

Gendered Perceptions and Political Candidacies: A Central Barrier to Women's Equality in Electoral Politics

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Based on the second wave of the Citizen Political Ambition Panel Study, we provide the first thorough analysis of how gender affects women and men's efficacy to run for office. Our findings reveal that, despite comparable credentials, backgrounds, and experiences, accomplished women are substantially less likely than similarly situated men to perceive themselves as qualified to seek office. Importantly, women and men rely on the same factors when evaluating themselves as candidates, but women are less likely than men to believe they meet these criteria. Not only are women more likely than men to doubt that they have skills and traits necessary for electoral politics, but they are also more likely to doubt their abilities to engage in campaign mechanics. These findings are critical because the perceptual differences we uncover account for much of the gender gap in potential candidates' self-efficacy and ultimately hinder women's prospects for political equality.

As of the 1970s, women occupied almost no major elective positions in U.S. political institutions. Ella Grasso, a Democrat from Connecticut, and Dixie Lee Ray, a Democrat from Washington, served as the only two women elected governor throughout the decade. Not until 1978 did Kansas Republican Nancy Kassebaum become the first woman elected to the Senate in her own right. By 1979, women comprised fewer than 5% of the seats in the U.S. House of Representatives, and only about 10% of state legislative positions across the country.

Although women's numeric representation is not quite as grave today, a striking gender imbalance persists. When the 111th Congress convened in January 2009, 83% of its members were men. Men occupy the governor's mansion in 44 of the 50 states, and they run City Hall in 93 of the 100 largest cities across the country. At least as important as women's continued underrepresentation in U.S. politics is evidence that points to stagnation in the numbers of women holding state and federal office. Since 2000, the number of women elected to state legisla-

tures, which act as key launching pads to higher office, has reached a plateau. More Republican women won election to state assemblies in 1989 than in 2009. And even though the U.S. House of Representatives continues to experience incremental gains in female members, more women filed to run for Congress in 1992 than have ever since.

Beginning in the 1970s, an academic subfield emerged to address women's political participation and representation. In particular, scholars began to offer a series of explanations for women's slow ascension into electoral politics. Much of the earliest research identified overt discrimination by voters and electoral gatekeepers as a critical impediment for women candidates (Diamond 1977; Githens and Prestage 1977; Rule 1981; Welch 1978). Other investigators pointed to "situational" factors as a prime explanation for the dearth of women in politics. Because women tended not to work in the fields of law and business—fields from which most congressional and state legislative candidates emerge—they often lacked the objective qualifications and economic autonomy to

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We are grateful for financial support from Brown University, Union College, Cal State Fullerton, Stanford University, the Carrie Chapman Catt Center, the Center for American Women and Politics, the Taubman Center for Public Policy, the Stanford Institute for the Quantitative Study of Society, Hunt Alternatives Fund, and the Barbara Lee Foundation. We also thank Kathy Dolan, Brian Frederick, Kent Jennings, Karen O'Connor, and Sue Tolleson-Rinehart for comments on previous drafts. Data will be made available upon completion of the next wave of the Citizen Political Ambition Panel Study. In the meantime, please feel free to contact the authors with any questions.

American Journal of Political Science, Vol. 55, No. 1, January 2011, Pp. 59–73

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DOI: 10.1111/j.1540-5907.2010.00484.x

pursue elective office (Welch 1977). Political scientists also focused on structural barriers, most notably the incumbency advantage, which inhibited electoral opportunities for previously excluded groups such as women (Studlar and Welch 1990; Welch and Karnig 1979). Finally, scholars posited a broad socialization explanation for women's underrepresentation. Often reinforcing situational and structural obstacles, a culture of traditional gender role expectations hindered women's candidate emergence. Because women and men were expected to conform to traditional sex roles—women as the primary caretaker of the family and men as the public-oriented breadwinner—the notion of even well-situated women serving in positions of political power was anathema (Fowlkes, Perkins, and Tolleson Rinehart 1979; see also Jennings and Farah 1981).

Scholars in the women and politics subfield today continue to tackle the issue of women's underrepresentation. Indeed, since the 1970s, we have developed a much fuller understanding of the factors that impede women's election to public office. In the contemporary electoral environment, for instance, the explanatory power of overt discrimination has been largely discarded (e.g., Fox 2006; Lawless and Pearson 2008; Seltzer, Newman, and Leighton 1997).¹ Situational factors have also lost some of their strength in accounting for the low number of women in politics; women have substantially increased their presence in the pipeline professions that lead to political careers (American Bar Association 2006; Catalyst 2008). Even the power of institutional inertia has been called into question. Certainly, incumbency continues to pose a serious obstacle, particularly at the federal level (Palmer and Simon 2006). But 21 states enacted state legislative term limits throughout the 1990s, and scholars uncovered no evidence that combating incumbency with term limits improved women's representation (Kousser 2005). Thus, although structural barriers, situational factors, and, to a lesser degree, discrimination undoubtedly contribute to gender disparities in U.S. political institutions, the story is far more complicated.

As women's numeric representation continues to lag, despite their gains in educational and professional spheres, it is imperative to return to the one explanation

that continues—at least in part—to elude us. We argue that one of the most fundamental barriers to women's representation derives from the patterns of traditional gender socialization to which scholars have long referred, but have been limited in studying empirically. Scholars suggest that women's historical exclusion from the political sphere, coupled with tenacious traditional gender role expectations, foster a masculinized ethos in electoral politics (e.g., Carroll 1994; Enloe 2004). Flammang (1997) argues, for instance, that men's dominance in political institutions that traditionally resisted women's inclusion makes it difficult for women to embrace themselves as politicians. Further, whereas men are taught to be confident, assertive, and self-promoting, cultural attitudes toward women as political leaders continue to leave an imprint suggesting to women—if even only subtly—that it is often inappropriate or undesirable to possess these characteristics. A political consequence of these patterns of gender socialization is that, over time, men develop a greater sense of efficacy as candidates. As Thomas posits, traditional socialization results in women's "lower levels of confidence about becoming candidates for political office" (2005, 12). Even women who are well positioned to offer themselves for public office often cannot envision themselves as candidates.

