

# *Political Elites and Sex Differences in Political Ambition: A Reconsideration*

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This study examines the political ambitions of representative national samples of women and men holding comparable elective offices in 1981. In contrast to the findings of previous research on sex differences in political ambition, most of which focused on party activists, women are found to be as ambitious for public officeholding as their male counterparts. Two possible explanations for the differences in results between this and earlier studies are tested. The first is that the findings of earlier studies were misleading because they failed to control for officeholding status, thereby masking underlying similarities in the ambitions of women and men who had similar levels of officeholding experience. The second is that the ambitions of political women, relative to those of political men, increased over time. Because neither of these explanations receives empirical support, differential selection into party activist and public officeholding elites is suggested as the most likely reason for the difference in findings. The implications of the findings for the numerical representation of women in national and major statewide offices are discussed.

**T**he numbers of women holding local, county, and state legislative offices have increased significantly in recent years. The proportion of women among state legislators increased from 4% in 1969 to 15% in 1985. The

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## NOTES

The data utilized in this paper were made available in part by the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research. The data for *The 1972 Convention Delegate Study: Women in Politics* were originally collected by Warren E. Miller and Elizabeth Douvan of the University of Michigan, William J. Crotty of Northwestern University, and Jeane Kirkpatrick of Georgetown University under grants from the Russell Sage Foundation and the Twentieth Century Fund. Principal investigators for the 1972, 1976, and 1980 Convention Delegate Study are Warren E. Miller, M. Kent Jennings, and Barbarah Farah. I would like to thank them for permission to present the data in table 5 prior to public release of the data. The 1980 study was sponsored by the Russell Sage Foundation. Neither the original collectors of the data nor the Consortium bear any responsibility for the analyses or interpretations presented here. I also would like to thank Janet Vavra, Technical Director of Member Services for ICPSR, for providing some requested analyses with restricted variables that were examined for this paper although not presented. Other data utilized in this paper were made available by the Center for the American Woman and Politics of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University.

proportion of mayors and local council members who were women more than doubled from 4% to 10% in the years between 1975 and 1981. The proportion of women among county commissioners grew from 3% in 1975 to 8% in 1983 (Center for the American Woman and Politics, 1985). However, increases in the numbers and proportions of women among local, county, and state legislative officeholders have not been paralleled by increases among congressional and major statewide officeholders. In 1985 women hold twenty-four, or 4.5%, of the 535 seats in Congress; this is only four more seats than they held in 1961-62. Only two women currently serve as governors of states (Center for the American Woman and Politics, 1985).

If women among political elites are less ambitious for public officeholding than their male counterparts, then the paucity of women at higher levels of office despite increases at lower levels might well be largely a function of an "ambition gap" among women and men at lower levels of office. After all, many congressional and statewide officeholders have traditionally come from the ranks of state legislative, county, and local officials (Schlesinger, 1966).

A substantial body of research on sex differences in ambition would seem to point to the conclusion that the discrepancy between the numbers of women at higher and lower levels of office is in large part a product of the constrained aspirations of political women relative to those of political men. Study after study has found women in political elites to be considerably less ambitious for public officeholding than their male counterparts (Jennings and Thomas, 1968; Constantini and Craik, 1972; Kirkpatrick, 1976; Farah, 1976; Hoag and Farah, 1975; Diamond, 1977; Fowlkes, Perkins, and Rinehart, 1979; Farah and Sapiro, 1980; Jennings and Farah, 1981; Constantini and Bell, 1984).

However, most previous studies have focused on the political ambitions of delegates to national party conventions or other party activists.<sup>1</sup> The ambitions of representative national samples of male and female public officeholders have not been examined. Moreover, despite the fact that much larger proportions of male than female party activists had held public office (see, for example, Kirkpatrick, 1976, pp. 428-429; Jennings and Thomas, 1968, p. 491; Constantini and Craik, 1972, p. 227), previous analyses of sex differences in ambition have not controlled for officeholding status. Consequently, most findings of sex differences in ambition have been based on a comparison of the ambitions of a group of women, few of whom had held office, with a group of men, many of whom had held office. Yet ambition theory clearly points to current political position as a

<sup>1</sup> An important exception here is Diamond (1977), who studied state legislators in Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont.

variable that is likely to influence officeholding aspirations (Schlesinger, 1966, p. 9; Prewitt and Nowlin, 1969, p. 309).

