

**THE POLITICAL AMBITION OF GIRLS & WOMEN:  
A LIFE-CYCLE ANALYSIS**

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**Paper prepared for presentation at the Western Political Science Association's annual meeting, April 2-4, 2015, Las Vegas, NV. Please do not quote or cite without permission from authors.**

## Introduction

The United States is a country of astonishing diversity, yet public offices continue to be overwhelmingly dominated by white men. The underrepresentation of women and minorities negatively affects these groups as well as the nation as a whole. Women are more likely to propose and support legislation that benefits the interests of women.<sup>1</sup> Policy outputs change when legislatures become more representative by race and gender.<sup>2</sup> On the process side, several studies find that the inclusion of women and people of color changes the style as well as the substance of legislative decision-making.<sup>3</sup> Finally, descriptive representation of disempowered groups is important in and of itself, in part because it encourages members of such groups to engage more in the political process and view government as more legitimate.<sup>4</sup> Underrepresentation is appropriate in a democracy only when the perspectives and interests of the underrepresented group are all represented by others in situations where diverse perspectives are needed and interests conflict.<sup>5</sup> Severe and continuing underrepresentation is thus just only if the axes of unequal representation are

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<sup>1</sup> Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004; Darcy, Welch, & Clark, 1985; Swers, 1998

<sup>2</sup> On gender of legislators and policy outputs, see: Swers 2001, 2002; Reingold 2006; Thomas and Wilcox 2005; O'Connor 2003; Caiazza 2002; Rosenthal 2002; Carroll 2001; Rosenthal 2002, 1998a, 1998b; Kathlene 1999; Little, Dunn, and Deen 2001; Thomas 1994. On race of legislators and policy outputs, the question is more complex because of geographical and partisan clustering by race/ethnicity. Some studies suggest that the formation of majority-minority districts is essential to increasing the racial diversity of legislative bodies (see e.g. Lublin 1999). Another strain of research suggests that such districts end up polarizing the surrounding districts in a way that makes the legislature as a whole more conservative and less likely to pass policies in the interests of greater racial equality (see Cameron, Epstein, and O'Halloran 1996). Both camps agree, however, that having some mix of non-white legislators along with white legislators increases substantive representation of non-white citizens.

<sup>3</sup> Osborn 2012; Karpowitz, Mendelberg, and Shaker: 2012; Rosenthal 1998a and 1998b; Thomas 1994; Kathlene 1994; see also Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, and van Engen 2003 and Eagly and Johnson 1990, two rare meta-analysis of men's and women's leadership styles, which both find more similarities than differences overall between men's and women's leadership style but also find some key differences, even controlling for level and position of leadership.

<sup>4</sup> Mansbridge, 1999

<sup>5</sup> Mansbridge 2003, 1999, 1983

irrelevant to the interests of members of the underrepresented group. This is the case with neither race nor gender.<sup>6</sup>

Previous work finds that women run for office in lower numbers because of their disproportionate work-family conflict<sup>7</sup>, because they view themselves as unqualified<sup>8</sup>, and because they lack confidence.<sup>9</sup> However, this work is based on adult women, studied at the height of their careers. Does looking at groups of women (and girls) at different stages in their life yield more information about the factors that either attract women to, or repel them from, politics and political careers?

In this article, we take a novel approach. We consider the political ambition – and broader political interest and engagement – of girls and women in a “lifecycle” analysis, using multiple sources of data to look at different stages of the lifecycle simultaneously. We draw on three original surveys to study female subjects at various points in their lives, including: (1) girlhood/teen years (ages 11-17), through the Girl Scouts of the USA’s “Girls and Politics Pulse Poll” of 2014, conducted by Modi and Schoenberg of the Girl Scout Research Institute (GSRI); (2) college experiences, through Silbermann’s “Student Political Career Interest Surveys” (of both a national sample and a sample from Yale University), conducted in 2013; and (3) graduate school, through Shames’ “Law and Policy School Political Ambition Survey” (LPS-PAS), including students from Harvard and Suffolk Law Schools and also Harvard Kennedy School of Government, and conducted from 2012-2014.

By utilizing a lifecycle analysis, this project makes an important contribution to the literature on gender and political ambition. In an ideal world, we would use longitudinal data to determine how and why the political ambition of young men and women changes over time. Because these

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<sup>6</sup> Kymlicka 2002; Mansbridge 1999; Phillips 1995; Phillips 1991; Young 1994, 1990

<sup>7</sup> Hewlett 2007; Lawless and Fox 2005; Hochschild 2003; Crittenden 2002; Thomas 2002; Williams 2000

<sup>8</sup> Fox & Lawless 2005

<sup>9</sup> Ibid; see also Lawless and Fox 2008, 2010

data are unavailable, we use the next best thing: multiple datasets that vary according to age but are consistent (when properly compared) on the type of respondents. First, we look to two nationally representative samples of students, one of sample of girls ages 11-17 and the other of college students. This first pair of surveys provides insight on how political ambition changes from childhood through college among Americans in general.

It is also important to understand gender differences in political ambition among those arguably most likely to run for office -- those at elite colleges and graduate schools. Whether or not these “elite students” would make the best representatives is an open question. Nonetheless, historically students from certain feeder schools and professions have dominated higher political offices [cite], making these students worth studying in their own right. To study the lifecycle of students most likely to run, we survey a sample of undergraduates at Yale College and graduate students at three elite law and policy schools (Harvard Law, Harvard’s Kennedy School, and Suffolk Law School). Results from these surveys shed light on gender differences among particularly ambitious students who are most likely to run for office later.

Looking across the first few influential stages of the U.S. female lifecycle in this way offers additional insight into women’s generally lower political ambition relative to that of men. We find that, through middle, high school, college, and graduate school, as well as across populations with varying educational backgrounds and varying levels of interest in careers that tend to precede political careers, girls and women are less interested in running for political office than are boys and men. Our results suggest that girls and women care about making a difference in the world and their communities but that they do not see politics as a way to achieve these goals. The consistency of these gender differences over space and time suggests that girls decide early not to run for political office and stick with this decision throughout life.

It is important to note from the start the considerable limitations of this project. First, as discussed above, we lack longitudinal data, and so we cannot determine how individual responses change over time. Second, we utilize results from three distinct surveys, each with different, if related, questions. On the other hand, as long as we are careful in fore-fronting these limitations, this novel attempt to harness the power of multiple studies can give us useful information about what seems different or the same across lifecycle stages. We cannot make causal claims using cross-sectional survey datasets, but these data provide us with hints about how the political ambition of girls appears to evolve as they grow up.

### **Context and Previous Literature**

Although women constitute a majority (51%) of the U.S. population, they make up only 24% of state legislatures, 18% of big city mayors, 19% of Congress, and 12% of state governors.<sup>10</sup> Time alone is not solving this problem of disproportionality; in the past two decades, gains for women has been at best incremental and has sometimes reversed course.<sup>11</sup> In the last 20 years, women have increased their share of state legislative seats by only three points (from 21 percent in 1994 to 24 percent now).<sup>12</sup> In 2010, for the first time since women began running for public office in their own right in significant numbers, women lost rather than gained ground in the state legislatures.<sup>13</sup>

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

A large explanation for the gender gap in representation is that women are much less likely to run for office. State legislative term limits – which feminists, political reformers, and scholars of

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<sup>10</sup> CAWP 2013

<sup>11</sup> CAWP 2013; NCSL 2009; Carroll 2001

<sup>12</sup> CAWP 2013

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

politics used to think would increase the diversity of legislative bodies – seem to have the opposite effect, at least for women.<sup>14</sup> As elected women are term-limited out of office, other qualified women are not coming forward to take their place, causing a decrease rather than increase in elected women overall.<sup>15</sup> This pattern, along with survey evidence that professional women are less likely to have considered a run for office than similarly situated men<sup>16</sup>, suggests that women are underrepresented because of the lack of women candidates.

