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Political Ambition: Where Are All the Women?

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Political Ambition: Where Are All the Women?

Abstract

Why do so few women hold elected office on local government bodies? The answer to this question encompasses a combination of barriers to running for office. The research discussed in this article involved two surveys conducted in Wisconsin. The findings indicate that in addition to systemic barriers, such as time away from work, many women are hesitant to serve on local governing bodies for other reasons, including concerns related to confidence and potentially inaccurate perceptions. This cautiousness was not as evident in male potential candidates. Understanding the barriers women face may inform how Extension educators work to address skewed compositions of local governing bodies as part of capacity-building efforts.

Keywords: [political ambition and gender](#), [running for elected office](#), [local government](#), [women](#), [leadership](#)

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Introduction and Background

Many Extension professionals attend local government meetings and likely have noted the underrepresentation of women on many local government boards and commissions. Indeed, the Wisconsin Women's Council reported in 2015 that statewide women made up less than half of the membership overall on county boards, town boards, village boards, city councils, and school boards. In fact, the report indicated that *no* women served on 75% of Wisconsin's 1,259 town boards and 25% of the state's 402 village boards (Wisconsin Women's Council, 2015). Moreover, as indicated in Table 1, there had been no significant progress during the decade that ended in 2015 (Wisconsin Women's Council, 2015).

Table 1.

Percentages of Women Serving in Local Governing Positions in Wisconsin: 2005 and 2015

Governing entity	2005	2015
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County board	19%	19%
Town board	7%	9%
Mayor	10%	12%
Village board	19%	22%
City council	20%	23%
School board	37%	40%

Note. Source: Wisconsin Women's Council. (2015). *Moving Wisconsin forward, 2015: An analysis of Wisconsin women in elected office.* Retrieved from <http://womenscouncil.wi.gov/docview.asp?docid=27147&locid=2>

The pictures at state and federal levels are much the same. In 2017, the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University reported that women account for less than a quarter of state legislators nationwide, with each state legislature composed of less than 50% women (Center for American Women and Politics, 2017). Additionally, fewer than one in five members of the U.S. Congress are women (Center for American Women and Politics, 2017). Yet women are significantly more likely than men to participate in community service (Smith, 2005). If women are highly engaged in their communities, why are they not represented in local elected office at the same rate as men?

Research has shown that women candidates for Congress are as likely as men to be elected and that women are equally adept at campaign fund-raising. Public opinion polling data generated over several decades have suggested a steady increase in voters' willingness to vote for a female presidential nominee and a concomitant decrease in the percentage of voters who agree that men are better suited emotionally for politics (Lawless & Fox, 2010). Citing numerous studies conducted at the state and federal levels, Lawless and Fox (2010) concluded that "levels of bias are low enough to no longer provide significant impediments to women's chances of election" (pp. 26–27).

If female nominees are just as likely to be elected as their male counterparts, what accounts for the relative dearth of women holding local elected office? Researchers have well documented the answer to this question for state and federal offices: Women are simply less likely to run (Carroll & Sanbonmatsu, 2013; Dittmar, 2015; Fox, 2003). According to Fox (2003), although women vote at the same rate as men and are equally interested in policy development, they are "significantly less likely than men to have ever considered running for office" (p. 4). Fox (2003) emphasized that women's lack of interest in seeking office "stands out as the largest gender difference in any area of political participation" (p. 4). Additionally, Lawless and Fox (2010) noted that "there is a glaring lack of empirical research that focuses on gender and the decision to run for office" (p. 3). We sought to address part of this gap in the research by shedding light on the reasons women do not run for local office in Wisconsin.

Building the capacity of local government fits squarely within the community development sphere of Extension's role. In much of rural Wisconsin, communities struggle with uncontested local elections and experience difficulties encouraging anyone to run. At the same time, the vast majority of local elected officials are male, resulting in a composition within local government that is not representative of the entire population. Increasing community engagement by unrepresented segments of the population is necessary for building community capacity. Consequently, we focused our research on why a significant part of the population lacks political ambition (i.e.,

the desire to run for and hold elected public office). Extension has an appropriate role to play in engaging all parts of the population to build community capacity. We believe Extension is particularly well positioned to work on this issue precisely because the organization is neutral. For these reasons, Extension educators need to understand what affects women's political ambition with regard to local government.

What is more, previous studies have shown that women who hold elected office are more likely to advocate for issues that affect families and women than their male counterparts are (Lawless & Fox, 2010). It is critical that relevant concerns be raised and women's voices heard. A representative democracy depends on hearing the voices and addressing the concerns of all citizens. Excluding these voices, unintentionally or not, reduces the effectiveness of our democratic institutions.