This study examines the political ambitions of representative national samples of women and men holding comparable elective offices in 1981. Because the findings are strikingly different from those of the earlier party activist studies, two possible explanations for the differences in results are tested. The first is that the findings of earlier studies were misleading; the failure of these studies to control for a critical variable, officeholding status, may have masked underlying similarities in the ambitions of women and men who had similar levels of officeholding experience. The second possible explanation is that change has occurred over time; perhaps an actual increase in the political ambitions of political women, relative to those of political men, accounts for discrepancy between the earlier delegate study findings and 1981 public officeholder findings.

#### DESCRIPTION OF DATA SETS

The first of three data sets used in this study is a 1981 survey of women holding elective office conducted by the Center for the American Woman and Politics (CAWP), a unit of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University. State legislators were surveyed by mail; county commissioners, local council members, and mayors were surveyed by phone.

Mail questionnaires were sent to the entire population of 137 women state senators and 769 women state representatives in 1981. A comparison sample of male state senators was drawn by systematically sampling male state senators within each state until the number of male senators selected equalled the number of female state senators serving in that state. The same procedure was followed in selecting a comparison sample of male state representatives except that the number of male representatives selected was only one-half the number of female representatives. The response rates were 53.3% for female state senators, 50.0% for male state senators, 58.1% for female state representatives, and 52.6% for male state representatives.

Of the 1,008 women serving on county governing boards in 1980, CAWP drew a systematic sample of 100 cases with 75 replacement cases. CAWP then randomly selected one man from each board on which a woman in the sample was serving. CAWP contacted 128 of these pairs of county commissioners before completing interviews with 101, for a response rate of 78.9%.

CAWP followed the same procedures for selecting samples of members of local governing boards. CAWP drew a systematic sample of 150 cases with 150 replacement cases from a list of all 12,136 women serving on local councils. CAWP then randomly selected one man from each council on

TABLE 1  
SEX DIFFERENCES IN PUBLIC OFFICEHOLDING AMBITION FOR 1981 ELECTIVE OFFICEHOLDERS

	STATE SENATE		STATE HOUSE		COUNTY COMMISSION		MAYORALTY		LOCAL COUNCIL	
	Men %	Women %	Men %	Women %	Men %	Women %	Men %	Women %	Men %	Women %
Probably or definitely will seek another term in current office <sup>e</sup>	79.4 N = (68)	69.4 (72)	74.5 (200)	81.6 (446)	54.5 (101)	60.4 (101)	41.4 (99)	41.4 (99)	44.3 (149)	43.9 (148)
		tau <sub>c</sub> = .01		tau <sub>c</sub> = -.12		tau <sub>c</sub> = -.01		tau <sub>c</sub> = -.03		tau <sub>c</sub> = .03
Highest level of office desired <sup>b</sup>										
High	35.7	39.7	33.8	35.2	11.7	9.9	9.8	9.9	5.2	6.8
Moderate	7.1	3.2	10.8	15.2	14.9	19.8	15.2	17.6	16.3	13.6
Low	—	1.6	—	.6	4.3	3.7	7.6	5.5	9.6	6.8
No other office desired	57.1 N = (56)	55.6 (63)	55.4 (157)	49.0 (335)	69.1 (94)	66.7 (81)	67.4 (92)	67.0 (91)	68.9 (135)	72.7 (132)
		tau <sub>c</sub> = -.03		tau <sub>c</sub> = -.04		tau <sub>c</sub> = -.02		tau <sub>c</sub> = -.01		tau <sub>c</sub> = .03

<sup>a</sup> Respondents were asked whether they planned to run again for the office currently held. Possible responses were definitely, probably, don't know, probably not, and definitely not.

<sup>b</sup> This is a composite measure based on responses to two questions. First, respondents were asked: "If you had the necessary political support and the right opportunities, are there other elective or appointive political offices at any level of government that you would eventually like to hold?" Those who answered "yes" were then asked: "What's the highest office you would like to hold in the future?" Responses to this question were grouped into the categories used by Jeane Kirkpatrick in *The New Presidential Elite*, p. 415. See table 3, note a for a description of the offices included in each category.

which a woman in the sample was serving. CAWP contacted 202 pairs of local council members before completing interviews with 151 pairs, for a response rate of 74.8%.

