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Not a 'Year of the Woman'...and 2036 Doesn't Look So Good Either

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INTRODUCTION



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At first glance, many political observers might be tempted to conclude that the 2014 midterm elections represented a banner year for women. Republican Joni Ernst's high-profile victory in her U.S. Senate race means that Iowa will finally send a woman to Congress. Democrat Gina Raimondo will be the first woman to occupy the governor's mansion in Rhode Island history. Mia Love (UT-4) became the first African-American female Republican to win a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. Thirty-year-old Republican Elise Stefanik (NY-21) became the youngest woman ever elected to Congress. And the total number of women serving in both chambers of Congress combined grew from 99 into the very low triple digits.

These victories undoubtedly represent important milestones for women's representation. But upon closer inspection of all the ballots that have been cast and votes counted, we think that the 2014 midterm elections hardly amounted to a "Year of the Woman." Overall, the election cycle was fairly uneventful for female candidates. The number of female governors held steady. After December's run-off election in Louisiana – which features a female candidate – it is likely that when the 114th Congress convenes, there will be the same number of women serving in the Senate as there are today. And globally, the United States entered the 2014 election season with more than 95 nations surpassing us in the percentage of women serving in the national legislature; post-Election Day, the same is true.

When only about one-third of U.S. Senate or House races feature a major-party female candidate, opportunities for substantial gains are slim.

To be fair, no one really expected that 2014 would be a great year for women in politics. Even though women and men win elections at equal rates, raise comparable amounts of money, and garner similar media coverage on the campaign trail, the key ingredients for a "Year of the Woman" were

missing.¹ After all, it was a bad year for Democrats, and roughly two-thirds of women run as Democrats. And it was not a redistricting year, so there were only a limited number of open seats, which present the best opportunities for electoral gains. But the real impediment to shifting the gender balance in elective office – regardless of the election cycle – is that we just did not have that many women running for office. When only about one-third of U.S. Senate or House races feature a major-party female candidate, opportunities for substantial gains are slim.

The relative dearth of female candidates is driven largely by the fact that women are systematically less likely than men even to consider throwing their hats into the ring. In 2001 and 2011, we conducted national surveys of male and female potential candidates – lawyers, business owners and executives, educators, and political activists, all of whom were well-situated to run for office. At both points in time, men were roughly 40 percent more likely than women ever to have thought about running for office. The gender gap emerged across political party, income level, race, profession, and region. And it persisted across all age groups, regardless of the fact that younger professionals (those under the age of 40) had come of age in a more gender egalitarian time. No matter how we sliced or diced the data, the results were the same: When it comes to political ambition, men tend to have it, and women don't.

When does this gender gap emerge? Is it smaller among the next generation of potential candidates? Based on our original survey of high school and college students, we demonstrate in the pages that follow that there is no reason to expect a “Year of the Woman” any time soon.

STUDYING YOUNG PEOPLE'S POLITICAL AMBITION

A general interest in running for office early in life often sets the stage for a political candidacy decades later. Most 45-year-olds don't wake up one day, look in the mirror, and decide to run for public office. The idea has usually been in their heads and percolating for quite some time. Maybe they were not sure when they would run, or whether the right opportunity would ever arise. Perhaps they did not know for certain what position they would seek. They probably had not fully considered the nuts and bolts of what a campaign might entail. But the seed of a potential candidacy was likely planted years ago, often dating back to childhood or young adulthood.

Indeed, young people's initial career goals tend to be excellent predictors of the jobs they eventually get. Studies that track high school and college students' professional aspirations with the careers they ultimately pursue reveal a strong correlation between specific job aspirations at age 16 with those attained by age 35 (e.g., Ashby and Schoon 2010; Brown et al. 2001; Schoon and Polek 2011). This finding holds for politics as well. We uncovered a similar pattern in our national surveys of adult potential candidates. Nearly half of those who had considered running for office reported that they first thought about it by the time they were in college (Fox and Lawless 2014a; Lawless and Fox 2010).