The theoretical connection between women and men's perceived efficacy as candidates and prospects for gender equality and parity in politics, therefore, is well established. And the implications of women's lower self-evaluations are far-reaching. As long as women are more likely than men to express doubts about their ability to run for office, then gender parity in politics will never materialize. Moreover, the degree of comfort and freedom women articulate regarding their entry into electoral politics serves as an important barometer of their full integration into all aspects of political life in the United States. Yet virtually no research systematically examines the ways that traditional gender socialization affects women and men's perceptions of themselves as candidates. In our previous work, which focuses explicitly on gender differences in the decision to run for office, we find that "the most potent explanation" for the gender gap in political ambition is that women are less likely than men to view themselves as "qualified" to enter the electoral arena (Lawless and Fox 2010). But we acknowledge that we can do little more than establish this important "qualifications gap." We can pinpoint neither the specific factors on which women and men rely, nor the calculus they employ, to arrive at their sense of efficacy as candidates. Moreover, we cannot examine the extent to which gendered perceptions, as opposed to concrete differences in women and men's politically relevant credentials,

¹In dismissing the impact of discrimination, we do not mean to overlook the pockets of bias that researchers continue to uncover or the complex role that gender continues to play in electoral politics. Surveys of local party officials reveal that some electoral gatekeepers appear to prefer male candidates (Niven 1998; Sanbonmatsu 2006). Examinations of campaigns show that gender stereotypes affect media coverage (Fowler and Lawless 2009; Fox 1997). And voters continue to rely on stereotypical conceptions of women and men's traits, issue expertise, and policy positions (Koch 2000; Lawless 2004).

experiences, and proximity to the political sphere, drive gender differences in self-efficacy. Hence, the next critical step in evaluating the evolution of women's candidacies and gauging prospects for women's full inclusion in the political system is to make a systematic assessment of the degree to which socialized beliefs about candidate efficacy persist.

In this article, we use data from the second wave of the Citizen Political Ambition Panel Study—a national survey of more than 2,000 “potential candidates” in 2008—to provide the first thorough analysis of the manner in which gender affects efficacy to run for office. Our findings reveal that, despite comparable credentials, professional backgrounds, and political experiences, highly accomplished women from both major political parties are substantially less likely than similarly situated men to perceive themselves as qualified to seek elective office. Importantly, we show that women and men rely on the same factors when evaluating themselves as candidates; but women are less likely than men to believe they meet these criteria. Not only are women more likely than men to doubt that they have the skills and traits necessary to succeed in electoral politics, but they are also more likely to doubt their abilities to engage in the mechanics involved in a political campaign. These empirical findings are critical because the perceptual differences we uncover account for much of the gender gap in potential candidates' self-efficacy and ultimately hinder women's prospects for political equality.

The Gender Gap in Efficacy as a Candidate: Background and Hypotheses

Many of the perceptions women and men hold about the political process are deeply engrained by a culture that tends to reinforce traditional sex-role expectations and women's marginalization in politics (Enloe 2004; Freedman 2002). These perceptions are essential when investigating women and men's self-efficacy as candidates because they suggest that, regardless of the concrete qualifications and credentials women and men possess, they may not view themselves the same way. Among individuals who have already entered politics as candidates and elected officials, for instance, researchers uncover a gendered perceptual lens through which women and men perform their leadership roles and pursue their policy goals (Thomas 2003). Limited research also points to gender differences in how elected officials conceive of climbing the political career ladder (Bledsoe and Herring 1990;

Fulton et al. 2006). And our earlier work provides anecdotal evidence that perceptions underpin gender differences in potential candidates' attitudes about their qualifications to run for office (Lawless and Fox 2010). For the most part, though, studies of political ambition tend to overlook gendered perceptions and examine, instead, the manner in which the political opportunity structure influences the decision to run for office.² Consequently, Githens (2003) identifies potential candidates' perceptions of the electoral process and their prospects for participating in it as a critical, yet unexplored question in the study of women's candidate emergence.

In gauging how socialized gendered perceptions may affect efficacy to serve as a candidate, we rely on an array of empirical studies from political science, social psychology, business, economics, and education. This body of literature establishes at least two types of gendered perceptions that, even among successful professionals, may inhibit women's views of themselves and their prospects for electoral success.

Perceptions of Politically Relevant Skills and Traits. The first type of gendered perceptions that may affect efficacy to serve as a candidate pertains to individuals' assessments of their skills and traits. Evaluating oneself as a potential candidate, after all, involves personal reflection of talents and shortcomings. Though not directly related to politics, investigators from a variety of disciplines provide evidence to suggest that these self-assessments will ultimately depress women's levels of efficacy.

Turning first to gender differences in skills-based measures, researchers find that women are more likely than men to diminish and undervalue their professional skills and achievements. Studies of gender differences in academic abilities provide a clear example. By the time of adolescence, male students rate their mathematical abilities higher than female students do, despite no sex differences in objective indicators of competence (Wigfield, Eccles, and Pintrich 1996). In the areas of language arts, male and female students offer comparable self-assessments, although objective indicators reveal that female students are actually higher achieving in these fields (Pajares 2002). Many of these misconceptions persist into adulthood, percolating up even to high-level professionals who have succeeded in traditionally male domains (Beyer and Bowden 1997; Brownlow, Whitener, and Rupert 1998). Controlling for a series of job-related functions and work experience, for instance, female MBAs accepted salary offers that were lower than the offers

²For a review of the literature on the manner in which the political opportunity structure affects the initial decision to run for office, see Fox and Lawless (2005).

accepted by their male counterparts (Bowles, Babcock, and McGinn 2005). In the absence of clear compensation standards, women are also more likely than men to express lower career-entry and career-peak pay expectations (Bylsma and Major 1992).

