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Do female politicians empower women to vote or run for office? A regression discontinuity approach [☆]



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ABSTRACT

Persistent gender gaps in political officeholding and mass political participation jeopardize women's equal representation in government. This paper brings new evidence to the longstanding hypotheses that the presence of additional female candidates and officeholders helps address these gaps by empowering other women to vote or run for office themselves. With a regression discontinuity approach and data on 3813 US state legislative elections where a woman opposed a man, I find that the election of additional women in competitive US state legislative elections has no discernible causal effects on other women's political participation at the mass or elite levels. These estimates are precise enough to rule out even substantively small effects. These results stand in stark contrast to a number of findings from India, suggesting that although electing the first women in a society can have these empowering effects, remaining barriers to women's inclusion in American democracy go beyond what further increases in female officeholding can themselves erode.

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Less than one hundred years ago, women in the United States were denied the right to vote in federal elections and no women held federal office. Today, it is commonplace for more women than men to cast ballots in US Presidential elections, while thousands of women hold significant political offices in the US. Nevertheless, despite the remarkable progress in women's political inclusion that has been made over the last century, large gender gaps in American politics remain (e.g., Verba et al., 1995; ch. 8): women are markedly less likely than men to contact their elected officials, to affiliate with political

organizations and, most starkly of all, to run for and serve in elected offices (e.g., CAWP, 2010).

Such gender gaps in political participation have significant consequences: at the mass level, who participates in politics greatly determines who receives substantive representation in government (e.g., Griffin and Newman, 2005); and at the elite level, female politicians are significantly more likely to provide women with substantive representation than are their male counterparts (e.g., Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004).

A number of activists, policymakers, and scholars have posited that the election of more individual women to office and the presence of more female candidates on ballots holds crucial promise to help close gender gaps in participation (see Dolan, 2006a and next section for review). Specifically, female candidacies and officeholding have long been argued both to increase political empowerment among women in the mass public, leading more women to vote, and to demonstrate to political elites, voters, and women themselves what women can accomplish in office, leading more women to run. Recent findings from India's unique policy experiments have crucially bolstered these arguments by

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demonstrating that the election of women there dramatically increases other women's political participation in the mass public and presence in office (e.g., [Beaman et al., 2009](#); [Bhavnani, 2009](#); [Bhalotra et al., 2013](#); [Deininger et al., 2013](#)). Thus, as [Dolan \(2006a\)](#) reviews, a large and still-growing body of work suggests that “women candidates...send[] the signal that politics is no longer an exclusive man's world,” thereby “stimulat[ing women's] activity and engagement” at the mass and elite levels.

This paper presents new evidence that casts doubt on this view with an empirical approach that is able to assess the causal impact of female officeholding and candidacies in the United States with greater precision and less bias than previous work has been able. Specifically, I employ a regression discontinuity approach and data describing 3813 US state legislative elections where a woman opposed a man to estimate the causal effects of the election of female officeholders and the presence of additional women on ballots.

This dataset and research design have several novel advantages over previous work. First, although previous work has struggled with teasing apart the causal impact of electing women from the pre-existing characteristics of the places that tend to elect women, I use a quasi-experimental design to identify the causal effects of women's presence on ballots and in office. In examining women's candidacies for state legislative office, I also focus on the most crucial training ground for future statewide and federal officeholders and where much systematic bias against women holding office first begins ([Maestas et al., 2006](#)). This is also the same level of government where substantial effects have often been found in India, allowing for a meaningful cross-national comparison to be conducted. Moreover, while women are just as likely to know who their state legislators are as they are their Member of Congress ([Burns et al., 2001](#), p. 102), the state legislative level features uniquely plentiful data and variation, allowing for statistically precise estimates that could uncover even subtle effects. Last, the nature of the regression discontinuity design estimates the effect of women's victories in the most competitive contests, precisely where prevailing theories predict the largest effects.

The results cast doubt on the propositions that one woman's election causes other women in her district to vote or women in nearby districts to run or win office. First, in other districts nearby districts where women have won the previous election, other women are no more likely to run for office or be elected. Moreover, women who are represented by a woman instead of a man or who have the opportunity to vote for a woman at the polls are no more likely to turn out to vote as a consequence. The precision of these null estimates is considerable enough to rule out even substantively small effects: the mobilizing effect of being represented by a woman instead of a man on women's voter turnout is statistically zero and, at most, smaller than the one percentage point turnout increase yielded from simple GOTV postcards. Likewise, the effect of a woman's victory on the probability that other women run for similar offices in their area is, at most, more than an order of magnitude smaller than the effect of a woman being asked to run for office by party leaders. Sorting around the discontinuity cannot account for these patterns, which are also robust across a number of specifications and to a number of alternative explanations.

The results shed new light on the remaining barriers women face to equal representation in American politics, both in the electorate and in elected office. Even as a bevy of promising new results from India suggest that the election of women can sometimes have strong empowering effects in contexts where few women have held office before, electing additional individual women in the United States appears unable to itself break down the underlying barriers to equal representation in government that American women face.

1. Do female politicians and candidates empower women to participate in politics?

Women's political participation continues to fall behind men's in the United States in important respects. In the mass public, women are significantly less likely than men to contact their elected officials, contribute to political campaigns, and affiliate with political organizations (among other political acts), patterns that have clear and widely appreciated implications for women's political equality (e.g., [Verba et al., 1995](#), p. 254). Among the ranks of elected officeholders, women's underrepresentation is even starker: as of 2012, only 17% of US Senators and 17% Members of the US House are women. These gaps in women's office-holding likewise have clear consequences for women's equal substantive representation: female legislators are more likely to sponsor and vote for women's interest legislation (e.g., [Gertzog, 1995](#); [Niven, 1998](#); [Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004](#)), and women have more positive evaluations of their female representatives ([Lawless, 2004](#)).¹

1.1. The empowering potential of female officeholders and candidates?

Seeking to understand how persistent inequalities in women's political voice can be addressed, scholars have devoted a great deal of attention to understanding the roots of women's underrepresentation in the mass public and among elected officeholders (see [Dolan, 2006a](#) for review). One novel hypothesis about how to increase women's participation has gained particular prominence: that the election of female officeholders and the presence of female candidates on ballots itself causes more women to politically participate, both in more routine acts of participation in the mass public (such as contacting one's representatives) and by running for elected office themselves.

At the mass level, scholars have long argued that historically underrepresented groups like women will participate in politics to a greater extent when they have descriptive representatives (e.g., [Banducci et al., 2004](#); [Beaman et al., 2012](#); [Bobo and Gilliam, 1990](#); [Gay, 2002](#); [Mansbridge, 1999](#); [Pantoja and Segura, 2003](#); [Williams, 1998](#)).² Supporting such expectations, a large empirical literature has uncovered

¹ Women's growing representation has more general consequences, as well: because barriers to entry for political office are higher for women than for men, the women who do enter politics are generally more talented than are men ([Anzia and Berry, 2011](#)).

² See also [Harris et al. \(2005, 2006\)](#), [Washington \(2006\)](#), and [Broockman \(2013\)](#).

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