If we want to gauge the prospects for women's inclusion in electoral politics, therefore, then we need to examine political ambition among young people when they begin to assess their professional interests. And that's exactly what we did. From September 27 – October 16, 2012, we surveyed a national random sample of more than 4,000

¹ Despite a nagging conventional wisdom to the contrary, when women run for office, they perform just as well as men on Election Day (Dolan 2014; Fox 2014; Lawless and Pearson 2008), and experience comparable media coverage, both in volume and substance (Hayes and Lawless 2015).

high school (ages 13 to 17) and college (ages 18 to 25) students.² We asked about their general interest in running for office, as well as their attitudes toward specific elective positions. We asked them to rank a series of professions, including politics, as careers they might consider for the future. We asked for their gut reactions to the idea of running for office, along with more elaborate impressions of the endeavor. And we included in the survey dozens of questions that allowed us to determine the factors that might contribute to or sustain young people's political ambition. The results paint a picture that does not bode well for gender parity in U.S. politics. It doesn't matter how we asked the question; in every case, we uncovered a substantial gender gap in political ambition - a gap that is clearly present well before women and men enter the professions from which most candidates emerge.

ESTABLISHING THE GENDER GAP IN POLITICAL AMBITION AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

Perhaps the best place to begin is with our most general gauge of political ambition. We asked our respondents whether they ever thought that, someday, when they were older, they might want to run for any political office. Although the majority of young people had not envisioned entering politics, 41 percent did report that the idea of running for an elective position had at least "crossed their mind." (We should note, however, that only 11 percent had given it any kind of serious or regular thought.) Men and women were not equally likely to have had such musings, though. Overall, men were 80 percent more likely than women to have thought about running for office "many times." Women were roughly 20 percent more likely than men never to have considered it.

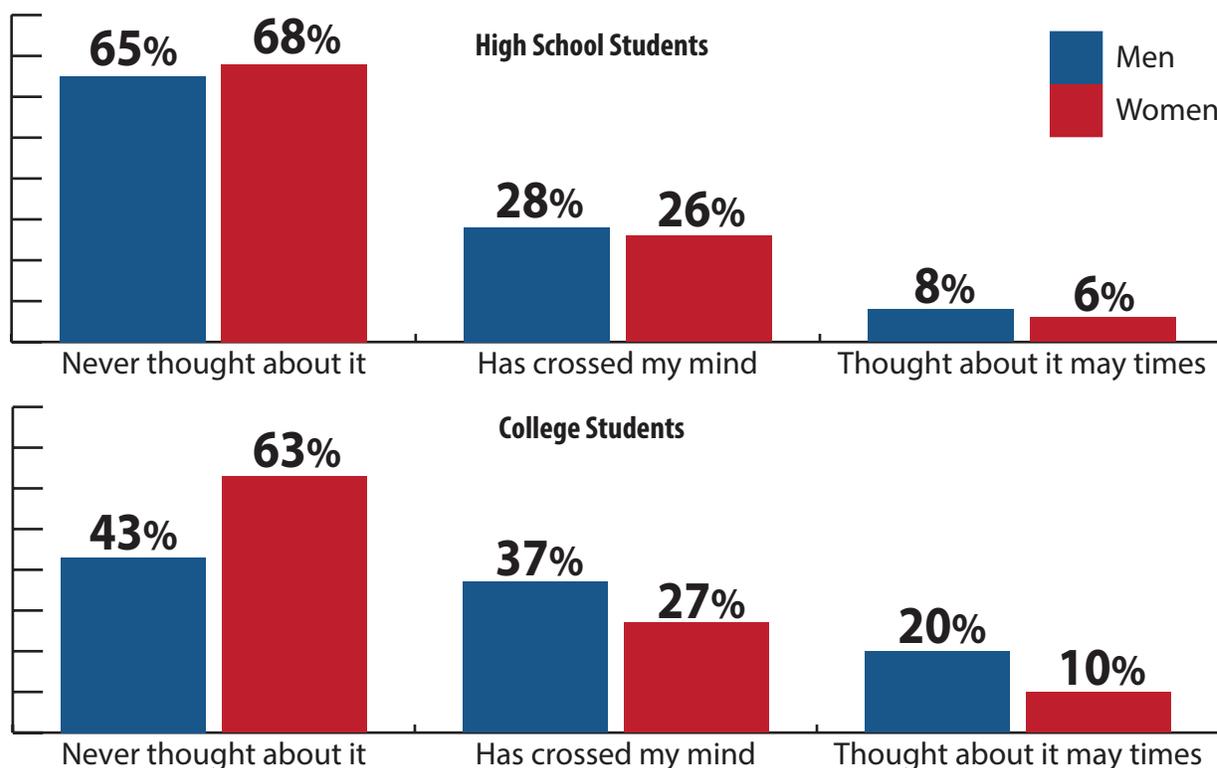
But the story for women's numeric representation is actually far worse than the aggregate statistics suggest. The data presented in Figure 1 reveal that the overall numbers obscure important differences between high school and college students. The top panel of the figure illustrates that in high school, boys (blue bars) and girls (red bars) are equally interested (or, perhaps more aptly put, uninterested) in running for office. Two-thirds of high school students had never thought about a career in politics. Girls, however, were just as likely as boys to be among the one-third of 13 - 17 year-olds who had considered running. When we turn to college students, political ambition between women and men diverges markedly. College men were twice as likely as college women to have thought about running for office "many times." Women were 50 percent more likely than men never to have considered it (see bottom panel of Figure 1).