Gender differences exist not only in how women and men perceive their objective skills, but also in the confidence they exhibit regarding their credentials, backgrounds, propensity to take risks, and willingness to compete. Studies reveal that, in general, men are more likely than women to express confidence in skills they do not possess and overconfidence in skills they do possess (Kling et al. 1999). Men tend to be more “self-congratulatory,” whereas women tend to be more modest about their achievements (Wigfield, Eccles, and Pintrich 1996). Men tend to overestimate their intelligence, while women tend to underestimate theirs (Beloff 1992; Furnham and Rawles 1995). Men often fail to incorporate criticism into their self-evaluations, whereas women tend to be strongly influenced by negative appraisals of their capabilities (Roberts 1991). Further, a review of 150 studies in psychology concludes that in almost all personal and professional decisions, women exhibit significantly higher levels of risk aversion than do men (Byrnes, Miller, and Schafer 1999). Perhaps because of this tendency, investigators find, when comparing professional performance in competitive and noncompetitive environments, that men are more likely than women to seek out competitive environments and to exude confidence when competing (Gneezy, Niederle, and Rustichini 2003; Niederle and Vesterlund 2007, 2010).

It follows, therefore, that any gender gap in potential candidates’ self-efficacy may be driven by differences in how women and men perceive their politically relevant skills and traits.

Perceptions of Campaigns and the Electoral Environment. The second type of gendered perceptions that likely affect efficacy to serve as a candidate concerns the political environment in which women and men would compete. Not only must prospective candidates consider how they will be treated in the political sphere, but they also must assess how they would feel about engaging in the nuts and bolts of a campaign. Even though women perform as well as men on Election Day, women’s historic exclusion from the political sphere may underscore their perceptions and work to women’s detriment.

A small body of literature pertaining to perceptions of the political environment suggests that when women perceive gender bias in public life, they often withdraw. Political scientists have identified this pattern both within the bureaucracy (Dolan 2000; Naff 1995) and elective offices (Blair and Stanley 1991). This withdrawal, which

may be a rational response to dealing with a political environment that has traditionally not embraced women, can also reinforce women’s exclusion and perpetuate the notion that the electoral arena is biased against them. Indeed, as recently as 2008, pollsters uncovered that 51% of Americans believed that the country was not “ready to elect a woman to high office” (Pew 2008). Further, 40% of women did not think Hillary Rodham Clinton was treated fairly in her presidential campaign (Lifetime Network 2008). These aggregate levels of perceived bias likely contribute to the gender gap in candidate efficacy.

Gender differences in attitudes toward competition, coupled with the experiences of actual candidates, may further lead women to doubt their abilities to succeed. After all, female congressional candidates face more primary competition than do their male counterparts (Lawless and Pearson 2008). Geographic differences facilitate women’s election in some congressional districts, but lessen their chances of success in others (Palmer and Simon 2006). Female candidates often recount bias in the press coverage they receive (Rausch, Rozell, and Wilson 1999). And women perceive fundraising as more difficult than men do (Fox 1997), ultimately devoting more time to it (Jenkins 2007). Certainly, women and men who have achieved high levels of professional success have, to some extent, already exhibited a willingness to compete. But if women are cognizant of a more difficult electoral process, then they may be more inclined than men to doubt that they would excel at typical campaign activities.

When assessing their efficacy as potential candidates, perceptions of gender bias, heightened electoral competition, and more challenging campaign dynamics may lead many women to conclude—perhaps rightfully so—that they have to be better than the average man to succeed. Accordingly, women may be less likely than men to express self-efficacy and consider themselves qualified to run for office.

Based on our review of research from a variety of disciplines, we test two central hypotheses. First, we expect to uncover a baseline gender gap in potential candidates’ efficacy to run for office, regardless of their objective qualifications and credentials:

Gender Gap in Self-Efficacy Hypothesis: There is a gender gap in self-efficacy among potential candidates, even after controlling for detailed measures of professional experiences, credentials, and political proximity.

Second, we expect that the deeply internalized perceptions of gender roles and politics that lead men to envision the notion of emerging as a candidate will lead women to doubt their abilities to enter the political sphere. We break this hypothesis into two parts:

Gendered Perceptions Hypothesis: The gender gap in self-efficacy will be explained by:

- a. gender differences in potential candidates' perceptions of their political skills and traits.
- b. gender differences in potential candidates' perceptions of the campaign and electoral environments in which they would compete.

In short, and to borrow from Githens, we expect the “gendered nature of evaluative standards” (2003, 43) to remain problematic even for women who have already achieved high levels of success. Operationalizing these hypotheses allows for the first in-depth assessment of the manner in which patterns of traditional gender socialization influence potential candidates' views of their suitability to run for elective office.

Research Design and Dataset: The Citizen Political Ambition Panel Study

We rely on data from the second wave of the Citizen Political Ambition Panel Study to examine potential candidates' self-efficacy. This national panel—the first wave of which we conducted in 2001, and the second wave of which we completed in 2008—serves as the only broad random sample of equally credentialed women and men who are well positioned to serve as future candidates for all elective offices. We drew our 2001 “candidate eligibility pool” from the professions that yield the highest proportion of political candidates for congressional and state legislative positions: law, business, education, and political activism (Dolan and Ford 1997; Moncrief, Squire, and Jewell 2001). We disproportionately stratified by sex, so the sample includes roughly equal numbers of women and men. The women and men are comparable in education, profession, income, and region, and they also hold similar employment roles, high degrees of professional success, and heightened levels of political interest and participation.³

The 2,036 respondents who completed the 2008 survey are a representative subsample of the original eligibility pool. Controlling for sex, race, and profession, individuals who expressed political ambition in 2001 were no more likely than respondents who had never considered a candidacy to complete the 2008 survey. Similarly,

potential candidates who reported high levels of political interest and activism at the time of the 2001 survey were no more likely than those who did not to respond to the 2008 questionnaire (regression results not shown). No significant demographic or professional factors distinguish the 2001 and 2008 samples. Further, the women and men who completed the second survey are well matched in race, education, income, and geography. Women are, however, more likely to be Democrats, while men are more likely to be Republicans. The women are also, on average, three years younger than the men, a probable result of women's relatively recent entry into the fields of law and business. Our empirical analyses are sensitive to these differences and always control for them.

