

Political Ambition: Why

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“Of the people, by the people, and for the people.” These words undergird American democracy. While these words have not always included all people, participation in our modern democracy is now open to all citizens, regardless of wealth, race, or gender. Open does not mean necessarily, though, that all participate.

A number of well documented studies have highlighted the disproportionately low number of women holding state and federal elective offices. This is also true of local elective offices in Wisconsin (Table A). These studies have also shown that women are less likely than men to run for elective office, and that their reasons for running often vary from those cited by men. The authors investigated whether these findings held true for women running for local office in Wisconsin.

Armed with an understanding of the barriers that discourage Wisconsin women from participation in the local electoral process and knowledge of ways to reduce the barriers, community leaders and activists will be in a better position to provide targeted educational programs designed to increase the number of women running for local elected office. Besides the obvious fairness issue, the identification and reduction of systemic barriers to women’s holding public office holds

the potential for improving democracy in Wisconsin by including heretofore unheard voices in the deliberative governance process.

METHODOLOGY

Development of Surveys

The research is based off of two surveys developed by the authors and distributed during the summer of 2015 with the help of the University of Wisconsin River Falls Survey Center. One survey was sent to current county board supervisors and one survey was sent to potential local elected officials (PLEOs). The two surveys asked participants to respond to similar questions identifying barriers to running for office. When completing the surveys, current county board supervisors were asked to reflect back on their perspectives and experiences prior to running for elected office for the first time. PLEOs were asked to respond with their current perspectives. This approach provided a comparison of perspectives of the barriers faced prior to running for office for both groups.

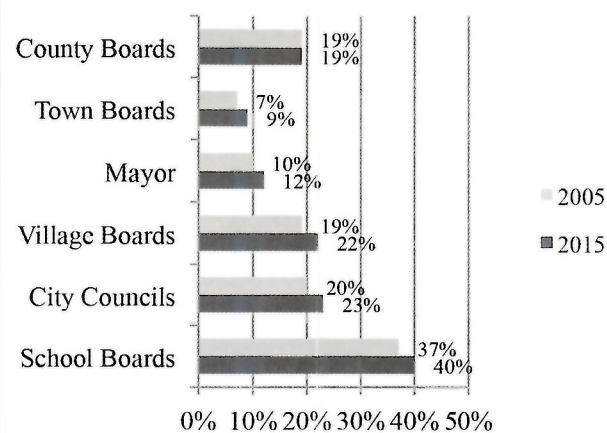
Contacting Current County Board Supervisors

With the assistance of the Wisconsin Counties Association, a survey was sent to all county board supervisors in all 72 counties in Wisconsin. Where possible, an on-line version of the survey was sent to the board supervisors. Supervisors who did not receive or respond to an email were sent paper copies of the survey in the post. In total 1,609 surveys were sent, with 592 responding (37 percent response rate).

Soliciting Contact Information for PLEOs

The authors developed a two-phase process for identifying PLEOs. The process was specifically designed to avoid biases in people identified as PLEOs for the purposes of this research.

Table A
 Percentage of women holding office, 2005 and 2015
 (Statistics from the Wisconsin Women's Council)



Don't More Women Run?

The first phase of the process involved contacting county-based UW-Extension colleagues in all 72 counties. These colleagues were asked to supply contact information for five men and five women as PLEOs who, to the best of their knowledge, had not run for elected office or served in elected office. To expand our contacts for PLEOs beyond the UW-Extension network, the colleagues were also asked to supply contact information for six informants or leaders in their county. These informants and leaders were then contacted and each of them was asked to supply the names of

five men and five women who could be PLEOs. This process yielded 353 PLEOs who were invited to complete a survey. A total of 241 completed surveys were received from this group of PLEOs (56 percent return rate).

Responses were received from 38 counties. These counties were spread throughout Wisconsin, with a balance between rural and urban communities.