### *Structural Explanations for Lack of Women Candidates*

There exist a variety of structural explanations for why women are less likely to run for office. Women's disproportionate work-family conflict as compared to men keeps far more women than men away from time-intensive jobs, including politics.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, due to a persistent wage gap and the concentration of women in lower-prestige and lower-paying jobs, women tend to have lower incomes than men. They therefore collect fewer of the resources that stimulate political interest and participation.<sup>18</sup> Women of color, who are disproportionately lower-SES compared to their white counterparts, are particularly vulnerable to the effects of both of these structural factors, which may in large part account for their paucity as candidates. A third structural barrier is incumbency, because incumbents overwhelmingly win re-election and the vast majority is male.<sup>19</sup> Finally, the structure and functioning of U.S. political parties may limit entry for political outsiders of various stripes, including women.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Carroll 2001

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> Lawless and Fox 2005

<sup>17</sup> Hewlett 2007; Lawless and Fox 2005; Hochschild 2003; Crittenden 2002; Thomas 2002; Williams 2000

<sup>18</sup> Chang 2010; Burns, Schlozman, & Verba 2001; Conway 2001; Williams 2000; Blau & Kahn 2000; Waldfogel 1994

<sup>19</sup> Palmer & Simon 2006

<sup>20</sup> Fox and Lawless 2010; Sanbonmatsu 2006; Dolan 2004; Baer 2003, 1993

Some of these structural factors, especially among educationally and financially elite young adults may be changing. Researchers used to attribute the relative dearth of women as candidates to the fact that women did not acquire as much education, as measured by college degrees. Also, men used to greatly outnumber women among graduates from law school. Both of these factors have changed in the past few decades. Women now are more likely than men to graduate from college, and law school cohorts are increasingly gender-balanced or close to it.<sup>21</sup> Although there is no one degree for becoming a politician, a J.D. comes closest; lawyers make up a larger proportion of Congress and state legislatures than any other profession.<sup>22</sup> The gender gaps in salary<sup>23</sup> and wealth<sup>24</sup> persist, but are attenuated for high-SES women, who are arguably more like elite men than they are like their lower-SES female counterparts. The same could be argued of well-educated, wealthier minorities when compared with their lower-SES counterparts.

#### *Psychological Explanations for the Lack of Women Candidates*

Much recent work that attempts to explain the lack of women candidates focuses on psychological explanations, or explanations based on the differing personalities of men and women. Studying a sample of “potential candidates” – lawyers, business people, educators and political activists – Fox and Lawless suggest three factors that inhibit women’s political ambition: perceptions of bias against women in electoral politics, gendered socialization, and the belief that they are not qualified to run for office. The authors take pains to suggest the irrationality of the first, drawing on work by Dolan to suggest that women face no bias at the ballot box.<sup>25</sup> Additional<sup>26</sup> work points to

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<sup>21</sup> U.S. Census 2012 shows that more women than men are enrolled in college and graduate schools. ABA 2013 reports that law school enrollment currently stands at 53% men, 47% women. Women also are nearly half (45%) of both associates and summer associates in law firms (Ibid).

<sup>22</sup> Lawless and Fox 2005; author coding from the Almanac of American Politics 2010

<sup>23</sup> IWPR 2014

<sup>24</sup> Chang 2010

<sup>25</sup> Lawless and Fox 2010, 2005; see also Lawless and Fox 2012.

<sup>26</sup> Dolan 2004

women's lack of self-confidence<sup>27</sup>, "election aversion"<sup>28</sup>, and gender-role socialization.<sup>29</sup> In contrast to men, women are socialized from infancy to believe they should prefer the private to the public sphere – or at least be able to participate fully in both, which in practice tends to reduce the time available to women for public leadership, relative to men.<sup>30</sup> Women see few women in office and therefore may believe, consciously or not, that politics is not for them.<sup>31</sup> Other studies have found that, as a group, women are more risk-averse than men, and in political campaigns women attach greater importance than men do to winning the race.<sup>32</sup> Finally, a group of studies find both that women continue to be treated differently than men as candidates, particularly in media coverage but also in recruitment and treatment by party leaders, biases which eligible female candidates anticipate with distaste.<sup>33</sup>

### *Contribution*

As Schlesinger argued nearly half a century ago, "Ambition lies at the heart of politics."<sup>34</sup> Following the lead of recent research studying the political ambition of "potential candidates"<sup>35</sup>, our project surveys and interviews people who would make for high-quality political candidates, but probably won't run. Unlike this previous research, which examines mid-life professionals at the top of their careers, we look for answers further upstream: among children, undergraduates, and law and

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<sup>27</sup> Buser, Niederle, & Oosterbeek, 2012; Niederle, Vesterlund, Franc, & Roth, 2007

<sup>28</sup> Kanthak & Woon, forthcoming

<sup>29</sup> Lawless and Fox 2010, 2005

<sup>30</sup> Lawless and Fox 2012, 2010, 2005; Hochschild 2003; Crittenden 2002; Williams 2000; Valian 1999; Phillips 1991; Bem 1988; Sapiro 1983; Jennings 1983; Greenstein 1969; Duverger 1955; see also above footnote on work/family conflict for women

<sup>31</sup> Atkeson & Carrillo 2007; Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006; Burns, Schlozman, & Verba 2001; Kahn 1996; Phillips 1991; Sapiro 1983

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Fulton et al 2006. Also, Lawless and Fox 2005 finds that women are more likely to judge the districts they live in as more competitive, and therefore harder to enter, than men.

<sup>33</sup> On biases in parties and media, see Falk 2008; Sanbonmatsu 2006; White House Project 2005, 1999; Baer 2003, 1993; Burrell 1993. On expecting sexism or double standards, in politics and in other workplaces, see Lawless and Fox 2010, 2008, 2005; Babcock and Laschever 2007; Fulton et al 2006; Bowles et al 2005; Fletcher 1999

<sup>34</sup> Schlesinger 1966, 5-6

<sup>35</sup> Lawless and Fox 2005



policy school students. We believe that decisions about running for public office, particularly for people belonging to groups historically excluded from the political process, are made earlier in life than previous work in this vein suggests, and are deeply tied to individuals' early perceptions about political institutions. If this is true, the reasons that people in the pool of eligible high-quality candidates might not run should be evident at a far earlier stage of life than that the recent wave of candidate emergence literature has examined.

By examining gender differences in political ambition and interest, as well as in personality traits (such as confidence) that are correlated with running for office, and at different points of the lifecycle, we can begin to speculate about at what point gender differences emerge, how they evolve, and why. What we find can inform what sorts of interventions might be most successful in encouraging more women to run for office and at what point in life these interventions might be most effective.

## **Data & Methods**

This project draws on three surveys and multiple samples, as described below, allowing us to investigate gender differences across space and time, and, where possible, compare female respondents to comparable males.

### *National Sample of Girls 11-17*

This study examines a national sample of 1,088 girls ages 11-17 recruited through a youth research panel managed by a partner research firm, The Futures Company. The 12-minute online survey was conducted in September, 2014. Respondents matched the U.S. Census distribution with

respect to race/ethnicity; 62% were white, 19% were Latina, 18% were African American, 7% were Asian American, and 2% were other races.

The goal of the survey was to understand girls' interest in, attitude toward, and perception of politics. Participants responded to questions about their leadership aspirations and civic engagement, political awareness, political interest, and opinions about gender in politics.

#### *Undergraduates: Nationally Representative Sample and Yale Sample*

This study surveys two samples of undergraduates, a nationally representative sample of undergraduates and a sample of undergraduates from Yale University. A random sample of N = 400 undergraduates was drawn from YouGov's national panel to participate in a survey between July 20 - 29, 2013.<sup>36</sup> All 5,286 Yale undergraduates were invited via email to participate in a survey in return for a chance at a \$50 Amazon gift card. The YouGov survey was a slightly shortened version (8 minutes as opposed to 12 minutes) of the Yale survey.

Of the Yale students, 1387 students (26%) completed or partially completed the survey.<sup>37,38</sup> 1,215 reported their race and gender. Of those, 44% were men and 56% were women. Of the men, 53% were white, 11% were African American, 9% were Latino, and 20% were Asian American. Of the women, 52% were white, 7% were African American, 10% were Latina, and 25% were Asian

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<sup>36</sup> YouGov uses a combination of sampling and matching techniques to approximate a nationally representative sample. For more information on this sampling technique, see Vavreck and Rivers (2008).

<sup>37</sup> The AAPOR Response Rate 2 for the Yale Survey is 26% and calculated by:

$$RR2 = \frac{(I + P)}{(I + P) + (R + NC + O) + (UH + UO)}$$

where I = 767, P = 620, R = 5, NC = 0, O = 0, UH = 0, and UO = 3894. See AAPOR (2009) for details. (The low rate for completed surveys (I) is due in large part to respondents having to leave the survey to enter the lottery for \$50 after finishing the questions in but before "completing" the survey by clicking on the final arrow key.) This response rate is fairly typical of surveys in the literature of public officials (Poggione 2004) and students (Sax, Gilmartin, and Bryant 2003). The sample was largely representative of the Yale population on observables. See Appendix A for sample statistics.

