

A Woman's Choice at the State Legislative District Level: A Comparative Case Study of the Northwest

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Abstract

A major concern in the United States is the underrepresentation of women in State Legislatures. Based on data from CAWP at Rutgers University, the growth of female representation has stagnated since the mid-90s. In an attempt to study this trend, I asked the question, are women's preferences for legislative districts different than their male counterparts? I looked specifically at open-seat districts, hypothesizing that women are more likely than men to choose an open-seat district. I compiled a comparative case study of the States in the Northwest, due to its high diversity among various factors including partisanship, urbanization, and population. Due to research methodology limitations, conclusions remain elusive; however, there is support for my hypothesis.

Introduction and Justification

In modern political thought, government is meant to be a reflection of its people. According to one of the most influential political philosophers of the modern era, John Locke, government actually gets its authority and legitimacy from its people (Locke, 1690). When the government becomes an oppressive body to its people, the people are imbued with the right of revolution. This idea was the primary justification the founders used for the American Revolution against their oppressor, the King of England (Jefferson, 1776). But that was in a day when only white males were considered full-fledged citizens. And not only that, violent revolution was much more probable, and far more enticing.

In the United States of America today, the badge of citizenship has been extended to include women, as well as people of color. Yet, the governmental bodies have lagged far behind in their role to descriptively reflect its citizenry. To some, this is a form of oppression. According the Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 21: "Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives" (UDHR). This clause seems to imply that everyone has the right to representation. What exactly representation means will be discussed in greater detail in the literature review section. Suffice it to say that if the citizens of a state feel they are being withheld this right by the fault of the government then they have the right to revolt. However, the revolution that is taking place in today's society is not so much a violent revolution but a political one. Researchers, interest groups, politicians, and others are carrying out this revolution in a civil, yet forceful way.

I feel that is my duty to aide in this civil revolution through research, as one who believes that the government should reflect its citizens both descriptively and substantively. It is for this reason that I have undertaken this research project. I am concerned, in particular, with the underrepresentation of women in American politics. With specific research interests in state politics, I chose to examine this phenomenon within state legislative bodies. I also chose to study the topic in the Northwest region of the United States, namely, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington. I believe this sample gives me a rich variety of state governments to draw conclusions from. The Northwest is highly diverse in terms of partisanship, ideology, population, geography, and its legislative size and professionalism.

My plan for this article is to begin with a brief overview of the relevant literature concerning representation, and then more specifically, the representation of women. I will then transition into my research hypothesis and methodology where I will lay out for the reader what I expect to find in the data, and how I carried out the collecting and organizing of that data. Next I will give a brief discussion on my findings and the implications of those findings. Finally, I will conclude with my thoughts on the successes and shortcomings of the research.

Discussion of Research Question

Briefly stated, my research goal is to answer the following questions: Where are women running? Do women make different choices about where to run than their male counterparts? And are women more likely to choose less competitive races due to election aversion? The reason these questions are important to answer is because if there is a significant difference between men and women, and it is visible, it makes the problem of the underrepresentation of women more ready to be solved. If we can find evidence that women are more likely to choose one race over another, it may help in recruitment efforts, as well as training efforts that parties and interest groups can engage in to increase the number of successful female candidates, which should ultimately increase the representation of women in state legislatures.

Literature Review

The Government of the United States can be classified as a presidential republic, a representative form of democracy. Hanna Pitkin, 1967, defines representation as to “make present again.” This idea speaks to the notion that the political policy making process is done with the citizens’ voices “present.” However, political theorists don’t always think in those simplistic terms. Pitkin thus gives us four concepts of political representation: formalistic, symbolic, descriptive, and substantive (Fenichel, 1967). Though formalistic and symbolic representation are important to gender representation, most research on the subject tends to focus on the descriptive and substantive representation, with descriptive representation getting the bulk of the attention.

Descriptive representation is an important part of the modern democratic process for many reasons, including the way it addresses structural barriers to representation and its ability to produce role models for underrepresented groups (Campbell, 2006). Other findings demonstrate that descriptive representation is critical to feelings of political efficacy (Merolla, Sellers, and Fowler, 2013), which in turn has a major influence on voter behavior (Austin and Pinkleton, 1995).

