

When Women Run: Explaining the Rise in Women State Legislative Candidates

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Abstract

Since 2016, the number of women running for office has dramatically increased. Although much of the congressional research has demonstrated that women candidates do not face significant disadvantages, other more recent work (Silva and Skulley 2019) shows that women often face different challenges and advantages based on their race and ethnicity. According to (Elder 2012) the number of Democratic women in state legislatures has continued to increase while the number of Republican women has decreased. This seems to be the case in both the 2016 and 2018 elections. We examine the factors that influence how the political and institutional context shapes candidacies of women with an intersectional framework. We explore these dynamics at the state level where institutional and political environments vary significantly. Our findings underscore the importance of district demographics in shaping the pool of candidates from diverse backgrounds. Institutional and electoral features do have some role as well yet this varies across different racial and ethnic groups.

On August 4, 2020, Cori Bush gave her acceptance speech as the Democratic nominee for Missouri's first congressional district after defeating 10-term incumbent Representative William Clay. Bush's victory makes her the first black woman elected to represent the state of Missouri in Congress. As a nurse and pastor, she was always active in her community, and this activism increased after the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri at the hands of the police. Bush's path to activism and politics sets her apart from most candidates. Bush, a once-homeless mom living out of her car, took to the frontlines of the Ferguson protest and through this experience of connecting with others in her community decided to run for Congress in 2018 on a progressive platform. Her first attempt was unsuccessful, yet she was not deterred. Her victory over long-time incumbent Rep. Clay positions her become the first black woman to represent the state of Missouri in the U.S. Congress.

Cori Bush's path to Congress is part of a broader movement of women running for office at all levels in record numbers since 2016. In 2018, a record number of women ran for congressional, gubernatorial and state legislative offices. The number of women candidates for the U.S. House increased by 74% between 2016 and 2018.¹ The 2018 election resulted in a historic number of women of color in Congress. The number of women of color in the House increased to 43, while the number of women of color Senators remained 4. Meanwhile, in 2018, 3,564 women ran for the state legislature, representing an impressive 28% increase from 2016 when 2,781 women ran. This trend is also seen in the state of New Mexico's recent election where all those elected to the house were women of color. This has only happened one other time, in 1990 in the state of Hawaii.

¹ <https://womenrun.rutgers.edu/by-the-numbers/>

This research examines the emergence of women candidates in state legislative elections during the 2016 and 2018 electoral cycles using an intersectional approach. Previous scholarship identifies a variety of explanations for women’s underrepresentation in elective office, including political/institutional explanations like the incumbency advantage or partisan leanings and sociological explanations including gender roles. We argue that the institutional and political features of the legislative environment offer different incentives and costs for White women and women of color to become candidates and this has important consequences for who runs and ultimately wins office. The state legislatures provide an ideal venue to examine our theory because of the vast variation in institutional features, including legislative professionalism, term limits, and partisan control, and demographic diversity. We find support for our argument that there are key differences in the factors that propel White women and women of color candidates into running for office and their success. Our most consistent finding is that the racial and ethnic demographics of the district profoundly affect candidate emergence of those with shared backgrounds. This suggests that the supply of potential candidates from diverse backgrounds is a leading factor for ensuring greater diversity among candidates and ultimately diversifying the legislature.

Why Women’s Representation Matters

Despite women’s recent gains in elective office, women are still underrepresented relative to their proportion of the population. A substantial body of research argues that women’s presence—or absence—from political institutions matters for substantive representation with women legislators more likely to prioritize women’s issues and work across the partisan aisle collaborating on women’s issue legislation. That descriptive representation leads to substantive representation is also advanced by the theory of politics of presence (

Wangnerud, 2009; Phillips, 1995). This work has examined roll-call voting, bill (co-) sponsorship, and floor speeches and found that women legislators are more likely to prioritize issues that disproportionately affect women as a group (Welch 1985; Dolan and Ford 1997; Gerrity, Osborn, and Mendez 2007; Clark and Caro 2013; Frederick 2015). Research also demonstrates that women are more effective legislators (Volden, Wiseman, and Wittmer 2013) and take a more constituency-oriented approach to representation (Lazarus and Steigerwalt 2018). Others have found a connection between women's collective descriptive representation and citizens' levels of external political efficacy (Atkeson and Carrillo 2007; Stauffer 2021) and decreases in the political knowledge gap between races and ethnicities when citizens are represented by co-racial or co-ethnic members in Congress (Wolak and Juenke 2021).