We are advocating not that Extension educators themselves recruit specific individuals to run for office but that educators view addressing the skewed compositions of local governing bodies as one more way that they might engage in community capacity building. Efforts to ameliorate the low share of women holding local public office can help strengthen local boards and councils. Although many factors influence the decision by anyone to run for elected office, some factors weigh more heavily on women. Our research addressed the factors that affect potential candidates' decisions regarding running for local elected office in Wisconsin and, in particular, factors affecting women's political ambition related to local elected offices. Armed with an understanding of why more women do not run for local elected office, Extension professionals could develop programs and initiatives designed to encourage more women to seek elected office and to educate those involved in the recruitment of candidates for elected office.

Methodology

We administered surveys to two cohorts. One comprised *potential* local elected officials, and the other consisted of all county board supervisors serving in Wisconsin in the summer of 2015. The surveys were practically identical and were adapted from surveys included in Fox and Lawless's 2010 book *It Still Takes a Candidate: Why Women Don't Run for Office*. We made some language changes to account for the fact that one cohort had never run for office and the other was actually holding office.

To generate the pool of potential candidates, we enlisted a University of Wisconsin–Extension educator in each of Wisconsin's 72 counties. We asked each educator to supply the names and contact information of five men and five women in the county who would make good local elected officials and had not run for local office. We did not provide criteria to the local educators; rather, we left it up to them to use their own judgment. In fact, we deliberately did not define what makes a "good" candidate for local elected office because research has shown that the definition is subjective (Murray, 2015). To mitigate the bias of surveying only potential candidates who had been identified by Extension educators, we asked each Extension educator to supply us with names and contact information of an additional six leaders in the county. In turn, we requested from these leaders the names and contact information of five men and five women they deemed to be good candidates for local office, again without providing any criteria other than the requirement that the person had never run for office. The pool ultimately contained 353 contacts from 38 counties representing both urban and rural portions of the state.

The University of Wisconsin–River Falls Survey Research Center conducted the survey, employing standard protocol. Participants were invited to complete the survey online. Those who did not complete the survey online were later sent a hard copy to complete. We received 241 usable responses from the potential candidates (68% response rate), and of those, 64% were women. We also received 592 usable responses from the group of 1,609

county board supervisors (37% response rate), and of those, 23% were women.

Results and Discussion

We asked the potential candidates and the current county board supervisors a series of questions to assess their perceptions of

- barriers to running for office and negative aspects of holding office;
- qualifications beneficial to holding office; and
- encouragement to run for office.

We surmised that there would be not only differences between those who had never run and those already elected but also differences between women and men.

Barriers to Running for Office and Negative Aspects of Holding Office

Both the potential candidates and the county board supervisors were asked a series of questions designed to determine the barriers to running for and holding local elected office. The respondents rated 30 items related to personal background, voter perceptions, campaigning, and life in elected office using a scale with the response options *not a barrier*, *a slight barrier*, *a barrier*, and *a major barrier*. The items included systemic barriers as well as perceptual ones. For every item, the potential candidates considered the item to be more of a barrier than the supervisors did. Table 2 lists the top 10 barriers identified through the potential candidates' ratings and the corresponding results from the supervisors.

Table 2.

Top 10 Barriers to Running for and Holding Local Office from the Perspective of Potential Candidates

Item	Potential candidates rating item as a barrier or major barrier	County board supervisors rating item as a barrier or major barrier
Lack of willingness to ask for campaign funds	58%	14%
Time away from family or home responsibilities	57%	11%
Time away from enjoyable activities	53%	12%
Time away from work responsibilities	51%	14%
Lack of willingness	41%	9%

to meet voters door to door		
Negative political atmosphere	38%	9%
Impact on personal finances	35%	6%
Constituent criticism directed at family members	29%	6%
Concern about criticism	26%	5%
Lack of support for candidacy	25%	1%

Even though they had been recognized by local leaders as "well qualified" for local elected office, the potential candidates had serious concerns about campaigning and holding office. The barriers they identified may relate more to perceptions they had than to the realities local elected officials face. This discrepancy may suggest an opportunity for Extension staff to provide educational programming on what is actually required to run for local elected office and the reality of life in local elected office.

We also compared the responses of female and male potential candidates regarding barriers. For five items, there was a statistically significant difference in how the items were perceived by women versus men, with women more likely than men to indicate that the items were barriers (Table 3).

Table 3.

Differences Between Female and Male Potential Candidates with Regard to Barriers to Running for and Holding Local Office

Item	Female potential candidates indicating the item was a barrier	Male potential candidates indicating the item was a barrier
Concern about criticism	31%	18%
Concern about running against an incumbent	24%	6%
Fear of losing the election	20%	8%
Concern about making decisions in public	19%	5%

Uncertainty regarding ability to do a good job	8%	4%
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Note. A chi-square test indicated that the relationship between gender and each of these barriers was statistically significant ($p < .06$).