Our method and sample allow for a comprehensive assessment of gender differences in self-efficacy. The results from the 2001 survey uncovered the gender gap in respondents' perceptions of their qualifications to run for office. But the survey was limited in the extent to which it could shed light on the reasons for the gender gap. The original survey did not ask questions about respondents' objective credentials, political experiences, or proximity to the political arena. Similarly, it failed to gauge respondents' assessments of their own politically relevant skills and traits, or their perceptions of electoral competition. Thus, we included in the 2008 survey detailed batteries of questions about proximity to politics, political skills and traits, attitudes toward campaigning, and perceptions of electoral competition and the political process. Accordingly, our analysis relies on the data collected from only those respondents who completed the 2008 survey.

Findings and Analysis

Establishing the Gender Gap in Self-Efficacy in the Candidate Eligibility Pool

To examine gender differences in how potential candidates assess their self-efficacy to run for office, we asked respondents a series of questions about their political qualifications. The broad measure of efficacy on which we rely gauges where potential candidates place themselves on a continuum from “not at all qualified” to “very qualified” to launch a candidacy. The data presented in the top half of Table 1 reveal that men are roughly 50% more likely than women to consider themselves “very qualified” to seek an elective position. Women are twice as likely as men to assert that they are “not at all qualified” to run for office. Similar gender gaps appear when we consider women and men's assessments of whether they are qualified to perform the job of an elected official. Whereas

³See online supplemental information for a description of the research design and sample.

TABLE 1 Gender and Self-Efficacy in the Candidate Eligibility Pool

	Women	Men
How qualified are you to run for public office?		
Very Qualified	21%	33%
Qualified	35	40
Somewhat Qualified	32	21
Not at All Qualified	12	6
How qualified are you to hold public office?		
Very Qualified	27%	40%
Qualified	36	40
Somewhat Qualified	27	17
Not at All Qualified	9	4
N	862	1,003

Note: Chi-square tests comparing women and men are significant at least at $p < .05$ for all comparisons.

80% of men contend that they are “qualified” or “very qualified” to do the job of an officeholder, fewer than two-thirds of women assess themselves this way. Women are more than twice as likely as men to rate themselves as “not at all qualified” to perform the job. This gender gap in self-efficacy, which exists across professions, is roughly equal for Democrats and Republicans.⁴ Further, the gap does not result from women envisioning running for higher offices than men. In fact, women are more likely than men to refer to local offices when expressing levels of political ambition (difference significant at $p < .01$).

The bivariate gender gap in respondents’ self-efficacy demonstrates that women are less likely than men to perceive themselves as qualified to enter the electoral environment. We would expect, however, that respondents who are politically involved may be more likely than those who are not to have a sense of efficacy to serve as candidates. In order to confirm the *Gender Gap in Self-Efficacy Hypothesis*, therefore, the gap must withstand a series of controls for measures of political proximity, campaign experience, and politically relevant credentials.

Table 2 presents the results of three regression equations. The first is an ordered probit model that predicts where respondents place themselves on the four-point qualifications continuum (from “not at all qualified” to

⁴Republican women are twice as likely as Republican men to self-assess as “not at all qualified” (10% of women, compared to 5% of men), and 32% of Republican men, compared to 20% of Republican women, consider themselves “very qualified” to run for office. Among Democrats, 12% of women, compared to 7% of men, self-assess as “not at all qualified,” and 35% of men, but only 20% of women, consider themselves “very qualified” to run for office.

“very qualified” to run for office). For ease of interpretation, we report in the second and third columns of the table the logistic regression coefficients from models that predict whether a respondent considers himself or herself “not at all qualified” to run for office and whether he or she assesses as “very qualified” to run for office. Each equation controls for demographic factors, as well as political participation, interest, knowledge, and recruitment. We also include three indices to tap into respondents’ objective political qualifications. First, we include a measure of campaign experience, so as to gauge whether the respondent ran for office as a student, or ever volunteered or worked on a campaign. Second, we control for political proximity, which measures the extent to which the respondent interacts in the political sphere both professionally and socially. Finally, our professional credentials index accounts for whether the respondent regularly speaks in public, conducts policy research, solicits funds, runs an organization or a business, or organizes events (see supplemental information for variable descriptions and coding).⁵ By including these measures, this analysis moves beyond previous work in the field, none of which controls for politically relevant experiences and professional skills. Ultimately, we provide an authoritative empirical account of the baseline effect of sex in predicting efficacy to serve as a candidate.⁶

The regression results indicate that differences in women and men’s assessments of their political qualifications do not derive from differences in their actual credentials. The sex of the potential candidate remains a statistically significant predictor of self-efficacy and withstands the series of rigorous controls. Whereas the “average” male respondent has a 0.077 likelihood of considering himself “not at all qualified” to run for office, the “average” female respondent’s likelihood of assessing this way is 0.122.⁷ At the other end of the qualifications spectrum, a typical male potential candidate has a 0.174 predicted probability of considering himself “very qualified” to run for office, compared to a typical

⁵Each of the models withstands fixed effects for professional subgroups. Levels of statistical significance also remain largely unchanged when we perform our analyses separately for each profession.

