

Women and Political Ambition: The Wisconsin Local Government Perspective

Jenny Erickson, Associate Professor Department of Community Resource Development, Sauk County
Dan Hill, Professor Department of Community Resource Development, Local Government Center
Victoria Solomon, Assistant Professor Department of Community Resource Development, Green County

ABSTRACT

Multiple studies have documented the disproportionately low number of women holding state and federal elective offices. According to the Wisconsin Women's Council, this is also true of local elective offices in Wisconsin. Studies have shown that women who run for office win elections at equal rates as men. So, why don't women run? The answer is a combination of real and perceived barriers.

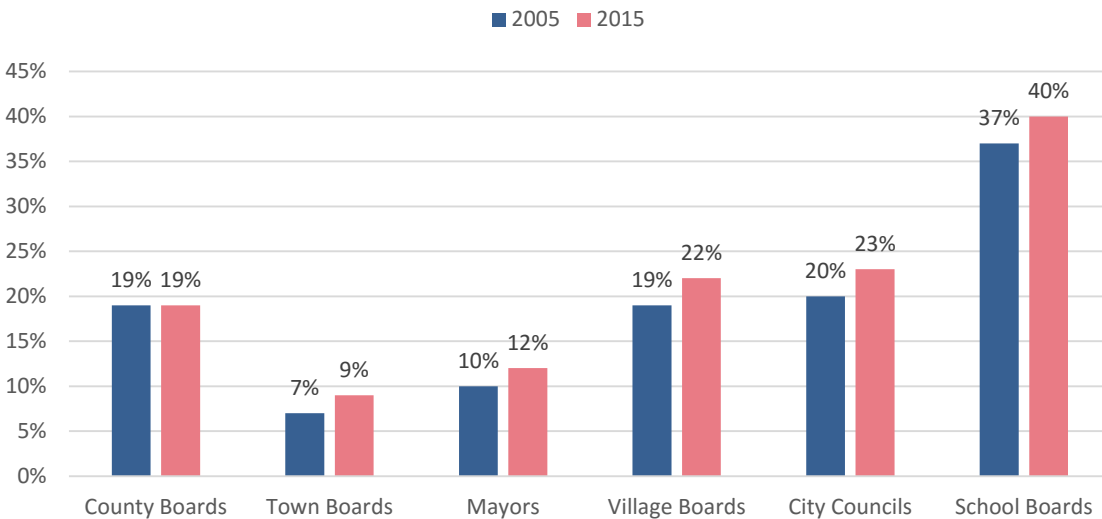
The barriers to women running for office have been studied at the state and national level. However, this research is the first attempt to learn more about the local level. It is based on two surveys we conducted in Wisconsin. The findings reveal that in addition to systemic barriers, such as time away from work and family, many women indicated doubts regarding their ability to successfully campaign for and serve on a local governing body. Additionally, the study explores perceptions around the skills needed for success in a campaign and elected office. Finally, it shows that potential women candidates may be more qualified than they realize.

BACKGROUND STATEMENT

"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 studies have well documented the disproportionately low number of women holding state and federal elective offices. In its 2017 publication, the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University reports that women make up less than a quarter of state legislators nationwide, with every individual state legislature having less than 50% women. This inequity is also true of local elective offices in Wisconsin (Wisconsin Women's Council, 2015). Figure A compares the percentage of women in local elected offices in Wisconsin in 2005 and 2015.

Figure A: Percentage of Women Holding Office in 2005 and 2015



As a result of their roles with University of Wisconsin-Extension the authors have noted that although there are not as many women in local government, they are well represented on local non-profit boards and other community organizations. Indeed, other studies have shown that women are significantly more likely than men to participate in community service (Smith, 2005).

A number of studies have also shown that when women decide to run they are just as likely to win elections as their male counterparts (Lawless and Fox, 2010). So what accounts for the relative lack of women in office? Recent research conducted at the state and federal levels indicates that women are less likely than men to run for office (Dittmar, 2015; Carroll & Sanbonmatsu, 2013). According to Fox (2003, p. 4), although women vote at the same rate as men and are equally interested in policy development, they “are significantly less likely than men to have ever considered running for office.” Their lack of “interest in seeking office, then, stands out as the largest gender difference in any area of political participation” (Fox, 2003, p. 4). We investigated the barriers to women running for local elected 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 barriers to women holding public office holds the potential for improving democracy in Wisconsin by including heretofore unheard voices in the deliberative governance process. In their book, Lawless and Fox (2010) confirm that women who hold elected office are more likely to advocate for issues that affect families and women than their male counterparts. In a democracy, it is critical that these concerns be raised and that these voices be heard.

