Women's Underrepresentation in the U.S. Congress

Kira Sanbonmatsu

Women's elective office-holding stands at an all-time high in the United States. Yet women are far from parity. This underrepresentation is surprising given that more women than men vote. Gender – as a feature of both society and politics – has always worked alongside race to determine which groups possess the formal and informal resources and opportunities critical for winning elective office. But how gender connects to office-holding is not fixed; instead, women's access to office has been shaped by changes in law, policy, and social roles, as well as the activities and strategies of social movement actors, political parties, and organizations. In the contemporary period, data from the Center for American Women and Politics reveal that while women are a growing share of Democratic officeholders, they are a declining share of Republican officeholders. Thus, in an era of heightened partisan polarization, women's situation as candidates increasingly depends on party.

Elective officeholders in the United States have always been majority male. This gender imbalance in politics may seem unremarkable and unworthy of investigation precisely because it appears to be a permanent feature of the political system. But a closer inspection reveals that the underrepresentation of women is, in fact, quite puzzling.

American women vote at a higher rate than men and have for four decades.[1] Women's majority status as voters should dispel the idea that women are somehow less political than men. If one looks subnationally, variation in the level of women's office-holding becomes apparent. Indeed, women in 2019 held a majority of seats in the Nevada Legislature, the first time that women constituted a state legislative majority in U.S. history. At moments, in some places, women have outnumbered men as members of city councils and as statewide officials. Several states have been represented by two women U.S. senators simultaneously. And a woman – Nancy Pelosi – presides over the U.S. House of Representatives as speaker, which represents a return to the position she held from 2007 to 2011; she is third in line to the presidency.

Still, American women are far from parity with respect to elective office-holding. The ideals of American democracy may not require that representa-

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tives precisely mirror the public demographically, but the quality of the representational relationship has been intimately connected to women's descriptive representation – or the lack thereof.[2] While scholars may assume that social and economic equality will give rise to political equality, the reverse may be true: women's political equality may be needed in order to achieve equality in other domains.[3]

The challenges American women face in politics are partly structural. The United States has typically lagged behind other nations with respect to women's representation because of its single-member congressional districts. In 2019, women constituted 23.7 percent of Congress compared with a global average of 24 percent.[4] The United States lacks a statute or constitutional provision for a gender quota for candidates or officeholders. Quotas are increasingly popular around the globe with half of all countries using quotas in elections for parliament. Without a proportional representation system or gender quotas, the United States stands apart from most industrialized democracies.[5]

The two-party system and absence of term limits advantage incumbent members of the U.S. Congress, incumbents who have, historically, been disproportionately men.[6] As a result, women have been most likely to enter Congress after winning open-seat contests. These electoral rules mean that most election cycles bring few opportunities for new candidates. Women congressional candidates are partisans; they run on the party label and must secure the party's nomination in order to compete in the general election. But they do so without the benefit of a party quota or other mechanism for creating a more gender-balanced institution. American politics and government also differ from other democracies in the extent of their social provision; a more generous U.S. welfare state might create greater public interest in maternal traits and therefore in women political leaders.[7]

With this backdrop of structural challenges in mind, I examine scholarly accounts of how social and political factors shape women's presence in the U.S. Congress. I consider how women's opportunities for political participation and influence in the United States have been contingent on race and ethnicity. Scholars of women's election to office have become more attentive to inequalities among women and especially the intersection of gender and racial categories, and intersectional theorists, including Kimberlé Crenshaw, have identified the inadequacy of thinking about gender or race alone.[8] Accounts of minority or female office-holding that fail to adopt an intersectional lens are likely to be partial or incorrect.

The relationship between gender and congressional office-holding is not fixed; instead, we observe change over time in the presence of women and variation across the two major parties. In other words, while male dominance of congressional elections has deep roots, it is neither natural nor inevitable.