However, gender representation may be concerned with more than just descriptive representation. Research by Susan J. Carroll, 2001, finds that legislatures that have greater representation of women are more likely to pass legislation that is friendlier to both women and children as opposed to legislatures that are more dominantly male (Carroll, 2001a). Other scholarship shows that female legislators at the national level are much more likely than men to give floor speeches on gendered issues (Pearson and Dancey, 2011) and are of higher quality than male legislators at representing their constituents needs (Anzia and Berry, 2011). This makes it clear that the scope of gender representation spills into the category of substantive representation—the actions that a representative takes on behalf, and in the interest, of the represented (Fenichel, 1967).

In the United States, women are considerably underrepresented. Among other nations, the United States ranks extremely low in the representation of women in their national legislature. But the problem for the United States is not simply its low level of the representation of women in the national assembly, but also on a state-to-state basis in the state legislatures. Though the national average of women legislators for state legislatures is much higher than that of the U.S. Congress (CAWP, 2014), the numbers are still remarkably low in state legislatures when considering that over half of the population is female (U.S. Census, 2010).

Because of this great gender gap in American legislative bodies, many researchers have undertaken the task of answering the question of “why?” Because of the breadth of research, there are several major theories that seek to answer these questions. Two major camps include research that focuses on political institutions, parties and ideology, while others focus on socialization, encouragement, and other similar factors.

Studies, such as a 2002 work by Kira Sanbonmatsu, have shown that one of the major factors that predict proportions of women’s representation in the state legislature is partisan affiliation. That is, states that are more heavily democratic tend to have more female representatives, and state legislatures that are more heavily controlled by Republicans are less representative of women (Sanbonmatsu, 2002). However, this wasn’t always the case. Scholars show that it was in the states that were more dominantly Democratic where women felt the largest barriers to election to the state legislatures in the 1970s and 1980s. It wasn’t until the 1990s that this trend began to turn around (Sanbonmatsu, 2002).

Ideology also matters. Though ideology is similar to partisanship, it is not the same. Partisanship deals with an individual’s party affiliation, while ideology deals with an individual’s personal political beliefs. Ideology is often associated with partisanship in the United States because most republicans self-identify as ideologically right, and most Democrats self-identify as ideologically left (Pew, 2014). The more ideologically conservative a state’s

electorate is, the less likely the state legislature is to be representative of women. And the more ideologically liberal a state's electorate, the more one would predict higher women representation (Elder, 2012).

Institutions also play an important role in influencing the representation of women. For example, research shows that state legislatures that are less professional and have lower salaries tend to have greater representation of women. Higher salaries warrant greater competition and larger amounts of resources to be poured into campaigns, which disadvantages women (Arceneaux, 2001). Though the professionalism and partisan composition of state legislatures affect women in general, they affect women differently depending on their own partisan affiliation primarily due to the fact that Republican and Democratic women candidates often draw from different pools (Sanbonmatsu, 2002). In other words, because Republican and Democratic women draw from different pools of voters, what may be considered a hostile state or district to run a campaign in for a Republican woman, may not be as hostile for a Democratic woman, and vice-versa.

Incumbency is also a large obstacle for women's representation, though it is a large obstacle for any underrepresented group. Research shows that states with term limits and higher turnover aren't predictably more representative of women (Carroll, 2001b). Running against incumbents, however, isn't the greatest obstacle to getting women in elective office. Lawless and Fox, 2004, find that the candidate emergence phase is the most significant determinant that explains the underrepresentation of women in elective offices (Fox and Lawless, 2004). They also find that women are simply less likely to be encouraged to run for political office compared to their male counterparts, and considering encouragement to seek office is a major component of any candidate's decision to run, women are severely disadvantaged by this finding (Fox and Lawless, 2004). In addition, women are more likely than men to cite party support as a significant determining factor on their decision to run for office (Carroll and Sanbonmatsu, 2013).

Behaviorally, research shows that women tend to be more election averse than their male counterparts (Kanthak and Woon, 2014). Women are more likely to avoid electoral competition than are men, thus driving down the potential pool of female candidates. Considering that female candidates are known to be just as likely to win the election they enter (Darcy et al. 1994), this is a significant obstacle to equal representation in terms of gender. If qualified women are choosing not to run due to an aversion to elections, then the electorate may not be able to choose the best candidate for the job.

Research by Fox and Lawless, 2014, finds a significant ambition gap between women and men which stems from political socialization in their youth. The research finds that women in their high school and college years have considered running for political offices at much smaller rates than men. (Fox and Lawless, 2014). Due to the socialization differences between men and women, other research has shown that men are more likely to be overconfident in their skills, even in skills they do not have, where women have been shown to show the opposite behavior, resulting in women being less likely to run for office (Kling et al., 1999; Beloff, 1992; Furnham and Rawles, 1995).

