

# Did Women and Candidates of Color Lead or Ride the Democratic Wave in 2018?

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Headlines touted a “wave” of women and minority candidates running in the 2018 elections, leading some to conclude that 2018 was the new “year of the woman” and perhaps “year of the candidate of color” (Lai et al. 2018). In fact, the number of women and candidates of color contesting US House elections was so high in 2018 that for the first time on record, White men were the minority of Democratic House nominees (Schneider 2018). Surveys taken immediately before the 2018 midterm elections indicated that women of color were the “ideal candidates” for Democrats, suggesting a changing voter demand for a more diverse field of candidates (Easley 2018).

Were these diverse candidates more successful than others had been in the past? Did changes in the composition of election winners reflect a new demand for candidates of color, as suggested by pre- and post-election press (Houck 2018; Schneider 2018)? Do the results of the 2018 midterm elections mean that “America wants to elect candidates who actually look like the people they are representing” (Houck 2018)? The answers to these questions are unclear without examining the 2018 elections relative to previous elections. Pundits also were excited about the prospects of the 2012, 2014, and 2016 elections. Although important strides toward equity have been made, 90% of elected officials in the United States are White, 71% are men, and 65% are White men (Women Donors Network 2019). Despite the increasing diversity of the United States and gains in women’s representation, officeholders fail to reflect changing population demographics and political empowerment. Indeed, as Dittmar (2018) noted, although more women were running, more men also ran in 2018, and the majority of new candidates ran as Democrats.

We examine outcomes from thousands of 2018 state legislative elections and provide metrics assessing the extent to which the resultant racial/ethnic and gender representation differs from previous years. We first consider whether there are any changes in the gender and racial/ethnic composition of the set of state legislative election winners in 2018 compared to recent baselines in 2012, 2014, and 2016.<sup>1</sup> Second, we explore results by party to estimate the theoretically appropriate electoral baselines for women and candidates of color across

time. Third, we test for whether descriptive representation changes in the 2018 state legislative elections are a result of changes in candidate supply or candidate success by first accounting for the presence of women and minority candidates on the general-election ballot.

Our preregistered analyses confirm that more women, more candidates of color, and more women of color won office in 2018 than in previous years but also that this increase was limited to Democratic nominees. Further, we find that all of the gains came from an increase in the supply of women and candidates of color, not from changes in voter demand; if anything, the success rate of nominees of color and women was lower than in previous years. Thus, gains in representation in 2018 at the state level came many months before the election, when a more diverse range of citizens was recruited or encouraged to run for office.

## PARTISANSHIP AND CANDIDATE SUCCESS

Parties can and do shape who runs for office by seeking out and encouraging candidates to run for office; often, they are citizens who might not have considered running otherwise (Broockman 2014; Lawless 2012). Thus, parties influence the decision-making process from the very beginning of a latent candidate’s emergence (Maestas et al. 2006). The literature on women candidates finds party recruitment to be particularly salient and, as Sanbonmatsu (2006) argued, the recruitment itself may create ambitious politicians and influence the perceived probability of winning (Brown 2014; Doherty, Dowling, and Miller 2019; Holman and Schneider 2018).

Recent scholarship finds that, in general, both the Democratic and Republican parties are doing more to recruit and fund women candidates (Burrell 2006; 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 whereas the number of Republican women has barely changed. Sanbonmatsu (2006) found that party leaders vary considerably in their assessment of women candidates: some are optimistic about the existence of an advantage for women candidates, whereas others view them as less viable than male candidates. Similarly, compared to White Democratic women candidates,

women of color are less likely to have run for the state legislature as a result of party recruitment, which is consistent with the pattern that they also are more likely to represent Democratic majority–minority districts (Sanbonmatsu 2015). Brown’s (2014) analysis found that party leaders question the viability of Black women and work against their emergence.

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More directly addressing the question of why so many women are running as Democrats, Thomsen (2015) examined how party fit influences candidate emergence. Her analysis of state legislators suggested 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. When women and candidates of color run in partisan elections, they win (Juenke 2014; Juenke and Shah 2016; Lawless and Pearson 2008; Sanbonmatsu 2006). Voters in a partisan contest tend to rely on their partisan affiliations to make candidate choices, even if they hold strong gender and racial/ethnic biases (Juenke and Shah 2016; Sanbonmatsu 2006).

