

**Gender and Political Ambition Revisited:  
What Questions Does American Politics Research Raise for Western Europeanists?**

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\* \* These are very preliminary thoughts, comments are welcome! \* \*

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Among the long-term post-industrial democracies there is considerable variation in women's political presence in national (See Table 1) and subnational legislatures as well as in executive branches. While nowhere have women reached parity with men, in 11 of the EU-15 member states, Norway, Switzerland, and the European Parliament, there are higher percentages of women represented than in the U.S. Congress. In many of these countries representation is considerably higher than in the United States. The European Parliament contains 30.3% women and all western European countries – even Ireland, Italy, France, and Greece whose national parliaments contain fewer women than the U.S. House – send delegations to Brussels with a higher percentage of female deputies than Congress contains. Women have also served as chief executive and have been elected head of state in western European countries while the U.S. Presidency remains an exclusively male domain.

Not only does women's representation differ across the Atlantic, however, so too do the academic explanations for the causes of the degree of women's representation in various regions. Comparativists studying western Europe have primarily focused on structural factors, or explanations external to women themselves, when trying to explain the presence or absence of women in national legislatures. These factors include, to name just a few, various aspects of the electoral system used (Is it PR? What is the district magnitude? Is there preferential voting?), the presence of gender quotas and/or the type

of quota present, the nature of political parties (What nomination procedures do they use? How centralized is the party? What is the party ideology?), the strength of the women's movement in a given country, the level of modernization, and the national religion.<sup>1</sup>

While the American politics literature has certainly not ignored such structural influences on women's representation, Americanists have for decades also been very concerned with individual women's attitudes toward running for office. There is a long tradition of studying gender and political ambition in the American context and much of the explanation of U.S. women's political underrepresentation has been rooted in the notion that American women just don't seem to desire political office as much as American men do. To my knowledge, very little (if any) systematic research on gender and political ambition has been done in the western European context. Fiona Mackay's 2004 essay on "Gender and Political Representation in the UK: The State of the 'Discipline'" doesn't mention any literature on political ambition other than to state that this explanation for women's under representation does not seem plausible (106).

Below I review the American politics literature on gender and political ambition and the questions that the high level of women's political representation in western Europe raises for the study of gender and political ambition. I then hypothesize about possible answers to these questions.

### The Concept of Political Ambition

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<sup>1</sup> For references to this vast literature see Davidson-Schmich 2006.

The study of political ambition was introduced into the American political science field in 1966 with the publication of Joseph Schlesinger's *Ambition and Politics*. Schlesinger argued that the accountability of democratically-elected politicians to citizens was ensured because individual politicians are ambitious. That is, they want to either remain in their political position – what Schlesinger termed *static* political ambition – or, if conditions are right, advance to the next highest position available to them – what he identified as *progressive* political ambition (1966, 10).<sup>2</sup> In both cases, Schlesinger argued, ambitious politicians act on the interests of their voters because doing aids them in their own desire for advancement. Schlesinger's arguments were well received and this assumption of political ambition pervades the study of American politics today.

#### Gender and Political Ambition in American Politics

With the exception of one brief section to be discussed below, however, throughout *Ambition and Politics* Schlesinger uses exclusively male pronouns to refer to politicians. In the intervening forty years, considerable ink has been spilled over the question of whether Schlesinger's assumption of ambitious politicians applies to women as well as men. The general consensus in the literature is that American women are less politically ambitious than American men.

Some of the earliest officeholders in American politics were widows who served out their deceased husband's term and then returned to private life (Flammang, 1997, 159) – a

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<sup>2</sup> He also recognized the possibility that politicians could have *discrete* political ambition. This involves a desire for a particular office for one term – in other words a plan to retire from politics rather than contest the next election.

clear example of discrete political ambition. In 1962, 45% of all female House members to date had been Congressional widows (Gertzog, 2002, 96).

