Sometimes events in the real-world leap ahead of our research-based understandings of them, and scholars have to race to catch up. Such is the case with women and politics in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Around the world, and especially in the United States, new approaches, programs, and trends cry out for greater exploration. We have seen rapid growth in nongovernmental and nonpartisan programs specifically designed to recruit and train women as political candidates. And, particularly since the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the huge cohort of women that stepped forward to run for office has changed the landscape of candidates and representation. The early decades of this century have also produced changes in the types of women who run, with female candidates and elected officials in the Democratic Party far outnumbering Republican women. Indeed, the 2018 election featured the most women (including the most women of color) of any election to date, and the 2020 Democratic primary alone featured more female candidates for the presidency than all parties together fielded in any prior U.S. presidential contest. And although in the past women of color have faced heightened discrimination based on both race and gender, the post-2016 landscape has also seen a record number of women of color run—and succeed. The essays in this volume are meant to serve as a primer on the current landscape of opportunities and constraints faced by women who are considering electoral campaigns.

Although most of the essays herein focus on U.S. politics, placing the experience of one country into conversation with others is an essential part of this project. The electoral system of the United States—where we typically elect only one candidate out of each district, and where the person with the
most votes takes the seat—is relatively candidate-centric compared to other systems. Unlike in other countries, where parties play a much larger role in recruiting and funding political candidates, in the United States we rely on individuals to step forward somewhat independently to pursue electoral office. Within this environment, the personal and financial costs of running for office are high. Given the vitriol in recent elections and the high level of hyperpartisanship, negative advertising, and animosity in even lower-level elections, it is fair to ask: Why would anyone run for office? Indeed, as many have found, the costs—in actual pay cuts, in other career opportunities lost, and in time away from family and friends—may be too much to ask for many people. Research suggests that these costs may weigh more heavily on some groups, especially those already marginalized in politics and economics, such as the working class, women, and people of color.

What do these costs mean for women’s representation in the United States? The United States lags behind most other countries; in 2019, women held 24 percent of seats in the U.S. House of Representatives, placing the United States as 104th out of 190 countries worldwide (see Figure I.1). Although a woman has never been president of the United States, globally, women head 7.2 per-
Introduction

In the Americas alone, eight women have served in the most powerful political office. Despite the dismal track record in comparison to other countries, women’s representation in the United States has increased dramatically over the past century. Figure I.2 presents the number of women that have served in Congress between 1907 and 2019, in both the Democratic (top line) and Republican (bottom line) Parties. As Figure I.2 shows, the Democratic Party has elected many more women to Congress, with particular success since the 1990s. As of 2019, 101 women serve in the 435 member House (88 D, 13 R), and 25 women serve in the Senate (17 D, 8 R). (This shows the growth in the number of women serving in the House from that of 2018, when 64 Democratic and 23 Republican women served.) There has also been a marked improvement in the representation of women of color. At the national level, Black women now hold 22 seats (21 in the House and 1 in the Senate). In the House,
there are now 13 Latina representatives, 8 Asian American/Pacific Islander women, 2 Native American women, and 1 female representative from Middle Eastern descent. And although there are still twice as many Black male state legislators as Black female state legislators, there has been a growth of more than 50 percent in Black women’s representation—from 170 women in 1995 to 275 (272 D, 3 R) in 2019. These figures suggest that, as the U.S. Congress and state legislatures have increased women’s representation, they have also diversified on other fronts.8

Why Don’t More Women Run?

As with anything in politics, scholars have engaged in a vigorous debate about whether, and to what extent, women are less likely to be supported as political candidates. While women may sometimes be equally likely to win elections as men (as advocates like to say, “When women run, women win”), other research shows that voters harbor biases (both explicit and implicit) that make women’s campaigns more challenging. In many studies, stereotypes and gender schemas have been found to color voters’ perceptions of the competence, ideology, and policy priorities of women as candidates.9 Still other studies counter that overt bias has all but faded, and, since similarly situated men and women win at equal rates when they run as candidates, the underrepresentation of women can best be explained by women’s relative lack of political ambition to run.10 Reconciling these disparate findings has made for a lively debate among scholars in recent years.11

Even if voters are equally likely to support men and women, other scholars see persisting inequalities: Jenkins, for example, finds that, although men and women raise the same amount of money when they run for Congress, women generally have to make twice the number of phone calls to raise this same amount.12 And women themselves clearly anticipate that they will face an unfair fight as candidates, including bias on the part of voters, funders, news and social media, and party leaders.13

The most perplexing aspect of women’s continued underrepresentation is the fact that most research shows that the women who make it to the top are highly successful in their posts: they are good at bringing money and projects back to their districts, they receive high ratings for the service they do in their own constituencies, they are more likely to get their proposed bills passed, and they are even more likely to get reelected than men.14 All of these findings have left feminists, advocates for democratic representation, and researchers with the conclusion that more women can run for political office, and, in fact, they should.