As much of the research focuses on why women do and do not run, and how they perform in comparison to their male counterparts once elected, there seems to be a gap in the research on the question of *where do women run?* Given that gap, I seek to examine state legislative districts, with a particular focus on the Northwest. In order to answer the questions, what kinds of legislative districts are more favorable to women candidates, and what impact does it have on the representation of women at the state legislative level?

Theoretical Expectations and Testable Hypothesis

My research question centers on the assumption that incumbency is a significant deterrent to the representation of women in state legislatures. That is, that since men already dominate legislatures, and incumbents are very likely to win, women cannot defeat incumbents at rates large enough to achieve a greater percentage in their respective state legislatures. Given the knowledge of the unlikelihood of defeating incumbents, it makes sense that any candidate would prefer to run for an open seat, to the seat of an incumbent.

In light of the 2014 Kanthak and Woon research—that women are more election averse than men—it would make sense to see this trend more pronounced among women candidates. Given the known research, the hypothesis that I tested was that women would run in open seats more frequently than as challengers.

Data and Research Design

Using Microsoft Excel, I tested this hypothesis by using my data set, which examines every candidate within the four midterm elections from 2002-2014 in the four states in the Northwest. Upon inspection of the data, I narrowed my candidate pool to only include quality candidates, which consist of candidates that ran under a major party and raised at least some value greater than zero in campaign contributions; this left me with a candidate pool of 3,380 candidates. Of those quality candidates, 895 of them were female, and 2,485 were male.

I also gathered data from the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) data website which gave me the data I have on the percentages of women in each of the four state's legislatures. After gathering my data, I organized it for this particular research project by first determining how many candidates ran as incumbents, as challengers, and in open races. I then tallied the number of men and women who ran in open races versus the number of men and women who ran as challengers.

Utilizing that data, I next created several tables for the ultimate purpose of depicting the actual percent likelihood that a candidate would choose to run as an open race candidate over a race where they would be positioned as a challenger. I then contrasted my findings between sexes to determine if there was any significant variation. Finally, I compared my results between states and tested for a significant difference between states and their percentage of women in their state legislatures.

Analysis

Subdividing all candidates into three pools by status: incumbents, challengers, and open seat candidates revealed the results found in table 1.

Table 1. Quality Candidates by Status

State	Incumbent	Challenger	Open	Total
Idaho	357	282	202	841
Washington	419	271	205	895
Oregon	248	185	156	589
Montana	331	275	449	1055
Northwest	1355	1013	1012	3380

I next divided each status by gender, excluding incumbency; tables 2 and 3 reflect this step in my analysis. Following that division, I then determined the likelihood that a candidate would choose an open race or run as a challenger. The numbers in red reflect the greater percentage in a comparison between women who have selected a race against an incumbent or have chosen to run in an open race. The result is found in table 4.

Table 2. Open Race Candidates by Gender

State	Female	Male	Total
Idaho	50	152	202
Washington	70	135	205
Oregon	36	120	156
Montana	125	324	449
Northwest	281	731	1012

Table 3. Challengers by Gender

State	Female	Male	Total
Idaho	69	213	282
Washington	63	208	271
Oregon	51	134	185
Montana	66	209	275
Northwest	249	764	1013

Table 4. Likelihood of a Candidate to be a Challenger/Open Candidate by Gender

State	Open Candidate		Challenger	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
Idaho	42.02%	41.64%	57.98%	58.36%
Washington	52.63%	39.36%	47.37%	60.64%
Oregon	41.38%	47.24%	58.62%	52.76%
Montana	65.45%	60.79%	34.55%	39.21%
Northwest	53.02%	48.97%	46.98%	51.10%

I then created a correlation chart depicting the relationship between the percent share of the legislature held by women and the percentage of women who chose to run as an open candidate. The results are found in figure 1.