In many instances when both women and men identified the same item as a barrier, women did not rate that individual barrier as substantially more of an obstacle than men did. However, women did identify more items as barriers (Table 4). Therefore, when considered together, the larger number of barriers may be insurmountable for some women potential candidates.

Table 4.

Comparison of Barriers to Running for and Holding Local Office Perceived by Female and Male Potential Candidates (in Order from Greatest to Least Discrepancy Between Genders)

Barrier	Percentage of difference
Barriers that concern women more than men	
Concern about running against an incumbent	+18%
Negative political atmosphere	+15%
Concern about making decisions in public	+14%
Concern about gender bias	+14%
Time away from work responsibilities	+13%
Concern about criticism	+13%
Fear of losing the election	+12%
Concern about "otherness" such as being a new resident, English as a second language, etc.	+11%
Lack of willingness to meet voters door to door	+10%
Lack of willingness to speak in public	+6%
Lack of encouragement to run	+6%
Lack of understanding of the rules of local government	+6%
Uncertainty that local government enables making a positive difference	+5%
Lack of understanding of how to run for local office	+5%
Uncertainty regarding ability to do a good job	+5%
Lack of knowledge of local government	+4%
Lack of knowledge of local issues	+4%

Lack of willingness to ask for campaign funds	+3%
Time away from enjoyable activities	+3%
Lack of willingness to work with the media	+3%
Lack of support for candidacy	+2%
Lack of impressive credentials	+2%
Lack of passion for addressing local issues	+1%
Concern about age bias	+1%
Concern about race or ethnicity bias	+1%
Barriers that concern men more than women	
Time away from family or home responsibilities	+13%
Constituent criticism directed at family members	+7%
Impact on personal finances	+3%
Concern about personal health issues	+2%
Concern about sexual orientation bias	+1%

With a greater understanding of these differences between female and male potential candidates, Extension educators can tailor programming to better reflect the needs of these groups. For example, Extension educators could work with community leaders who reach out to and recruit women, addressing female candidates' specific concerns regarding campaigning and holding office.

It is important to note that the majority of potential candidates (both women and men) rated barriers related to time away from work, family, and other activities among their greatest concerns. However, many of the barriers, especially those cited more often by women, relate to perceptions around preparedness for office and incivility during a campaign and while holding office. These barriers may be of most interest to Extension educators because they are the barriers most susceptible to the influence of education.

Qualifications Beneficial to Holding Office

We asked both the potential candidates and the county board supervisors to indicate how important specific qualifications were in making a candidate competitive when running for local elected office. Our question focused on 16 specific qualifications, including experiences such as organizing an event, serving on a nonprofit board, soliciting funds, and so on. When we compared the responses from the potential candidates and the supervisors, we found that the same five qualifications were the most commonly identified by both groups (Table 5).

Table 5.

Perspectives on the Most Important Qualifications for Candidates for Local Elected Office

Qualification	Potential candidates	County board supervisors
Being informed on local public policy	98%	86%

issues

Knowing many people in the community	84%	75%
Attending local government meetings	72%	61%
Speaking in public	69%	48%
Running an organization, business, or foundation	51%	36%

In nearly every case, a lower percentage of supervisors deemed it important to have the specified qualification. In other words, people who have not run for office may be placing artificially high expectations on what is required to be in office.

We also asked the supervisors to indicate which of those same qualifications they possessed prior to running for office. Even for the top five qualifications the supervisors listed as the most important, in no case did more than half indicate that they had possessed the qualification when they first ran for office. We also asked the potential candidates about their qualifications, and their responses were similar to the supervisors. The majority of potential candidates reported not possessing most of the qualifications.

While the qualifications identified may be important, they are not essential to running for or serving in local elected office. Our findings in this regard reaffirm that potential candidates may have artificially high expectations about what is necessary to serve in local elected office. This circumstance provides an opportunity for Extension educators to develop programming underscoring the idea that potential candidates may already have the skills needed to be elected officials.

When we looked further into the data for potential candidates, we found that women and men reported similar experiences as contributing to being qualified to hold public office. However, when asked whether they considered themselves as qualified to serve in elected office, significantly more men (71%) than women (60%) claimed they were qualified. This finding parallels research results related to political ambition at the state and national levels, which have indicated that by a margin of more than 20%, women are less likely than men to claim they are qualified to hold office (Fox, 2003).

Women may be more hesitant to enter this arena if they feel they do not have every one of the qualifications they deem necessary for doing so. They may require themselves to be very qualified in order to run for office, whereas men may be more willing to learn as they go (Lawless & Fox, 2010). In a recent *Harvard Business Review* article about why men and women do not apply for jobs, the author stated, "What held them [women] back from applying was not a mistaken perception about themselves, but a mistaken perception about the hiring process" (Mohr, 2014, p. 3). On the basis of our research, we think women may have similar misconceptions about the process of running for and holding local office. These misperceptions may imply another opportunity for Extension educators to work with local leaders to engage women. Specifically, they can help women recognize that they do not need to "check all the boxes" in order to add their names to the ballot.