<sup>38</sup> The survey was conducted between February 13 and February 21, 2013. A reminder email was sent on February 18.

American. This sample was proportionally representative of the Yale undergraduate population, with the exceptions that women and Asian Americans were slightly oversampled.

Both surveys asked respondents about their interest in running for office at various levels: state or local political office (e.g., city council or the state legislature), national political office (U.S. Congress or Senate), and at the level of President. The surveys also ask about interest in politics and current affairs, confidence, beliefs they would make good politicians, and expectations that they would be victims of discrimination should they run. Both surveys also asked about levels of interest in a variety of careers. The Yale survey, but not the YouGov survey, asks about levels of interest in policy careers.

Results of these two surveys allow for analysis over space and time. Over space, they allow us to determine whether gender differences that exist in the general population exist too among hyper ambitious Yale undergraduates, a population of undergraduates most likely to run for political office. By comparing the Girls Scouts survey results to the YouGov survey results, we can get a sense of how gender differences evolve from childhood through college, for girls and young women in the general population. By comparing Yale students interested in law or policy careers to the law and policy graduate school students, discussed below, we can see how gender differences evolve over time from college through graduate school among “elite” students planning careers in law and policy.

### *Law and Policy Graduate Students*

Between 2011 and 2014, the Law and Policy School Political Ambition Survey (LPS-PAS) collected data from an original web-based survey of law and policy school students from the three campuses, resulting in about 750 usable survey responses from students who were all U.S. citizens (a prerequisite of sample inclusion). The survey data were supplemented with one-hour interviews with

more than 50 survey respondents, varied by race, gender, year, and school, to further understand respondents' interest in and reactions to politics and to a possible political candidacy

No one degree leads to elective office, and most politicians have some other profession before running. However, a law degree comes closest to a running-for-office degree. About 42% of the members of Congress have a J.D., along with 47% of Massachusetts state legislators.<sup>39</sup> Far fewer have a policy school diploma, such as an MPP or MPA, although these relatively new degrees seem to be gaining ground as an entrée into governmental service, and many politicians start out as civil servants. Together, then, students from elite law and policy schools constitute an ideal sample; they are, on the whole, relatively high-SES young people, who are mostly unmarried and childless (thus minimizing the effects of work-family conflict). Importantly, the work of the admissions committees of these schools ensure a far closer “match” between men and women, and between whites and nonwhites, than we would find in a representative sample from the general population or in many other institutional settings.

The three schools chosen for sample recruitment were Harvard Law School and Harvard Kennedy School of Government (which together produce a number of national political leaders), and Suffolk Law School (which produces many Massachusetts political leaders). The Harvard schools were a natural choice, given their reputations and the likelihood that these schools would attract extremely ambitious students across race and gender. Harvard Law and Harvard Kennedy School are also well-known as conduits into national-level governmental positions. Harvard sends a significant number of its graduates into politics and government in the United States.

Suffolk Law was chosen after collecting data on current state legislators in Massachusetts and finding that Suffolk Law is the modal degree: 42% of MA state legislators with a JD come from Suffolk, a far higher proportion than the next closest competitors, New England School of Law and

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<sup>39</sup> Data analysis by the author (Shames), based on data in Almanac of American Politics 2010 and website of the Massachusetts General Court (state legislature).

Boston College Law.<sup>40</sup> (Not all state legislators have a JD, but it was the most common form of graduate degree, held by 47% of Massachusetts state legislators.<sup>41</sup>) Suffolk Law, then, is the largest “feeder” of graduates into state-level politics, just as Harvard – specifically Harvard Law and Harvard Kennedy School – is the largest “feeder” of graduates into national-level politics. The Suffolk data also serve as a check on the Harvard data, to test which effects might be Harvard-specific and which may be more generalizable to the population of elite law students. Likewise, the Harvard Kennedy School data serve as a check on the data from the two law schools, to test for differences between highly ambitious JD students and their non-JD but still policy-minded counterparts.

Recruiting only from uncompensated volunteers for this survey could skew the results, as it might mean that only students already interested in politics would take the survey. Because the goal was to capture the politically uninterested as well as the interested, and the politically unambitious as well as the ambitious, this study obtained grants to provide incentives to all respondents. Funding for survey recruitment incentives was generously provided by grants. Each survey respondent received a \$10 reward (in the form of a coupon for Amazon.com or Starbucks) for taking the 15-minute survey. Interview respondents (n=54) were recruited from those who took the survey. A “thank-you” screen at the end asked those interested in discussing these questions further for an additional \$20 incentive.

The students of the two Harvard schools and Suffolk Law School constitute an elite sample; as much as possible, this project attempts to minimize the role of SES (which previous studies have shown to be perhaps the most powerful factor in explaining political participation) so as to study the effects of other factors – in particular, race, gender, and perceptions/expectations of elections and

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<sup>40</sup> Figures derived from author analysis and coding of member biographical data from the web site of the Massachusetts General Court (state legislature), at <https://malegislature.gov/People/House/> (accessed May 10, 2010).

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

holding office. The sample is representative of U.S. political candidates – who, as previous research has documented, are more educated, wealthier, more partisan, and more politically active than those in the general population.<sup>42</sup>

Previous samples of potential candidates have tended to be whiter and more male than the general population (which is also true of actual candidates – see the National Candidate Study data from Brookman et al). The LPS-PAS sample of eligibles, however, intentionally over-represents people of color and women, as the project’s original questions centered on these groups. This sample is also intentionally younger than other samples in this vein, to look for effects “upstream” of previous research. The mean age of the sample was 27.8 years, with a standard deviation of 3.5 years.

## **Results & Discussion**

The following results report gender differences among middle, high school, college, and law/policy graduate students in their political interest, political ambition, and other variables of interest. As discussed above, results are from multiple separate surveys with separate samples. Below, any reference to “girls” and “middle and high school students” refers to the national survey of girls, conducted by the Girl Scout Research Institute (GSRI). Any reference to “Yale university undergraduates” or “National undergraduates” refers to the Yale University sample and the nationally representative (YouGov) sample and the “Student Political Career Interest Survey,” conducted by Silbermann. Any reference to “LPS Students” refers to the sample of law or policy school students at elite institutions in the Boston area (Harvard Kennedy School, Harvard Law

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<sup>42</sup> [cite Brookman and Carnes, Lawless and Fox, and Stone/Maisel]

School, and Suffolk Law School) and the Law and Policy School Political Ambition Survey (LPS-PAS) survey conducted by Shames.

### *Girls (Ages 11-17)*

Our survey shows that an encouraging 67 percent of girls are interested in politics. The most common motivations behind becoming a politician are the desire to make a difference in the world (78%) and to help people (76%). Additionally, girls have an array of political and civic experiences both in and out of school, including engagement in causes and campaigns they care about (83%), debate (64%), voting (56%), mentoring others (44%) and running for student council or government (28%).

[FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

However, girls' interests in becoming a politician are less encouraging. Thirty-seven percent of girls are interested in becoming a politician; 9% are "very interested". Eighty-two percent of girls acknowledge that serving in a political capacity is not a common goal for girls their age. In fact, when asked to choose between becoming a movie star, and becoming the President of the United States, 61% of girls choose a movie star. A staggering 92 percent of girls feel there are other ways to make a difference in the world besides becoming a politician. The good news, though, is that girls do believe that they have what it takes to have a political career; 84% believe they are smart enough to have a career in politics, and only 17% agree that "men make better politicians than women".

[FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

When asked about how male and female politicians are portrayed in the media, an interesting finding emerges. Girls view both female and male politicians as equally capable, according to qualifications and characteristics fit for leading (such as intelligence, confidence, bravery, resilience, and honesty/trustworthiness). When asked about how the media depicts female politicians, the story

changes. Girls view the media as depicting female politicians as *more* emotional than men, and *less* intelligent, confident, brave, resilient, and honest/trustworthy than men.

The survey also shows areas where girls need more support. Just thirty-eight percent of girls say their teachers have encouraged them to pursue politics. Fifty-seven percent of girls feel more after school programs for girls to gain experience in community work and/or politics would encourage more girls to pursue a career in politics. And girls feel that more mentoring for girls and women from current politicians (65%) and more positive stories about female politicians in the media (65%) would encourage more girls to pursue a career in politics.