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Table B. Top 10 barriers for potential local elected officials(PLEOs)

Percent of PLEOs that indicated the item was either a barrier or a major barrier

Percent of current supervisors that indicated the item was either a barrier or a major barrier

Lack interest or willingness to ask for campaign funds	58 %	14 %
Time away from family or home responsibilities	57 %	11 %
Time away from other activities I enjoy	53 %	12 %
Time away from work responsibilities	51 %	14 %
I lack interest/willingness to meet voters door-to-door	41 %	9 %
Negative political atmosphere in local government	38 %	9 %
Concern about the impact on my finances	35 %	6 %
Spouse, partner or family subjected to criticism from constituents	29 %	6 %
I have concerns about reprisals or criticism	26 %	5 %
I perceive a lack of support for my candidacy	25 %	1 %

Results:

Both the supervisors and the PLEOs were asked a series of questions designed to determine the barriers to running for local elected office. In each survey they rated thirty barriers related to their personal background, voter perceptions, campaigning, and life in elected office on a scale from not a barrier, a slight barrier, a barrier, to a major barrier. These barriers included systemic barriers as well as perceptual ones. Table B lists the top ten barriers for the supervisors and the PLEOs. The percent of survey respondents who indicated each item was either a barrier or a major barrier is also listed in Table B.

In every case the PLEOs rated all of the items to be more of a concern than the current supervisors. Even though the PLEOs have been recognized by their peers as “well-qualified” candidates, they identified serious concerns regarding campaigning and life in office.

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SELF-CONFIDENCE: A DETERMINING FACTOR?

Women appeared to doubt their abilities to run for and serve in local elected office to a greater degree than men. A number of the barriers asked about on the survey related to self-confidence. There were nine items where the responses indicated that a statistically significant proportion of women viewed this as a barrier or a major barrier as opposed to men (Table B). Although the percent of all PLEOs who indicated that these were major barriers was relatively low, when looked at collectively, a pattern of doubt among women begins to emerge.

WHAT IS A "WELL-QUALIFIED" CANDIDATE FOR LOCAL ELECTED OFFICE?

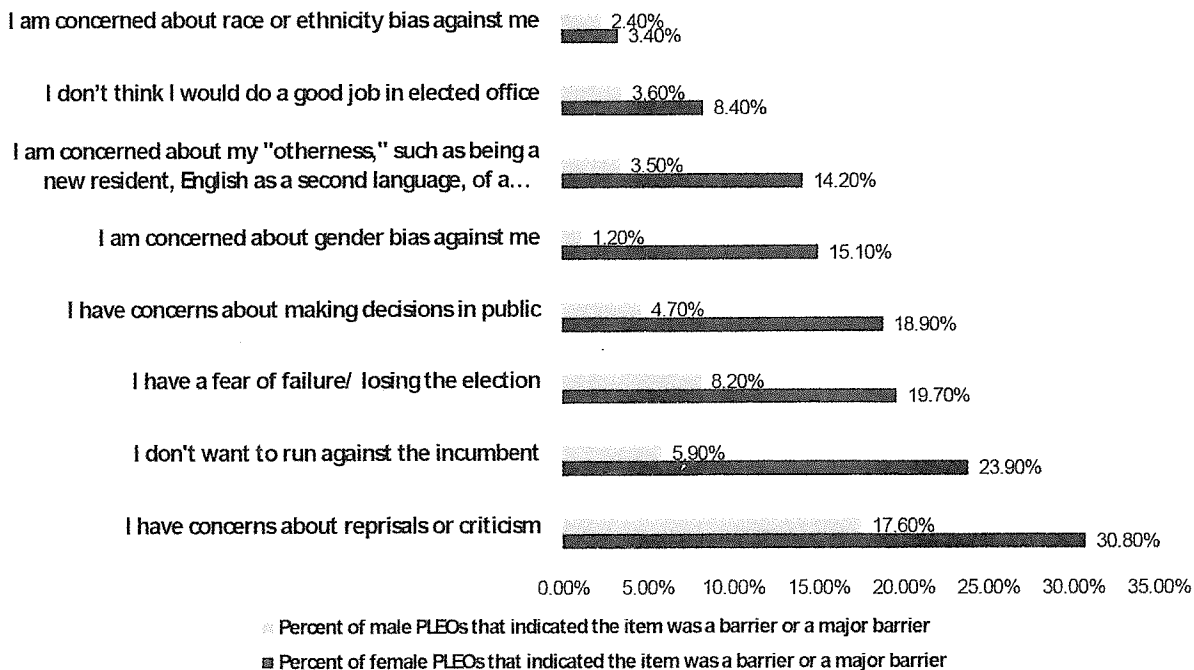
The county supervisors and PLEOs we surveyed rated a series of sixteen abilities and experiences that they felt made someone well-qualified to run for local elected office. For

both groups the following ranked among their top five: (1) being informed on local public policy issues, (2) knowing many people in the community, (3) attending local government meetings, (4) having public speaking experience, and (5) running an organization, business, or foundation. In addition, there were no statistically significant differences between the responses between male and female PLEOs as to what qualities were desirable for an elected official.