Encouragement to Run for Office

The most cited reason county board supervisors had run for local elected office was that someone encouraged them to run. The survey results indicate that 76% percent of the supervisors had been asked to run for local

elected office and that the most influential encouragement had come from their friends and other elected officials. Sixty percent of the potential candidates had been encouraged to run, and they indicated overall that the most influential encouragement had come from their friends. A segment of female potential candidates indicated that the most influential encouragement had come from other women.

Women may think about running for office differently than men do, so recruitment efforts that appeal to men may not work for women. Female candidates may require a suggestion from someone else before pursuing office. Recruiting self-starters, through mass advertisements and mailings, likely will continue to yield a field of mostly men. Increasing the number of women candidates may be less about recruitment in general and more about *how* women are approached (Crowder-Meyer, 2013).

The information about influences on female potential candidates highlights another opportunity for Extension educators. They can train recruiters on how best to approach women to encourage them to run for office. Other findings from the survey provide background for such efforts. Extension educators and others attempting to encourage women to run for office can assuage the concerns potential candidates may have by shedding light on the realities of life in local elected office. For example, most local campaigns do not require significant financial resources. Extension also can help recruiters communicate to female potential candidates that they likely have many of the experiences and abilities necessary to run for office. Additionally, candidate recruiters can back women candidates by providing a strong support network prior to, during, and after an election. Support could include assistance in navigating election laws, introducing potential candidates to key constituents, and helping candidates learn best practices for campaigning.

Implications for Extension

Our research indicates that women face different challenges than men when it comes to running for local office. Understanding these challenges enables Extension professionals to encourage more women to run by taking actions such as those suggested here.

- Provide training and opportunities for women to increase their knowledge about and experience for running for office. For example, Extension leadership development programs
 - could include targeted educational programming on building professional networks, participating in local government meetings, and leading groups or managing projects and
 - could address the many issues and topics local government can affect, as a way to interest and engage more women.
- Develop a candidate training curriculum that focuses on the realities of running for and serving in local government.
- Teach elected officials (especially women) and candidate recruiters to consider women in their recruitment efforts. The research findings reported here can be used for developing tools and talking points to effectively reach female potential candidates. Those talking points could include the following messages:
 - The barriers that concern a potential candidate may be based on misperceptions. For example, women expressed concerns about raising campaign funds. However, the need to raise campaign funds is minimal or

nonexistent in many local elections.

- Candidates do not need to possess 100% of the abilities and experiences they perceive are mandatory for running for local office. Elected officials can learn on the job, and there are widely varied resources to support and assist local officials.
- Developing support networks can be highly beneficial before, during, and after an election.

This information may help Extension educators encourage greater engagement in local government.

Conclusions

The study reported here expands on the findings of previous studies, which addressed women's political ambitions relative to state and federal offices, to address women's involvement in local elected offices. The women in our study identified more barriers to running for office than did the male respondents. In fact, for 25 of the 30 barriers we asked about, women were more likely than men to cite the barrier as an impediment to running for office. We believe that these barriers, added together, create a cumulative effect that severely diminishes the number of women willing to consider running for office.

It is critical to have women's voices and issues represented in local governments. Community leaders who value diverse voices on their governing bodies may need to take a closer look at their recruitment efforts. Although both men and women may need to be asked to run for office, the way in which women are most effectively encouraged to run may be different. Recruiting qualified women to run for office may take more than simply letting women know there is a vacancy or an upcoming election. Getting new women to run, even people who are already viewed as having leadership potential, likely will require explicit, targeted efforts (Fox & Lawless, 2010).

Systemic barriers continue to exist, but women cite a number of confidence/perception barriers that do not seem as troublesome to men. Our research leads us to believe that effectively encouraging more women to run will involve more discussions on the realities of campaigning and serving in local office as well as an emphasis on the strengths of the potential candidates. Community activists looking to recruit female candidates may need to spend time not only identifying qualified female candidates but also backing their candidacies through mentorship and support networks.

In addition, candidates for local office could be disavowed of distorted perspectives on the impact that candidacy would have on their personal finances and the amount of time that holding office would take away from other activities. Similarly, potential candidates could be encouraged to assess the culture of their local boards and commissions; it may very well be that the local civic culture is not characterized by the same level of rancor and negativity found at state and federal levels. Candidate recruiters will need to spend time convincing some candidates that they have the necessary skills, knowledge, and support to run a successful campaign and make a difference once elected.

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