While there is little to no research to date in comparison, these findings show that girls do have an encouraging level of political interest at a young age. Their experiences, though limited in scope to prepare them to become politicians in adulthood, are varied and vast. Engagement in community service, volunteer, and fundraising activities are much higher than running for student government offices. Certainly there is a need for more mentoring and guidance for girls to pursue these interests and experiences beyond the level of episodic service to a more consistent set of experiences through youth organizations or other opportunities to get the necessary leadership experience needed to gain confidence and efficacy to eventually run for a political position and stand for a set of beliefs and values. Girls also need more role models of young politicians to show them that politics can be a viable option to consider for their futures and to encourage more girls to consider politics as a viable route to make a difference in their world and help people.

### *College-Aged Young Women*

Previous work shows that those who run for office tend to be interested in politics and current affairs and competitive. This section analyzes the results of the Undergraduate Career Interest Surveys, comparing male and female students. This survey was conducted through YouGov,



with a nationally representative sample of undergraduates, and at Yale, comparing men and women students. First, we compare the YouGov nationally representative sample of undergraduates (“National” sample) to the Yale sample. Second, we focus on the Yale sample and compare students who are interested in law and policy careers to those who are not interested in these careers. We find gender differences in political ambition of similar magnitude in all samples and subsamples. Yale students are, overall, no more interested in politics or running for office than average American students. Students at Yale interested in law and policy careers are more interested in politics and in running for office, and are also more competitive, than other students at Yale, but gender differences remain in this subsample as well.

A word of caution is in order. Although the results presented here consist of questions that were asked in both Yale and National surveys, the surveys were different and comparisons of the samples should be viewed with caution. The Yale survey was longer. The payment schemes were different: Yale students were entered into a lottery to win a \$50 gift card and National students were paid to be part of YouGov’s panel. Any comparisons between the two samples, then, should be viewed as speculative.

Figures 4 and 5 compare male and female students in the National and Yale samples in terms of their interest in politics and current affairs and whether they like competition. Students were asked how interested they were in politics and current affairs on a 3-point scale, consisting of “not at all,” “somewhat,” and “very” interested.

[FIGURES 4 AND 5 ABOUT HERE]

Figure 4 plots the proportion of students who report being “very” interested. In both samples, men, on average, report being more interested in politics and current affairs than do women ( $p < .05$ ). The gender difference in the Yale sample of 9 percentage points, however, is slightly smaller than that in the National sample, which was 12 percentage points. Interestingly, this is due to nationally-

representative male students being more likely to report being very interested in politics than Yale male students, rather than Yale women students being more likely to do so. Nonetheless, this suggests that gender differences in political interest may be smaller at Yale than in the general student population, but not by much.

Students were also asked their level of agreement with the phrase “I like competition” on a 5-point scale. Figure 5 plots students who “somewhat” or “strongly” agree with this statement. Male students in both samples are more likely than women to agree with this statement with about three quarters of men and two thirds of women doing so. It is notable, however, that the vast majority of both men and women agree with this statement, suggesting that a lack of competitiveness may not be the factor holding women back from running, at least in college.

Figures 6, 7 and 8 plot the proportion of students who report being at least “somewhat” interested in running for state/local or national political office along with students who report being somewhat interested in careers in “non-electoral politics and policy.”<sup>43</sup> Students were asked about their interest on a 5-point scale, consisting of “not at all,” “slightly,” “somewhat,” “very,” and “extremely” interested. Gender differences of similar magnitude exist for both samples and in all levels of office. Interestingly, more men and women in the National sample are interested in running for state or local office than in the Yale sample, with 44% of National men and 27% of Yale men, and 27% of National women and 18% of Yale women reporting being at least somewhat interested. These within-gender sample differences are statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ). When asked about running for national political office (i.e., for Congress or Senate), the sample differences are less pronounced and no longer statistically significant. Gender differences remain essentially the same in magnitude.

[FIGURES 6, 7 & 8 ABOUT HERE]

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<sup>43</sup> The “policy careers” question was asked in the Yale survey only.

Interestingly, the gender differences in political ambition exist only when asked about *electoral* politics. Students in the Yale survey (but not the YouGov survey) were asked about their level of interest in “careers in non-electoral politics and policy.” Crucially, women are just as interested as men in these careers, with about 60% of each saying they are at least “somewhat” interested. In other words, the gender difference among Yale students in political ambition exists only in the realm of *electoral* politics not in governing itself. Similar to middle and high school students, Yale women are interested in policy issues and policy careers but not in running for office.

These results suggest two conclusions. First, gender differences in political interest, competitiveness and interest in running for office exist across samples, with men more likely than women to possess the qualities linked to running. Second, and surprisingly, although Yale students are more likely to run for office later in life, they appear no more interested in politics, running for office, or competition than average American students. This suggests that although gender differences in interest emerge early in life, what goes into the final decision of whether to run likely occurs later and involves factors such as networks and resources.

Figures 9 and 10 limit the analysis to the Yale sample and divides the sample into two subsamples: those interested in law and policy careers and those not interested in these careers. “Law & Policy Students” are those who were “somewhat,” “very,” or “extremely” interested in “a career in non-electoral politics and policy” and/or “being a partner at a large law firm” and/or “being an attorney at a small law firm.” We divide the sample in this way to approximate how the elite law and graduate students of the next section might have responded to the survey when they were in college.

[FIGURES 9 & 10 ABOUT HERE]

Law and policy students are *much* more interested in politics and current affairs and in running for Congress.<sup>44</sup> Nonetheless, even among Yale students interested in law and policy careers - - i.e., the subsample of students most likely to run for office later in life in the school that produces many candidates for higher office -- male students are more interested in running than female students.

### *Women in Graduate School*

Previous research has found important linkages between political interest, political participation, and political ambition. This section will examine results from the Law and Policy School Political Ambition Survey (LPS-PAS) on each of these variables, comparing female to male students.

In Figure 11 below, each variable is operationalized as binary, with 1 representing full agreement from each respondent on that variable, and 0 full disagreement. Thus a 1 in “follow national politics closely” means the respondent agreed that s/he followed national politics (either closely or very closely). A 0 means s/he did not. The mean thus gives us a useful proportion (in this case, the percentage of men versus women agreeing). In all cases, the differences between men and women shown below are statistically significant ( $p=.05$  or lower).

[FIGURE 11 ABOUT HERE]

As shown in the figure, men are far more likely than women to say that they follow national politics both closely and very closely. They are also significantly more likely to follow local politics closely (although the difference is much smaller). The male graduate students are also significantly more likely to think that the problems they most care about can be solved through politics.

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<sup>44</sup> Results are similar for state/local offices (not shown).

As we might expect, these differences also show up in political ambition. Figure 12 below shows data for the variables most relating to political ambition.

[FIGURE 12 ABOUT HERE]

About twice as men as women report having “thought seriously” about running for political office. The same gap shows up in those saying “the thought [of running] has crossed my mind.” And, consistent with previous research, there is a large gender gap in having been asked to run ( $p < .001$ ).

Not surprisingly, given the previous figure, Figure 12 further shows large sex differences along two measures of political ambition (having thought of running for office, and having thought about it seriously). Both differences are strongly statistically significant. Also as predicted by the previous literature, and as we would expect given the data already presented in previous sections, there is a high degree of correlation between variables testing for political interest and those relating to political ambition.

Finally, the survey data results from the graduate students reveals that women appear to perceive more “costs” to running for office (and in some cases greater sensitivity to the costs that men too perceive). Some of the costs tested include having to ask people for money, facing hostile questions from the media, feeling one’s privacy (or that of one’s family) intruded upon, and facing discrimination. In the final column of Figure 12, we see that men on average were far less likely to be bothered by the idea of being asked hostile questions were they to run for office (which also correlates with both of the two political ambition variables shown).

Another “cost” that female respondents might perceive is seeing politics as biased against women. It turned out that a majority of both men and women saw politics as being sex biased, but women thought this much more strongly than did men (which could be a good reason for not wanting to be involved in it). And perhaps most significantly, men were strongly more likely than

women to perceive politics as being a venue for solving the kinds of problems they cared most about (see Figure 13).

[FIGURE 13 ABOUT HERE]

Generally, the LPS-PAS data suggest that women – even those in law and policy school graduate programs – are less interested than comparable men in running for office. The differing rates of belief in politics’ ability to solve problems may provide a clue as to the causal mechanism behind this strong correlation. These data also show some trends similar to the above-described data on girls and college-aged women. Figure 14, below, marshals data on multiple questions about survey respondents’ political interests and activities over their life span. This graphic shows some similarities between these men and women, and also a few large and interesting gaps. Most noticeably in the figure are the gender differences in more recent occurrences in these grad students’ lives, such as having been told they should run or currently following politics. What is important for our purposes from this graphic is to see that these highly-elite men and women did not differ that much in earlier life experiences; as high school girls and boys, they were equally active in student government and equally active in outside politics (the women and men of color show greater variability because of smaller sample sizes). It was only in college, and then after college, that these students began to diverge by gender in their political interests and activity.