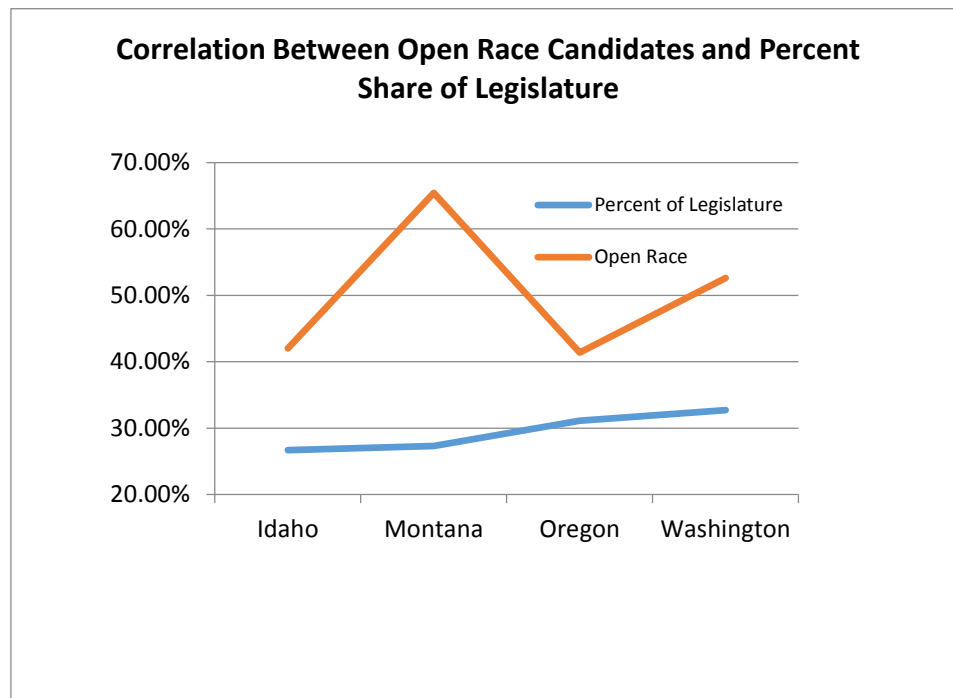


Figure 1. Correlation between open race candidates and percent share of legislature

My original hypothesis stated that because women are more election averse than are men, my data should reveal that women should show a significant preference to running for an open seat, than a seat currently held by an

incumbent. However, I found that only appeared to be the case in two of the four states studied, namely, Washington and Montana.

Examining the Northwest as a whole, and ignoring sex, there appears to be no distinction whatsoever between the decision to run for an open seat rather than as a challenger. Of the 2,025 candidates that chose to run for office (non-incumbents), exactly half chose to run for an open seat and half for a seat held by an incumbent, 1,012 to 1,013 respectively. Separating by sex, however, shows that women give a slight preference to open races versus challenger roles 53.02% of the time. Their male counterparts, on the other hand, prefer the challenger role to open seats, 51.1% of the time.

Findings and Conclusion

My findings give a mixed result. While it appears that state-by-state there is no preference held by female candidates for open races, when examining the Northwest as whole, there is a preference, albeit a small one. And though there is a wide variation between states in the variable, when put up against the percentage of women in a state's legislature, there does seem to be a small correlation between the preference of open races and percent share of the state legislature. Furthermore, there does appear to be difference in the preferences of women and men in their choice to run in an open race. Women are more likely than men, in the Northwest as a whole as well as three of the four states, to prefer open races, which seems to support my hypothesis.

However, this study suffered from several limitations. First, it is difficult to truly say whether women have a preference for open races or not. Only 21% of all races studied were open races, compared to 79% of races with sitting incumbents, which means the opportunity for a candidate to choose an open race is significantly hindered. My results could only prove to be accurate if there were an equal opportunity of choices for one or the other, or a way to control for the gap, which was not the case. In future research, I will control for these factors by conducting a regression analysis.

A second limitation came in the form of studying the correlation of the preference for open races and the percent share of the state legislature held by women. While the data on race preference came from a study of candidates of four elections spanning over a decade of time, the percent share of the legislature was only a snapshot in time. In order to produce the most accurate results, a time-series analysis would have to be done for each state to determine if there was variation over time between preference, and percent share of the legislature. But without the necessary knowledge of how to conduct such a study, I was limited by my abilities. However, in future studies, if there is a strong correlation between the percentages of women who ran in open races and the percentage of women in a given state legislature over time, then it may be a significant factor in increasing the representation of women in state legislatures.

Despite the limitations, it does appear that my hypothesis was supported by the findings that women, more so than men, prefer open races to positioning themselves as a challenger to an incumbent. That is not to say that the only cause is election aversion, but it could be a significant contributing factor. State politics are never black and white, and there is rarely, if ever, one causal factor behind any phenomena. However, that should not deter researchers from examining single variables one at a time, if done so with the assumption that it is more than likely working in tandem with other factors.

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