**To Succeed or Not to Succeed: It's Based on Your Experience**

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Abstract

This article explores the impact of lower level statewide office experience on the success of female gubernatorial candidates. We examine all of the gubernatorial contests from 1976-2014 in which a female candidate ran against a male candidate in the general election. We find that holding a lower level statewide position such as Lieutenant Governor, Attorney General, and others is beneficial to Democratic women running for governor but not for Republican women running for governor. This finding supports the belief that the gendered opportunity structure may be different for each party with Democratic women receiving more of a benefit from the development of a traditional pipeline of potential candidates for higher office. We also find that the same benefit does not exist for the men who face women candidates. The data suggest that the strongest male candidates tend to come from other political backgrounds or the business world instead of from the conventional springboard offices such as those for Democratic women.

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Introduction

Currently, there are six women governors leading their states (NH, NM, OK, OR, RI & SC). One of the most recent additions to this group of female leaders is Rhode Island governor, Democrat Gina M. Raimondo, who won the open seat with 40.7% of the vote (State of Rhode Island Board of Elections 2015). Governor Raimondo is the first female governor for her state, although she is not the first female gubernatorial candidate for Rhode Island. Democrat Myrth York ran unsuccessfully for the governor’s seat in 1994, 1998 and 2002, and prior to York’s three gubernatorial campaigns, Republican Elizabeth Ann Leonard was unsuccessful in her attempt to unseat the incumbent governor in 1992[[1]](#footnote-1). Even though residents of Rhode Island had five opportunities to elect a female governor, only in 2014 was the female gubernatorial candidate successful.

One of the main reasons why York and Leonard were unsuccessful in their gubernatorial quests while Raimondo is now leading her state as governor may be the type of political experience the candidates have as they run for the top executive office in their state. Elizabeth Leonard, a small business owner, was considered a political newcomer when she became the Republican gubernatorial candidate in 1992, and Myrth York’s political experience was in the state senate. However, Gina Raimondo came into the 2014 gubernatorial race as the current General Treasurer of the state. In 2010 she had been elected to this state-wide position and as a result, had the experience and name recognition that came with that 2010 election and her years of service as the “custodian of State funds, charged with the safe and prudent management of the State’s finances” (State of Rhode Island Office of the General Treasurer).

As we consider the other current female governors, all five have some level of elected political experience. Republican Nikki Haley from South Carolina and Democrat Maggie Hassan from New Hampshire both served in their state legislatures. Republican Susana Martinez from New Mexico was elected the Dona Ana County District Attorney and served from 1996 to 2009. Democrat Kate Brown served for seventeen years in the Oregon state legislature following that up with six years as Oregon’s Secretary of State (2009-2015). Finally, Republican Mary Fallin from Oklahoma was elected to the state legislature (1990-1994) and the U.S. House of Representatives (2007-2011) in addition to serving as lieutenant governor of her state from 1995 to 2007 (CAWP 2015). None of these women were political newcomers; this supports the findings that gubernatorial candidates usually have elected office experience in either the legislative or executive branches (Beyle 1999; Windett 2011).

This paper examines the effect that previous political experience can have on the success of female gubernatorial candidates. In other words, are women more likely to be successful in getting elected as governor if they have held an elected political office previously? Furthermore, we question if certain levels of political office experience are more advantageous for female candidates. For example, are female candidates who have lower level statewide office experience such as Lieutenant Governor or Attorney General more successful in their quest for the governor’s office than female candidates with other types of experience? Finally, we further examine any differences in paths to success by political party. Past research suggests that for female gubernatorial candidates, the path to success reflects a different candidate pool for Democrats than for Republicans (Stambough and O’Regan 2007).

In this study, we begin with a discussion of past research on the factors that explain the success and failure of female candidates before focusing more specifically on gubernatorial elections. We then examine all of the female vs. male gubernatorial elections from 1976-2014 to identify if a certain career path is associated with the success of female gubernatorial candidates measured by the percentage of the vote received by the female candidates. We conclude with suggestions for future areas of research in this field.

