

WOMEN IN PUBLIC OFFICE: WHAT INFLUENCES WOMEN TO ENTER POLITICAL LIFE?

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to study was to identify common elements among women who have held or currently hold positions in public office. The intention is to foster a change in the political system in the United States, as there is disparity in the gender distribution in the elected leadership roles. Multiple case studies conducted of three women from the NH State legislature to identify similarities in their stories. They had these elements in common: strong mothers, mentoring, and competition. More research is needed to learn if these elements are true for other women. If these elements are true, then educators may want to look at incorporating them into their curriculum to create a generation of female political leaders.

Introduction

The purpose of this research was to interview three women who have successfully run for political office in the state of New Hampshire (NH). A study conducted by Lawless and Fox (2013) indicates why women don't run for office, this paper explores why the women studied did. They surveyed college-aged students, and found women to be less likely than men to have considered running for office and to express interest in a candidacy at some point in the future, or to even consider elective office a desirable profession. The intent is to assist women by creating educational opportunities to support them so that more women may run. In the United States (US) there is gender disparity in the elected leadership roles; women make up more than half of the population yet only occupy 16-20% of leadership positions (Tarr-Whelan, 2011, p. 166). A government doesn't truly represent its citizens when there is such a gender gap in elected positions.

Review of Literature

There is social and economic value to having more women hold political office. Research sponsored by the World Bank demonstrates the value of women in office. When women are empowered as political leaders, countries often experience higher standards of living with positive developments in education, infrastructure, health (Markham, 2013; Stanwick & Kleeman, 1983) and a lower level of corruption (Dollar, Fisman, & Gatti, 1999; Hunt, 2007). Additionally, "there is a correlation between women holding political office and the overall economic competitiveness of a nation" (Hunt, 2007, para. 8). "Worldwide, female legislators tend to concentrate on helping marginalized citizens" (Hunt, 2007, para. 10). If the research conducted on women with strong leadership roles in other countries holds true for the U.S., then more women in leadership will allow the U.S. citizens the opportunity to have a more robust economy with less corruption.

The literature points to key factors that influence a woman's decision not to run for political office there is a persistent gender gap in political ambition (Lawless & Fox, 2013).

- Women were less likely than men to receive support (mentorship) to run for office (Lawless & Fox, 2013, p. ii).
- Young men are more likely than young women to have played organized sports and care about winning, therefore they have less experience with competition (Lawless & Fox, 2013, p. ii).

This section will explore the literature that supports these factors.

Mentor

Mentoring remains a critical activity for career advancement. There are many definitions of mentoring, for this research, this definition will be used: a relationship in which a mentor supports the professional and personal development of another by sharing his or her experiences, influence or expertise (Driscoll, Parkes, Tilley-Lubbs, Brill, & Pitts Bannister, 2009, pp. 6–7). Studies support the importance of mentoring to develop a positive sense of self, learn about organization culture, and build stronger political skills and networking opportunities (Ruminski & Holba, 2012, p. 67). This is true for both men and women however,

women don't realize what mentoring can do for them ...When women mentor other women, they can build their own power base. For example, their protégés write about them, quote them, and give them credit during speaking engagements. For the protégé, mentoring offers an opportunity to learn the profession, to connect with powerful and influential people, and to establish an intimate relationship at work (Jeruchim, 1992, pp. xiv–xv).

Women have a more difficult time establishing mentoring relationships than men as mentoring and sponsoring relationships often form between individuals who have common interests or when the junior members remind the more senior members of themselves. This means that men often gravitate toward sponsoring younger men. Since there are so many more men at the top of every industry, the proverbial old-boy network continues to flourish. And since there are already a reduced number of women in leadership roles, it is not possible for the junior women to get enough support unless senior men jump in too (Sandberg & Scovell, 2013).

When there is a shortage of women at the top, peer mentoring may be desirable. Peer mentoring is the term applied when people of equal status mentor one another. A peer is often viewed as having wisdom and experience; hence, he or she can serve as a model and guide (Allen, 1999, p. 456). Models and guides are an important role of a mentor by supporting personal and professional development.