One of the earliest studies of women who were elected in their own right was Irene Diamond's 1977 book *Sex Roles in the State House* which examined female state legislators in New England, most of whom expressed little or no political ambition of any kind.<sup>3</sup> As one of her "housewife-benchwarmer" legislators recalled,

the townspeople came and asked me if I would take over [a departing representative's seat.] I ran unopposed and here I am. ... I was really very ... unhappy about it. I really didn't want to do it (Diamond, 1977, 120).

Also at this time, Jeane Kirkpatrick, based on a study of female state representatives and senators, observed, "Women do not have the habit of making long range plans for themselves. Few plan careers, or train for them; until recently, few planned families" (1974, 78).

A decade later, Susan J. Carroll's 1985(b) study of female Congressional and state legislative candidates also found limited numbers to be interested in a life-long political career. Further, most candidates did not have ambitions beyond state-level office, in contrast to Schlesinger's expectation of progressive ambition. Costantini (1990) studied Democratic and Republican presidential nominating convention delegates from California between 1964 and 1986 and found women less ambitious than men, although the gap closed considerably over the period studied. In a subsequent study, Susan J. Carroll (1985a) agreed with this assessment of party activists but found that women who held political office in the 1980s, in contrast to the party activists who became campaign

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<sup>3</sup> She did find a few individuals who were exceptions to this rule, however.

delegates, were just as ambitious as their male counterparts. Further, like Constantini, Gertzog found similar increases in progressive political ambition when tracing U.S. House members' careers throughout the twentieth century (2002).

Despite this closing gap and women's march into professional occupations and their rising (but still very limited!) presence in American government, women's political ambitions remained limited in the 1990s. Bledsoe and Herring (1990) found American male city councilors twice as likely to have progressive ambitions as female city councilors. That is, men were more likely than women to view their local political role as a springboard to higher office. Furthermore, even ambitious women were less likely than ambitious men to actually run for a higher post. Flammang (1997) also found women in local politics in Santa Clara, CA to have only static ambitions. In 1994, the National Women's Political Caucus found women less than half as likely as men to consider running for office (1).

The most recent scholarship in this area, led by Fox and Lawless (2004, 2005) and Lawless and Fox (2005) still finds American women less likely than similarly-placed men to consider a run for office, to think themselves qualified to run for office, or to be willing to run for office.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, women who do serve in Congress are less willing than men to remain there under certain circumstances, harboring only discrete ambitions (Lawless and Theriault 2006; Thomas, Herrick, and Braunstein, 2002, 414).

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<sup>4</sup> Indeed, qualified women's opting out of top positions in corporate America have also made headlines in the past several years. See Belkin (2003), Kellerman and Rhode (2004), Tischler (2004).

### How Students of American Politics Explain this Ambition Gap: Internal Factors

While American women have generally been found to be less politically ambitious than their male counterparts over the past four decades, the explanations for these low levels of ambitions have varied over time.<sup>5</sup> The primary thrust of this literature has been to look at women themselves – their individual beliefs and qualifications – as the sources of their low levels of political ambition. Initially, scholars stressed the role political socialization played.<sup>6</sup> Early studies found that women didn't see themselves as capable political actors, viewing politics as a man's job (Lee, 1977, 131). Instead, women were raised to think that competition was unfeminine and competitive behavior would be punished by social sanctions (Lee, 1977, 119). Observers agreed that women were socialized to sit back and wait and be asked to do something; they were not likely to be self-starters (Carroll, 1985b, 28; Kirkpatrick 1974). Later scholars criticized this work as “blaming the victim” (Darcy, Welsh, and Clark, 1987; Carroll 1993) and more recent work makes much less mention of these aspects of socialization.

Nonetheless, many studies have found correlations between a woman's support for feminism and her level of political ambition (Diamond 1977, Carroll, 1993, 204; Carroll, 1985b, 131; Fox and Lawless, 2003) and it seems likely that the generation of women researched in early studies may indeed have held limited ambitions due to traditional

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<sup>5</sup> Another possibility may simply be that American women *are* as ambitious as American men and have been socialized to deny or downplay their ambition, as it is considered a male trait unbecoming to women (Bledsoe and Herring, 1990, 218; Fox, 1997, 27). While this is indeed possible, the anonymous survey methodology used in many of the studies makes this seem unlikely. Furthermore, since the empirical research cited above has found women in candidate pools less likely than men to actually run, and if elected, to have higher levels of discrete ambition, their actual behavior seems consistent with reported attitudes.