⁶We recognize that, despite egalitarian shifts in the workplace, a traditional division of labor still characterizes most household arrangements (Lawless and Fox 2005). Moreover, professional women face a more complicated balancing of priorities and responsibilities than do men. When we include in the equations gauges of marital and parental status, however, neither approaches statistical significance.

⁷Our analysis is based on setting all continuous independent variables to their sample means and dummy variables to their sample modes.

TABLE 2 The Baseline Gender Gap in Potential Candidates' Self-Efficacy (Regression Coefficients and Standard Errors)

	Ordered Probit (4-Point Qualifications Scale)	Logit (Respondent Considers Self "Not at All Qualified" to Run for Office)	Logit (Respondent Considers Self "Very Qualified" to Run for Office)
Sociodemographic Characteristics			
Sex (Female)	-.36(.06)**	.52(.20)**	-.59(.12)**
Age	-.00(.00)	.02(.01)	-.00(.01)
Race (White)	-.18(.08)*	-.40(.25)	-.61(.16)**
Education	.18(.03)**	-.23(.09)*	.33(.08)**
Income	.04(.02)	-.07(.08)	.05(.05)
Political Background			
Republican	-.09(.10)	-.78(.32)*	-.46(.23)*
Democrat	-.25(.10)*	-.19(.29)	-.60(.22)**
Political Participation	-.01(.02)	-.00(.06)	-.03(.04)
Political Interest	.13(.02)**	-.11(.07)	.22(.05)**
Political Knowledge	.04(.03)	-.03(.09)	.12(.09)
Recruitment by Electoral Gatekeeper	.47(.06)**	-1.22(.27)**	.75(.15)**
Politically Relevant Experience			
Political Proximity	.09(.02)**	-.13(.08)	.14(.06)**
Professional Credentials	.13(.02)**	-.20(.07)**	.24(.05)**
Campaign Experience	.14(.04)**	-.54(.15)**	.23(.10)*
Constant		1.21(.90)	-5.16(.67)**
Threshold 1	.68(.27)*		
Threshold 2	1.86(.28)**		
Threshold 3	3.08(.28)**		
Pseudo-R ²	0.30	0.22	0.26
N	1,757	1,757	1,757

Significance levels: **p < .01; *p < .05.

female potential candidate's predicted probability of 0.106. Put somewhat differently, women are nearly 60% more likely than similarly situated men to consider themselves "not at all qualified" to run for office; men are nearly two-thirds more likely than their female counterparts to evaluate themselves as "very qualified" to enter the electoral arena. Comparing the effect of sex relative to other factors highlights its importance; the independent, substantive effect of sex exceeds all of the political proximity and professional credentials variables.⁸ Indeed, the only predictor of qualifications with a larger relative effect than sex—albeit only slightly larger—is political recruitment.⁹

⁸For each additional campaign experience or substantive credential a respondent holds (i.e., public speaking skills, policy research, fundraising experience), his or her likelihood of assessing as "very qualified" to run for office increases by an average of 2.5 percentage points.

⁹For a detailed analysis of the gender gap in political recruitment, see Fox and Lawless (2010).

Notably, when we include in our regression equations interactions between the sex of the respondent and the political proximity and credentials measures, none of the interaction terms achieves statistical significance (see Appendix A, column 1). We uncover this result both when we supplement the ordered probit model presented in Table 2 with an interaction between the sex of the respondent and each of the variables one at a time, as well as in combination with each other. Thus, women and men are statistically indistinguishable from one another in terms of the extent to which they look to their political credentials and experiences when evaluating their self-efficacy to run for office.¹⁰

¹⁰When we perform the regression analyses separately for women and men, the results also reveal no differences in the factors on which women and men rely when placing themselves on the qualifications continuum. A downside to this method, however, is that we cannot compare coefficients across equations. Only by

When comparing women and men in the candidate eligibility pool, we confirm the *Gender Gap in Self-Efficacy Hypothesis*. The landscape for women candidates may be a shifting terrain with more women seeking and winning office than was the case 20 years ago. And women may have made progress in acquiring the backgrounds, experiences, and connections on which politicians traditionally have relied. Yet women remain less likely than men to report a sense of self-efficacy as a candidate. Because the gender gap persists despite professional and political similarities, we must move beyond objective credentials and assess respondents' perceptions of themselves navigating the political sphere.

Explaining the Gender Gap in Self-Efficacy in the Candidate Eligibility Pool

Our *Gendered Perceptions Hypothesis* asserts that the gender gap in self-efficacy results from differences in women and men's perceptions of themselves and the electoral arena. Thus, we asked respondents 17 questions about a variety of activities and characteristics associated with being a candidate for elective office. The first series of questions we posed focuses on respondents' assessments of their political skills and traits. These measures allow us to test the first part of our hypothesis—that personal self-assessments drive the gender gap in self-efficacy. The second set of questions pertains to assessments of the political arena in which candidates compete. Here, we can examine the second part of the hypothesis—that perceptions of the political environment significantly affect efficacy to serve as a candidate. We relied on principal component analysis to verify the distinction and to group the measures empirically. The results indicated that the 17 perceptions measures load onto five distinct factors: politically relevant skills, political traits, campaign mechanics, gender bias, and electoral competition. The top of Table 3 presents gender differences in perceptions of skills and traits; the bottom of the table provides data comparing women and men's perceptions of campaigns and the electoral environment. The bivariate gender gaps are statistically significant for 15 of the 17 perceptions ($p < .05$).

Turning first to perceptions of political skills and traits, women in our pool of potential candidates rate themselves less favorably than do men across the board. We uncover one of the largest gender differences when we focus on perceptions of political traits; women are

including interaction terms can we say with any confidence that women and men rely on the same decision-making calculus when it comes to developing a sense of self-efficacy.