It is important to understand the factors that enhance or diminish women's candidacy for state legislative seats for several reasons. First, state legislatures have the capacity to make important decisions that have a profound influence on the lives of citizens. From criminal justice policy to health care and voting rights, state legislatures make policy on a range of issues that directly impact citizens in their states. Second, state legislative positions are often the springboard for candidates running for other offices (Squire 1988). Thus, they help establish a pipeline of quality candidates for other offices both within the state as well as in the federal government. Third, because these state legislatures vary considerably in their institutional features—professionalism, term limits, party strength, size—understanding how these features can elicit greater (or less) representation of historically excluded groups can help us build better theories of the institutional design and electoral politics.

Candidate Emergence and Success

A record-breaking number of women have run for state legislative seats since 2016. During the 2016 cycle, 2,648 women ran in state legislative races, and the number of women running in 2018 exceeded this by 150 percent (Shames, et. al 2020). In 2018, we saw the greatest number of women running for state legislative office in history. What has caused the precipitous rise of women candidates for state legislative seats, and has this translated into a more diverse makeup of state legislatures? Although earlier research tended to characterize political ambition as a fixed characteristic internal to individuals (Schlesinger 1966), the surge in women's candidacies during the 2016 and 2018 election cycles suggests that contextual factors may also shape ambition and that political ambition may vary over time. Within the broad literature on gender and political ambition, research has focused on both individual-level and institutional explanations for why women choose to run (or not run) for office. Women typically perceive themselves as less qualified (Fox and Lawless 2003; Kanthak and Woon 2015), have less interest in campaign tasks including fundraising (Jenkins 2007), and often face barriers due to the household "second shift," breadwinning, and career choices that fail to lead them into political offices (Norris and Lovenduski 1995; Bernhard, et. al 2020).

In addition to the individual characteristics that shape ambition, scholars have also found that the institutional context can also influence women's emergence as candidates. The recruitment of candidates and the possibility of success are intrinsically related since potential candidates and parties are strategic actors. Women face disadvantages due to the incumbency advantage (Carroll 1994), and they tend to have greater success in open-seat elections (Welch 1985). The organizational strength of political parties—as both recruiters of candidates and gatekeepers—influences women's electoral prospects as well (Sanbonmatsu 2006). Parties are strategic in their recruitment of candidates and much of their decision-making hinges upon

electability, which varies a great deal by state and by district (Ondercin 2020). In general, gatekeepers like political parties are also less likely to recruit women as candidates (Fox and Lawless 2010; Sanbonmatsu 2006). Others have found that women in the Republican Party face additional barriers due to male dominated recruitment networks (Crowder-Meyer 2013; Sanbonmatsu 2006) and possible also due to the fact that Republicans generally downplay identity politics (Elder 2012; Thomsen 2015; Wineinger 2019)

Intersectionality and the Candidacy for State Legislatures

Do the pathways into politics described by earlier research on women's political ambition offer an accurate explanation for the experiences of women of color? Although earlier work by Rule (1992) argued that the electoral environments most conducive for the election of White women were similar for women of color, more recent research demonstrates that the factors influencing the emergence and election of White women candidates may not be universal and may differ for women of color (Bejarano 2013; Scola 2013; Sanbonmatsu 2015; Holman and Schneider 2018; Shah, Scott, and Juenke 2018; Silva and Skulley 2019; Matos, et. al 2021; Bejarano and Smooth 2022). Rule's earlier work identified a variety of conditions that similarly benefited White and Black women running for office—multimember districts, highly populated areas, and high proportions of well-educated, professional women. Subsequent studies have identified several unique aspects of the candidacies of women of color compared to White women. For instance, Smooth (2006) notes that African American women have been most successful in Southern states with more traditionalistic political cultures, namely because there is a diverse population from which to draw quality African American women candidates. Similarly, Fraga, et. al (2006) notes that over half of all Latina state legislators reside in Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Texas, and these are the states with the greatest Latino populations. This success may be both

due to a large base of support in the electorate as well as a large, diverse pool of potential candidates from which to recruit (Casellas 2009).