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT/METHODOLOGY

A number of studies have documented the barriers to women running for state and national office, however similar research had not been conducted at the local level (county, municipal, or town governments). The objective of this research was to determine the barriers to women running for local elected office. After conducting a robust literature review, the authors shared their proposed research methodology and sought feedback from leadership within the Wisconsin Counties Association, the Wisconsin League of Municipalities and the Wisconsin Towns Association. The authors also consulted with researchers at the Eagleton Institute of Politics, Center for Women and Politics at Rutgers University and at the Carrie Chapman Catt Center for Women and Politics at Iowa State University. These key informants expressed excitement about the implication of this new research and encouraged us to proceed.

Development of Surveys

The research is based on 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. The surveys were practically identical and adapted from surveys included in Lawless and Fox (2010). One survey was sent to current county board supervisors and one survey was sent to potential local elected officials (PLEO). 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. Potential local elected officials 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.

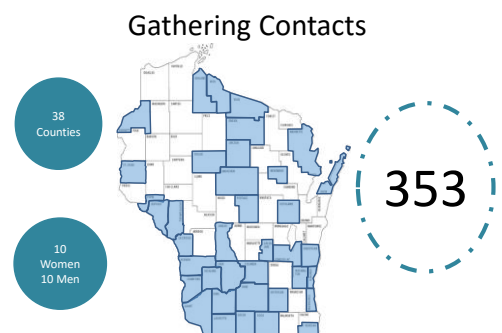
Contacting Current County Board Supervisors

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% response rate).

Soliciting Contact Information for Potential Local Elected Officials

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.

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 (68% return rate).



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

RESULTS and FINDINGS

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 1 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 1.

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.

Table 1. Percent of survey respondents that indicated the following items were barriers or major barriers to running for or serving in local elected office.

<i>Top 10 Barriers for PLEOs</i>	<i>Percent of PLEOs that indicated the item was either a barrier or a major barrier</i>	<i>Percent of current supervisors that indicated the item was either a barrier or a major barrier</i>
<i>Lack interest or willingness to ask for campaign funds</i>	58%	14%
<i>Time away from family or home responsibilities</i>	57%	11%
<i>Time away from other activities I enjoy</i>	53%	12%
<i>Time away from work responsibilities</i>	51%	14%
<i>I lack interest/willingness to meet voters door-to-door</i>	41%	9%
<i>Negative political atmosphere in local government</i>	38%	9%
<i>Concern about the impact on my finances</i>	35%	6%
<i>Spouse, partner or family being subjected to criticism from constituents</i>	29%	6%
<i>I have concerns about reprisals or criticism</i>	26%	5%
<i>I perceive a lack of support for my candidacy</i>	25%	1%

Barriers for Men and Women Potential Local Elected Officials

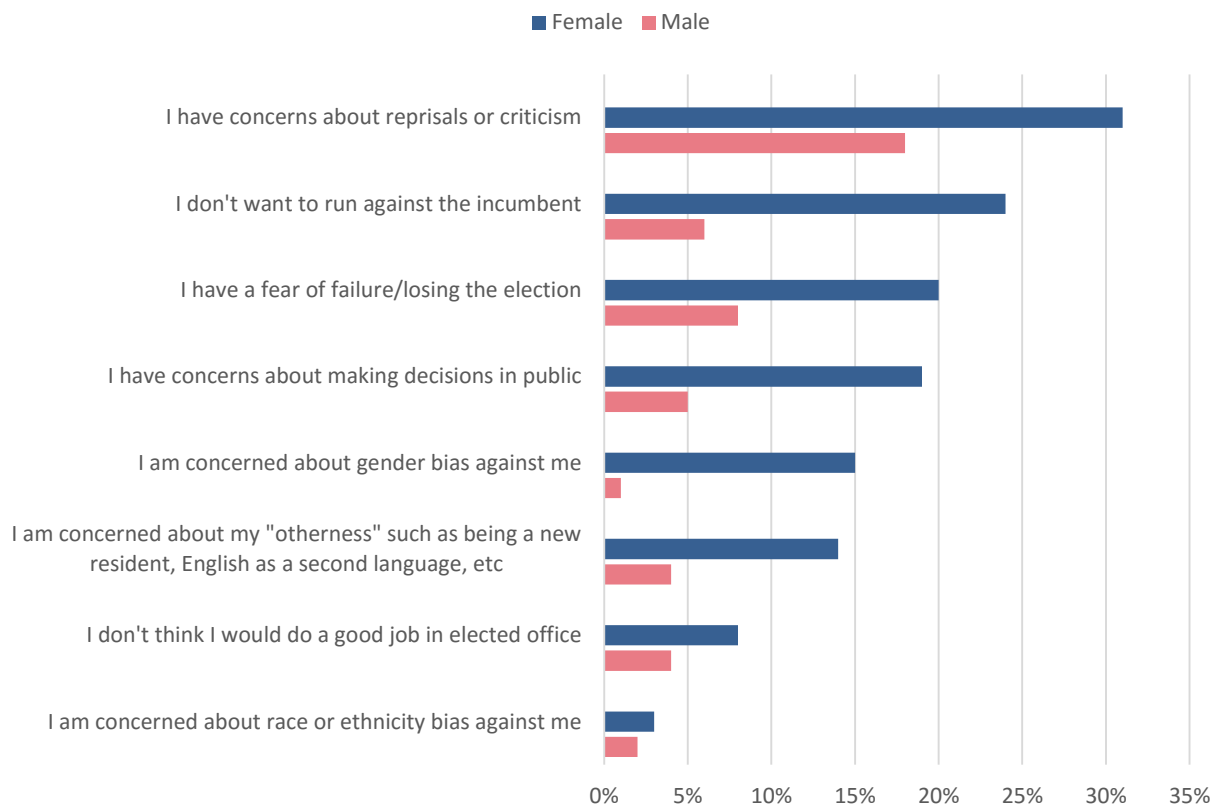
The responses from the male and female PLEO’s surveys were compared to determine if specific barriers for females existed. Within the top ten most identified barriers there were no statistically significant differences in the response rates between men and women except for the barrier related to concerns 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 any one of these barriers

