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IALOGUE: STILL NOT THERE: CONTINUED CHALLENGES TO
WOMEN'S POLITICAL REPRESENTATION



Women of color candidates: examining emergence and success in state legislative elections

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ABSTRACT

Scholars conclude that increasing the number of elected women of color is vital to achieving gender and racial parity in U.S. politics. Many challenges remain, however, in order for women candidates of color to reach office in proportion to their share of the population. In this dialogue, we focus on the patterns of opportunities that women of color have used to run for state legislative office. Building on other intersectionality work within the American context, we take gender and race/ethnicity to be interactive and mutually constitutive, and thus women of color may face unique challenges and opportunities as candidates as compared to non-Hispanic white women. We examine how three structural features – legislative district demographics, incumbency, and partisanship – influence the emergence and electoral success of women of color candidates. The findings suggest that while women of color are very successful when they run for state legislative office, they are far too often missing from ballots in white districts, pointing to a particular intersectional issue in the partisan pipeline.

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Introduction

The 2012 and 2014 elections were groundbreaking for women and racial minorities seeking elected office in the United States. The 113th Congress included the largest contingent of women representatives (20 in the Senate and 82 in the House), the most number of Latino representatives (3 Senators and 29 House members) and a sizeable number of African Americans (1 Senator and 43 members of the House). Despite these successes, women and candidates of color continue to be under-represented in elected office. Recent data from the Reflective Democracy Campaign shows that 90% of elected officials at most levels of government in the U.S. continue to be white, and the vast majority of them white men despite tremendous growth in the minority population.¹

This is in contrast to many European nations, which have seen marked improvement in women's and minority representation over the last few decades with the implementation of quotas (Hughes 2011). As we discuss below, the majoritarian electoral system, strong

incumbency advantage, and weaknesses in party recruitment and support reinforce this imbalance in the U.S. context. In contrast, in many European democracies, proportional representation rules, party-driven candidate election, and internal measures of equity have provided a more conducive institutional context for women's and minority advancement (Hughes 2011).

Early research into the question of under-representation in the U.S. focused on voter "demand" – i.e., how do the (racist) and (sexist) attitudes of voters limit more diverse office holding? Much of this early research suggested that racial stereotypes and prejudice prevented African American and Latino candidates from attaining office (Terkildsen 1993; Grofman, Handley, and Niemi 1994). Similarly, this research found that voters often categorized women candidates as having fewer leadership skills and being less qualified (Sanbonmatsu 2002). For women of color, it was theorized that the effects of both race and gender were compounded to disadvantage them as candidates (Githens and Prestage 1977).

More recent scholarship, however, has called into the question that role voters *alone* play in determining the electoral fates of women and racial/ethnic minorities, as well as how the experiences of women of color may differ from their counterparts on the campaign trail. The scholarship on women in office suggests that "when women run, women win" – they can garner similar campaign contributions (Burrell 1985), equal vote shares (Lawless and Pearson 2008), media coverage (Smith 1997), and suffer little sex-based voter bias (Dolan 2004). Similarly, research on candidates of color demonstrates that we underestimate the likelihood of Latino candidates winning in white districts (Juenke 2014), that the likelihood of black candidates winning elections when they run are very similar to their white counterparts (Shah 2014; Voss and Lublin 2001), and that when partisanship is explicitly accounted for, Latino and Black candidates fare as well as their white partisans in state legislative elections (Juenke and Shah 2016).

What about women of color? Do their electoral fates mirror those of white men or men of color? Or do they forge their own path? Some scholars suggest that women of color fare better because of their ability to appeal to multiple constituencies – both women and people of color (Smooth 2006). In addition, there is evidence that the role of party officials and party recruitment cannot be underestimated in understanding why women of color emerge as candidates (Sanbonmatsu 2002; Crowder-Meyer 2013; Doherty, Dowling, and Miller 2018). In particular, if the parties are disinclined to think that women of color are able to win, despite evidence to the contrary, then this has implications for who is asked to run and who actually does so. Together then, this recent scholarship suggests that a focus on voters may miss the role strategic candidates and electoral institutions play in the under-representation of women and candidates of color, and that impact on women of color may be more than the sum of their individual identities.