Literature Review

Over the years, research has addressed the factors that affect the electability of female candidates. One reason that is used to explain the lack of women in elected office is the incumbency advantage. The benefit of incumbency is the name recognition and resources that are vital for a successful campaign (Jacobson 2004). Because, over the years, most of the incumbents have been men, they are the candidates who have benefited from the advantage (Carroll 1994; Darcy et. al. 1994; Witt et. al. 1995). As more women get elected and run for re-election, the advantage of incumbency will benefit the women. The anticipated solution to this barrier for women is for women to run for open-seats where they stand an equal chance as men of getting elected (Wilcox 1994; Seltzer et. al. 1997).

Another reason for the low level of female elected officials is the lack of party support that female candidates receive. Studies contend that party elites may not view women as viable candidates and therefore are less likely to provide organizational and monetary support for the women (Darcy et. al. 1994; Witt et. al. 1995; Ford 2006). There are indications that as more women have run and been successful in their bids for political office, party support has increased (Biersack & Herrnson 1994; Sanbonmatsu et. al. 2009). Along with this party support, interest groups are realizing the viability of female candidates and are providing the necessary financial support for a female candidate to be successful. Evidence of this is in the similar amounts of PAC money that female and male candidates are receiving (Herrick 1995). Furthermore, the establishment of various organizations, such as EMILY’s List and Wish List, which support female candidates have also provided the necessary encouragement and resources for a candidate to become an officeholder (Darcy et. al. 1994; McGlen et. al. 2005; Burrell 2010).

Researchers have also suggested that the types of issues that are focused on during the campaign can influence the support that women candidates receive (Huddy & Terkildsen 1993; Witt et. al. 1995; Dolan 2001). When elections revolve around security and crime issues, voters tend to view women as ill-equipped to deal with such issues and will not vote for the women. These assumptions are based on long-established stereotypes that are difficult to overcome. However, when the issues are gender-related, such as reproductive freedom, or social concerns like education, health care and assistance for the disadvantaged, voters assume that female candidates are more competent in dealing with these issues and will therefore vote for the women.

Finally, the lack of qualified female candidates has slowed attempts to increase the number of female officeholders at the higher levels. Scholars have found that women are less likely than men to run for political office (Duerst-Lahti 1998; Lawless & Fox 2008) and this results in a limited number of viable female candidates that voters can choose from. In their comprehensive analyses of the political ambition of women, Fox and Lawless (2004, 2011) found that even when women have the same personal characteristics and qualifications as men, the women are less likely to seek elective office. Whether it is due to the lack of encouragement for women to run for office, or women’s personal views that they are unqualified, the pool of viable female candidates remains shallow.

Although this may seem discouraging, this condition may be changing. Literature has addressed the development of a political pipeline that is providing a pool of qualified female candidates for various political offices (Rogers 1993; Pearson & McGhee 2003; Palmer & Simon 2008). Here we find more women working their way up the political ladder and developing the credentials and name recognition that are necessary for a candidate to get elected to a higher office. Advocates for expanding the pool of experienced women candidates expect that as more women get elected and serve in lower political offices, we will see increases in the number of quality female candidates who run for higher offices (Carroll 1994; Darcy et. al. 1994; Duerst-Lahti 1998). However, others (Mariani 2008) are less optimistic and contend that gender-based differences complicate the political pipeline for women resulting in women being less likely than men to get elected to a higher level political office.

While most of this literature focuses on female candidates for state and national legislative seats, more recently we find research on the obstacles that female gubernatorial candidates deal with. A significant amount of this research addresses the media coverage of the women’s campaigns. Scholars note that due to differences in media coverage, women are at a disadvantage when compared to their male rivals (Kahn 1996; Rausch et. al. 1999; Devitt 2002; Banwart et. al. 2003; Fowler & Lawless 2009); however, some argue that media coverage is becoming more gender balanced (Jalalzai 2006).