To select samples of mayors, CAWP first drew a systematic sample of 100 cases with 100 replacement cases from a list of all 1,184 female mayors. CAWP contacted 161 of these women before completing interviews with 100, for a response rate of 62.1%. A comparison sample of men was selected by randomly selecting male mayors within each state until the number from that state equalled the number of female mayors in the women's sample from that state. CAWP completed interviews with 100 of the 129 male mayors contacted, for a response rate of 77.5%.<sup>2</sup>

The second data set used in this study is the *1972 Convention Delegate Study: Women in Politics*, conducted by Warren E. Miller, Elizabeth Donovan, William Crotty, and Jeane Kirkpatrick. Although data were collected through both mail questionnaires and personal interviews, the data presented in this paper are drawn only from the mail questionnaires. The overall response rate for the mail questionnaire, distributed to all delegates to both major parties' conventions, was 58%.

Finally, data are presented from the *1972, 1976, and 1980 Convention Delegate Study* conducted by Warren E. Miller, M. Kent Jennings, and Barbara Farah. The response rate for delegates to the 1980 conventions was 52%. Respondents to the 1972 Convention Delegate Study also were resurveyed as part of this study; the response rate for those who had originally been included in the mail questionnaire portion of the 1972 study was 44%.

#### AMBITIONS OF 1981 ELECTIVE OFFICEHOLDERS

Contrary to the findings of past research examining the ambitions of delegates to national party conventions, women and men serving in comparable elective offices in 1981 were very similar in their political ambitions (table 1). Across most levels of office, women and men were about equally as likely to want another term in the office in which they were serving in 1981, to aspire to some other elective or appointive position, and to desire ultimately to serve in a national or state gubernatorial office, thereby reflecting a "high" level of aspiration.

In the few cases where there were small (but statistically insignificant) differences between women and men, the differences generally pointed in the direction of greater ambition among women. Women state legislators were slightly more likely than their male counterparts to desire both

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<sup>2</sup> See Carroll and Strimling (1983) for a more complete description of the methodology employed in the 1981 elective officeholder study.

TABLE 2  
REGRESSION OF AMBITION ON SEX AND OTHER VARIABLES  
FOR ELECTIVE OFFICEHOLDERS, 1981

	UNSTANDARDIZED REGRESSION COEFFICIENT (B)	STANDARDIZED REGRESSION COEFFICIENT (BETA)	STANDARD ERROR OF B
Age	-.04*	-.33	-.004
Marital Status <sup>a</sup>	.15	.05	.09
Party <sup>b</sup>	-.06	-.02	.07
Officeholding Status <sup>c</sup>	.37*	.15	.07
Sex <sup>d</sup>	.06	.02	.07
Education <sup>e</sup>	.13*	.11	.03
Political Ideology <sup>f</sup>	.19*	.14	.04
Age of Youngest Child <sup>g</sup>	.05	.04	.04
		R <sup>2</sup> = .21	
		N = 1146	

\*Statistically significant at .05 level.

Note: The dependent variable consists of the measure described in table 1, note b.

<sup>a</sup> 0 = Married, 1 = Unmarried.

<sup>b</sup> 0 = Republican, 1 = Democrat.

<sup>c</sup> 0 = County or local officeholder, 1 = State Legislator.

<sup>d</sup> 0 = Female, 1 = Male.

<sup>e</sup> Ordinal scale with 5 categories from least to most educated.

<sup>f</sup> Ordinal scale with 5 categories from most conservative to most liberal.

<sup>g</sup> 0 = 6 years old or younger, 1 = 7 to 12 years old, 2 = 13 to 18 years old, 3 = No children or youngest child older than 18.

another term in the state house and another office. Similarly, female county commissioners slightly more often than male county commissioners expressed a desire to seek another term on county governing boards. The major exception to this pattern of women's ambitions equaling or exceeding those of men occurred among state senators. Women state senators were somewhat less likely overall than their counterparts to express interest in another term in the state senate; however, women in the state senate nevertheless were more likely than men to say they definitely (rather than probably) desired another term (34.7% to 29.4%).