To a large extent, recent gains in women's office holding have been fueled by the achievements of women-of-color candidates. From 2016 to 2017, the percent of women in state legislative office increased from 24.5% to 24.9% due to the election of women of color (Dittmar 2017). In particular, the number of Black women in state legislative office has reached an all-time high of 271 (14.7% of women legislators and 3.7% of all legislators). Moreover, the growth in the number of women of color in political

office outpaces that of men of color (Garcia Bedolla, Tate, and Wong 2005; Hardy-Fanta et al. 2006).

Scholars conclude that increasing the number of elected women of color is vital to achieving gender and racial parity in U.S. politics (Bejarano 2013; Sanbonmatsu 2015). Many challenges remain, however, in order for women candidates of color to reach office in proportion to their share of the population. In particular, women of color are less likely to receive equal levels of media coverage as their counterparts (Gershon 2012) and struggle to attain party support (McClain, Carter, and Brady 2005; Sanbonmatsu 2006a; Gallagher 2007). Furthermore, women of color face difficulty in raising funds to build their campaign resources (Sanbonmatsu, Carroll, and Walsh 2009; Sanbonmatsu 2015).

In this dialogue, we focus on the patterns of opportunities that women of color have used to run for state legislative office. Building upon other intersectionality work centered on the American context (Hancock 2007; Smooth 2011; Bejarano 2013; Brown 2014; Holman and Schneider 2018), we take gender and race/ethnicity to be interactive and mutually constitutive, and thus women of color may face unique challenges and opportunities as candidates as compared to non-Hispanic white women. Because much of the large-N research on descriptive representation has focused on either race or gender, the majority of our broader understanding of minority representation is confined to white women and Black or Latino men. In this paper, we shift away from these binary distinctions, and examine the ways in which intersecting identities produce political opportunities that differ from the dominant groups (Smooth 2010). We examine how three structural features – legislative district demographics, incumbency, and partisanship – influence the emergence and electoral success of women of color candidates.

We use a dataset of candidates for 2012 and 2014 state legislative office in 42 states² from the Women Donor’s Network Reflective Democracy Campaign to examine when and where women of color run for office, and where they win. State legislative elections are particularly fruitful for studying representation. Currently, there are 7,383 state legislators in the US, and every two years, as many as 85% of the seats are up for election. The large dataset allows us to gain significant leverage in understanding the relationship of party, incumbency, and demographics across a variety of contexts that rarely exist in Congressional elections, even with the small number of women of color candidates who run for state office. Our analysis provides one of the largest investigations into how the intersections of race, ethnicity and gender operate in a variety of electoral contexts across the United States. The findings suggest that while women of color are very

Table 1. Women candidates by race and ethnicity, in state legislative elections 2012–2014.

Women candidates who are:	
American Indian or Alaska Native	.5%
Asian American or Pacific Islander	1%
Black or African American	10%
Hispanic or Latino	4.5%
Multiracial	0.2%
Other	0.1%
White	84%
Total # of women candidates	3,848
Total # of candidates	15,127

successful when they run for state legislative office, they are far too often missing from ballots in white districts, pointing to a particular intersectional issue in the partisan pipeline.

The descriptive picture

By any measure, women of color are a small portion of the candidates running for state legislative office in the U.S. Of the 15,127 candidates in our dataset, only 621 (or 4%) are women of color. In Table 1 we examine the racial/ethnic identities of the women candidates. After accounting for non-Hispanic white women (84% of all 3,848 women candidates), African-American women comprise the largest share of women of color running (10%), with Latinas making up roughly half of that number (5%). However, women of color make up a larger share of minority candidates (1 in 3) than women in the white candidate pool (1 in 4). This is almost certainly due to the partisan differences for women of color, which we discuss further below.