Additionally, studies examine pre-election and exit polls to determine voter support of female gubernatorial candidates (Rausch & Rausch 1997; O’Regan & Stambough 2002). Although finding different results, these studies show that the gender, age, partisanship and region of residence of voters affect their level of support for female gubernatorial candidates. Further research demonstrates that the novelty of being the first female gubernatorial candidate in a state’s history decreases voter support for the female gubernatorial candidate and their likelihood of winning (O’Regan & Stambough 2011); when the novelty is gone, female gubernatorial candidates are more successful. In addition, research tells us that there are differences in the parties’ nomination of female candidates for governor and these differences can negatively affect the chances of female gubernatorial candidates (Stambough & O’Regan 2007). The Republican Party is more likely to nominate a female candidate as a sacrificial lamb to run against an incumbent than the Democratic Party is. Furthermore, the Democratic Party is more likely than the Republican Party to have developed a political pipeline of qualified female candidates to run for governor. As a result, female Republicans have a more difficult time of getting elected to the governor’s office.

Moreover, the literature demonstrates that the society and culture of each state determines the likelihood of women entering and winning their respective races. Jason Windett concludes that a favorable female sociopolitical subculture results in a stronger probability of success for female gubernatorial candidates. This study also found that female gubernatorial candidates who held elective office previously had an increased likelihood of winning their respective race (2011).

Windett’s findings prompt us to ask if experience as a state-wide executive office-holder increases the likelihood of success for a female gubernatorial candidate?For this preliminary research, we theorize that female gubernatorial candidates who have lower level state-wide executive office experience are more likely to get elected than female gubernatorial candidates with other types of experience such as local political office, state legislative, or even from the world of business. Furthermore, because the traditional pipeline model applies to Democratic women candidates and not to Republican women candidates, we expect to find differences in results based upon the partisanship of the female candidates.

**Data and Analysis**

To investigate the impact of prior statewide elective office on the success of female gubernatorial candidates, we examine the elections in which a female gubernatorial candidate ran against a male gubernatorial candidate from 1976 to 2014. Because we are interested in whether statewide elective office is an advantage for women seeking the governorship, we limited the cases to only those in which a female candidate was seeking election and not re-election to the position of governor. Therefore, the data includes all contests in which a female challenger faced a male incumbent or when a female candidate faced a male candidate in an open-seat election. By restricting the analysis to only those races in which the two major candidates in the general election were of different sexes, we are able to gain the most direct examination of the impact of candidate sex on electoral success.

*Dependent Variables*

Because past research suggests that there is a substantial partisan difference in both recruiting and the opportunity structure for women between the Democratic and Republican parties (Sanbonmatsu 2002; Stambough and O’Regan 2007), we conducted separate analyses for Democratic gubernatorial candidates and Republican gubernatorial candidates. The primary dependent variable for both analyses, *Female Vote Share*, is the overall percentage of the vote received by the female candidate. Therefore, in the analysis of Democratic women the dependent variable is the percentage of the vote received by the Democratic candidate and in the analysis of Republican women, the dependent variable is the percentage of the vote received by the Republican candidate. This information was obtained from the *Facts* sheets available at the Center for American Women and Politics ([www.cawp.rutgers.edu](http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu)).

*Independent Variables*

Our primary independent variable of interest is *Female Candidate with Statewide Office Experience.* This variable captures whether or not the female gubernatorial candidate held statewide elective office. The list of statewide offices is provided in Table 1. The most commonly held prior offices for female gubernatorial candidates are Lieutenant Governor (14.8%), State Treasurer and other similar positions (18.5%), and Attorney General (8.6%). This variable is measured as a dichotomous variable indicating whether the candidate’s most recent level of political office was a statewide position below the office of governor. In all, 41 of the 81 women candidates (50.6%) in these races held a statewide position as their most recent political position. Of those with either no prior political experience or experience at some other political level, the most common office is that of a state legislator. Twenty-four (29.6%) of the candidates in this sample held state legislative office as their most recent political experience. As discussed above, it is expected that holding a statewide political position should be positively related with the percentage of the vote received by the female candidate and that this effect should be greater for Democratic women than for Republican women.