A regression of ambition on sex and several other variables found in previous research to be related to ambition<sup>3</sup> does not alter the conclusion

<sup>3</sup> For research finding relationships between ambition and one or more of the variables of age, party, education, age of youngest child, marital status, and political ideology, see, for example, Schlesinger (1966), Farah (1976), Prewitt and Nowlin (1969), Dutton (1975), Fishel (1973), Soule (1969), Farah and Sapiro (1980), Stone (1980), and Johnson and Carroll (1978).

TABLE 3  
SEX DIFFERENCES IN PUBLIC OFFICEHOLDING AMBITION FOR OFFICEHOLDERS  
AND NON-OFFICEHOLDERS AMONG 1972 CONVENTION DELEGATES

HIGHEST LEVEL OF OFFICE DESIRED <sup>a</sup>	HOLDS OR HAS HELD PUBLIC OFFICE		NEVER HELD PUBLIC OFFICE	
	MEN %	WOMEN %	MEN %	WOMEN %
High	68.2	33.7	67.3	34.5
Moderate	15.6	33.2	9.2	16.6
Low	4.0	11.4	2.6	5.9
None	12.3	21.8	20.9	43.0
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N =	(628)	(193)	(900)	(863)
	tau <sub>c</sub> = .24		tau <sub>c</sub> = .33	

<sup>a</sup>The categories here are the same as those used by Jeane Kirkpatrick in *The New Presidential Elite* (see p. 415). The question asked: "Thinking of all the possible offices and positions in politics, from local to national—which of the following would you most like to be if you could have your personal choice? Consider public office."

"High" ambition included president, vice-president, U.S. senator, congressperson, cabinet member, ambassador, federal judge, federal prosecutor, "other" national office, or state governor.

"Moderate" ambition included lieutenant governor, state senator, state representative, state judge, state administrative post, "other" state office, or mayor.

"Low" ambition included council member or "other" local office.

drawn from an examination of the bivariate relationship between sex and elective officeholding ambition (table 2).<sup>4</sup> The standardized regression coefficient for sex is small and statistically insignificant. Other variables—especially age, officeholding status, political ideology, and education—are much more important predictors of ambition.

<sup>4</sup> Various regression models that tested for possible interactions among the independent variables were estimated. The only interaction that proved worthy of note was age × education. Although the regression coefficient for this interaction term was statistically significant at the .05 level for 1981 elective officeholders, it was not statistically significant in the analysis for 1972 delegates presented later in this paper. Adding this interaction term to the regression equation did change the magnitude of the regression coefficients for age and education. However, it did not alter the magnitude of the regression coefficients for sex and officeholding status or the relative importance of these variables for either delegates or officeholders. The addition of this interaction term also did not add appreciably to R<sup>2</sup>. Because my interest is in the effects of sex and officeholding status, I have chosen to present the simple additive model in both table 2 and table 4. Nevertheless, the reader should be aware that an interaction model leads to similar conclusions about the effects of sex and officeholding status.

TABLE 4  
REGRESSION OF AMBITION ON SEX, OFFICEHOLDING STATUS,  
AND OTHER VARIABLES FOR DELEGATES, 1972

	UNSTANDARDIZED REGRESSION COEFFICIENT (B)	STANDARDIZED REGRESSION COEFFICIENT (BETA)	STANDARD ERROR OF B
Age	-.02*	-.22	.002
Education <sup>a</sup>	.10*	.14	.02
Party <sup>b</sup>	-.03	-.01	.07
Age of Youngest Child <sup>c</sup>	.01	.01	.02
Sex <sup>d</sup>	.64*	.24	.05
Officeholding Status <sup>e</sup>	.44*	.16	.06
Marital Status <sup>f</sup>	.18*	.06	.07
Political Ideology <sup>g</sup>	.07*	.07	.03
R <sup>2</sup> = .19			
N = 2203			

\*Statistically significant at .05 level.

Note: The dependent variable consists of the measure described in table 3, note a.

<sup>a</sup>Ordinal scale with 7 categories from least to most educated.

<sup>b</sup>0 = Republican, 1 = Democrat.

<sup>c</sup>0 = 6 years old or younger, 1 = 7 to 12 years old, 2 = 13 to 18 years old, 3 = No children or youngest child older than 18.