19 percentage points more likely than men to doubt that they have thick enough skin to run for office. Women are also less likely than men to perceive themselves as possessing all six of the skills about which we inquired. These perceptual differences are striking in light of women and men's actual skills and experiences. Women and men in the sample are statistically indistinguishable from one another in terms of the key skills necessary to run for office. Thirty-three percent of women and 35% of men have conducted extensive policy research; 65% of women and 69% of men regularly engage in public speaking; and 69% of women and 64% of men report experience soliciting funds (in all comparisons, $p > .05$).

The gender differences are just as robust when we focus on respondents' perceptions of the electoral arena. The data presented in the bottom half of Table 3 reveal that women are significantly more likely than men to view most of the mechanics of running for office, particularly negative campaigning, as deterrents to a candidacy. Further, despite the fact that women and men in the sample are similarly dispersed geographically, women are more likely than men to perceive a biased and competitive electoral environment. The bivariate-level gender differences corroborate the expectation that women and men who are well matched professionally, educationally, and politically differ in how they envision the electoral arena and their ability and willingness to perform as candidates.

When interpreting these findings, it is important to recognize that the gender gap in self-efficacy may be a result not only of women's under-assessments of their skills and traits, but also men's tendency to overestimate their political skills. This phenomenon would be consistent with findings from the aforementioned studies in the fields of business and education. In a similar vein, men's longer-term presence and success in top positions in business and law may result in heightened levels of confidence about entering the political arena, also a male-dominated environment. In either case, though, women and men perceive political reality and their ability to succeed in the political system through a gendered lens.

To determine the degree to which these gendered perceptions account for the gender gap in potential candidates' self-efficacy, we performed three regression equations, presented in Table 4. Once again, the first equation is an ordered probit model that predicts where on the four-point qualifications continuum respondents place themselves. The second and third columns report the logistic regression coefficients from models predicting whether a respondent considers himself or herself "not at all qualified" to run for office, and whether he or she self-assesses as "very qualified" to launch a candidacy. We control for the same sociodemographic variables and

TABLE 3 Gender Differences in Perceptions of Skills, Traits, Campaigns, and the Electoral Environment

	Women	Men
Perceptions of Political Skills		
Knowledgeable about public policy issues.	46%**	59%
Professional experience relevant to politics.	66%**	74
Good public speaker.	57%**	66
Connected to the political system.	21%**	27
Good fundraiser.	13%**	21
Good self-promoter.	17*	21
Perceptions of Personal Background and Traits		
Has thick enough skin.	52%**	71
Has a lot of skeletons in his or her closet.	10	11
Perceptions of Engaging in Typical Campaign Activities		
Deterred by soliciting contributions.	30	22
Deterred by dealing with party officials.	15	11
Deterred by going door-to-door to meet constituents.	19*	14
Deterred by dealing with the press.	15*	10
Deterred by potentially having to engage in a negative campaign.	45%**	30
Perceptions of Gender Bias in the Political Arena		
Believe it is more difficult for a woman than a man to be elected.	78%**	57
Believe it is harder for women than men to raise money for a campaign.	65%**	38
Perceptions of Electoral Competition		
Perceive local elections as highly competitive.	58%**	46
Perceive congressional elections as highly competitive.	61%**	49
N	862	1,003

Notes: For “Perceptions of Skills and Traits,” entries indicate the percentage of respondents who self-assess as possessing the skill or trait. For “Perceptions of Engaging in Typical Campaign Activities,” entries indicate the percentage of women and men who report that they view the activity so negatively that it would deter them from running for office. For “Perceptions of Gender Bias in the Political Arena” and “Perceptions of Electoral Competition,” entries indicate the percentage of respondents who answered affirmatively. Sample sizes vary slightly because some respondents omitted answers to some questions. Significance levels of chi-square tests comparing women and men: ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

political experiences in our baseline models (Table 2). But each equation also includes additive indices for each of the five types of perceptions that might affect self-efficacy. In the case of campaign mechanics, for example, respondents score one point for each campaign activity they report would serve as a deterrent to running for office.

Two central findings emerge from the multivariate analysis. First, the models demonstrate that respondents’ perceptions of their skills, traits, and ability to campaign are central to explaining the gender gap in self-efficacy. In fact, when we control for these perceptual measures, respondents’ objective qualifications and credentials lose their statistical significance.¹¹ The professional credentials and political proximity on which women and men are well matched, in other words, are not the criteria

¹¹These results are not an artifact of multicollinearity. No perceptions measure correlates with any political credential or experience measure at more than 0.40 ($p > .05$).

on which they rely to generate their self-assessments. Perceptions, not actual skills and experiences, drive self-assessments about the suitability to enter electoral politics. Second, women and men employ the same calculus and weigh perceptions similarly when arriving at their levels of self-efficacy. Once again, when we add to the regression equations interactions between the sex of the respondent and each of the perceptions measures, none achieves statistical significance, either individually or in combination with each other (see Appendix A, column 2).¹²

¹²Here, too, we performed the regression analyses separately on the subsamples of women and men. Among women, Democrats are more likely to place themselves higher on the qualifications continuum. Among men, respondents who view the electoral environment as more competitive are more likely to report lower levels of self-efficacy. These differences, however, do not hold up in the pooled model with interaction terms (as reported in Appendix A).