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Running for office – and especially congressional office – has been a predominantly male enterprise for most of American history. Since the founding, gender and race together have shaped legal access to citizenship, voting rights, and elective office.[9] The Civil War and subsequent federal amendments ended slavery and conferred citizenship on former slaves, but the right to vote and hold office was only extended to Black men. Their office-holding experiences were also short-lived: the Jim Crow system, violence, and new legal restrictions would end Black men's election to Congress from the South. While the first White woman, Jeannette Rankin, entered Congress in 1917 – prior to the extension of suffrage to women by constitutional amendment in 1920 – it would take another half-century with the election of Patsy Takemoto Mink in 1965 for the first woman of color to be seated in Congress. Racial discrimination and voter suppression limited the ability of people of color to vote, meaning that not all women had access to the franchise after 1920. And race and ethnicity continue to shape the ability of people of color – women as well as men – to compete for elective office.[10]

For the early part of the twentieth century, it was rare for women to reach Congress, except as the widow of a sitting member who died in office.[11] The exclusion of women from the vote forestalled their opportunities for candidacy and office-holding, even after suffrage.[12]

Women have confronted not only formal legal barriers such as being prohibited from voting and holding office, but also other barriers related to men's greater access to and accumulation of informal social, educational, and economic credentials. Gender roles in society, the sexual division of labor, and racial and ethnic inequalities have combined to advantage White men in politics. The "social eligibility pool" of those individuals believed to hold the informal qualifications for office has largely been male.[13]

Meanwhile, racially polarized voting, stereotypes, and gatekeeper skepticism have reduced opportunities for candidates of color. Statewide electorates, which are almost always majority White, have been more difficult settings for women of color compared with the context of majority-minority legislative districts.[14] The first Black woman to reach the Senate, Carol Moseley Braun, did so in 1993. It would not be until 2013 that the second woman of color would be elected to the Senate, when Mazie Hirono became the first Asian American woman to serve. And Catherine Cortez Masto of Nevada would become the first Latina to enter the Senate in 2017, marking the first time more than one woman of color served in the Senate simultaneously.[15] Prejudice and stereotypes based on race, gender, and/or their intersection mean that White women, Black women, Asian American women, Latinas, and Native American women are likely to have different experiences on the campaign trail.[16]

Political institutions from political party organizations to political campaigns, as well as actors such as voters and donors, may be biased against women or with-

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hold support as a result of societal expectations about women's roles and their abilities.[17] The language around campaigns and elections reinforces cultural expectations that politics is a masculine space. Public opinion polls from the twentieth century document widespread sexism, issue stereotypes, trait stereotypes, and general skepticism about the appropriateness of women wielding political power. As recently as the 1960s, a party leader advised that one would only run a woman candidate in a hopeless race, as a "sacrificial lamb" for the party. Women candidates may be perceived to be violating their social role and their expected qualities as caregivers and passive dependents.[18]

From an early age, girls and boys internalize society's expectations, including the assumption that men, more than women, are qualified for politics and elections. Political ambition consistently reveals a gender gap with respect to citizens' aspirations.[19] Even today, with the presence of women in Congress at an all-time high, the experience of successfully reaching Congress as women creates a sense of commonality and solidarity within the institution.[20]

Women's disproportionate responsibilities in the home have also fundamentally shaped their political careers, altering opportunities for political involvement and the timing of women's candidacies.[21] After all, politics arguably represents a third shift for women who shoulder paid work and the second shift of household labor.[22] Women's decision-making about candidacy is also more "relationally embedded" than men's, meaning that women are more likely to take into account the perspectives of others, including family members, in deciding to become a candidate.[23]

Social norms, roles, and stereotypes have been subject to contestation and transformation, however. The second wave of the women's movement that emerged in the 1960s indirectly aided women candidates by fundamentally altering women's educational and economic opportunities and facilitating liberalization in attitudes toward women. As a result, what had been the common route to Congress – the "widow's path," in which women would briefly take the seats vacated by the death of their husbands – was gradually surpassed over the course of the twentieth century by more traditional strategic entry patterns typical of male candidates.[24] While a candidate's motherhood status may dampen voter support, parental status can advantage candidates in some circumstances today.[25]

Socioeconomic stratification intertwined with race means that women of color candidates, and potential candidates, lack equal access to resources.[26] Women of color serving in state legislatures report having to overcome more efforts to discourage their candidacies than their White women colleagues. In a national study of elected officials, sizable proportions of women of color in the Gender and Multi-Cultural Leadership National Survey reported experiencing race-based discrimination that affected their party support and fundraising; they also experienced unequal treatment in assessments of their qualifications.[27] Women of color have made significant strides in winning election to the U.S. House of Representa-

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tives, particularly from majority-minority districts. Women of color constitute 42 percent of all women members and 8.8 percent of all members of the U.S. House in 2019, according to the Center for American Women and Politics; but their presence in the U.S. Senate remains unusual.