When are voters able to vote for women and women of color? The vast majority of the elections in these years – 63% – had *only* male candidates on the ballot, and a full 86% of elections in the U.S. states have at least one man on the ballot. In contrast, only 37% of these elections have at least one woman on the ballot,³ and only 13% had *only* women on the ballot. Thus, the choices being offered to voters across the states are gender-biased. Even more striking are the biased choices voters are presented with when it comes to racial and ethnic diversity of women candidates. Eighty-one percent of the elections in the data have *only* white candidates on the ballot, and a full 90% of the elections have at least one white candidate in the election.⁴ Only about 5% of the elections have a woman of color on the ballot.

Together, these data reveal that the pipeline to candidacy is biased by both race and gender *before* voters are allowed to make their choices. In other words, while voters may very well be biased against women and minority candidates, in the vast majority of cases, they are not even asked to vote for anyone other than a white man. This finding highlights the recent push to examine the supply-side of candidate emergence to find the source of representational differences.

That said, when women of color run, they win. Table 2 displays the win rates for minority women and other groups. Both women of color and minority men do better than their white counterparts. The small differences hold up even when looking at open seat and competitive races (those with at least one competitor on the ballot). These findings support previous work that concludes when racial/ethnic minorities run they win (Juenke 2014), and when women run they win (Sanbonmatsu 2006a), but addresses the understudied question of how race and gender intersect to influence electoral prospects.

Table 2. Women candidate winners: 2012–2014.

	Overall winning %	Competitive seat winning %	Open & competitive seat winning %
Minority women	73%	59%	61%
White women	59%	52%	48%
Minority men	67%	53%	53%
White men	61%	50%	50%

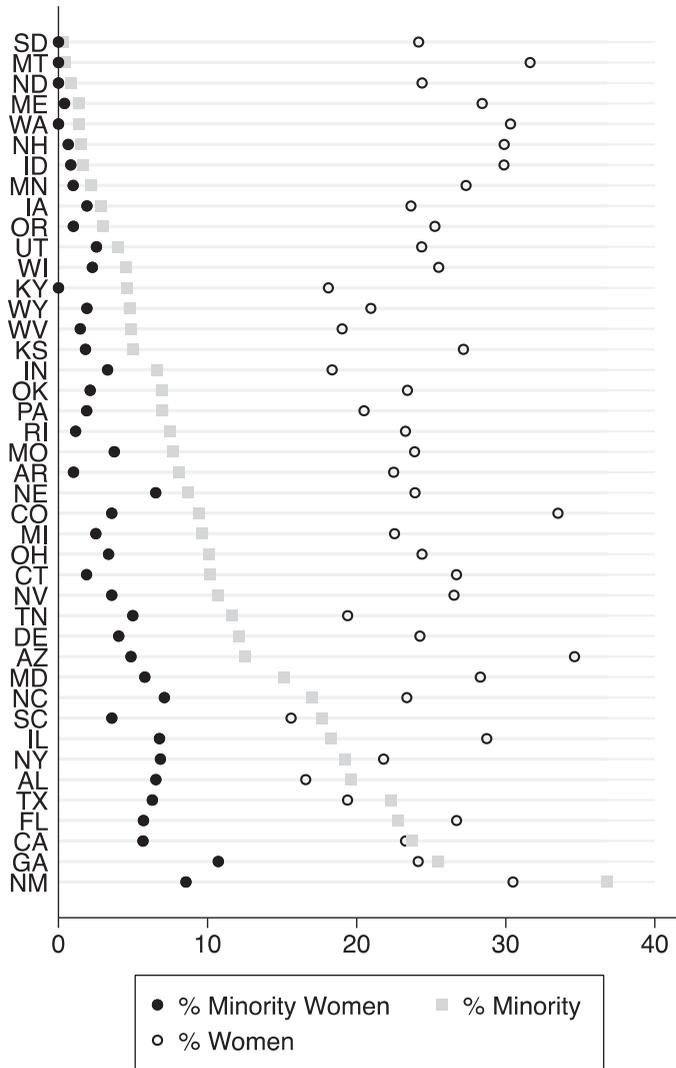


Figure 1. Intersectional candidates in the state: '12 & '14.