Hypothesis 1: The demographics of a district will have a positive effect on the emergence of candidates from the shared demographic group. For example, the likelihood of a Black woman candidate running will increase as the percentage of Blacks in the district increases.

The institutional and political environment can also have an important influence on who runs and wins elective office. First, parties have a significant role in recruiting candidates and their ultimate success. As the prior work has demonstrated, the parties have had different levels of success in attracting women and non-White candidates to run for office, and this in turn has also influenced their success in diversifying their caucuses. While women are underrepresented in legislatures generally, the proportion of women of color legislators comprise a greater share of officeholders who are from historically excluded groups compared to White women legislators and all White legislators (Sanbonmatsu 2015). Fraga, Shah, and Juenke (2020) investigate the candidacies of women and women of color in the 2018 election compared to previous elections and find that they experienced high levels of success, but their success was confined to Democrats running for office. Thus, we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 2: White women, Latinas, and Black women will be more likely to run when Democrats control the chamber.

Earlier work on the representation of women and African Americans and Latinos in legislatures found little effect of term limits. However, Casellas (2009) found evidence that term limits enhanced Latino representation but only in states that had a sizable Latino population. This demonstrates that the effects of electoral rules may not be evenly felt across all underrepresented groups.

Hypothesis 3: Term Limits will enhance the candidacies and success of Latinas but have no effect for White women and African American women state legislative candidates.

Finally, scholars have noted the important effect of multimember districts on who gets elected. Women are more likely to win seats in multimember districts (Arceneaux 2001; Darcy, Welch, and Clark 1994; Hogan 2001; Moncrief and Thompson 1992). Although women are generally more election averse than men, some suggest that multimember districts enhance women's comfort in running and also voters' comfort in supporting women candidates (Darcy, Welch, and Clark 1994).

Hypothesis 4: Multimember districts will enhance the electoral success of White women candidates but will diminish the electoral success of Black women candidates and Latina candidates.

Data and Methods

To examine the factors that influence women's underrepresentation, we rely on a comprehensive dataset of all state legislative candidates during the 2016 and 2018 elections. We used the *State Legislative Election Returns* (Klarner 2018) for a complete list of all candidates, and we coded the legislators' gender and race. We also cross-referenced our 2018 coding with the Juenke et al's (2020) data to ensure consistency. There were 3,564 women candidates for state legislative seats in 2018, which includes Democrats, Republicans and third-party candidates. The number of women candidates represented a 28% increase compared to the 2,781 women who ran in 2016. Many of these candidates were successful as well. In 2019, 2,073 women occupied seats in the

statehouses. The nearly 3 percent increase is the largest increase in the share of women since the Year of the Woman in 1992.

We merged Census demographic data with the SLER dataset and calculated the percentage of Blacks, percentage of Latinos, and percentage of Whites for the state legislative districts. We used data from the Correlates of State Policymaking project (Jordan and Grossman 2020) to get the percentage of Latinx state legislators and the percentage of Black state legislators from the previous sessions. These measures allow us to examine how the potential pipeline of candidates from historically excluded racial and ethnic groups shapes the emergence of candidates.

Finally, we merged data on the following institutional features of legislatures: term limits, legislative professionalism, and multiple-member districts. Term limits and multiple-member districts consist of dummy variables that are coded 1 if the legislature has implemented term limits (or uses multiple-member districts) and 0 otherwise. The legislative professionalism measure is taken from Squire's legislative professionalism index. These indicators enable us to test how institutional features shape candidate emergence and success.