may not be compelling, but collectively they seem to create a considerable hurdle for women to overcome.

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 eight 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 (See Figure 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.

Figure B: Barriers with Statistically Significant* Differences Between Male and Female Potential Local Elected Officials



* A chi-square test indicates that the relationship between gender and each of these barriers is statistically significant (p<.06).

What is a "Well-Qualified" Candidate for Local Elected Office?

The supervisors and PLEOs 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 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 soliciting 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 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% of the male PLEOs and 60% of the female PLEOs said they were either qualified or very qualified.

In a recent Harvard Business Review article about men and women choosing not to apply for jobs, Mohr (2014, p. 3) stated “What held them [women] back from applying was not a mistaken perception about themselves, but a mistaken perception about the hiring process.” Based on our research, we think that women may have a similar misconception about the *processes* of running a campaign and holding local office. Extension educators may be able to exploit this misconception by working with local leaders to engage women in different ways. Specifically, they can help women recognize that on the job learning is acceptable and that there is no need for them to “check all the boxes” before adding their names to the ballot.

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 formidable 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.

* t-test ($p < .05$)

In addition to systemic barriers, such as time away from family and time away from other activities, many women displayed 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. Because women likely think about running for office differently than men, recruitment efforts that appeal to men may not work for women. Recruitment strategies that target, perhaps implicitly, self-starters, through mass advertisements and mailings, will likely yield a field of mostly male candidates, as it always has. It may be less about the recruitment and more about how women are approached (Crowder-Meyer, 2013).

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 or an upcoming election. 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.

IMPLICATIONS TO CES/UWEX

Armed with improved understanding of the kinds of barriers that women perceive to successfully seeking local public office, Extension professionals can more effectively provide training and education to community leaders seeking to increase the pool of qualified candidates for local boards and councils. For example, Extension community leadership programs could offer a session on how to run for office and include information from this research. Specifically, these sessions might address: building support networks; fundraising within the local political context; an assessment of the local political culture and levels of civility; testimonials from successful female candidates; balancing work, family, and volunteer activities; and, the minimum skills needed to perform successfully in a local office.

Extension educators have a history of developing programs around how to run for office. Future programs might focus on the realities of campaigning for and serving in local offices, with special attention on ways to overcome the perceived barriers identified by women.

Extension educators might consider teaching local elected officials, community leaders, and candidate recruiters to consider women specifically in their recruitment efforts. The findings from our research could be used to develop talking points to reach out more effectively to qualified female candidates. For example, a number of the barriers cited by women appear to be based on misconceptions. The need to raise significant campaign funds, for instance, is non-existent in many local elections; disavowing female candidates of this perception would eliminate this barrier.

Recruiting qualified women to run for office may take more than simply letting women know that there is a vacancy or an upcoming election. Women candidates may also feel the need to “check every box” on the imaginary list of qualifications for a local office before they believe they are fit to run. To get new women to run, even people who are already viewed as having leadership potential, will likely require explicit, targeted efforts (Fox & Lawless, 2010). With many resources available through the statewide local government associations and UW-Extension, ample opportunities exist to learn on the job while still having an impact on the local board.

AREAS OF POTENTIAL ADDITIONAL STUDY AND RESEARCH

1. This research’s base of analysis was county board members. Similar research could be conducted at the town, village, city, and school board levels.
2. This research focused on barriers. Further research could focus on what has worked for those women who decided to run and were successful.
3. What variables within the structure of county government i.e. committee structure, administrative roles, time of meetings, etc. affect whether women choose to run?
4. What efforts have been taken at the local level to increase the diversity of candidates for local office? To what extent have these efforts resulted in increasing diversity on local boards and councils? What processes and strategies are currently in place to recruit candidates? Can these processes be tweaked to encourage reaching out to broader audiences?
5. Adapt this research to determine the barriers to running for local elected office for other underrepresented groups.

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