[FIGURE 16 ABOUT HERE]

## **Conclusion**

Women are less interested in running for office than men are, and girls are less interested in running for office than boys are. This lifecycle analysis demonstrates striking consistencies among middle school, high school, college, graduate, and law school students. The gender gap in political

ambition exists across different populations as well as different age groups. The gap among Yale College students approximates the national average. And the gap among Yale students interested in the “feeder” careers of policy and law is just as large. It seems that girls from all backgrounds decide early not to run and stick with that decision.

The gender gap in political ambition, however, is not due to lack of interest in governing *per se* but in its particular manifestations in current American politics. Middle- and high-school girls are interested in politics, have an array of political and civic engagement experiences, often participate at high rates, and are motivated to make a difference in the world and to help people. Female college students are just as interested in policy careers as men are; the difference only comes in when we examine *electoral* careers. Indeed, women make up nearly half of public-policy Masters’ students at Harvard Kennedy School, and these women had great interest in government/public service work. In other words, girls and young women have the qualities and interests that should but fail to propel them towards political careers.

The electoral process itself appears to be the stumbling block. Girls and young women seem to believe that careers in electoral politics are not for them. Girls do not generally view politics as a way to make a difference in the world. Similarly, female graduate students in law and policy mostly do not believe that politics solves the problems most important to them. At an early age, girls seem to sense that American political institutions are not set up to help them achieve their civic goals. This sense stays with them through adulthood. And female students of all ages believe that they would experience discrimination should they decide to run.

Future research should add further data to allow replication of these findings, as this is the first study to attempt to bring together multiple datasets in this way. Ideally, future research would offer longitudinal rather than just cross-sectional data, to confirm these findings. And if there do indeed turn out to be stumbling blocks for girls and young women imagining themselves as political

candidates, the next step for future researchers would logically be testing different remedies. What might convince more girls and young women that politics can indeed be a fruitful avenue for important change? Would different information about policy and political careers change the minds of these potential candidates? We hope to see many studies, perhaps in an experimental vein, of these ideas in the future to help alleviate what appears to be a persisting candidate gender gap.

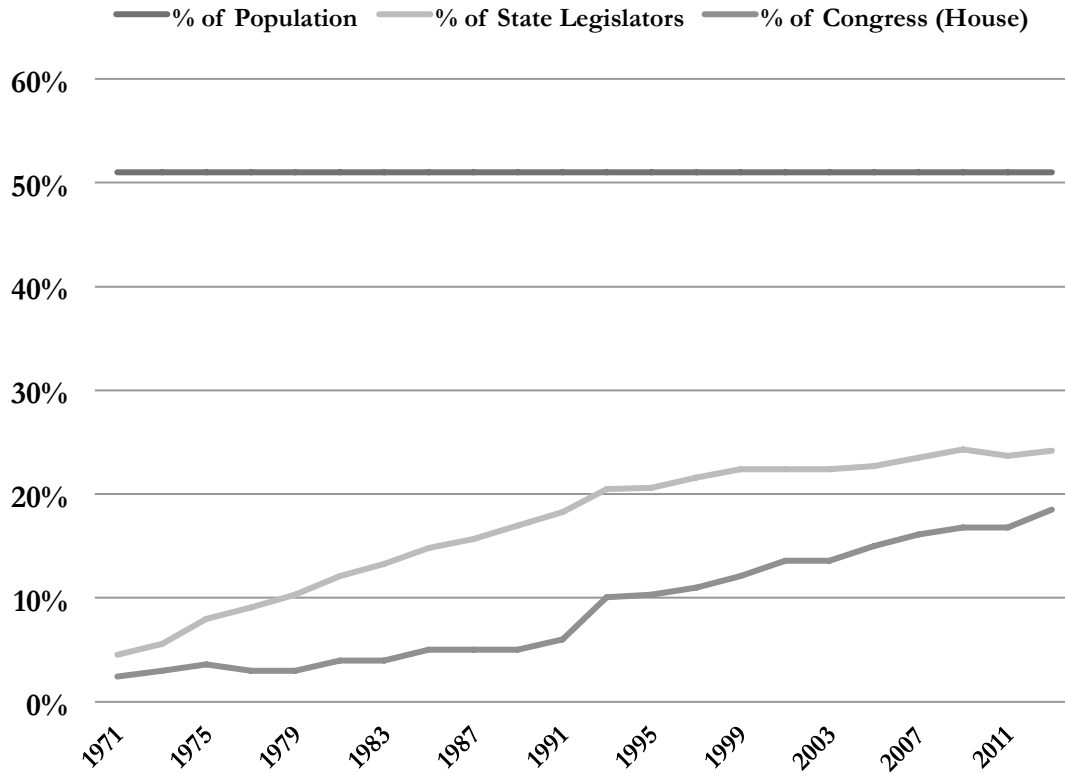


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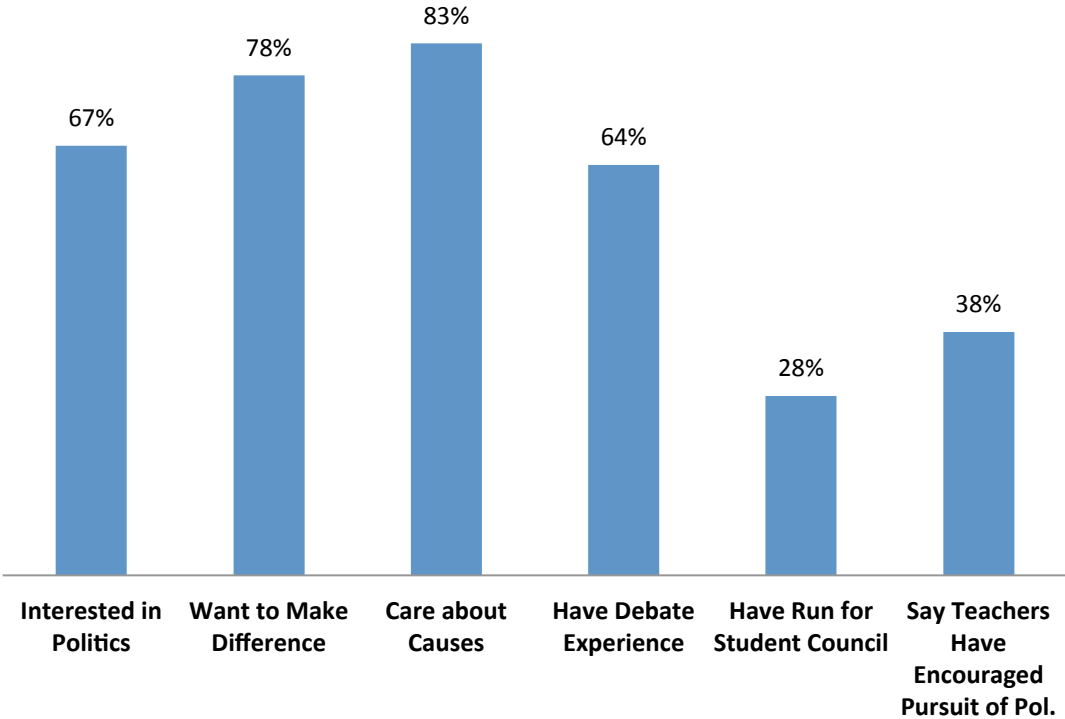
FIGURES