We next examine the distribution of women of color candidates geographically. In Figure 1, we display the race and gender data across the states in the sample. The states are sorted by the percent of minority candidates on the ballot, which reveals an important pattern in the emergence of women of color candidates. Previous research finds a strong correlation between minority population and minority candidates (Lublin 1997; Pinderhughes, Hardy-Fanta, and Sierra 2007), but there is little evidence that the size of the population of women, on its own, influences the likelihood of women candidates (Silva and Skully 2018). Our analysis of women of color confirms these overall patterns. The percent minority women on the ballot (filled circles on the left) are unrelated to the overall percent of women on the ballot (empty circles on the right). Instead, there is clearly a racial and ethnic pattern to minority women emergence, as it correlates with

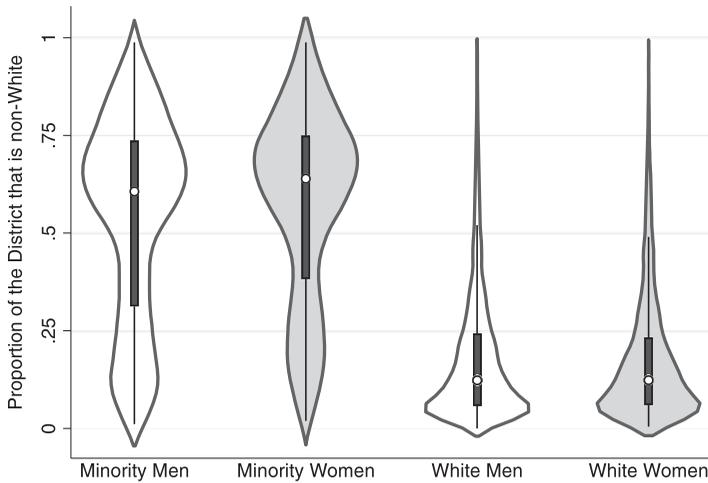


Figure 2. Where do women run?.

minority candidate emergence more generally (although not perfectly, showing larger gender gaps in some states than others).

This pattern of racial/ethnic geographic emergence reveals itself more directly at the district level, Figure 2, where we see bias in where whites and non-whites run for office. The violin plots show the distribution of candidates in the dataset by race/ethnicity and gender. White candidates are running overwhelmingly in white districts and minority candidates are running in largely majority-minority districts, although there is greater demographic variation for minority candidates as the larger interquartile (dark) bars indicate. Theory suggests minority candidates will emerge only in places where their prospects of victory are high (Black 1972), and for strategic minority candidates to take both the demographic and partisan context into account (Juenke and Shah 2016). Previous research finds that women of color legislators are more likely to be elected from majority-minority districts (Hardy-Fanta et al. 2006; Juenke and Shah 2016; Swain and Lien 2017). This is what we find as well. Non-white candidates are more likely to be on the ballot in districts that have far greater racial/ethnic minority populations: 53% minority in the district, compared to 17% minority population for ballots which only include white candidates (which are again, 81% of the elections).⁵ Together, Figures 1 and 2 clearly show that the path to political office for women of color is indeed distinct from their white women counterparts and that the presence of women of color in state legislative races continues to be tied to majority-minority districts.

Smooth (2006) and Tate (2003) argue a likely explanation for why women make up larger proportions of African-American and Latino districts is the creation of new majority-minority districts and the opportunities they offer for women of color to compete for open seats in their state legislatures. This appears to be the case in these data, where minority women run uncontested in roughly 30% of open seat races (and these are in heavily minority, or majority-minority, districts) compared to white candidates, who run uncontested in open seat races only 10% of the time.

Minority men run uncontested about 20% of the time in open seat elections. As the data in Figures 1 and 2 show, the parties have largely matched candidates and districts by race

and ethnicity, severely limiting the amount of representational growth for women of color. Indeed, district demographics play an outsized role in emergence for women, both white and non-white.