The story is similar when we move beyond whether young people have ever considered running for office and ask them, even if they'd never thought about it, whether they are open to pursuing politics in the future. High school boys and girls were equally likely to report that they would "definitely" be interested in running for office at some point down the road. Again, the proportion interested in doing so was small, but there was no gender difference (4 percent of girls and 5 percent of boys). Meanwhile, college men were twice as likely as college women to express "definite" interest in a future candidacy (14 percent of men, compared to 7 percent of women). College women were about 50 percent more likely than college men to assert unequivocally that they would never run for office (36 percent of women, compared to 23 percent of men). In fact, the size of the gender gap in political ambition among college students is comparable to the size of the gap we uncovered in our studies of potential candidates (Lawless and Fox 2012; 2010; 2005).

² In carrying out this study, we contracted with GfK Custom Research LLC (formerly Knowledge Networks), which relies on a probability-based online non-volunteer access panel. Panel members were supplemented with a companion sample of respondents from an opt-in web panel. Important for our purposes, the male and female respondents were very similar in terms of race, religion, household income, region, and age. Accordingly, any gender gap in political ambition does not result from socio-demographic differences between male and female respondents. For a detailed description of the research design, as well as information about the demographics of the sample, see Fox and Lawless 2014a. This research was funded by the National Science Foundation (grant #115405).

Figure 1: The Gender Gap in Political Ambition

Have you ever thought that, someday, when you're older, you might run for political office



Notes: Data are based on responses from 903 high school boys and 915 high school girls, all of whom plan to attend college, and 1,020 college men and 1,095 college women. Bars represent the percentage of men and women who fall into each category. The gender gap is not statistically significant in any of the comparisons between high school boys and girls. The gender gap is statistically significant at $p < .05$ in all comparisons between college men and women.