We estimate a series of logistic regression models for candidate emergence. For each model, we estimate the probability of a candidate of the particular demographic running for state legislative office (e.g., Black woman candidate). The most consistent finding across our models is that the racial demographics of the district influences emergence of candidates with shared demographics. This lends support for our first hypothesis. Black women (and men) candidates are more likely to in run as the percentage of Black population increases. Latina (and Latino) candidates are more likely to run as the percentage of Latinx population increases. Finally, White women (and White men) candidates are more likely to run as the percentage of White population

increases. This relationship is statistically significant at the .01 level across all models. This suggests that a diverse population from which candidates of different racial and ethnic backgrounds can be recruited will help in diversifying state legislative elections. Figure 1 presents the margins plots of each model. While we see consistently a positive effect, there is a much stronger effect for Black women and Latina candidates compared to White women candidates.

We do not find support for our second hypothesis. Democratic unified control was not a statistically significant predictor for the emergence of Black women candidates. It actually had a *negative* (yet statistically significant) effect for Latinas and Latinos. The coefficient for Democratic unified control of the legislature was positive and statistically significant for Black men, though. It was insignificant for White male and female candidates.

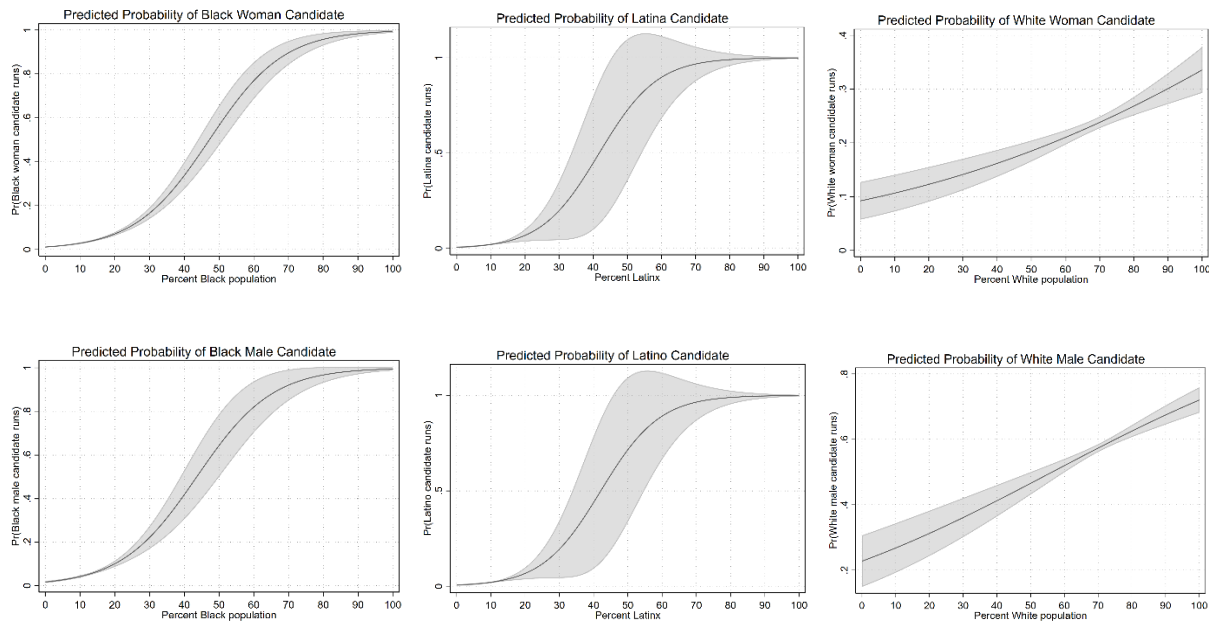
Table 1: Logistic Regression of State Legislative Candidate Emergence