Given the elite expectation for a Democratic-wave election in 2018 (Klarner 2018a) and the increase in women candidates (Dittmar 2018), candidates of color (Schneider 2018), and women candidates of color (Bejarano 2018), we expected that the Democratic surge in women and candidates of color will lead to more victories for these historically underrepresented groups. We thus hypothesized that these “supply-side” factors will drive increases in officeholding for women and candidates of color.

H1a: *The proportion of general-election winners that are women will be greater in 2018 than in 2016, 2014, or 2012.*

H1b: *The proportion of general-election winners that are racial/ethnic minorities will be greater in 2018 than in 2016, 2014, or 2012.*

H1c: *The proportion of general-election winners that are women of color will be greater in 2018 than in 2016, 2014, or 2012.*

However, because of partisan recruitment differences, these increases will come from Democrats (and not Republicans) in 2018.

H2a: *The proportion of general-election winners that are Republican women in 2018 will be less than or equal to the proportion in 2016, 2014, or 2012.*

H2b: *The proportion of general-election winners that are Republican racial/ethnic minorities in 2018 will be less than or equal to the proportion in 2016, 2014, or 2012.*

H2c: *The proportion of general-election winners that are Republican women of color in 2018 will be less than or equal to the proportion in 2016, 2014, or 2012.*

#### CANDIDATE SUPPLY AND CANDIDATE SUCCESS

As a corollary to the previous discussion, we did not expect gender and racial/ethnic “demand-side” factors alone to be influential in increasing the chances of women and candidates of color in the 2018 general election. Recent research on women and candidates of color finds that a number of “supply-side”

factors influence electoral success. For example, Fraga (2019) examined racial/ethnic minority candidates for congressional office and found evidence that race is a salient factor predicting candidate emergence at the primary stage but not at the general-election stage. Juenke (2014) considered Latino state legislative candidates in 2000 and 2010 and found significant bias associated with the traditional approach of ignoring candidate emergence in the descriptive-representation process. Similarly, Shah’s (2014) analysis of Black-candidate emergence into local office in Louisiana concluded that population or district composition effects are more acute at the first stage—and diminish significantly once a candidate is on the ballot. Shah, Scott, and Juenke (2019) examined the success of women of color in 2012 and 2014 elections and found strong support for the adage, “When they run, they win.” Indeed, of all the groups examined, women of color in those elections experienced the greatest success.

Given this growing body of research showing that when women and candidates of color make it to the general-election ballot, they win as often as their White and male partisan counterparts, we did not expect to see a measurable increase in the rate of general-election victory for women and candidates of color when they are on the ballot.

H3a: *Restricting the analysis to those elections in which a woman candidate is on the ballot, the proportion of general-election winners that are women in 2018 will be less than or equal to the proportion in 2016, 2014, or 2012.*

H3b: *Restricting the analysis to those elections in which a candidate of color is on the ballot, the proportion of general-election winners that are racial/ethnic minorities in 2018 will be less than or equal to the proportion in 2016, 2014, or 2012.*

H3a: *Restricting the analysis to those elections in which a woman of color candidate is on the ballot, the proportion of general-election winners that are women of color in 2018 will be less than or equal to the proportion in 2016, 2014, or 2012.*

In summary, we argue that those who were predicting a Democratic wave in 2018 because more women and candidates of color have the opportunity to win have the causal story exactly backwards. To the extent that there was a wave of new women and candidates of color officeholders resulting from the 2018 election, it was because more of them were competing (i.e., candidate supply)—and competing as Democrats in a

*Democratic-wave election*, not because voters are making new gendered and racial/ethnic choices (i.e., voter demand).