Competition

Researchers Jennifer Lawless and Richard Fox (2013) purport that barriers to political ambition have also shown competition as a barrier. “Young men are more likely than young women to have played organized sports and care about winning” (p. ii). Lawless and Fox (2013), believe that “the competitiveness associated with sports appears to be a significant predictor of interests in running for

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office” (p. 10). Even when there are opportunities for girls to play sports, these opportunities are often not taken. Two examples of women in political office who played competitive sports are Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Governor Sarah Palin. Secretary Clinton played sports as a child. “I played in a girls' summer softball league through high school” (Clinton, 2003, p. 13). Governor Palin characterizes herself “as an athlete who advanced more on tenacity than talent. I wanted sports to be my future but was realistic enough to know I wouldn't always be a player” (Palin, 2009, Chapter 5).

One barrier to girls and women playing competitive sports is that girls are not socialized to be competitive. Female socialization impacts a woman's propensity for competitiveness and running for public office. As an Associate Professor of Political Science at Northern Illinois University and a faculty associate in Women' Studies, Barbara Burrell wrote of the socialization of women. She says, “traditionally women have been socialized to emphasize values such as cooperation, nurturance, sacrifice, harmony, and moralism, whereas men are socialized to prize rationalism, competition, and objectivity” (Burrell, 2004, p. 111). If one must be assertive and competitive to run, then teaching girls to value cooperation through socialization may impact the number of women who are willing to run. Beth Reingold (2008), Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science, at Emory University writes, the “men are taught to be confident, assertive, and self-promoting” (p. 58). Women are socialized to disdain these traits.

Methodology

Three women from the NH general court were interviewed, the guiding questions used were based the literature review as to what influences women not to run for office. The questions were related to family, what influenced them to run for office, and competitive activities in childhood or college. The women had held office from a few months to 18 years. None of the women were NH natives (one moved to NH with the intent of holding public office), all are married, white, and middle to upper class. One of the women is retired. In all cases, they are the eldest daughters. They range in age from mid-forties to mid-sixties.

This qualitative study employed a multiple case study approach; specifically three case studies were conducted. “Qualitative research is an inquiry approach in which the inquirer: explores a central phenomenon (one key concept); asks participants broad, general questions” (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2004, sec. 5). The purpose was to understand how the cases succeeded in politics. This research utilized open ended interview questions. Permission was granted, from Plymouth State University, to conduct this research through their Institutional Research Board.

In the phenomenological study, a common meaning is sought for several people's experiences as a concept or a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). The basic purpose “is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). In this case, it was important to find those shared common or shared experiences to identify how women overcome the barriers described by Lawless and Fox.

The intent of grounded theory research is to “generate or discover a theory” (Creswell, 2013, p. 83). Creswell (2013) writes, “grounded theory is a good design to use when a theory is not available to explain or understand a process” (p. 88). The purpose of the research was not to develop a theory of explanatory framework but to understand the experiences.

The purpose of this study was to understand and learn from the experiences of three N.H. women who were elected to office, which would be instructive to other women interested in seeking public office and could be used to encourage and support more women candidates.

Setting

New Hampshire's population is a million people and just over 50% of its residents are women ("New Hampshire QuickFacts from the U.S. Census Bureau," n.d.). New Hampshire is racially homogeneous, 94% of the residents are white ("New Hampshire QuickFacts from the U.S. Census Bureau," n.d.). New Hampshire residents are educated, 91% have completed high school and 33% have at least a 4-year college degree ("New Hampshire QuickFacts from the U.S. Census Bureau," n.d.).

In the NH state legislature, known as the General Court, women hold 33% these elected positions (Center for American Women and Politics, 2013). The General Court

consists of two chambers, the House of Representatives and the Senate. There are 400 Representatives and 24 Senators, making the General Court the second largest legislature in the United States following the U.S. Congress ... For their time and effort they are paid \$200 per (2 year) term plus mileage costs. Because \$250 per term ("New Hampshire Almanac," n.d.).

