make American institutions, businesses and government truly representative .... When women leaders bring their voices, vision and leadership to the table alongside men, the debate is more robust and the policy is more inclusive and sustainable.***

***Marie C. Wilson, The White House Project***

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### SELECTED LINKS AND RESOURCES

#### WISCONSIN

Running for Local Elected Office in WI  
<http://www.uwex.edu/lgc/elections.htm>

New Leadership Wisconsin, Mt. Mary College  
<http://www.mtmary.edu/cawp.htm>

WI Women's Council  
<http://womenscouncil.wi.gov>

Wisconsin State Elections Board  
<http://www.uwex.edu/lgc/elections.htm>

#### NATIONAL

The White House Project – Run, Vote, Lead  
<http://www.thewhitehouseproject.org/voterunlead/>

Center for Women and American Politics  
<http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/>

Emily's List Training & Campaign Jobs Program  
<http://www.emilyslist.org/do/jobs/index.html>

National Federation of Republican Women  
Campaign Management School  
[http://www.nfrw.org/programs/political\\_education.htm](http://www.nfrw.org/programs/political_education.htm)

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