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Shared Experiences of Women in Politics

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Abstract

Research has consistently shown that when women run for political office, they are just as likely to win their election as any other candidate (Lawless & Fox, 2012; Fulton, 2013). That being said, there are significantly fewer women holding political office in the United States when compared to men. In the Maine State Legislature, only 34.4% of the seats are held by women (Center for American Women in Politics, 2017). Overall, fewer women are actively choosing to run for political office for a variety of reasons. There is very little research that explores the reasons propelling or discouraging women from attempting to enter into elected office. This phenomenological research study focuses on interviews with women who have won elected office. Interviews were conducted to find similarities between these women, causing them to run for and win elected office. Feminist theory frames the research question to help discover potential catalysts for why some women make the active decision to run for office.

Introduction

Previous studies and readings highlighted the fact that women were entering the political realm at a rate slower to their male counterparts. This prior research highlights many of the reasons why women do not run for office but does not focus heavily on the reasons women choose to run for elected office. This lack of research on why women choose to enter the political sphere piqued my interest in the topic. The state of Maine is ranked 7th among state legislatures for the proportion of women holding office (Center for American Women in Politics, 2017). Even with a high rating compared to other states, Maine still comes nowhere near gender parity in office, yet is higher than the national average of women holding office in state legislatures (Fig. 1). Conversations with current female politicians help to highlight shared factors that caused them to run for office, and to perhaps pinpoint these same factors in potential future candidates.

Questions

- What are the lived experiences of female politicians in the state of Maine who have made the active decision to run for elected office?
 - What is the experience like for a woman running for political office?
 - What motivates and hinders women in their aspirations to run for political office?

Methods

Phenomenology

- “[The researcher] focuses on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, pg. 76)

Feminist Theory Framework

- “Feminist researchers see gender as a basic organizing principle that shapes the conditions of their lives” (Creswell, 2013, pg. 29)

Participants

- Fourteen former and current female politicians contacted by email.
- Nine accepted participation.
- Three Republicans, five Democrats, and one Independent.
- Participant ages ranged from 58 to 74, with an average age of 65.

Themes

Theme One: On the Job

First of all it [serving] gave me an enormous understanding and appreciation for the lives that people live and the struggles that most people are living with. That family you know just getting by day by day, how hard people work you know, for their education. You know the sacrifices that get made over and over and the struggles that families go through. And in all different ways. So I think you know it just opened my world in that way and then once your world is opened, for me there is just this huge desire and commitment to make life easier for people who are struggling in any way that I could...And [in my position]...I would just work my hardest to represent those families not just in my district but across the state who I felt could be helped by government, by their government. (Participant 7)

Theme Two: The Personal is Political

And the other thing that was hard when I first decided to run, like a lot of women, I had to work really hard to convince myself that it was okay as a mom to not be home everyday. You know that was just like I really had to believe that it wasn't, you know, against the rules or, you know, the wrong thing to do. And I just don't think men do that. I just don't think. I mean I'm sure, you know, I know a lot of men worry about their family obligations and all that but it's not – it doesn't feel like a taboo. Whereas for women, it's like you feel you're doing something wrong and you just hope like your kids will survive or you know, somehow you can make up for it. (Participant 8)

Theme Three: Being a Woman in this Political Journey

It had been all men, all men for a really long time [in this position]. And so the slogan we used was 'sometimes the best man for the job is a woman'. And that goes way back, that's probably 30 years ago. So people were like, 'what do you mean a woman is running?' It was so funny because I'd been a bank officer, and I was a public school teacher and I'd been a financial manager of a nonprofit...I just didn't think in a small town it would be that big of a deal. But it was. (Participant 9)

Theme Four: Making a Difference

We wanted to make sure that the number of chairmen of committees is equal to the percentage of women who are serving. And so several of us marched in – there's a newspaper article about it which somebody dug up not too long ago and gave back to me hysterically – and we said 'you know, we're this percentage and that means that eight of the chairmanships should go to women'. And [the Speaker of the House] kind of smile and said, 'you think it's all that easy, why don't you give me a list?' And so we did. And we gave him a list of women that we thought should be...and he picked 7 of the 8. (Participant 1)

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Results

The results from interviews showed a mix of lived experiences and perspectives that helped create four major themes and multiple sub-themes within the data.

These four themes are: (1) On the Job; (2) The Personal is Political; (3) Being a Woman in this Political Journey; and (4) Making a Difference.

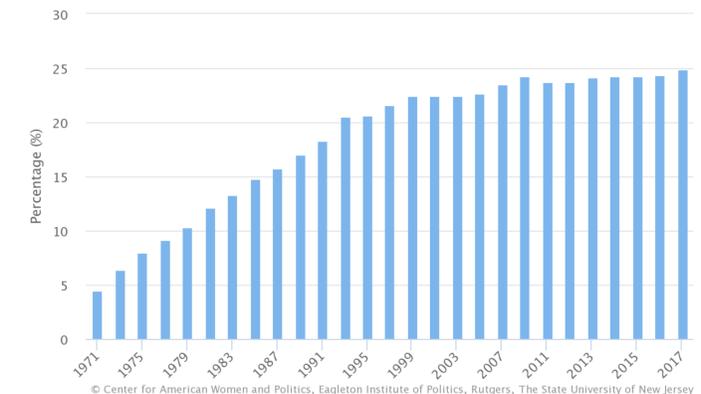


Figure 1: Percentage of Women in State Legislatures Across the USA

Discussion

Encouragement in early life can influence involvement later on (Lawless & Fox, 2013). Many participants highlighted the influence of their parents and involvement in school. All participants highlighted at least one extracurricular involvement during middle or high school. *“My father...ended up with three very powerful [daughters] because he always told us we could do anything we wanted to do. And Dad always, you know, said nobody is inferior to you, you're just as good as everybody else and you can do these things”* (Participant 5).

A large majority of the women interviewed highlighted being asked or encouraged to run as the biggest reason they made the decision to run for office. This is consistent with prior research highlighting the fact that men are more likely to believe they are qualified for a politician position (Lawless & Fox, 2013) while women tend to believe they are not qualified enough to run for office and therefore have self-doubt (Lawless & Fox, 2012; Brookman, 2014). *“Women are afraid of taking risk. My, women are afraid of risk – just do it”* (Participant 7).

Many interviewees stated that differences in treatment was due more so to their political party affiliation rather than gender. This can be connected with the fact that women are more likely to vote along party lines rather than gender (Dolan, 2008; Dolan, 2014; Fulton, 2014). *“I can't say that I felt, in our legislature, a lot of biases either from constituents or from the legislature themselves. In regards to which sex I was, I think it felt a lot more different between the partisanship but not necessarily between just for my being a woman”* (Participant 2).

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