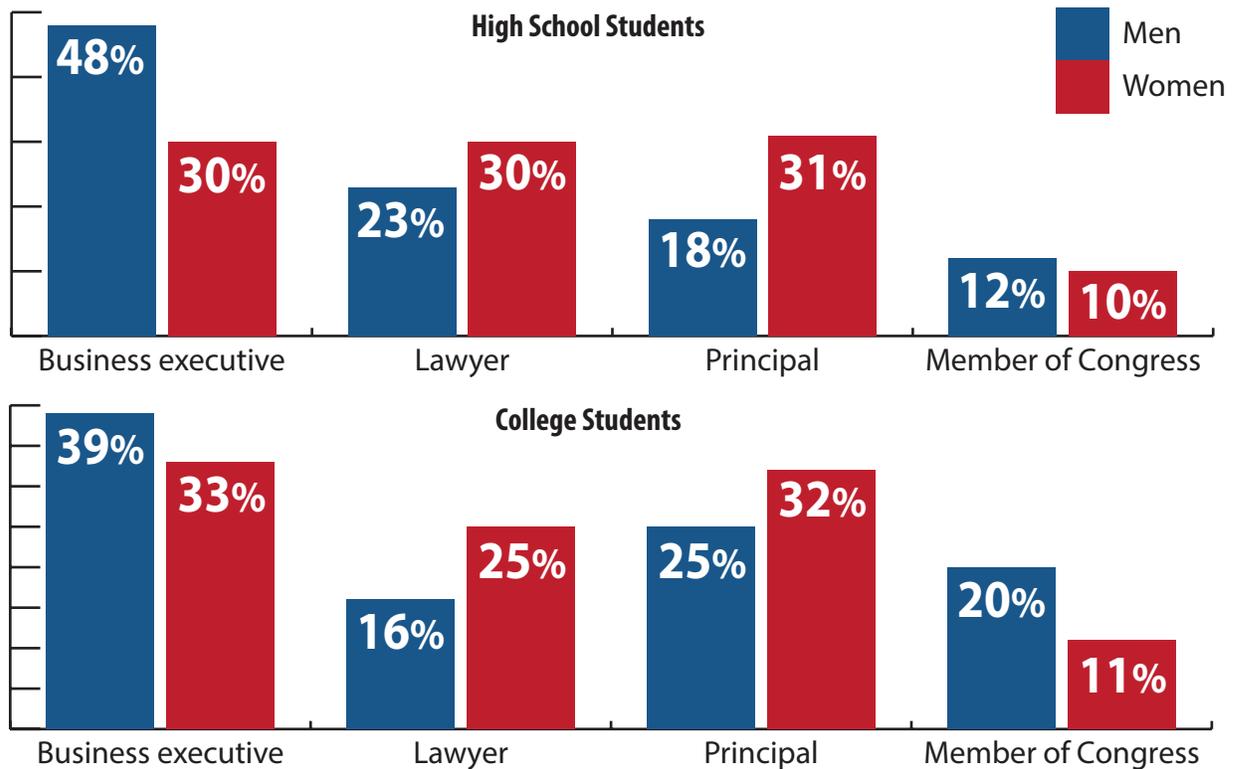
Reactions to general questions about interest in running for office are instructive. But a future candidacy can seem abstract and far off for young people. So it is important to juxtapose ambition for a political career with aspirations for other professional paths that might seem equally far off into the future. Accordingly, we presented young people with four career options - business executive, lawyer, school principal, and member of Congress - and asked which they would most and least like to be, assuming that each paid the same amount of money.

Overall, preferences for careers in the fields of business and education dwarfed interest in electoral politics. Nearly three times as many young people chose a career in business (37 percent), as opposed to a career in politics (13 percent), as their preference. Being a school principal appealed to twice as many as did serving in the U.S. House of Representatives or Senate. On the other hand, young people were significantly more likely to eschew a congressional career than any of the three alternatives. Nearly four out of ten ranked it dead last, making it the least desirable profession.

But here too, significant gender gaps emerged - gaps that were driven almost entirely by the college students. More specifically, high school boys and girls were equally (un)likely to choose a career as a member of Congress as their top choice (see top panel of Figure 2). Yet college men were almost twice as likely as college women to

Figure 2: A Congressional Career

If the following jobs paid the same amount of money, which would you most like to be?