<sup>d</sup>0 = Female, 1 = Male.

<sup>e</sup>0 = Has never held public office, 1 = Holds or has held public office.

<sup>f</sup>0 = Married, 1 = Unmarried.

<sup>g</sup>Ordinal scale with 7 categories from most conservative to most liberal.

### *Officeholding Status as a Possible Explanation*

Several of the studies making the claim that political women are less ambitious for public officeholding than their male counterparts have used the *1972 Convention Delegate Study* data. Jeane Kirkpatrick, for example, found that "in both parties, in all candidate groups, and in all age cohorts women had significantly lower levels of ambition for public office" (1976, p. 411).

To test for the possibility that earlier studies found differences only because they failed to control for officeholding status and thus masked underlying similarities in the ambitions of women and men who had comparable officeholding experience, the relationship between ambition and sex was examined for both those delegates in 1972 who held or had held



public office and those who had not (table 3).<sup>5</sup> The relative strength of the measures of association indicate that ambition differences between male and female delegates with public officeholding experience were slightly smaller than those for delegates who had not held office; among officeholders, women did not lag as far behind men in their interest in serving in a future office as they did among nonofficeholders. Nevertheless, sizable sex differences in public officeholding are apparent for both officeholders and nonofficeholders.<sup>6</sup>

The results in table 4 show that the effect of sex on ambition is both strong and statistically significant even when the effects of officeholding status and other variables are taken into account. While officeholding status has a statistically significant effect on ambition, its effect and that of other variables do not overpower that of sex. Thus, sex differences in ambition among 1972 convention delegates clearly existed independent of differences between the sexes in their public officeholding experience. The failure of previous research using the *1972 Convention Delegate Study* to control for officeholding status did not lead to erroneous conclusions about sex differences in ambition.

#### *Change Over Time as a Possible Explanation*

As increasing numbers of women moved into elective positions and other positions of political power during the 1970s, the political opportunity structure may have been perceived by women as increasingly receptive to their participation. If so, perhaps political women's ambition grew in response to their changing perceptions, and perhaps a real increase in ambition over time is the underlying reason for the discrepancy in findings between the 1981 public officeholder study and earlier research.

Unfortunately, there are no data from representative samples of male and female public officeholders from the early 1970s that would allow a

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<sup>5</sup> Those who held a public office at the time of the 1972 convention, and those who were not holding office in 1972 but had held public office previously, were combined into one group for analysis. However, current and former officeholders were not vastly different in their ambitions. A total of 71.1% of current male officeholders aspired to national or gubernatorial office compared with 64.3% of the former male officeholders. Corresponding figures for females were 32.4% and 36.8%. The major difference in the distributions was that approximately 10.8% more former officeholders than current officeholders among men, and 16.4% among women, expressed no future officeholding aspirations.

<sup>6</sup> Among those who had held office, men more often had held higher levels of office. Consequently, those who had held office were divided into three categories representing the highest level of office held. Then, within each category sex differences were examined. At every level of officeholding, women were less ambitious than men, particularly in their desire to hold national or gubernatorial offices.

TABLE 5

SEX DIFFERENCES IN PUBLIC OFFICEHOLDING AMBITION FOR DELEGATES  
TO THE 1980 CONVENTIONS AND DELEGATES TO THE  
1972 CONVENTIONS RESURVEYED IN 1980

HIGHEST LEVEL OF OFFICE DESIRED <sup>a</sup>	DELEGATES TO THE 1980 CONVENTIONS		DELEGATES TO THE 1972 CONVENTIONS RESURVEYED IN 1980	
	MEN %	WOMEN %	MEN %	WOMEN %
High	64.1	36.6	60.2	33.7
Moderate	14.0	21.5	12.4	17.1
Low	3.9	9.5	4.4	6.7
None	18.1	32.4	23.0	42.5
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N =	(1419)	(1094)	(756)	(520)
	$\tau_{uc} = .28$		$\tau_{uc} = .27$	

<sup>a</sup>See table 3, note a.

comparison between their ambition levels and those of public officeholders in 1981. However the 1972, 1976, and 1980 *Convention Delegate Study* data make possible a comparison of sex differences in ambition between delegates to the 1972 conventions and their 1980 counterparts. As part of the 1972, 1976, and 1980 *Convention Delegate Study*, those who were delegates in 1972 were resurveyed in 1980. Thus, a longitudinal examination of the political ambitions of 1972 delegates also is possible.