TABLE 4 The Impact of Perceptions on the Gender Gap in Potential Candidates' Self-Efficacy (Regression Coefficients and Standard Errors)

	Ordered Probit (4-Point Qualifications Scale)	Logit (Respondent Considers Self "Not at All Qualified" to Run for Office)	Logit (Respondent Considers Self "Very Qualified" to Run for Office)
Sociodemographic Characteristics			
Sex (Female)	-.19(.06)**	.10(.24)	-.36(.15)*
Age	.00(.00)	-.02(.01)	.01(.01)
Race (White)	-.19(.08)*	-.35(.31)	-.56(.17)**
Education	.19(.03)**	-.25(.11)*	.39(.08)**
Income	.01(.02)	-.04(.09)	-.04(.06)
Political Background			
Republican	-.05(.11)	-1.29(.38)**	-.38(.25)
Democrat	-.20(.10)	-.61(.35)	-.50(.23)*
Political Participation	-.03(.02)	.07(.07)	-.03(.05)
Political Interest	.09(.02)**	-.03(.08)	.15(.05)**
Political Knowledge	.01(.03)	.02(.11)	.09(.09)
Recruitment by Electoral Gatekeeper	.36(.07)**	-.83(.31)**	.64(.16)**
Politically Relevant Experience			
Political Proximity	.03(.02)	-.05(.09)	.01(.06)
Professional Credentials	.04(.02)	.01(.08)	.09(.06)
Campaign Experience	.07(.05)	-.46(.17)**	.16(.11)
Perceptions of Skills and Traits			
Political Skills Index	.31(.02)**	-.90(.12)**	.52(.05)**
Political Traits Index	-.14(.05)**	.45(.18)**	-.18(.08)**
Perceptions of Campaigns and Elections			
Campaign Mechanics Index	-.08(.02)**	.34(.06)**	.06(.05)
Gender Bias Index	-.01(.02)	-.08(.07)	-.04(.04)
Electoral Competition Index	-.06(.03)	.20(.14)	-.08(.08)
Constant		2.45(1.18)*	-5.23(.78)**
Threshold 1	.53(.32)		
Threshold 2	1.88(.32)**		
Threshold 3	3.21(.32)**		
Pseudo-R ²	0.41	0.40	0.35
N	1,653	1,653	1,653

Significance levels: **p < .01; *p < .05.

To begin our explication of how perceptions affect self-efficacy, it is critical to highlight the distinction between potential candidates' perceptions of themselves and their perceptions of campaigns and elections. The measures of perceptions of political skills and traits are significant across equations. When we turn to perceptions of the external environment, though, only the measure of perceptions of the mechanics involved in running for office achieves statistical significance. The two measures that fail to meet the threshold for statistical significance—gender

bias in the political arena, and electoral competition—focus on the political arena candidates must navigate when they emerge. When analyzing how gendered perceptions affect the ease and comfort with which individuals consider putting themselves forward as candidates, therefore, it is important to recognize that the significant barriers women face are deeply internalized estimates of themselves, not impressions of a biased or competitive political environment.¹³

Notably, the gender bias index fails to approach statistical significance for both women and men.

¹³Certainly, women's perceptions of a biased electoral arena and heightened levels of political competition may depress

TABLE 5 Predicted Probabilities of Potential Candidates' Self-Efficacy

	Probability of Assessing as "Not at All Qualified" to Run for Office	Probability of Assessing as "Very Qualified" to Run for Office
Calculations Based on Overall Candidate Eligibility Pool Means and Modes		
Men	.028	.165
Women	.032	.117
Gender Gap	.004	.048*
		<i>(women are 29% less likely than men to assess this way)</i>
Calculations Based on Subsample Means and Modes, by Sex		
Men	.009	.196
Women	.046	.097
Gender Gap	.037*	.099*
	<i>(women are 80% more likely than men to assess this way)</i>	<i>(women are 51% less likely than men to assess this way)</i>

Notes: Predicted probabilities are based on the regression analysis in Table 4. The top half of the table presents the likelihood that women and men in the sample consider themselves "not at all qualified" and "very qualified" to run for office, all else equal (and set to the sample means and modes). The bottom half of the table embeds within the calculations the statistically significant gender differences in the perceptions variables. The predicted probabilities, therefore, are calculated based on the subsample means and modes for women and men. Level of significance: *p < .05.

The three significant perceptions indices substantially diminish the independent effect a potential candidate's sex exerts on self-efficacy. Based on the logistic regression analyses in Table 4, the top half of Table 5 presents the predicted probabilities of assessing as "not at all qualified" and "very qualified" to run for office, all else equal. Sex is no longer a statistically significant predictor of whether a respondent assesses as "not at all qualified" to run for office. Sex remains a statistically significant predictor of whether a potential candidate assesses as "very qualified" to run for office, but the magnitude of its coefficient is far smaller than is the case when we do not include the perceptions indices. Compared to the predicted probabilities generated from the baseline model that does not include respondents' perceptions of their

their interest in running for office. Nevertheless, the gender gaps on these measures do not affect women's perceptions of whether they are qualified to run for office.

skills or traits, the gender gap in the fully specified model is 40% smaller.

The strength of the coefficient on sex, however, must be interpreted in light of the critical perceptions that spur self-efficacy and the gender differences therein. Consider, for instance, the effects of perceptions of politically relevant skills. The regression coefficients presented in Table 4 translate to mean that, all else equal, a respondent who does not perceive that he or she possesses any of the politically relevant skills necessary to enter the electoral arena has a 0.193 predicted probability of assessing as "not at all qualified." The likelihood of assessing as "not at all qualified" for a respondent who perceives himself or herself as possessing the mean number of these skills, however, drops to 0.028. In a similar vein, a respondent who does not believe that he or she has the traits and background needed for politics is more than twice as likely as a respondent who does to self-evaluate as "not at all qualified."

Because of gender differences on each of these perceptual measures, women's levels of self-efficacy are lower than a simple comparison of predicted probabilities might suggest. This becomes clear when we embed within the calculations the statistically significant gender differences in the perceptions variables. The bottom half of Table 5 presents recalculated predicted probabilities of assessing as "not at all qualified" and "very qualified" based not on the sample means for our perceptions measures, but rather, based on the subsample means for women and the subsample means for men. The gender gap in self-efficacy grows considerably. The "average" woman is five times more likely than the "average" man to consider herself "not at all qualified" to run for office. On the other hand, the "average" man's predicted probability of considering himself "very qualified" is twice that of the "average" woman.