In addition to the primary independent variable of interest, we include several additional variables to account for any influence they might have on the dependent variables. First, we include *Male Candidate with Statewide Office Experience*,a variable that measures the prior political experience of the male opponent. This is measured the same way as it is for women candidates. This variable is included because candidate quality of the female candidate does not exist in a vacuum. Each female candidate for governor in the dataset competed against a male candidate for governor with each asking voters for their support based, in part, on both candidates’ political experience.

It is difficult, however, to know exactly what to expect from this variable. As discussed earlier, past research suggests that men tend to be more aggressively ambitious about their political careers (Fox and Lawless 2004). The common way this has been described is that women need to be asked while men do not. Within this study and research question, that aggressive ambition suggests that men may be less likely to move up the traditional political ladder and, instead, cut in line or move from an entirely different candidate pool. In fact, unlike the political experience levels we found among the female candidates, the male candidates in the dataset are less likely to have statewide experience. While just over half of the women in the dataset had lower level statewide experience, just under 30% of the men in the dataset had that same level of experience. As we found with women candidates, the single most common office for male candidates is state legislative experience. However, the overall percentage is much lower. For women, 29.6% of the candidates in the dataset were state legislators while for men it was only 19.4%. For men, the next highest percentage of candidates came from the world of business with 18% of the dataset.

Since ambitious, successful male candidates are more likely to *cut in line,* the regular benefits of working up the political ladder might not be as strong for men. In fact, a lower level statewide position might be more of a sign that the male candidate is blocked or has hit a political ceiling. Therefore, although it is important to include this independent variable it is unclear how this would impact the percentage of the vote for the female candidate. If the female candidate faces a male, lower level statewide office holder it might indicate that the party decided to go with the political equivalent of the usual suspects instead of tapping a true rising star as their standard bearer.

Because the dataset includes those races in which a female candidate is seeking election as governor and not those seeking reelection, it includes races with a male incumbent. To account for any difference between running as a challenger against a male incumbent and as a candidate in an open-seat election, we also include the dichotomous variable, *Open-seat Elections,* indicating whether the contest is an open-seat election (1) or one in which a female challenger faces a male incumbent (0). Because it is expected that candidates do better for open-seats than as challengers, we expect a positive relationship between this variable and the dependent variables.

In addition to these election specific factors, we incorporate three state specific features into the analyses as independent variables. The first of these is *Citizen Ideology*. This is measured using the citizen ideology data from Berry et al (1998). For a given election, we used the value of the ideology of the state for the period prior to the election. Although it is anticipated that more ideologically liberal states will be a more supportive environment for women gubernatorial candidates, any impact should be greatest for Democratic women. In addition, the success of a new generation of more distinctly conservative Republican gubernatorial candidates (O’Regan and Stambough 2014) makes any particular expectation for state ideology more difficult to anticipate for Republican women.

The second state specific variable is *Women in the State Legislature*. Using the data available in the *Facts* section of the Center for American Women and Politics webpage, we include the percentage of a state legislature that is female prior to the gubernatorial election. Conventional wisdom suggests that success at one level eventually leads to success at another level. Greater percentages of women in the state legislature also suggest that the state’s electorate and other political actors are more willing to elect women to higher levels of political office. It is expected that higher percentages of women in state legislative bodies will be positively associated with the success of women gubernatorial candidates.

The final state specific variable is a dichotomous variable, *South*, indicating whether the state is in the south. Because of the rise of the Republican Party as the dominant party in the south during this period, it is expected that *South* will be positively associated with the percentage of the vote for Republican women but not for Democratic women. This regional variable has been shown to be important for the success of female candidates (Burrell 1994; Lublin and Brewer 2003). However, since the dataset is limited to only those candidates who received their party’s nomination, the impact of the variable in this equation is more about the party vote than about the gendered vote.