Incumbency at the intersection

One of the most enduring features of American elections is the incumbency advantage. That is, current officeholders seeking another term in office have greater name recognition and resources than their challengers (Cox and Katz 1996). This often serves to deter strong challengers in electoral contests (Hogan 2004). The electoral power of incumbency has been documented at multiple levels of analysis (Ansolabehere and Snyder 2002; Thomsen 2015) but is not always leveraged in large-N studies of descriptive representation. Palmer and Simon (2005) posit two hypotheses to explore how gender influences incumbency. As a result of perceived vulnerability compared to male incumbents, and media coverage that reinforces these stereotypes, women running for reelection will face more competition in retaining their seats (Competition Hypothesis). At the same time, women incumbents may represent a symbolic cue to other women considering a run for office (Atkeson 2003). Strategic candidates may look at a women incumbent as evidence that women can be successful in this district. Thus, their second hypothesis is that women incumbents will face more competition from women candidates than their male counterparts (Gender Effect Hypothesis). Their analysis of 10,431 House elections between 1956 and 2002 finds considerable support for both hypotheses. Almost no research on the effects of incumbent candidates on minority candidate emergence has been conducted (although see Gillespie 2010), but we expect similar mechanisms to be at work on how race/ethnicity may intersect to influence competition of elections.

In Table 3 we show that women of color candidates have the highest incumbency rates (column 1). Further, they run for open seats and open seats in white districts (columns 2 and 3) at the same rate as the other groups we examine. Finally, not only do women of color face the least amount of competition for open seats (28% in column 4), our data also show that incumbent minority women face the least competition for their seats, 50% of incumbent women of color run unopposed, and their level of competition looks more like minority men (49% unopposed) than white women (27% unopposed) and white men (35%). Indeed, this is an area where the gender “competition hypothesis” is not only different for women of color, but is completely reversed, possibly tied to the relative safety of the seats occupied by minority women incumbents.

Next, we look at the “gender effect hypothesis” to see if women of color are more likely to be challenged by women or women of color. The data do not support this claim.

Table 3. Women candidate emergence: 2012–2014.

	% Who are incumbents	% in open races	% in open races in white districts	% who run uncontested for “open” seats
Minority women	55%	25%	28%	28%
White women	43%	26%	26%	9%
Minority men	51%	24%	26%	22%
White men	45%	25%	25%	13%

Conditional on being challenged, only 5% of women of color incumbent candidates face another woman of color. Instead, their challengers are overwhelmingly men but again, 50% of minority women incumbents run unopposed. The data suggest that women of color are not competing for the same seats in the general election as much as white women are (20% of white women incumbents face another woman). This is another place where the conventional wisdom for “all” women does not fit the data for women of color.

Regardless of race or ethnicity all incumbent candidates succeed at an extremely high rate (about 95% of the time). Also, in contrast to previous work on the disproportionate impact of incumbency for men (Carroll 1994), we find that women incumbents are just as successful as their male counterparts. These findings support recent literature that finds fault with *pre*-Election Day mechanisms – recruitment and support for women and minority candidates – rather than voters for low levels of legislative representation (Juenke 2014; Juenke and Shah 2016).

Given that women of color have the highest incumbency rate, it is worth noting that the incumbency advantage can be hampered by term limits at the state level. Fifteen states have either imposed a lifetime limit or consecutive limit on service in the legislature.⁶ To date, 1,423 state legislatures have been term limited.⁷ While term limits were expected to increase the representation of women and people of color in state legislatures, this has not been the case (Carey, Niemi, and Powell 2009). In fact, there is some evidence that term limits can hurt the representational gains that these groups have made in state level legislatures (Carroll and Jenkins 2005). Moving forward, the continual presence of women of color in state legislatures, with term limits, may be dependent on the supply of women of color willing to replace them.

Where are the Republican women of color?

Parties can and do shape who runs for office by seeking out and encouraging candidates to run for office, often these are citizens who might not have considered running otherwise (Lawless 2012; Broockman 2014). Thus, the parties are seen as influencing the decision-making process from the very beginning of a latent candidate’s emergence. The literature on women candidates finds party recruitment to be particularly salient, and as Sanbonmatsu (2006c) argues, the recruitment itself may create ambitious politicians and influence the perceived probability of winning.