Because women fare about as well as men in general election contests, as well as in primary contests, scholars contend that the main problem is the scarcity of women candidates.[28] However, some research has questioned the notion of a level playing field because women appear to be more strategic than men about when to enter a race and may need to be more qualified in order to obtain the same vote share. Women also face more competition than men when they run for Congress.[29]

Because the supply of candidates interacts with the demand for candidates, we would not expect candidates to emerge in unfavorable contexts.[30] Some voters are more supportive of women candidates than others, leading to the existence of what political scientists Barbara Palmer and Dennis Simon have called "women-friendly districts." Interestingly, however, they find that while White women are more likely than White men to be elected to Congress through these districts, Black women and Black men are elected from similar types of districts.[31]

Ironically, often overlooked within the U.S. politics literature about women's election to office is politics itself, with more scholarly attention paid to social dynamics than to political dynamics.[32] But political actors including parties and interest groups shape candidate recruitment, campaigns, and ultimately election results, with gendered and raced implications. Because American candidates do not run on a party list, they are assumed to be self-starters, leading most women and politics scholars to neglect the role of parties in the United States as both recruiters and gatekeepers. Scholarly interest in the partisan imbalance in women's office-holding, in which Democratic women outnumber Republican women, is rising, however.[33]

Whereas most research on elections in the United States typically understands gender to be primarily or exclusively a social category, the political realm itself is a source of information about women in society. And the realm of politics, including the institution of Congress, has not always been welcoming to women.[34]

Some of the obstacles facing women in politics are rooted in law and policy. In the modern period, the policy victories of the civil rights movement, including the Voting Rights Act and subsequent interpretations of the Act, have been vital to office-holding by women of color, eliminating formal and informal restrictions on voting and establishing the ability of minority communities to elect candidates of their choice. Given the opportunity to elect a candidate of their choice, majority-minority districts have typically done so. The creation of majority-minority legislative districts helps to explain the rise of women of color in elective office, including Congress.[35]

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Because immigration from Asia and Latin America rose as a result, the elimination of race-based distinctions in immigration policy in the 1960s also paved the way, indirectly, for more women of color to gain office.[36] According to data from the 2010 U.S. Census, Blacks make up 13.6 percent, Latinos 16 percent, Asians 5.6 percent, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders 0.4 percent, and American Indian and Alaska Natives 1.7 percent of the population.[37] Of these groups, Black women have been the most successful in securing elective office.

Informal recruitment and selection processes can also be a barrier to minority women's candidacies. Without informal support, and financial support, it has been challenging for women of color to make inroads outside of majority-minority districts. Indeed, Ayanna Pressley, who in 2018 became the first woman of color to win a seat in Congress from Massachusetts, ran for her first elective office – city council – over the protestations of political leaders who advised her that she was better suited for an advocacy role.

It is worth noting, however, that intersectional theorists have injected dynamism into theories about how structural inequalities affect women of color, questioning the assumption that race and gender always combine to create a situation of double disadvantage.[38] They note the potential for women of color to build broad coalitions because of their location at the intersection of race and gender categories.

Although electoral politics was not the main focus of second-wave feminist activity in the 1960s and 1970s, some activists did take up formal politics and the cause of women candidates.[39] Beginning in the 1970s and continuing to the present day, women's political action committees (PACs), groups, and donors have been essential to recruiting, training, and funding women candidates. As political scientist Barbara Burrell has documented, women congressional candidates have achieved considerable fundraising success, even surpassing the campaign contributions of their male counterparts in some cases.[40] As political scientist Susan J. Carroll and I have argued, the presence of support and recruitment mechanisms drives women's representation, and not just the absence of impediments.