Together, the results provide strong support for the **Gendered Perceptions Hypothesis**. Women and men who are equally and objectively qualified to run for office perceive neither themselves nor the political arena the same way. Similar professional credentials, economic autonomy, and political experience, alone, cannot close the gender gap in self-efficacy. These findings are vital because the socialized perceptual differences we uncover translate into a formidable hurdle women must overcome when behaving as strategic politicians and navigating the candidate emergence process. Self-efficacy, after all, is a statistically and substantively significant predictor of whether a respondent ever considered running for office, actually ran for office, took any concrete steps that tend to precede a campaign, or expressed interest in running for office at some point in the future (regression results not shown).

Conclusion and Discussion

Based on the results of the second wave of the Citizen Political Ambition Panel Study, we establish and explicate the gender gap in self-efficacy among potential candidates. The women and men we surveyed share professional and educational backgrounds. They are well matched in objective indicators and experiences typical of actual candidates and officeholders. And they rely on the same calculus when evaluating their qualifications to run for office. Yet women are significantly more likely than men to dismiss their qualifications, and significantly less likely than their male counterparts to express self-efficacy to enter the electoral arena. Once we account for gender differences in perceptions of the skill sets and characteristics necessary to run for office, however, the gender gap in self-efficacy decreases considerably. In fact, a potential candidate's sex does not exert an independent effect on the likelihood of assessing as "not at all qualified" to run for office. The empirical findings delineate several factors that work to women's detriment; gender differences in perceptions of political skills and traits, as well as what it would be like to engage in the mechanics of a campaign, depress women's self-efficacy.

Our findings strongly suggest that traditional gender role socialization continues to perpetuate a culture in which women remain unaccustomed to entering the electoral arena. Women's lower self-assessments of their political skills are consistent with a political culture that has not embraced women in the public sphere. In addition, women's perceptions of their politically relevant traits reflect a heightened level of discomfort with entering politics, also a likely result of traditional gender role orientations that discourage women's candidacies. Until now, research has not been able to demonstrate the central role and extent to which socialized perceptions affect women's self-efficacy or candidate emergence.

The nature of the electoral system in the United States likely exacerbates the patterns of traditional gender socialization that depress women's levels of self-efficacy. Running for office in the United States is a highly competitive endeavor that requires significant levels of entrepreneurship and self-promotion; women may be less comfortable than men competing in this environment. After all, recent studies in economics suggest that women are less likely than men to succeed in competitive environments. Niederle and Vesterlund (2010), for instance, find that competition accounts for the persistent gender gap in math test scores, one of the most important predictors of professional financial success. Moreover, social psychologists and economists continue to find that women

are more risk averse than men when making professional decisions (Eckel and Grossman 2008). Although these scholars do not speculate about the origins of the gender differences in attitudes toward competition and risk assessment, these patterns likely manifest themselves in politics as well. Choosing to run for office clearly poses many personal and professional risks. Indeed, future research must focus on the extent to which these factors contribute to and reinforce the gender gap in self-efficacy, especially since the electoral arena remains one of the few domains into which women have not yet been fully integrated.

Overall, our results do more than fill a void in the literature pertaining to gender and elections; they also provide an opportunity to gauge where the United States stands on the path to gender parity. Longstanding barriers to women's inclusion in the political arena—such as incumbency, the candidate pipeline, and political recruitment practices—pose challenges, but can be ameliorated over time. There is also no question that the public faces of politics have become more diverse. Nancy Pelosi, Hillary Rodham Clinton, and Sarah Palin have moved us away from a time when it was nearly unheard of for women to envision themselves as candidates for high-level office. Indeed, Atkeson (2003) finds that women who live in states with successful, visible female candidates are more likely to be politically engaged. Within the general population, women's levels of political proselytizing (Hansen 1997) and political interest (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001) also correlate with the presence of women elected officials. This heightened engagement, however, does not appear to affect self-efficacy among potential candidates. Our data reveal no correlation between self-efficacy and the percentage of women in the state legislature or the congressional delegation. These results may be an artifact of our sample design; perhaps women in the sample who live in traditional environments have already overcome numerous obstacles in achieving professional success and, therefore, have already developed a sense of self-efficacy. The fact that we uncover no remarkable regional or state-level differences in the gender gap in perceptions, though, indicates that women across the country do not readily acknowledge their qualifications to compete in politics.

Ultimately, given the heavyweight potential candidates place on their self-evaluations when considering a candidacy, women's full inclusion in the electoral process is unlikely in the near future and women's political equality is illusory. The changes required to close the gender gap in the perceptions we uncovered involve dismantling some of the most deeply embedded and socialized beliefs that both women and men hold about what political candidates look like and what performing that role entails.

Appendix A

Gender and the Calculus Employed to Arrive at Self-Efficacy—Ordered Probit Regression Coefficients (and Standard Errors) on Interaction Terms

	(Corresponds with Ordered Probit Model in Table 2)	(Corresponds with Ordered Probit Model in Table 4)
Politically Relevant Experience		
Political Proximity * Female	-.00 (.04)	.01 (.04)
Professional Credentials * Female	-.05 (.03)	-.04 (.04)
Campaign Experience * Female	-.01 (.07)	-.03 (.08)
Perceptions of Skills and Traits		
Political Skills Index * Female		-.01 (.04)
Political Traits Index * Female		.02 (.09)
Perceptions of Campaigns and Elections		
Campaign Mechanics		-.02 (.04)
Index * Female		
Gender Bias Index * Female		.05 (.04)
Electoral Competition		.10 (.07)
Index * Female		

Note: Entries indicate the regression coefficient and standard error for each interaction term when it is added, by itself, to the ordered probit models presented in Tables 2 and 4. For ease of exposition, we report all of the coefficients and standard errors in one table.

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