Recent scholarship finds that, in general, both the Democratic and Republican parties are doing more to recruit and fund women candidates (Maestas, Maisel, and Stone 2005). Yet it would appear that one party is doing better than the other: the number of Democratic women in Congress has increased dramatically since the 1980s with the number of Republican women has barely grown. Sanbonmatsu (2006c) finds that party leaders vary considerably in their assessment of women candidates: some party leaders are optimistic about the existence of an advantage for women candidates, whereas others see them as less viable than male candidates. More directly addressing the question of why so many women are running as Democrats, Thomsen (2015) examines how party fit influences candidate emergence. Her analysis of state legislators suggests that the dearth of women running as Republicans can be attributed, in part, to candidate strategic behavior: *moderate* Republican women do not find a fit within their party.

In their survey of legislative candidates, Moncrief et al. find important differences in the recruitment patterns between black and white candidates. Specifically, black candidates reported receiving significantly less encouragement from party officials and legislative leaders to run for office than white candidates reported (2001, 105–109). Similarly, party leaders are less likely to recruit women of color (Sanbonmatsu 2006a) and building support for a political campaign is an obstacle (Sanbonmatsu 2015). Additionally, women of color are often faced with efforts to discourage their candidacy (Sanbonmatsu, Carroll, and Walsh 2009). All together, this suggests that women of color face a number of barriers in their pursuit to political office and the women who do win often do so without party support.

We confirm that Democrats have managed to do a much better job of recruiting women and candidates of color (Figures 3 and 4). Only one-third of women run as Republicans and only 18% of Republicans are women. The percent of women Democrats is about double that of Republicans (35%) but is still low. The scholarship on party recruitment of racial minorities is still nascent, but we see similar patterns emerge: the polarization of the parties influences the strategic behavior of candidate to run as either a Democrat or Republican. Indeed, the data show that while both parties are still overwhelmingly white (94% for the GOP and 80% for Democrats), the Democrats seem to have found more success in recruiting and supporting minority candidates. One in five Democrats is a person of color, and overwhelming majority of each racial/ethnic group – except Whites – run as Democrats.

Finally, in Figure 5 we show that the intersection of race and gender is also best represented in the Democratic Party. Minority women are simply not a significant part of the Republican coalition. Whatever marketing the GOP is doing in terms of centering candidates like Mia Love (MC from Utah) and Susana Martinez (governor of New Mexico), it is a shallow bench reflecting a flawed recruitment and support process. While these numbers are not surprising, given the context of how racial and ethnic minority groups in the U.S. *vote*, they do remind us that the representation relationship starts long before the campaigns do. Voters choose *amongst* the options on the ballot, and those choices are shaped by the beliefs and actions of party elites and the latent candidates

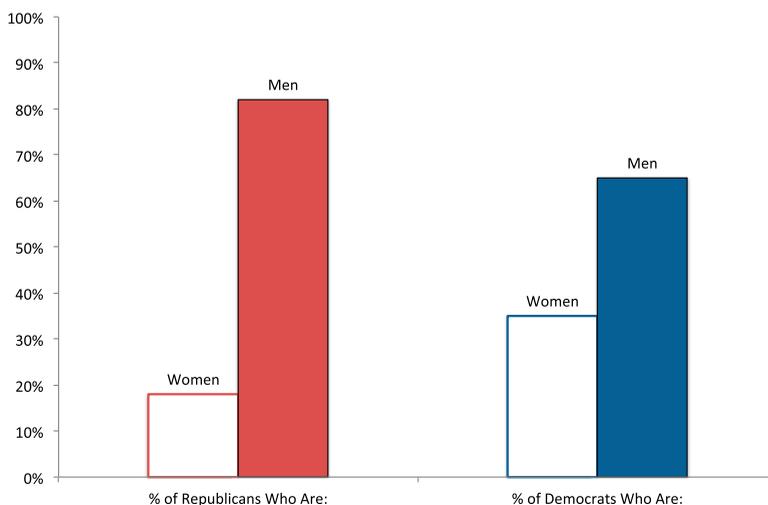


Figure 3. Candidate partisanship by gender in the 2012 and 2014 state legislative elections.