The public officeholding ambitions of male and female delegates to the 1980 conventions (table 5) are strikingly similar to those of their counterparts among delegates to the 1972 conventions (table 3). Moreover, the 1980 ambition levels of 1972 delegates (table 5) of both sexes closely parallel their 1972 ambition levels. Both women delegates to the 1980 conventions and women delegates to the 1972 conventions resurveyed in 1980 were much less likely to have aspirations reflecting a "high" level of ambition and much more likely to desire no elective office than were their male counterparts. Women who had held public office among both 1980 delegates and resurveyed 1972 delegates were slightly more likely than women officeholders among delegates in 1972 to exhibit "high" ambition. Nevertheless, women officeholders in both cohorts of delegates also continued in 1980 to be notably less ambitious than their male counterparts.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> For officeholders among delegates to the 1980 conventions, men were moderately more ambitious than women ( $\tau_{uc} = .22$ ). Similarly, for officeholders among 1972 delegates resurveyed in 1980, there was a moderate relationship between sex and ambition ( $\tau_{uc} = .23$ ).

These findings suggest that the political ambitions of political women, relative to those of political men, did not increase greatly during the 1970s. If officeholder data from the early 1970s were available, it is possible that a different pattern might emerge. However, existing data offer little evidence that the findings of sex differences among 1972 delegates who had held public office but no sex differences among 1981 elective officeholders are a consequence of real increases in political women's ambition.

### CONCLUSIONS

In the early 1980s, women who held elective office were as ambitious for future public officeholding as their male counterparts. This finding is in stark contrast to the findings of earlier research on political ambition. However, it does not appear that the failure of earlier research to control for officeholding status can account for the difference in findings. Sex differences in ambition existed among both those delegates to the 1972 national party conventions who were public officeholders and those who were not. Neither does the possibility of change in women's political ambitions in response to expanding opportunities in the 1970s seem to provide a satisfactory explanation. Women's political opportunities may have expanded during the 1970s, but data from the *Convention Delegate Studies* suggest that politically active women did not become substantially more ambitious over the decade.

If the results of earlier research were not misleading, and if political women's ambitions have not increased significantly over time, then differential selection into elites would seem to provide the most satisfactory explanation for divergent findings regarding sex differences in ambition.<sup>8</sup> The extent of sex differences in ambition would seem to depend on the particular "elite" group considered. In particular, the distinction between public officeholding elites and party activists appears to be an important one in the study of sex differences in political ambition. Although women among convention delegates or other party activists may be less ambitious than their male counterparts, women elective officeholders are not.

The fact that women and men serving in state legislative, county, and local offices in 1981 had similar political ambitions has important

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<sup>8</sup> The fact that women officeholders among delegates to the 1980 conventions and among delegates to the 1972 conventions resurveyed in 1980 were less ambitious than their male counterparts lends support for this differential selection explanation. The fact that sex differences in ambition did not exist among 1981 elective officeholders but did exist among delegates who were officeholders during the same time period suggests that delegates who are officeholders are not representative of all officeholders. Findings for officeholders among delegates cannot be generalized to all officeholders.

implications for the representation of women in national and major statewide political offices. While low levels of political ambition may be one of the reasons why fewer women than men seek political office in the first place, women's aspirations relative to men's are not a factor holding them back once they have achieved the basic threshold of election to a public office. The fact that the political ambitions of women in state legislative, county, and local offices equal or exceed those of their male counterparts suggests that, in the absence of other impediments to women's advancement, the stagnation which has characterized the representation of women at the highest levels of office should soon come to an end. Within the next few years women should move into major statewide and national political positions in roughly the same proportions as they were represented in the early 1980s at lower levels of government.

Of course, such progress toward parity in representation of women at the highest levels of government may not come about so quickly. But if it does not, the findings presented here suggest that the ambitions of women officeholders at state legislative, county, and local levels are not at fault. Rather, political scientists must begin to look not to political women's ambitions but to possible patterns of discrimination and limitations in the structure of political opportunity in order to account for the paucity of women at the highest levels of officeholding.

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