Due to the large percentage of women in the General Court vs. the number in the US Legislative Branch, the women legislators from NH may have experiences that would be more informative to other women than women from other states.

The interviews were performed in person and recorded using Evernote™ on the Apple iPad™. These questions were asked:

1. Tell me about yourself?
2. What led you to run for office?
3. Did you have any early experience with office? Say, in school or college?
4. Who were your mentors? Did you have mentors who assisted you with running (or pushed you to run)?
5. Did your parents hold political office?
6. Did you play sports as a child or participate in any competitive activities?
7. Did your mother work outside of the home?
8. What advice would you give to a woman considering running?

Results

The themes emerged from the surveys; they are role of mothers, mentors and the role of competition.

Mothers

All three of the women grew up in homes where their mothers who worked outside of the home. Two of the women were young in the 1950s and 60s where thirty-four percent of the workforce were made up of women (Toossi, n.d.). In the 1970's, when our youngest legislature was a girl, the rate of women working outside the home was forty-three percent (Toossi, n.d.).

One woman grew up on a farm (in the 1950's); her father worked the farm and her mother worked outside of the home to make money. Her mother held a variety of jobs. Her mother was always on the move; she took care of the household, two children, and worked on the farm. In her interview, the legislator said that she had to run to keep up with her mother and describes her mother as very independent (Interview 1, personal conversation, June 28, 2013). The interviewer's tone and body language during this part of the interview conveyed that she deeply treasured and appreciated her mother.

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The second woman's mother was a professional who raised eight children. The legislator was the eldest child. In addition to working in the family pharmacy as a pharmacist, managing the home, raising eight children, her mother also volunteered for two civic organizations (Interview 2, personal conversation, July 6, 2013). Although this was during the 1950's, the subject didn't seem to think that this was remarkable, that this is what people "do."

In the final interview, the mother of the woman interviewed had joined the workforce after a divorce in 1972. Her family went to live with their grandparents who she described as unwell. She described her own mother as

reluctantly working outside of the home. We lived with my grandparents. ... My mother and brother are very shy. I think part of what pushed me to be more outgoing is that I got frustrated with them for instance in the grocery store, my mother would never ask where to find an item. This would make me crazy so I would finally go and ask. I was a polar opposite response to her shyness, although I had been quiet when my parents were still married. (interview 3, personal conversation, July 10, 2013)

She didn't see her mother as a role model but quite the opposite. She spoke in an intimate tone, very quietly, and confidentially.

Peer mentor

Although the research points to the value of mentors in one's life, only one of the legislators answered affirmatively about the influence of mentors in her political life. They did not recognize the peer mentors in their lives. Peer mentoring was the mentoring experience that they had experienced.

The first women ran for office during a mid-year election. When she joined the legislature, she didn't join with a freshman class of legislators. These freshman groups create a cohort that learns the rules of the legislature—they create their own peer network and co-mentor one another. She created her own network of mentors to help her thrive in the legislator.

I ran as an independent and had one contact (in the legislature). This fellow told me that he had a relative that was in the legislature. My first vote was in a special session that was called because there was a crisis in health and human services area and that vote was a very important vote, I knew nothing about it. So I consulted with a person from another town, whom I had never met. She was the cousin of a constituent. I didn't have any other connections and didn't know how to trust at first. I began to try to meet as many people as possible, to get to know at least one person on each committee well enough so that I could consult with them on the subject matter that I didn't have time to learn. At the same time, I got to know the people who sat around me in representative's hall. I got to know the people on my committee, and through those relationships, I learned who to trust. (Interview 1, personal conversation, June 28, 2013)

She created her peer-mentoring group. They helped her to map the landscape of the legislature.