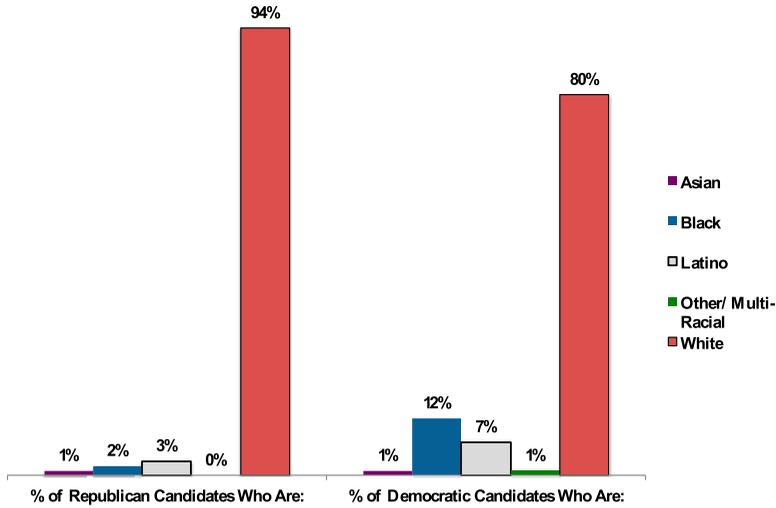


Figure 4. Candidate partisanship by race and ethnicity in the 2012 and 2014 state legislative elections.

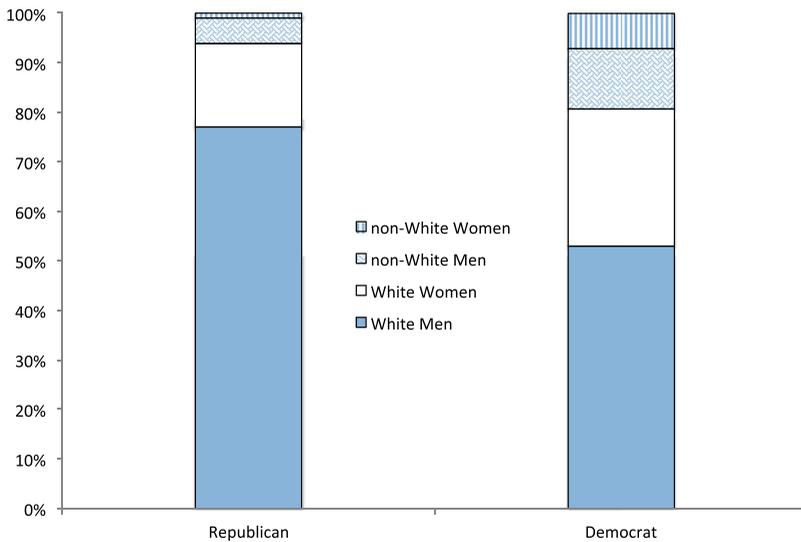


Figure 5. Gender and race/ethnicity by party in the 2012 and 2014 state legislative elections.

themselves. It remains to be explored whether the Republican electorate remains mostly white in response to the demographics of the candidate pool, or if instead the partisan candidate pool is the inevitable result of districting mostly Democratic minority voters in majority-minority districts (which would produce the same results).

Discussion

The day after the 2016 midterm elections, political analysts lauded the progress of women of color in the Senate. It had quadrupled ... from 1 to 4. This highlights the paradox of

women of color candidates – they are seen as making the most progress of gendered and racial minorities, but their numbers are still very small. As we celebrate the record number of women of color projected to run in 2018, our analysis here offers some insights on where we should find success.