**Figure 1:**  
**Women as a Proportion of U.S. Legislative Bodies and U.S. Population, 1971-2013**



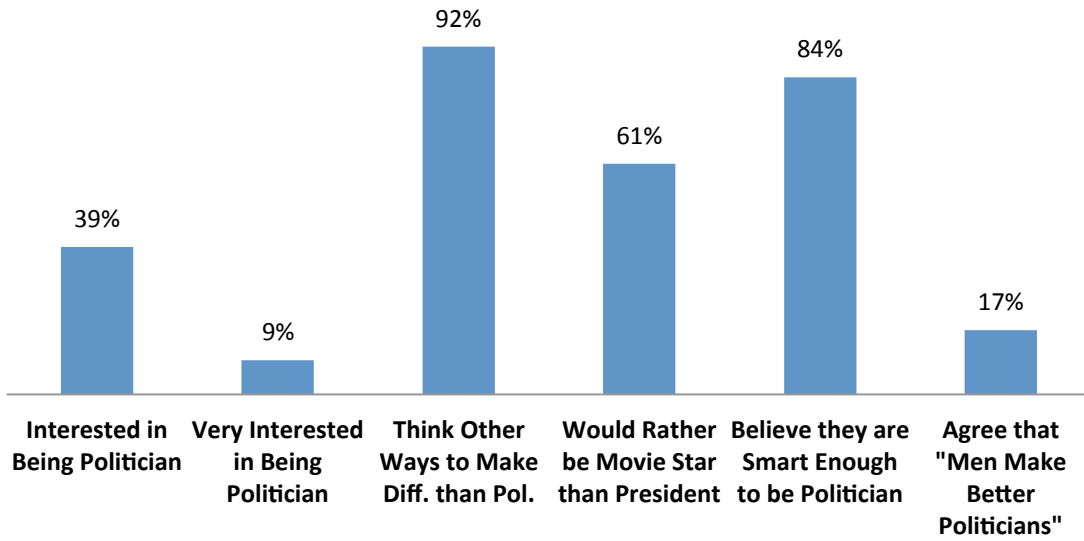
*Source:* Compiled from data given in CAWP 2014, U.S. Census 2014, Congressional Research Service 2014a; chart reprinted with permission from Shames 2014

**Figure 2:  
Girls' Political Interests and Experiences**



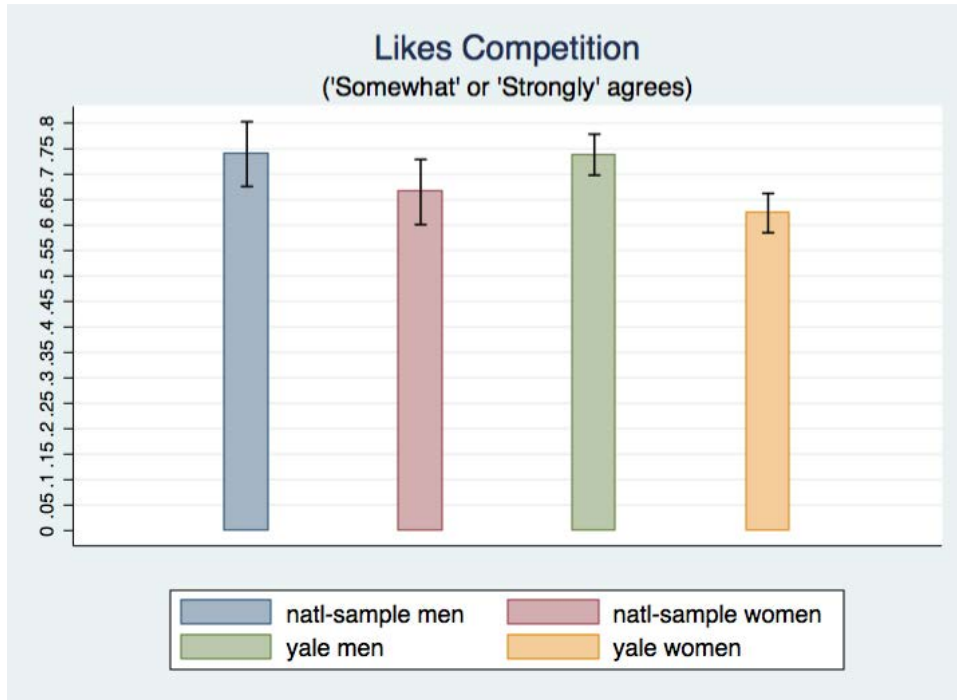
*Source:* Girl Scouts of the USA “Pulse” survey data

**Figure 3:  
Girls' Expectations about Politics and Political Careers**



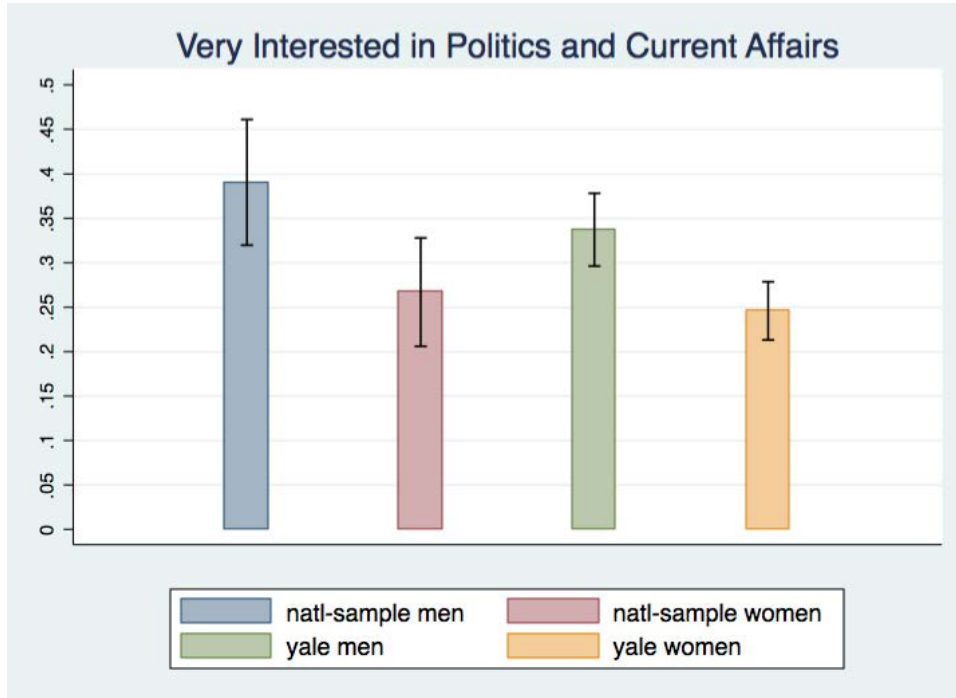
*Source:* Girl Scouts of the USA "Pulse" survey data

Figure 4:



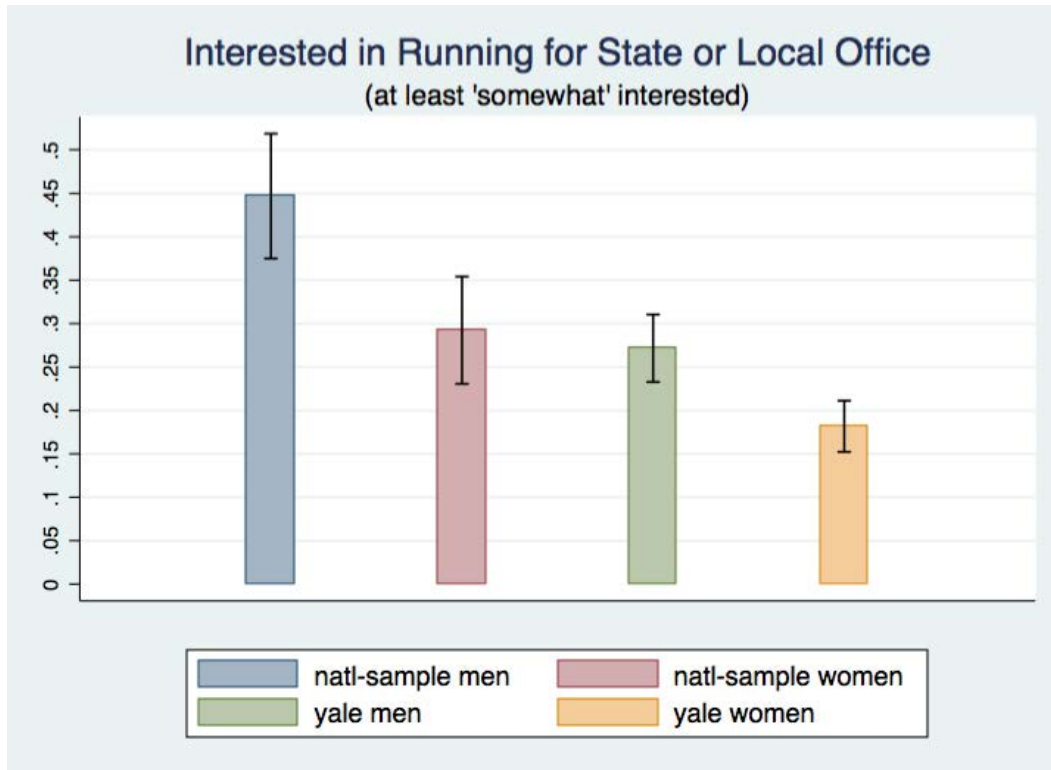
*Sources:* YouGov and Yale Samples from Silbermann work