Even setting aside practical concerns, potential candidates often express displeasure with aspects of campaigning and governing. Some prefer careers that provide more opportunities to work collectively and help others.15 And
many otherwise eligible people may willingly avoid the process of running for office itself, including selling oneself to voters, soliciting donations, facing a hostile media, and making tough compromises. The problem may be more acute for female candidates, as women seem to be averse simply to putting themselves up for election, even in the low-stakes environment of laboratory experiments. Some recent research suggests that, although male and female candidates face the same type of costs-versus-benefits structure of decision-making in deciding whether to run, women typically see more costs and fewer rewards to running and feel the costs more keenly.

And yet, there are those women who do run for office. In the 2016 election cycle alone, 2,648 women ran in state legislative races as major party nominees (see Figure I.3), 183 women ran for Congress as their party’s nominees, and 1 woman ran for the highest office in the land as the Democratic Party’s nominee. The numbers of female candidates in the 2018 election exceeded this by 150 percent, with more women running for Congress than ever before. So, what would prompt someone to subject herself to the rigors of a political campaign and the potential antipathy of the general public?

Figure I.3. Women in U.S. state legislatures, 1975–2019. The top line lists the total number of women who were candidates for state legislative offices (from 2000 to 2018), while the marked lower lines list the number of women winners from the Democratic, Republican, and Independent nonheritage parties. In 2019, there were a total of 7,383 in state legislatures. (Source: Graphic by the editors, based on data from Center for American Women in Politics 2018.)
Political Ambition

A lot of the recent debate about why women are underrepresented has centered on the role of women’s political ambition in limiting gender parity in U.S. politics. Intuitively, the focus on ambition makes sense; no other term affixes itself so firmly to our image of politicians. But on deeper inspection, ambition as an explanation for candidate emergence appears to be more useful as a description than as an explanation. Here, in this collection, we engage broadly with the idea of ambition, with a focus on why some individuals or groups might want to run for political office in an environment where so many forces point to the irrationality of political candidacy.

Despite the widespread use of the term and relative simplicity of the definition, there have been surprisingly few theoretical explanations for how or why some individuals possess political ambition while others express no interest in public office. Beginning with Schlesinger’s study of political careers in 1966, researchers have defined political ambition in terms of commitment to running (expressive ambition) or desire to move to higher office once elected (progressive ambition). More recently, a set of studies on “nascent” ambition look further upstream, tracking the early antecedents of individuals’ desires to run. But “ambition” itself is not well defined in these works; we suspect, instead, that ambition is an outcome in search of a theory. Indeed, the phrase political ambition suggests a sycophantic, vote-maximizing individual, plotting her way to the top of the political system like the Frank—or Claire—Underwood character in Netflix’s House of Cards. Such a caricature hardly describes every individual (or even most individuals) who might be interested in holding elected office. Further, the term political ambition suggests an ambitious personality, but most studies have found that thinking of ambition as related to one’s seeking of status, desiring of salary, or having an ingrained personality trait does not predict actual people’s level of political ambition.

In many ways, research on political ambition supports the idea that ambition is largely affected and shaped by external factors; the early works focused on how things like incumbency, open seats, and district composition affected the “political opportunity structures” facing potential candidates, and more recent research has expanded this understanding to also include the role of recruiters and party “gatekeepers.” Recruitment refers to the process by which political parties, interest groups, and peers persuade individuals to run for office. Political parties exist, in part, to recruit individuals with broadly similar ideologies and worldviews to run for office. Not surprisingly, recruitment matters for the decision to run for office; in short, simply asking people to run for office will lead to more of those people running for office. But recruitment does not happen in a vacuum. Often, the people recruited by party operatives are already known by the party and already have the type
of “nascent political ambition” that led them to be visible to recruiters in the first place.  

Although we suspect that some people really are “born to run,” new research suggests that ambition is not innate but fluctuates based on contextual, structural, institutional, and psychological factors. Women, in particular, on the whole appear to be more strategic about how, when, and where they run and are likely to make more “relationally-embedded” decisions about candidacy. In other words, women are more likely to think about the consequences their candidacies will have for those around them.