Further, as the states prepare for redistricting battles after the 2020 Census, we argue that geographic gerrymandering may be less important for gender and minority representational outcomes than it has been in the past (i.e., the 1980s and 1990s), and when compared to pipeline problems in the two major U.S. political parties. Some may look at our results for candidates of color and think that majority-minority districts are critical to their continued success. We think instead they suggest that women and men of color have proven their ability to win in all kinds of districts if given the chance to do so by both parties in the right partisan context.

Our analyses lead us to three preliminary conclusions. First, the voter-driven models are not wrong: the size of the co-racial/ethnic population continues to matter for descriptive representation of persons of color and women, specifically in terms of where they choose to run for office and where they are recruited to run for office. But the *exclusive* focus on the electorate (eligibility, partisanship, participation) and the potential for biased voting among white voters is inadequate to explain the underrepresentation of women of color in state legislatures. The data here suggest that racial/ethnic and gender representation is as much of a supply problem as it is a demand one. In other words, strategic minority women candidates run in places and elections where they believe their chances of winning are highest (such as uncontested elections and open seats, and seats in partisan-favorable environments), as do all candidates. But the racialized emergence in majority-white districts (white candidates) and majority-minority districts (minority candidates) is a lasting and formidable barrier to the growth of women of color in office. Put simply, underrepresentation will not change unless both parties recruit more women of color to run in majority-white districts. This is happening – Stacey Abrams in GA and Catherine Cortez Masto in NV are two examples – but at a slower pace than one would expect, and certainly much slower than the pace of other democracies with quota systems in place (Hughes 2011).

Second, incumbency constrains further representational growth, but the real culprit for the continued lack of descriptive representation is the failure of the parties, more so in the GOP, to recruit and support women candidates of color. Current research has coalesced around the idea that party elites play a substantial role in the continuing shortage of minority and women candidates and officeholders (Sanbonmatsu 2006b; Doherty, Dowling, and Miller 2018), even as women of color are finding support from outside organizations like Collective Pac and Latino Victory Project. The evidence here again supports this supply-side perspective.

Last, we uncover a number of places where evidence for “all” women is only true for white women. Women of color face fewer challengers than any other group, they fare better as incumbents, and they are generally one of the most successful demographic profiles we examine. Women of color face a double-burden but it does not necessarily manifest itself in the voting booth. Gender constrains opportunities, whether because of the history that is tied up in incumbency or because of the lack of support from the parties. Second, race and ethnicity is constrained by geography, as very few minority candidates are found outside of largely minority-populated districts. This double-burden in

the pipeline is perhaps all the more frustrating given the great success of women of color in state legislative races.

As Childs and Hughes (2018) argue, our study of the under-representation of women of color is also about the continued over-representation of upper class white men, and the challenge this continues to present for meaningful descriptive representation. Instead of treating gender and minority status as electoral *disadvantages* as much of the previous literature has, we might be better off thinking of the overwhelming historical and institutional *advantages* given to upper class white men in the U.S. electoral context (see also Carnes 2018). We demonstrate that what has been shown for women and minorities separately in previous studies, is also true for candidates at the intersection of gender and race/ethnicity, but also find that women of color are uniquely positioned. When women of color run, they win, but representational parity will not be achieved with so few women of color running for office.

Notes

1. <http://www.womendonors.org/what-we-do/strategic-initiatives/reflective-democracy/>
2. Four states did not hold state legislative elections in 2012 and 2014 (LA, MS, NJ, VA) and four states were excluded because of difficulties merging districts with election returns (AK, HI, MA, VT). Bias and generalizability concerns are real but minor with these exclusions given the large amount of variation in the remaining 42 states.
3. Under conditions of parity, we might expect between 75% and 90% of ballots to have a woman on them (given that 20% of elections are uncontested this number is unlikely to approach 100% for either gender).
4. For context, the current White non-Latino population in the U.S. is about 60%.
5. American Community Survey (U.S. Census 2012).
6. The states with lifetime term limits include Arkansas, California, Michigan, Missouri, Nevada, and Oklahoma. The states with consecutive term limits include Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Louisiana, Maine, Montana, Nebraska, Ohio, and South Dakota.
7. https://ballotpedia.org/State_legislatures_with_term_limits

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