Figure 5:



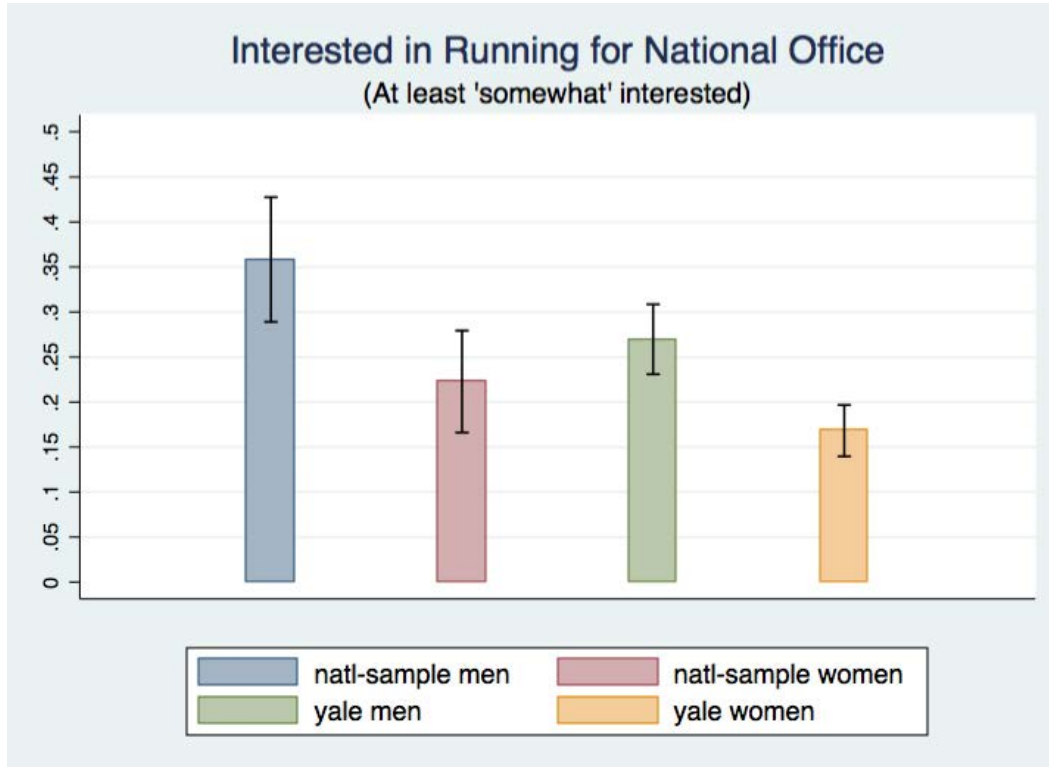
*Sources:* YouGov and Yale Samples from Silbermann work

Figure 6:



*Sources:* YouGov and Yale Samples from Silbermann work

Figure 7:



*Sources:* YouGov and Yale Samples from Silbermann work

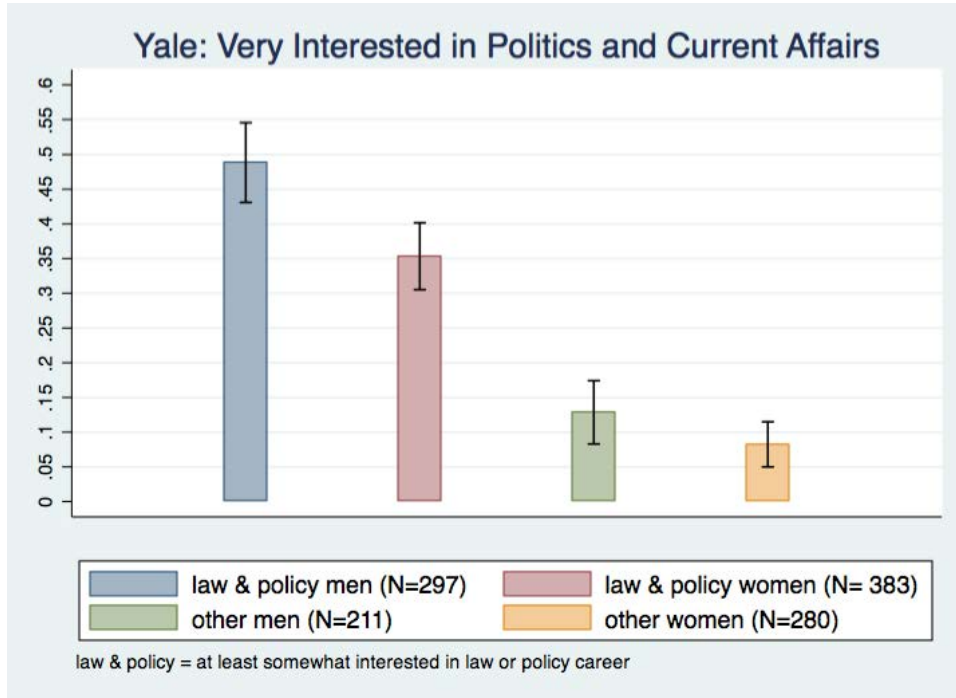


Figure 8:



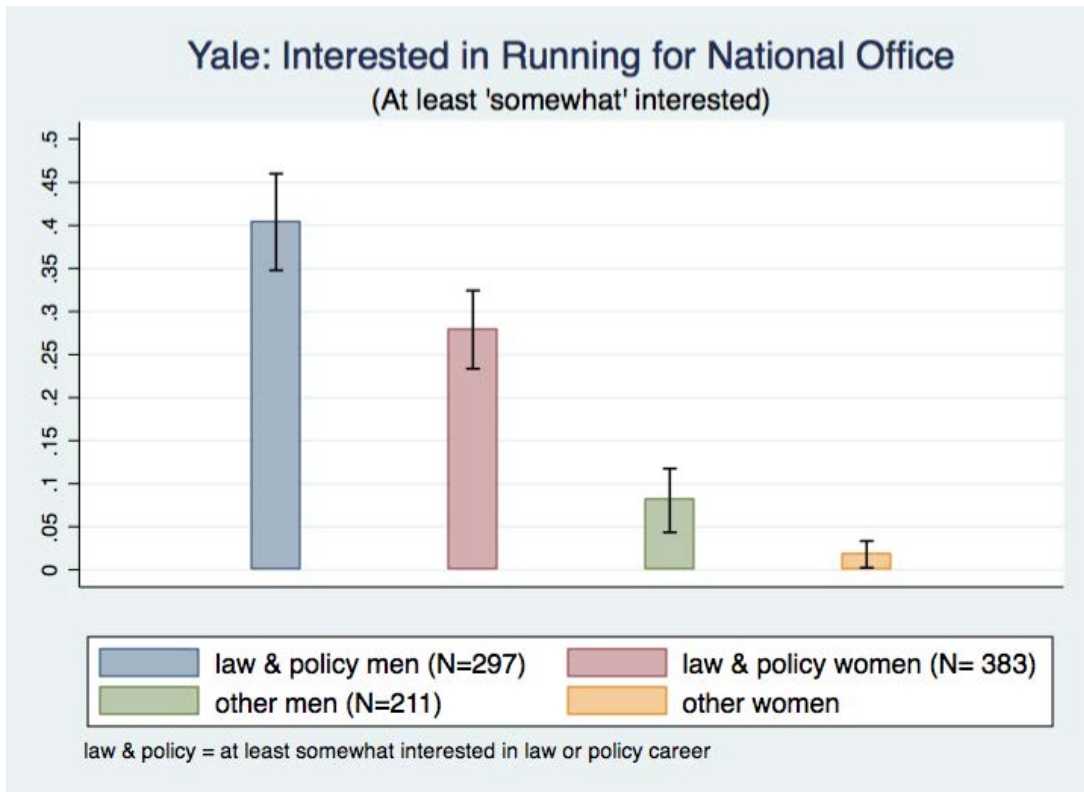
Sources: Yale Sample from Silbermann work

Figure 9:



