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Still not there: continued challenges to women's political representation

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As we finalized this collection of papers, a historic number of women ran for office in national, state and local elections in the United States, and a record number were elected, leading the media to dub this the “Year of the Woman” (Lu and Collins 2018). Arguably, this increase has been fueled by the amplified saliency of women's issues over the last two years. This phenomenon is global and affects many levels of elected office. For instance, the 2018 Afghan parliamentary elections, the 2018 Quebec provincial elections, and the 2017 Scottish Council elections all saw a record number of women candidates (Mohamed 2018; Girard 2018; Bochel and Denver 2017). These elections increased the number of women in Scottish councils and set a record for the number of women winning seats in the Quebec National Assembly (McCall 2017; Valiante 2018).¹

Globally, there is apparent progress in closing the electoral gender gap. But this advancement still remains uneven and, most importantly, incomplete. Indeed, even in the “Year of the Woman” women lost several high-profile races to male challengers in the U.S.

This *Dialogue* explores the persistent gender gap in electoral candidacy through five diverse, comparative studies. Taken together, they highlight the importance of parties and other gatekeepers in limiting the number of women who contest and, ultimately, win elections.

The studies in this collection focus on the candidate selection process, as this is a necessary step for election, but also a stage of the electoral process with persistent barriers to women. By focusing on the gender balance of the candidate pool, we broaden consideration of political participants (rather than just election winners) and provide a more detailed understanding of the barriers to political participation.

The *Dialogue* consists of five studies on the selection of women electoral candidates in four different countries: Canada, Denmark, the United States, and Zambia. These cases constitute a mix of developed and developing states, different electoral systems, and elections at the national, sub-state and municipal levels. The studies draw on a variety of data and empirical techniques including elite interviews, large-N election returns, and spatial cluster analysis. This collection of articles seeks to identify general challenges to women

becoming electoral candidates, with implications for appropriate strategies to overcome them.

The consensus in the gender literature is that the process of candidate supply is as important as the process of voter demand in understanding the representation of women. The findings from the different studies confirm that women still face challenges to becoming candidates, across a range of social and electoral contexts. The studies highlight the predominant role of political parties in the persistence of the gender gap. More precisely, several of the studies show that elite bias – which may be associated with informal rules and/or social networks – creates significant disadvantages for women in the selection process. Local-level factors – associated with riding demographics and elite political networks – play a lesser, but still significant, role in the gender balance of candidates.

Four of the studies examine candidate selection in first-past-the-post district systems, in Canada, Zambia, and the United States. In their study of the 2015 Canadian federal election, Medeiros, Forest, and Erl find a continuation of the pattern of prior elections, with major differences in the proportion of women candidates among parties and some effect of local party organizations and constituency demographics. Their findings also point to the potential importance of local social and political networks in the recruitment (or not) of women candidates. In Zambia, Wang and Muriaas demonstrate how even relatively weak, albeit centralized national parties coordinate to enforce a uniform – and low – informal quota for women candidates. During the selection process, many female aspirants focus on swaying the local electorate, but the few who are ultimately nominated as candidates do so by bargaining with the central party leader.

In the U.S., Thomsen uses a longitudinal dataset to show how inter-party differences strongly influence the selection and success of women candidates, and why Republican women face a long-standing and increasingly difficult path compared to their Democratic counterparts. Also focusing on the United States, Scott, Shah, and Juenke, expand the analysis to include women of color and find that this understudied group is constrained by the double-bind intersectionality of race and gender in the candidate emergence stage even though they perform well in elections once they are on the ballot.

Finally, in their study of municipal elections in Denmark that allow electors to indicate candidate preference, Kjaer and Krook find that voters are more favorable toward women candidates than the parties who establish the ordered candidate lists. Yet, voters have complex motivations; although they are more positive toward women candidates than parties are, candidate gender is not a primary factor in voters' choices.

Together, the five studies provide an important analytic examination of women's representation within a comparative framework. Across four countries and different levels of government, we find that, first, the party continues to be an important gatekeeper, both within the North American context, where self-nomination is more common among candidates, and in the European and African context, where parties make decisions on candidate selection directly. Second, women continue to be discriminated against by party elites and disadvantaged by institutions that give preference to incumbents (most often men). Last, our emphasis on candidates allows for both supply-side and demand-side analysis, which together give us leverage on how to best understand the continued under-representation of women in elected office.

Note

1. As of February 2019, the full results of the Afghan parliamentary elections had not yet been announced.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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