**DATA**

We examined the racial/ethnic and gender composition of the pool of state legislative candidates and eventual state legislative winners from 2012 to 2018. To do so, we drew on a list of

categories such that “minority” candidates constitute any individuals who are not White. Our measure of gender was closer to gender identity, which is the self-presentation of a person’s self-conception as male, female, or other gender category—again drawing on candidate websites and press reports. Individuals for whom race or gender could not be ascertained via either of the two coding strategies were dropped from the analysis,

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state legislative candidate names and election results compiled by Klarner (2018a; 2018b).<sup>2</sup> States without state legislative elections in 2018 (i.e., Louisiana, New Jersey, Mississippi, and Virginia) were excluded from our analysis.

Using information about the name and district of each individual, we determined race/ethnicity and gender by examining available relevant data about the candidates via two coding strategies.<sup>3</sup> We coded each individual as non-Hispanic White, Black, Hispanic, Asian American, or some other non-white group. For the purposes of our analysis, we collapsed

with an additional verification check determining whether our results would change if all of the missing datapoints were coded as White men.

**RESULTS**

Tables 1, 2, and 3 present the results of our analysis. Beginning with table 1, our first set of preregistered hypotheses is confirmed: racial/ethnic and gender representativeness among the proportion of general-election winners increased in 2018. Confirming the optimistic rhetoric following the 2018 election,

Table 1

**State Legislative General-Election Winners, All States in Sample**

| Total |       | Women |         | Candidates of Color |         | Women of Color |         |
|-------|-------|-------|---------|---------------------|---------|----------------|---------|
|       |       | Count | Percent | Count               | Percent | Count          | Percent |
| 2012  | 5,127 | 1,301 | 25.4%   | 673                 | 13.1%   | 241            | 4.7%    |
| 2014  | 5,350 | 1,350 | 25.2%   | 727                 | 13.6%   | 266            | 5.0%    |
| 2016  | 5,255 | 1,327 | 25.3%   | 742                 | 14.1%   | 267            | 5.1%    |
| 2018  | 5,649 | 1,710 | 30.3%   | 944                 | 16.7%   | 414            | 7.3%    |

Note: *Total* indicates the number of general election winners with information on gender and race. *Count* indicates the number of women, candidates of color, or women of color who won office, respectively. *Percent* indicates the share of winners who were women, candidates of color, or women of color.

Table 2

**Republican State Legislative General-Election Winners, All States in Sample**

| Total |       | Women |         | Candidates of Color |         | Women of Color |         |
|-------|-------|-------|---------|---------------------|---------|----------------|---------|
|       |       | Count | Percent | Count               | Percent | Count          | Percent |
| 2012  | 5,127 | 501   | 9.8%    | 82                  | 1.6%    | 20             | 0.4%    |
| 2014  | 5,350 | 561   | 10.5%   | 103                 | 1.9%    | 26             | 0.5%    |
| 2016  | 5,255 | 543   | 10.3%   | 88                  | 1.7%    | 25             | 0.5%    |
| 2018  | 5,649 | 523   | 9.3%    | 62                  | 1.1%    | 15             | 0.3%    |

Note: *Total* indicates the number of general-election winners with information on gender and race. *Count* indicates the number of Republican women, candidates of color, and women of color who won office, respectively. *Percent* indicates the share of winners who were Republican women, candidates of color, or women of color.

Table 3

State Legislative General-Election Win Rate, All States in Sample

|      | Women |       |          | Candidates of Color |      |          | Women of Color |      |          |
|------|-------|-------|----------|---------------------|------|----------|----------------|------|----------|
|      | Won   | Lost  | Win Rate | Won                 | Lost | Win Rate | Won            | Lost | Win Rate |
| 2012 | 1,301 | 753   | 63.3%    | 673                 | 241  | 73.6%    | 241            | 71   | 77.2%    |
| 2014 | 1,350 | 924   | 59.4%    | 727                 | 325  | 69.1%    | 266            | 104  | 71.9%    |
| 2016 | 1,327 | 859   | 60.7%    | 742                 | 285  | 72.2%    | 267            | 109  | 71.0%    |
| 2018 | 1,710 | 1,692 | 50.3%    | 944                 | 515  | 64.7%    | 414            | 196  | 67.9%    |

Note: *Won* and *Lost* indicate the number of women, candidates of color, and women of color who won or lost the general election, respectively. *Percent* indicates the share of women, candidates of color, and women of color who won office, conditional on being a general election candidate.

women, racial/ethnic minorities, and women of color won more elections than in previous years. In total, 400 more women, 200 more racial/ethnic minorities, and 200 more women of color were winners in 2018 than in 2016, thereby breaking through the stagnant pattern of minority and women’s representation rates observed from 2012 to 2016.