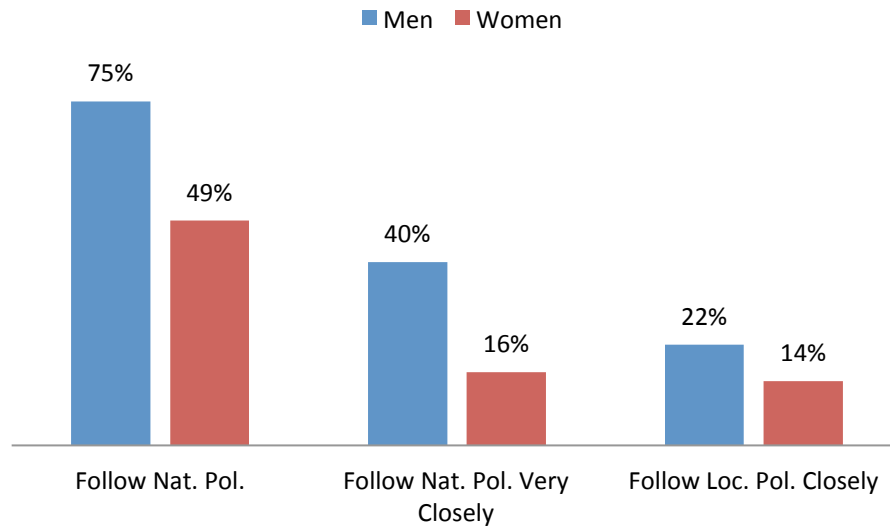
Sources: Yale Sample from Silbermann work

Figure 10:



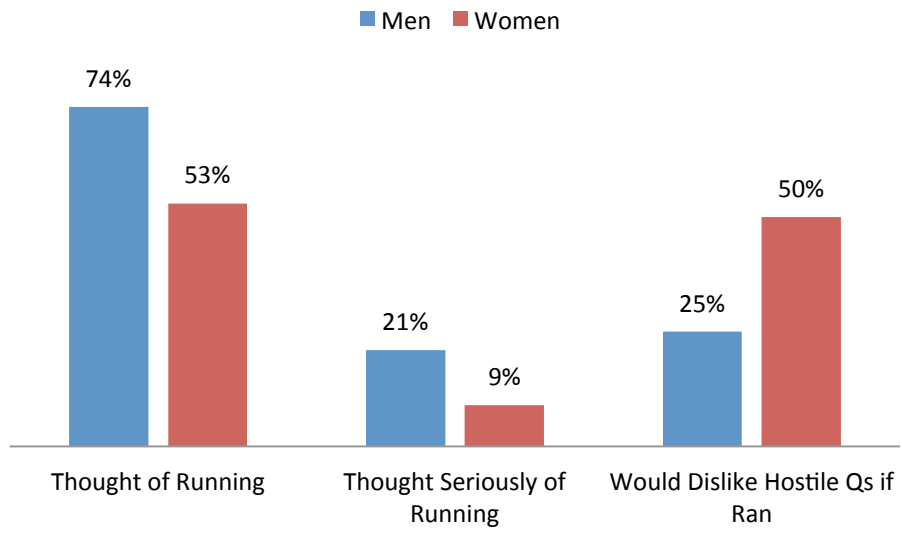
*Sources:* YouGov and Yale Samples from Silbermann work

Figure 11:



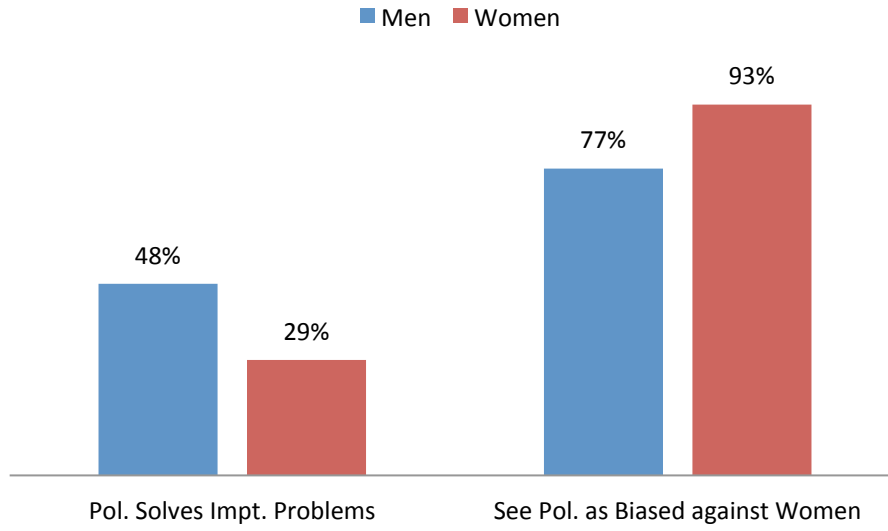
*Source:* LPS-PAS data from Shames work

Figure 12:



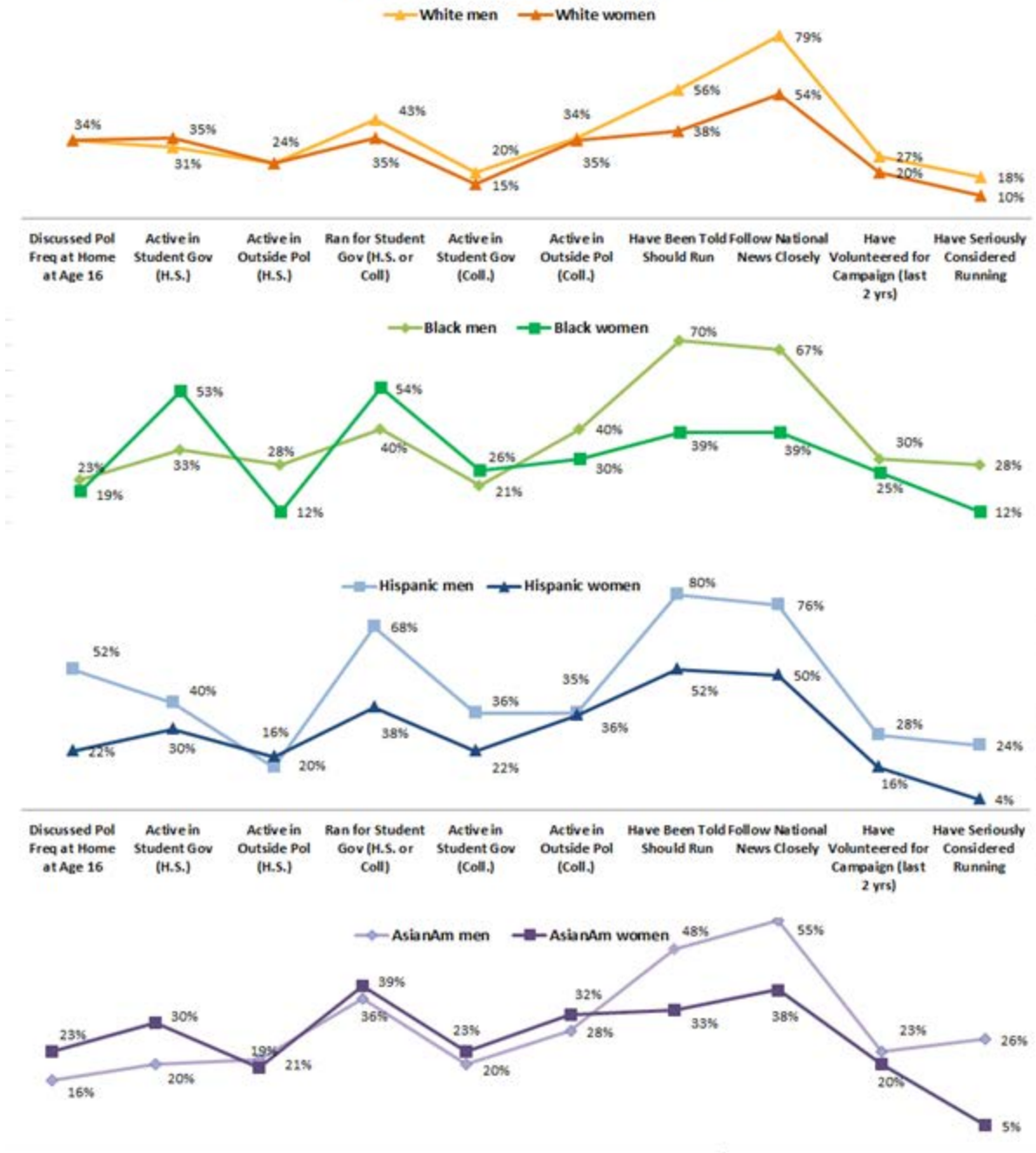
*Source:* LPS-PAS data from Shames work

Figure 13:



*Source:* LPS-PAS data from Shames work

Figure 14:  
Over-time Political Trajectories for Elite Graduate School Women,  
by Gender and Race/Ethnicity



Source: LPS-PAS data from Shames work