VARIABLES	(1) Black Women	(2) Black Men	(3) Latinas	(4) Latinos	(5) White Women	(6) White Men
Term Limits	0.374** (0.181)	0.193 (0.135)	0.0266 (0.198)	0.0210 (0.197)	0.0337 (0.0804)	-0.138** (0.0658)
Unified Democratic Control	0.0972 (0.153)	0.370** (0.148)	-0.488*** (0.144)	-0.486*** (0.143)	0.0263 (0.0878)	0.0679 (0.0774)
Professionalism	0.106*** (0.0299)	0.0477 (0.0395)	0.0304 (0.0407)	0.0322 (0.0406)	-0.0167 (0.0217)	0.0255 (0.0212)
% Latinx in Leg.	0.0128* (0.00752)	0.00453 (0.00902)	-0.0394 (0.0331)	-0.0377 (0.0329)	0.0126** (0.00592)	0.00200 (0.00651)
% Black in Leg.	0.00669 (0.0130)	-0.0193 (0.0146)	0.0288*** (0.0108)	0.0295*** (0.0107)	0.0262*** (0.00721)	-0.0118** (0.00542)
State Liberalism	-0.00455 (0.00634)	0.000721 (0.00601)	0.0227*** (0.00630)	0.0225*** (0.00628)	-0.000961 (0.00236)	-0.00633** (0.00247)
Multimember Districts	-0.313** (0.158)	-0.485** (0.206)	0.0843 (0.135)	0.0750 (0.134)	-0.0806 (0.0826)	0.000357 (0.0753)
% Black population	0.0966*** (0.00586)	0.0946*** (0.00884)				
% Latinx Population			0.124*** (0.0268)	0.123*** (0.0267)		
% White population					0.0161*** (0.00306)	0.0218*** (0.00326)
Session	0.0032 (0.0144)	0.0001 (0.0023)	0.0017 (0.0341)	0.0221 (0.0410)	0.0183 (0.0227)	0.0331 (0.0522)
Constant	-4.642*** (0.299)	-3.763*** (0.383)	-6.835*** (0.427)	-6.823*** (0.425)	-2.949*** (0.296)	-0.604*** (0.201)

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Figure 1: Margins Plots of Candidate Emergence



In the case of term limits, we also fail to find support for the expectations in hypothesis 3.

We do find that term limits have a positive effect on the emergence of Black women state legislative candidates and reduces the likelihood of White men emerging as state legislative candidates. However, it was significant for all other groups. This result is consistent with previous work that finds that term limits have failed to enhance women’s representation in state legislatures as was originally promised, yet it does suggest that there could be important nuances across different racial and ethnic groups.

Multimember districts had a negative influence on the emergence of Black women for state legislative seats, though no impact on Black men. This is consistent with prior research showing the negative effect that MMDs have had on Black candidates more generally. The effect of MMDs on candidacies was insignificant for all other groups.

The degree of diversity in the makeup of the state legislature had some effects on candidate emergence. The percentage of Latinx legislators yields a positive, significant effect on

the likelihood that Black women and White women will run for office. Interestingly, though, this had no effect on whether Latinas or Latinos will run for a state legislative seat. Additionally, the percentage of Black legislators in the state legislature had a positive, significant effect on the likelihood of Latinas, Latinos, and White women candidates emerging and a negative effect on White men running for the state legislature, yet no effect on the likelihood of Black women and Black men running for state legislative seats.

Finally, state ideology had a significant effect on the likelihood of Latinas and Latinos running for the state legislature. As the state becomes more liberal ideologically, Latinas and Latinos are more likely to run for the state legislature, while White men are less likely to run for state legislative office. State ideology failed to wield a significant effect on candidacies for the other models.

Conclusion

Since 2016, women have run for elected office at historical rates, and as their success has grown, we have seen substantial diversification of our elected institutions. State legislatures are an ideal venue for us to examine how institutional and electoral rules shape individuals' decisions to run because of the substantial variation at the state level. We argued and found some evidence that these factors influence candidates of color differently than their White counterparts.

While this study identifies some important institutional features that shape candidates' decisions to run, there are other factors that also may shape these decisions. Partisan recruitment efforts likely play a considerable effect in diversifying the field of candidates. At the congressional level, there have been several works that point out the vital role of parties in

recruiting women candidates. More work focused on the state-level can shed further light on the significant role the parties may play in this process. Additionally, campaign funding networks may also help to explain candidate emergence at the state-level. To the extent that racial and gender differences in campaign giving exist, this may offer some additional explanation for disparities we see across the states.

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