**Findings**

As mentioned previously, separate analyses were conducted for Democratic women and Republican women gubernatorial candidates. These results are presented in Tables 2 and 3. The following equation was estimated in each analysis.

*Female Vote Share = a + Female Candidate with Statewide Office Experience + Male Candidate with Statewide Office Experience + Open-seat Elections + Citizen Ideology + Women in the State Legislature + South*

For Democratic women gubernatorial candidates, the findings suggest that statewide experience is an important factor for the success of women candidates. The data suggest that women who have held lower level statewide elective office receive approximately 5 more points on their vote totals than women who have not. This relationship is statistically significant. At least for Democratic women, it appears that women gubernatorial candidates benefit from prior statewide experience, which is consistent with our expectations. This suggests that to be successful it helps to have had experience running and winning statewide office prior to the gubernatorial election. This may be due to the experience of running a statewide campaign or even the credibility that comes with holding that level of political office. Therefore it appears that in order for Democratic women to make more gains among the gubernatorial ranks, the Democratic Party will need to continue building a traditional pool of potential candidates through recruiting and supporting women candidates for lower level statewide political offices.

It is interesting to note the effect of *Male Candidate with Statewide Office Experience* on the success of Democratic women gubernatorial candidates*.* There is a statistically significant and positive relationship between the male opponent having lower-level statewide experience and the share of the popular vote for the female candidate. In other words, female Democrats do better against male Republicans with lower-level statewide experience than against male Republicans with other types of experience. This finding supports the contention that the recruiting pool for male Republicans is different. Successful Republican male candidates are more likely to come from the world of business or other political offices. Although this topic is not the subject of this research, it appears that Republicans are willing and likely to nominate men with unconventional career paths for winnable gubernatorial elections.

One surprising result is that the variable *Open-seat Elections* does not attain traditional levels of statistical significance. Although it is generally better to run for an open seat than as a challenger, the effect of challenger status seems to be reduced to levels of statistical insignificance after taking into account these other factors especially prior political experience of the candidates. The effect of this variable approaches statistical significance at the 0.1 level and, perhaps, as there are more instances of Democratic women facing Republican men, an effect may emerge as the sample size increases. However, at this point the effect seems to be explained by other variables.

For Democratic women, none of the state specific factors that were included achieved traditional levels of statistical significance[[2]](#footnote-2). For future iterations of this research, we will include a greater array of measures based upon both data availability and limitations due to the small sample size. For Democrats, however, it appears that the main driving forces influencing success for the women are the prior experience of both the female and male candidates.

The story for Republican women is very different than for Democratic women (see Table 3). This is not surprising due to the partisan differences in the opportunity structures for women politicians in general and the partisan differences in the emergence of female gubernatorial candidates specifically. It is also important to note that because of the smaller number of female Republican candidates, we must be cautious about making firm conclusions with quantitative analysis of a sample with such a small sample size (n=26). Of the factors tested, the only one that mattered was the regional variable *South* which was positively associated with the vote for female Republican gubernatorial candidates. This finding could serve to spur and direct more research with a specific focus on the rise of the new generation of more conservative, southern, female politicians such as Governors Mary Fallin of Oklahoma and Nikki Haley of South Carolina.

**Conclusion**

In this research, we examine the unique situations of female vs. male gubernatorial campaigns. While much of the early research was limited to single or comparative case studies, the increasing frequency of these types of races permit us to begin conducting larger *n* quantitative studies. Our research examined the impact of contest specific and state specific factors on the vote totals for women running against men for governor.

Of primary interest for this research is the effect of prior political experience on the success of female gubernatorial candidates. Past research suggests that prior political experience is important and, perhaps, is more important for women than for men. Our findings suggest that a certain type of political experience is beneficial for Democratic women seeking election to the position of governor. Consistent with expectations, it is advantageous for Democratic women to have the experience of a prior lower level statewide campaign and the credibility from holding such an office to use as a springboard for a run for governor. The same advantage is not found for Republican women, which supports research that suggests different career paths for candidates in the Democratic and Republican parties.