Table 2 confirms our preregistered hypotheses that the partisan “wave” was instrumental in these increases. In fact, when we review the proportion of Republican winners over time, we find a *decline* in 2018; whereas the raw numbers already were quite small, these declines are substantial. Specifically, the proportion of Republicans winning elections in 2018 declined by 10% from 2016, the proportion of racial/ethnic minorities declined by 35%, and the proportion of women of color declined by 40%.

Table 3 confirms our final set of hypotheses regarding the role of candidate supply in structuring an increase in state legislative representation by women and racial/ethnic minorities. Not only do we not see evidence of an increase in the win rate for 2018; a decrease also appears instead. Considering the opportunity to vote for women, racial/ethnic minorities, or women of color candidates on the general-election ballot, we found that in 2018, the proportion of winners was less than that in 2012, 2014, and 2016. Women in particular fared worse in 2018, dropping below a win rate of 50% for the first time in the elections we analyzed—and perhaps even

CONCLUSION

The 2018 elections were historic for inclusive representation, and we do not suggest that the increases in women and candidates of color running are not remarkable. Indeed, we join others in arguing that this is exactly where more scholarly attention should be given (Bernhard et al. 2019). However, as we demonstrate in this brief analysis, once candidate supply is considered, women and racial/ethnic minorities did not achieve record levels of *success* in 2018. Placing 2018 within the context of previous elections, we show first that women, racial/ethnic minorities, and women of color were less likely to win in 2018 than in previous years if we condition the results on candidate supply. Second, we find that the gains in representation were uneven and that representation of Republican women and Republican candidates of color decreased. These findings support recent research concluding that the Democratic Party is more invested in the recruitment of racial/ethnic minorities and women candidates.

Underrepresentation in the states continues but the future looks different. This is clear from the baseline findings that more women and candidates of color are winning office. However, these candidates are winning more because they are running more. Scholars should continue to examine the factors that lead to increases in the recruitment and support of women and candidates of color because these are the main drivers of representational changes in the United States. For the parties

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further back than 2012. Racial/ethnic minorities and women of color also were less likely to win their election and the win rate for women of color dropped to 67.9%, almost 10 percentage points lower than in 2012. Determining the reasons for this decline is beyond the scope of this analysis, but it is likely the result of a combination of factors, including increased racial/ethnic and gender resentment since 2016 (Junn 2017) and the mathematical artifact of more women and candidates of color running in 2018.

and political elites, particularly Republican elites, the message is clear: women and candidates of color will win partisan elections if they are supported on their pathway to the ballot. ■

NOTES

1. Our preregistered analysis was restricted to 2014–2018; however, we also present results from 2012.
2. For data from 2012 to 2016, we referred to Klamer (2018b). For 2018, we used a list of candidates and results provided by Klamer to participants in the PS symposium.

3. We used two coding strategies to ascertain candidate characteristics. First, for 15 states from 2012 to 2016 (i.e., Arkansas, Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Kentucky, North Carolina, New Mexico, Nevada, New York, Ohio, and Texas), we relied on expert coding conducted by the authors and their research assistants. Our primary source of information was candidate websites and press reports. Each candidate was coded twice. Second, for remaining states from 2012 to 2016, we relied on race/ethnicity and gender as estimated via voter file-based modeling conducted by the Women Donors Network's Reflective Democracy Campaign (2019). Using self-reported race from state voter files, or an imputation of race based on last name and neighborhood demographics, the Women Donors Network identified candidates as non-Hispanic White, Black, Latino, Asian American, Native American, multiracial, or "other." All 2018 data were coded by a collaborative network of scholars using the same coding rubric the authors developed for the 15 expert-coded states for 2012-2016. Information about the Candidate Characteristics Cooperative (C3) and a list of the 2018 participating scholars will be available when the data are released publicly in 2020.

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