The overrepresentation of men in elective office can fuel the assumption that men are better political leaders and dampen interest in women candidates. But the fact of women's underrepresentation can create political momentum for women's candidacies. In 1992, for example, in the so-called Year of the Woman election, public awareness of women's underrepresentation in Congress, including their status as only 2 percent of the Senate, led a record number of women to run in the wake of the Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas sexual harassment hearings. And women disregarded the conventional wisdom that women must run as men to be successful.[41] Public attention to the extent of women's underrepresentation intersected with a large number of open seats as well as heightened awareness of the problem of sexual harassment.[42]

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Donald J. Trump's unexpected defeat of Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential election and the subsequent Women's March in 2017 led to the unprecedented number of women candidates in the 2018 midterm election. As anti-Trump sentiment mounted and the #MeToo movement took shape over the course of 2017, more women declared their candidacies, many of whom were first-time candidates. Similar to the 1992 election, public awareness of women's underrepresentation in politics and heightened attention to policy issues that disproportionately impact women as a group interacted with a large number of open congressional seats. As a result, women entered primaries in record-breaking numbers for Congress, governor, and state legislature and went on to break records as major party nominees.[43] In the end, 2019 saw 127 women serving in Congress and 2,127 women in state legislatures, establishing two new U.S. records.[44]

But in both 1992 and 2018, the uptick in candidates and officeholders was disproportionately Democratic. In fact, although a stunning 476 women entered primaries for the 435 seats of the House, surpassing the previous record of 298, the raw number of women running for the chamber was not a historic high for Republican women. Despite a record number of women entering the House in 2019, the number of Republican women declined. Republican women also declined as a percentage of all Republican members of the House. Nonincumbent Democratic women were more likely to emerge victorious from their primaries than Democratic men, suggesting that Democratic women were advantaged in the 2018 elections.[45]

Left parties have traditionally been more supportive of women's equality and women candidates.[46] Thus, the disproportionate presence of women within the Democratic Party – as voters, activists, candidates, and officeholders – is consistent with this crossnational trend. It also reflects the Democratic and Republican Parties' relationships with organized feminism and civil rights issues.[47]

Since 1980, women have been more likely to vote for the Democratic candidate in presidential elections. Gaps are also evident in congressional and gubernatorial elections and in voters' partisan attachments.[48] Political party continues to be the most important predictor of congressional vote choice, although stereotypes about candidates are shaped by both party and gender.[49] And the greater representation of women among Democratic officeholders is evident to the public and appears to affect the magnitude of the gender gap in partisan identification.[50]

The two major parties are quite distinct with respect to the infrastructure available to women potential candidates. This can be seen clearly with respect to the partisan gap in Congress historically and particularly in the contemporary era. The 1992 election was essentially the "year of the Democratic woman," as the relatively young PAC EMILY's List (Early Money Is Like Yeast), founded in 1985, bundled contributions from a women's donor network to finance women's campaigns. EMILY's List only supports pro-choice Democratic women candidates,

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and their strategy has been to provide women candidates with early money, putting their weight behind candidates in competitive primaries. The role of EMILY's List in helping elect Democratic women to Congress cannot be overstated.

Recent studies of fundraising confirm the vast differences in the financial environment faced by women of the two major parties. Democratic women congressional candidates, but not Republican women candidates, are advantaged with respect to their gender, party, and ideology. While female donor networks and organizations exist on the Republican side of the aisle, they are not as well known as EMILY's List and do not approach its level of influence.[51]

The financial cost of running for Congress is high and rising. All else equal, this aspect of American politics places women, as well as men of color, at a disadvantage because of the effects of gender and race on employment opportunities, personal income, and wealth. While women have outvoted men, men have dominated political giving by rate and amount of contributions. Women's PACs and donor networks have disrupted male dominance to some extent, and women's giving has increased in recent years, but the financing of politics continues to put women at a disadvantage. The existence of gendered patterns of giving exacerbates this economic disadvantage.[52]

Candidate emergence and candidate recruitment patterns have also affected Democratic and Republican women differently. Moderates have been largely eliminated from Congress as the two parties have become more polarized. This change has disproportionately adversely affected Republican women in politics, who traditionally come from the party's moderate wing.[53] Recruitment on the Republican side favors conservative candidates, and conservative candidates are disproportionately male.[54] And with many more women serving in and holding leadership positions in the Democratic Party, it is more likely that women candidates will be recruited.[55]

For strategic reasons, Republican women in Congress have been overrepresented as communicators of the party message compared with their presence in the party.[56] Despite the party efforts to showcase women in leadership roles, the stubborn fact of Republican women's underrepresentation – as well as their declining presence in the party – remains. The dwindling presence of Republican women is unfortunate given that women are more effective members of Congress than their male colleagues, particularly when they are in the minority party.[57]