By focusing on only female vs. male gubernatorial campaigns, we are able to isolate gender dynamics for a given campaign for the under-researched area of gubernatorial campaigns. This focus also presents challenges based upon the limited number of cases. Early research such as ours can help guide future endeavors as the number of cases increases with time. Of particular interest for future research might be a better understanding of the career paths of male gubernatorial candidates relative to their female counterparts. Due to differences in party support and personal ambition, male candidates with strong potential and appeal as gubernatorial candidates may skip the political middle-ground of lower-level statewide positions. Men who move more slowly up the political ladder may be those whose political career paths have been blocked or who have more limited political ceilings. These types of male candidates may be safe picks when the party’s prospects are less promising but could be passed over for nomination by less experienced rising stars when the party’s prospects are strong.

Finally, another important question for future research concerns the nomination stage. While this research focused on the general election, the impact of lower level statewide elective experience may also impact the likelihood of winning a party’s nomination for governor. Specifically, do women with this level of experience face tougher primary opposition than their male counterparts and do we see differences in this effect based upon partisanship? As more women run for governor over time, we will be able to gain a broader and more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities for women as they seek the highest political office in their state.

Table 1. Prior political office of non-incumbent gubernatorial candidates.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Level of Office** | **Women** | **Men** |
| Total Lower Level Statewide   * Lieutenant Governor * Attorney General * Treasurer, Comptroller, Financial Officer | 50.6%   * 14.8% * 8.6% * 18.5% | 27.8%   * 5.6% * 11.2% * 4.2% |
| State Legislature | 29.6% | 19.4% |
| Business | 4.9% | 20.8% |

Numbers indicate percentage of all non-incumbent candidates with the indicated level of prior political experience by gender. The Total Lower Level Statewide category includes offices other than the top three that are listed for comparison purposes.

Table 2: Vote for Democratic female gubernatorial candidates running as challengers or in open-seat elections, 1976-2014.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Variable | Coefficient | Robust Standard Error |  |
| Female Candidate with Statewide Elective Office Experience | 5.13 | 2.27\*\* |  |
| Male Candidate with Statewide Elective Office | 1.57 | 0.64\*\* |  |
| Open-seat Elections | 4.02 | 2.60 |  |
| Citizen Ideology | 0.33 | 0.94 |  |
| Democratic Women in State Legislature | -0.07 | 0.14 |  |
| South | 2.11 | 2.75 |  |
| Constant | 35.41 | 6.63\*\*\* |  |

\*\* p<0.05; \*\*\* p<0.01; n=53; Prob > F 0.00; R-square 0.31

Table 3: Vote for Republican female gubernatorial candidates running as challengers or in open-seat elections, 1976-2014.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Variable | Coefficient | Robust Standard Error |  |
| Female Candidate with Lower Statewide Elective Office Experience | -3.69 | 4.04 |  |
| Male Candidate with Lower Statewide Elective Office | 1.05 | 1.75 |  |
| Open-seat Elections | 0.27 | 3.85 |  |
| Citizen Ideology | 0.01 | 0.14 |  |
| Republican Women in State Legislature | -0.12 | 0.23 |  |
| South | 14.39 | 6.75\* |  |
| Constant | 42.90 | 10.09\*\*\* |  |

* p<0.1; \*\* p<0.05; \*\*\* p<0.01; n=26; Prob > F 0.02; R-square 0.31

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1. In 1992, Article IV Section 1 in the Rhode Island constitution was amended to change the governor’s term of office from two years to four years beginning in 1994. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The equations were also estimated with alternative measures of two of the variables. Instead of the *Citizen Ideology* measure from Berry et al, we estimated the equation using dichotomous measures of state political culture from Elazar (1984). There was no difference in the results. In addition, we estimated the equation using the percentage of women in the legislature for each party instead of the total amount of women from both parties. Again, there were no differences in the results. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)