This volume attempts to take seriously the idea that women’s candidacies, and their political ambition more generally, are contingent, malleable, and relationally embedded. What this means is that when something major happens in the social or political environment, we may expect women’s interest in running for office to undergo profound changes. Here we ask not who has ambition, as much previous work has done, but how to activate and encourage ambition among a larger population of potential female candidates. Such ambition is not innate; it can be created anew from new experiences and understandings, coached, and supported or quashed. How and for whom these processes work is the starting point for many of the studies in this book.

**Book Overview**

Electoral democracy requires that voters have meaningful choices about who serves in office. To provide voters with real choices, we need willing candidates. In this book we strive to combine rigorous scholarship with a focus on the “real world” of women as potential candidates, both in the United States and more broadly. This unusual compilation is the result of an innovative conference, held in November 2017 at the University of Pennsylvania, that brought together academics and advocates working in the field of women and politics. We believe that this sort of collaboration is essential: scholars may overlook important problems on the ground for lack of shoe-leather experience, while practitioners may be unaware that solid, peer-reviewed research has already attempted to answer many important questions in their field.

Part of the disconnect between practitioners and scholarship revolves around language; academics in particular are often used to speaking to each other and to focusing far more on data and methods than most advocates may want or need. This volume, therefore, presents original research but in an accessible format; to the extent that our authors’ comments draw on statistical techniques, an online appendix includes additional scholarly information but the main body of each chapter attempts to tell a clear story about some aspect of women’s political ambition, recruitment into political parties, training to run for office, or fundraising campaigns. The central question our authors address is how to get more women to run for public office.
The essays in Part I, “Who Runs?” assess who does and who does not seem interested in running (Bernhard et al.), with particular explorations into key demographic subgroups, including elite women (O’Connor and Yanus), Republican women (Och), and Black women (Scott, Dickinson, and Dow). Part II asks “Why Run?” as in, what are the “good reasons” that would generate women’s candidacies? Some potential answers arising from these chapters include the idea of making good public policy (Thomas and Wineinger), understanding electoral politics as civic service (Deen and Shelton), and thinking of elected office as a way to promote one’s activism (Mo and Anderson-Nilsson).

Part III, “Why Not Run?” flips the question, asking how larger contextual factors might make even those women who would otherwise make great candidates choose not to run. The answers offered through the original data and reasoning in this section include the idea of geographically strategic candidates (Ondercin), the role of party leaders in recruiting and promoting women as candidates (Gimenez Aldridge et al.; Brown and Dow), and the negative messages that can come from a prominent female candidate’s defeat (Bonneau and Kanthak).

Parts IV and V turn to the new and emerging strategies that nonprofit training and funding organizations are using, both here and more globally, to help more women run for and win office. Part IV, “How Nonprofits Help Women Run for Office,” focuses more on what these organizations are, what they do, and why, with chapters devoted to a broad overview of the organizational landscape (Kreitzer and Osborn), specific organizations and their effects (Sanbonmatsu and Dittmar; Schneider and Sweet-Cushman), and examining campaign training for women on a global scale (Piscopo).

Part V, “The Special Role of Money,” examines the special role of money and fundraising in campaigns, looking at how this affects women as candidates in particular (Swers and Thomsen), the role and impact of training and funding in a comparative case study (Johnson), and an innovative look at contributions to a diverse set of candidates within the United States (Kettler).

The essays in this book thus seek to move beyond description toward answering “how” and “why” questions, with the goal of increasing women’s candidacies for public office. In a time of declining public trust in government, not to mention increasing political polarization, gridlock, and animosity among public officials, we firmly believe that a key part of the solution will be giving more power to women.

NOTES
2. Proportional representation systems typically elect more than one candidate out of a district. In those systems, parties and not individuals tend to be more important in candidate entry.


6. The head of state is the chief executive position (like president) while the head of the government is often a prime minister. Some countries like France have both a president and a prime minister.


16. Shames, Out of the Running; Lawless and Fox, It Still Takes a Candidate.


19. Thanks to Patrick Meehan for some of the research, thinking, and writing on political ambition used in this section.


21. Jennifer L. Lawless and Richard Logan Fox, It Takes a Candidate: Why Women Don’t Run for Office (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Melody Crowder-

22. Shames, *Out of the Running*, for example, studies a sample of elite law and policy students, where 95 percent describe themselves as “ambitious” but only about 15 percent had seriously considered running for office.


29. Online appendix can be found through the Harvard Dataverse available at https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/BJTBIW.