The second woman is married to a fellow legislator. Before moving to NH they had lived in a state where there were very few available elected seats. She said, we "moved to NH to influence state government" (Interview 2, personal conversation, July 6, 2013). They attended a political school to learn how to run for office. When she moved to NH, she spent time in state house observing and learning the process. She doesn't have mentors and she doesn't sit next to her husband because "he doesn't need my help" (Interview 2, personal conversation, July 6, 2013). She sits next to others who she feels need help.

She learned by watching others and through the school. She now uses that knowledge to act as a peer-mentor for others.

The third woman recently entered the general court; this is in her first year as a legislator. She joined the freshman class when she was elected.

We had an orientation which was enormously helpful, we joked about how it felt like freshman year of college, and I'm still friends with the people in my orientation group. (Interview 3, personal conversation, July 10, 2103)

This is a peer-mentoring group as the freshman class supports one another.

She had another political experience with mentoring, as her party had recruited her to run for the legislature twice. The first time she didn't win, the second time she did win. The party provides mentors to assist during the campaign process.

During the first campaign I was mentored. The committee to elect house democrats is made up of current and past state representatives. They do a phenomenal job. They gave us tools, and money. The last week of the campaign, they did a literature drop in the mail. They gave workshops on how to run your voter list, how to create walk able routes, all those kinds of things you couldn't possibly consider. Honestly, it was very helpful. (Interview 3, personal conversation, July 10, 2103)

All three interviews discussed peer mentors, one designed her own peer network, one created her own credibility to become a peer-mentor, and the third woman's entering class became a peer network. The third subject had experienced traditional mentoring as well and peer-mentoring.

Competition

In the literature, a lack of experience with competition was cited as a reason that women do not run. The subjects were of varying ages and experience; two of the three women played sports. "When I got to school, I played competitive basketball. Our team always won. I was terrible at shooting and very good at defense, nobody got past me...I was a Phys-Ed major for a while" (Interview 1, personal conversation, June 28, 2013). She changed her major when she realized that she did not play well enough to be competitive at the college level. One played street hockey and softball (Interview 2, personal conversation, July 7, 2013).

All three legislators had participated in debates, another form of competition. One participant said, "I was on the debate team and can vividly remember that one of the topics was whether or not we should have capital punishment" (Interview 1, personal conversation, June 28, 2013). "I was on the debate team in high school" (Interview 2, personal conversation, July 7, 2013). "I lost the debate but that sort of gave me the (political) bug" (Interview 3, personal conversation, July 10, 2013). Only two of the N.H. State legislators interviewed competed through athletics; however they have all experienced competition through formal debates.

Conclusion

The women had unexpected similarities. In all three cases, their mothers were instrumental mentors as role models, each had enjoyed the experience of peer mentoring, and they had all participated on a debate team.

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In each of the interviews, the mothers of the legislators were important to them. This information may show us how to mother our own children in order to give them the confidence to become women of political influence. Each of the mothers worked outside of the home and managed a family. These lessons became part of the fabric of their eldest daughters' lives.

The research suggests that lack of mentors contributes to the dearth of women in politics; in this case all three women had been involved in mentoring. Peer mentoring was valuable for these women. In addition to providing women with information as to how to raise leaders, women must learn to support one another. Peer-mentors assist one another, as they are equal. The networks that the legislators have established provide so much support that they need to succeed in their positions.

Mentoring is crucial to increase the number of women in politics. Women in political leadership should encourage other women to run and then mentor them.

As for competition, girls should be encouraged to participate in competitive events, including sports. Learning to be competitive is important for someone who may eventually take political office. Incorporating competitive experiences into school curriculum could prove to be beneficial to girls.

The stories of these women point to areas where girls and ultimately women can be supported so that more women will enter politics. Successful role models for girls may help to accomplish this. Girls can be encouraged to participate in competitions in order to give girls the opportunity to learn how to compete.

To validate this research project, more women should be interviewed to see if the experiences of these three women are unique. Additionally, more avenues to increase the number of women in political life could be uncovered through a broader research effort. ■

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