Notes: Data are based on responses from 885 high school boys and 897 high school girls, all of whom plan to attend college, and 1,005 college men and 1,075 college women. Bars represent the percentage of men and women who fall into each category. The gender gap for Member of Congress is not statistically significant among high school students, but is significant at $p < .05$ among college students.

select a congressional career as their preferred option (see bottom panel of Figure 2).³

On a variety of measures, our national survey results tell a straightforward and consistent story. High school boys and girls report generally comparable levels of political ambition. By the time they are in college, though, young women and men are not equally likely to consider

running for office a desirable future endeavor. As Figures 1 and 2 make clear, this is not because women's political ambition drops. It doesn't. It remains steady over the course of their adolescence and young adulthood. But men's ambition to enter politics increases substantially when they get to college.⁴

By the time they are in college, though, young women and men are not equally likely to consider running for office as a desirable future endeavor.

³ In a second scenario, we presented respondents with four somewhat lower echelon career options - business owner, teacher, mayor of a city or town, and salesperson - and asked them which they would most like to be, assuming that each paid the same amount of money. Although both women and men ranked owning a business and being a teacher as more desirable than serving as a mayor, college men were almost two-thirds more likely than women to select mayor as their preferred job. When we asked respondents to indicate which of the four positions they would least like to hold, a substantial gender gap emerged as well; 43 percent of college women, compared to 31 percent of college men, reported that mayor was their least preferred profession. We uncovered no such gender differences among the high school students.

⁴ There is little variation in the size of the gender gap during the high school years (for ages 13 - 17). This also seems to be the case among the college years. Although there are some fluctuations in the size of the gap between the ages of 18 and 25, for six of the eight ages within the college sub-sample, the gender gap is at least 22 percentage points. And although it is smaller for 19 and 21 year olds, there is no systematic pattern to account for these differences. See Fox and Lawless 2014a for an elaboration of these findings.

EXPLAINING THE INCREASING GENDER GAP IN AMBITION BETWEEN HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGE

Without data that tracks young people as they graduate from high school and enter college, we are limited in what we can say about the reason that the gender gap is so much larger among college than high school students. But in our previous work, we identified some of the strongest predictors of political ambition among young people: immersion in politics, competitive experiences, and self-confidence (Fox and Lawless 2014a). When we compare high school and college students in these three areas, we find large gender differences among the college students that just don't emerge within the high school sample.

Table 1: Gender Differences in Politically-Relevant Experiences among High School and College Students

	High School Boys	High School Girls	College Men	College Women
Immersion in Politics				
Discusses politics at school at least weekly	39%	37%	35%*	30%
Discusses politics with friends at least weekly	13	10	27**	20
Visits political websites every day	5	5	17*	9
Competitive Experiences				
Ran for student government	17	20	26	25
Never played a sport	40**	49	14**	29
"Very competitive" when playing sports	31*	24	38**	23
Self-Confidence				
Will not be qualified to run for office in future	29	34	31**	51
Will be qualified to run for office in future	14	15	23**	11
N	903	915	1,020	1,097

Notes: Number of cases varies slightly, as some respondents omitted answers to some questions. Levels of significance: ** p < .01; * p < .05.

Consider the eight comparisons presented in Table 1. Among high school students, we uncovered only two significant gender differences, and both relate to competition: high school girls were significantly less likely than boys ever to have played a sport or to consider themselves "very competitive" when they did. While we do not want to minimize these differences, it is important to assess them relative to those we find among the college sample. On seven of the eight indicators displayed in Table 1, college women were significantly less likely than college men to benefit from the experiences and characteristics that spur and reinforce political ambition. Compared to women, men in college were more likely to discuss politics regularly in their classes and with their friends. They were almost twice as likely as college women to visit political websites on a regular basis. And they were two-thirds more likely than women to consider themselves competitive when playing sports (the magnitude of this gender gap, therefore, is roughly twice the size as it is in high school).

Why are these gender differences so pronounced among college students? The explanation likely lies, at least in part, in the personal and academic freedom that college students enjoy compared to their high school counterparts. A majority of college students move out of their parents' homes to attend college, and even when they don't, they often have more independence. Further, whereas high school curricula generally offer little choice, college provides students with a wide array of academic options and electives, not to mention an expanded menu of extracurricular activities. Essentially, when students get to college and "the shackles come off," young women and men have much greater control over how they spend their time and what interests they pursue.