The misogyny of Trump (as a candidate and now president) also affects women differently according to partisanship.[58] While the Republican Party has periodically sought to increase the racial and gender diversity of its candidates, that strategy seems to be a nonstarter in an environment in which Trump, as party leader, routinely disparages women and minorities, and particularly women of color. Studies of "modern sexism" – a form of sexism that seems to have replaced old-fashioned sexism – are on the rise in the Trump era. Trump's misogyny as a can-

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didate and president creates an unwelcome environment for Republican women candidates. In contrast, the energy of the women's marches and #MeToo movement and the strong anti-Trump sentiment on the left appear to have fueled the explicitly gendered appeals made by the new women candidates who ran in 2018. Experiences with pregnancy, motherhood, sexual assault, and sex discrimination animated political advertising in 2018 in new ways.[59]

In 2019, the number of women of color serving in Congress – forty-seven – represents a historic high. The 2018 midterm saw numerous "firsts" with respect to women's office-holding in Congress, including the first Native American women, Debra Haaland (D-NM) and Sharice Davids (D-KS); the first women of color elected from New England, Ayanna Pressley (D-MA) and Jahana Hayes (D-CT); and the first Latinas elected from Texas, Veronica Escobar (D) and Sylvia R. Garcia (D). The youngest woman ever to enter Congress, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY), a Latina, defeated an incumbent from her own party and a member of House leadership in 2018. The national Democratic tide and public interest in women candidates helped to propel these Democratic women to office. While these firsts for women of color signal progress, the fact that they occurred only recently is a poor reflection on the country's record of inclusion.[60] With explicit sexist and racist messages emanating from the White House, it is perhaps not surprising that almost all women of color serving in elective office are Democrats.

Throughout the past century, women in Congress have usually been the staunchest advocates for policies important to women as a group. Women in Congress seek to provide representation for all women including those beyond their states and districts, albeit with different ideas of what it means to represent women.[61]

Institutional and societal challenges as well as obstacles rooted in racial inequality have historically limited women's access to Congress. Concern about women's underrepresentation and collective efforts to elect more women have twice disrupted the status quo of congressional elections, most recently in 2018. But the situation of women candidates varies greatly by political party, and the party imbalance among women in Congress is widening.

Future research on women's election to Congress would benefit from a more sustained intersectional approach, even if that approach can be, as political scientist Wendy Smooth has noted, a bit messier than single-category approaches.[62] As scholars grapple with the best empirical methods to accomplish intersectional research, they must also strive to incorporate additional categories. One area that scholars have neglected within the American women and politics field is the election of sexual minorities. Several openly gay women serve in Congress in 2019, including two women senators: Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) and Kyrsten Sinema (D-AZ). While some scholars have examined the challenges that sexuality poses for

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women candidates, much more research is needed to identify how LGBTQ identity and politics affect the level of women's representation.[63] Women are a large and differentiated group, and political equality for women as a whole must take into account sources of inequality beyond gender alone.

For our book *A Seat at the Table*, Kelly Dittmar, Susan Carroll, and I interviewed more than three-fourths of the women serving in the 114th Congress (2015–2017); they explained that the presence of women in the institution is a "big thing."[64] House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi (CA) explained the significance, for American women, of seeing "that someone who may have shared their experience – whether it is to be a working Mom or whatever it happens to be – [has] a voice at the table."[65] And women in Congress should reflect the diversity of American women. As Representative Joyce Beatty (D-OH) noted, "[Having more women of color in Congress] makes a difference when little African American girls can dream that they, too, can serve in Congress."[66] And Representative Kristi Noem (R-SD) explained that "Most of the voters in this country are women. So they deserve to be represented and have people there that think like they do."[67]

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kira Sanbonmatsu is Professor of Political Science and Senior Scholar at the Center for American Women and Politics at the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University. Her publications include *A Seat at the Table: Congresswomen's Perspectives on Why Their Presence Matters* (with Kelly Dittmar and Susan J. Carroll, 2018), *More Women Can Run: Gender and Pathways to the State Legislatures* (with Susan J. Carroll, 2013), and *Where Women Run: Gender and Party in the American States* (2006).

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