Using the same list of abilities and experiences, PLEOs were asked to indicate whether or not they felt they had those abilities or experiences. The county board supervisors were asked to reflect back on when they originally ran for office and consider whether or not they had those abilities or experiences at that time. Among the sixteen items, there were few differences among the collective responses of the PLEOs and those of the current supervisors. There were no significant differences between the responses between male and female PLEOs except that more male PLEOs had experience solic-

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Table C. Barriers for men and women potential elected local officials



The responses from the male and female PLEOs surveys were compared to determine if specific barriers for females existed. Within the top ten most identified barriers there were no statistically significant differences in the response rates between men and women except for the barrier related to concerns about reprisals or criticism. However, on 25 of the 30 items listed, a higher percentage of women than men indicated the item as a barrier or a major barrier. On an individual basis these barriers may not be significant, but collectively they seem to create a considerable hurdle for women to overcome.

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iting funds for an organization, interest or cause than their female counterparts.

This data indicates that both male and female PLEOs should consider themselves equally qualified to run for office based on their definition of a qualified candidate. Yet, a statistically significant difference exists between men's and women's perception of how well qualified they are to serve in a local elected office. When the PLEOs were asked how qualified they thought they were to serve in local elected office, 71 percent of the male PLEOs and 60 percent of the female PLEOs said they were either qualified or very qualified.

ENCOURAGEMENT TO RUN FOR OFFICE

The most cited reason that supervisors ran for local elected office was because someone asked them to run. Seventy-six percent of county supervisors were asked to run for local elected office and the most influential encouragement came from their friends and other elected officials. Sixty percent of the PLEOs have already been encouraged to run and they felt the most influential encouragement came from their friends. In order to get both men and women to run for office they need to be asked, but the way they are approached and encouraged likely differs between men and women.

CONCLUSION

This study supports the findings of previous studies looking at women's political ambition for state and federal offices. The Wisconsin women in our study more commonly identified significant barriers to running for office than did the male respondents. It appears that a combination of systemic barriers and confidence/perception barriers combine to prevent many women from making the decision to run for local elected office.

In addition to systemic barriers, such as time away from family and time away from other activities, many women dis-

played a lack of self-confidence in their ability to serve on a local governing body that was not as evident in potential male candidates nor in those already serving on a county board. The elimination of actual systemic barriers — daytime meetings, for example — may open access for some. More likely to contribute to increased numbers of new people running for local office, though, is the elimination of perceived barriers. In some cases potential candidates may have a distorted view of the impact that holding office may have on such things as their personal finances and the amount of time that it will take away from other activities—work, family, and social. Similarly, potential candidates, having seen a steady stream of negative campaigning and political activity and gridlock at the national level for the past several decades, may associate local politics with a similar level of rancor, negativism, and inability to get things done that is likely not the case in their communities.

Previous studies have shown that women who hold elected office are more likely to advocate for issues that affect families and women than are their male counterparts. It is critical that these concerns be raised and that these voices be heard. Community leaders who value diverse voices on their governing bodies may need to take a closer look at their recruitment efforts. While both men and women may need to be asked to run for office, the way in which women are encouraged to run may be different. Recruiting qualified women to run for office may take more than simply letting women know that there is a vacancy for an upcoming election. To get new people to run, even people who are already viewed as having leadership potential, will likely require explicit, targeted efforts. Effectively encouraging more women to run may involve more discussions on the realities of campaigning and serving in local office, as well as the strengths of the potential candidates. Community activists looking to recruit female candidates may need to spend time not only identifying qualified female candidates, but also convincing these candidates that they do, indeed, have the requisite experience, knowledge, and skills to do a good job once elected.

As UW-Extension Community Development Educators Jenny Erickson and Victoria Solomon work with diverse audiences to develop, manage, implement, and evaluate educational outreach initiatives that address local needs. They focus on economic development, strengthening organizations, and leadership development. They can be reached at JErickson@co.sauk.wi.us and victoria.solomon@ces.uwex.edu. Dan Hill is a Local Government Specialist for the UW-Extension's Local Government Center. The Center provides focus, coordination, and leadership to UW System educational programs supporting local government, and works to expand the research and knowledge base for local government education. He can be reached at dan.hill@uwex.edu.