When this happens, women and men's interests diverge. Recent analyses of gender differences in the selection of college majors reveal that women are more likely than men to major in psychology and sociology, whereas men are more likely to major in business, engineering, and science (Dickson 2010). In fact, among our college student sample, male respondents were 10 percent more likely than female respondents to have taken at least one political science or government class, and they were almost twice as likely to join either the College Democrats or College Republicans (gender differences significant at $p < .05$).

Importantly, the choices women and men make about what interests and opportunities to pursue occur on college campuses that are still rife with dynamics that can reinforce traditional gender role orientations. Researchers have found that the transition to university life diminishes women's self-concept more than it does men's; the move from the small pond of high school to the larger pond of college may reduce young women's self-assessments of what they can achieve (Jackson 2003). The prospects of parenthood also play a larger role in college women's self-concepts than men's (Devos et al. 2008). In addition, studies in the fields of education, sociology, and psychology highlight the gendered realities of alcohol consumption, date rape, sexual harassment, and Greek life at American universities, all of which can work to depress women's autonomy (e.g., Armstrong, Hamilton, and Sweeney 2006; Gmelch 1998; Stuber, Klugman, and Daniel 2011). There is little doubt that these dynamics reinforce different roles for women and men in college and play a fundamental role in the "choices" women and men make. They might also explain why women in college are so much more likely than men (and their high school selves!) to doubt that they will be "qualified" to run for office in the future (see also Fox and Lawless 2011).

HOW WILL WE EVER SEE A "YEAR OF THE WOMAN?"

When a college woman possesses the ingredients that contribute to political ambition, she is just as likely as her male counterpart to articulate interest in running for office (see Fox and Lawless 2014b). Female college respondents, however, are significantly less likely than men to have these backgrounds. Thus, if we want to close the gender gap in political ambition, then organizational efforts to engage young women politically during the college years seem like the most practical and efficient way to proceed. Because female college students are less likely than men to take political science classes, discuss politics with their friends, and seek out political information through the media, there are substantial opportunities for women's organizations – on college campuses and nationally – to make a difference.

Organizations that already exist and have a well-established infrastructure are particularly well-suited to expand their reach. Consider IGNITE, which runs political and civic education and training programs in high schools in California and Texas. The organization identifies 15 high school girls at participating schools and offers an after-school training program for three hours each week throughout the school year. Annually, hundreds of participants learn about government, issues they consider personally relevant, and the importance of women in politics. At

the college level, IGNITE’s programming is quite limited; they offer one 10-hour training session on participating campuses. Or look at Running Start. The organization runs a flagship Young Women’s Leadership Program, which is a six-day retreat for 50 high school girls from across the country. The weeklong foray into politics includes workshops on public speaking, networking, fundraising, media training, and issue advocacy. Here too, though, programming beyond the high school level is far less developed. The organization offers one annual day-long Young Women’s Political Summit (for women under the age of 35), which touches on many of the same topics.

But only with initiatives directed at college women can the gender gap close. It is during the college years, after all, when the gender gap in political ambition skyrockets.

Programs like these are vital for ensuring that high school girls are just as politically interested as high school boys. But only with initiatives directed at college women can the gender gap close. It is during the college years, after all, when the gender gap in political ambition skyrockets. High-profile, bipartisan women’s advocacy groups, or even the Democratic and Republican Parties themselves, would be well-served to launch national initiatives on college campuses. These organizations

are well-positioned to provide college women with continued exposure to female candidates and elected officials. Their sustained efforts would show young women how running for office can bring about societal change. And the programs would help combat women’s tendency to doubt their abilities to enter politics. The organizations would win, too. By casting a wider net, all of these groups would expand their own pools of potential female candidates down the road.

We understand that raising money for programs and initiatives like these is difficult. And we recognize that it is often easier to corral high school students than college students into particular groups and activities. But unless there is a jolt to the political system, or a systematic and sustained effort to encourage college women to enter the political arena, the conclusion after every election for the foreseeable future will be the same as it was in 2014: It was not a “Year of the Woman.”

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