<sup>6</sup> Flammang 1997 summarizes this literature well.

socialization.<sup>7</sup> This finding is reinforced by the many studies in American politics that find regional disparities in the numbers of women elected to U.S. state legislatures (Hill 1981, Nechemias 1987, Rule 1990, Flammang, 1997 Fox, 2000, 235). These authors rely on Daniel Elazar's categorization of regional political culture in the United States (1966). Women hailing from states with traditional political cultures (i.e., the deep South) were less likely to serve in the state legislature than women from other states. More recently, however, Fox and Lawless 2004 find regional culture makes little difference to women's political ambition, suggesting that even in the most traditional states competitiveness and political ambition may now be socially more acceptable in girls. Indeed, studies of American voters suggest that they are now willing to vote for women and that when women run, women win elections just as often as similarly-placed men (Darcy, Welsh and Clark 1987; Seltzer, Newman, and Leighton, 1997; Duerst-Lahti, 1998, 15). This may explain the closing of the ambition gap between the 1960s and the 1980s.

While society may now be more willing to accept women candidates in principle, traditional socialization may still make women less ambitious in practice, however – at least in certain stages of their lives. The long and irregular hours associated with a political career make it difficult to combine political office with childrearing and household tasks<sup>8</sup> – especially if the office held requires the politician to spend considerable time in Washington or in the state capital. Repeated studies have found women with children at home to have lower levels of political ambition than other

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<sup>7</sup> Recent work by Fox and Lawless (2005) finds that politicized upbringing increases political ambition; if girls don't receive such an upbringing they are unlikely to be ambitious later.

<sup>8</sup> An extensive literature finds that these tasks continue to fall disproportionately to women, even when both parents are employed (See Fox and Lawless, 2003, 22 for references).

groups, especially when an office far from home is considered (Lee, 1977, 128-130; Flammang, 1997, 162-67; Mandel 1983, 86, Fox and Lawless, 2003<sup>9</sup>). Finally, some observers have noted that women are less single-minded about pursuing a political career because they also get satisfaction from their role in the family (Bledsoe and Herring, 1990, 218). However, it is also important to mention that women may not uniquely be burdened with family responsibilities. Other studies have also found men reluctant to run because it could take time from their family (Fowler and McClure 1989, NWPC 1994, Fox and Lawless 2005). It is also the case that not all women are married or have children, and even those who are, do not spend their entire adult lives raising small children. In fact, more women than men in the “eligibility pool” for American candidates are unmarried and/or childless (Fox and Lawless, 2003, 39). Thus family responsibilities might diminish some women’s ambitions at some points in their lives, but seems unlikely to explain the overall political ambition gap.

Even without children, however, women may focus more on the effects of a political career on their interpersonal relationships than their male counterparts. American women have been found to consider more factors than men do when weighing an elective office (Flammang, 1997, 160; Fox, Lawless, and Feeley 2001). Having a supportive spouse has been shown to be of vital importance for American women considering a run for office while men often ignore their spouse’s opposition (Carroll 1993, 201; Mandel 1983, 73). A study of potential candidates done by the National Women’s Political Caucus found men more likely than women to say that running for office might hurt their personal lives, but nonetheless more men than women were willing to run (1994). Ruth Mandel, found

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<sup>9</sup> The same authors do not replicate this finding in their 2004 study, however.

that wives were more likely to support their husband's candidacy because it would add to family's income/ status. Husbands, in contrast, were less likely to support their wives' campaigns because the family's welfare wasn't as dependent on her winning; further, husbands were less available than wives to work on campaigns because they more often had their own careers to attend to (1983, 77; see also Thomas, Herrick, and Braunstein, 2002, 404). The fact that spousal support is critical, but often not forthcoming, depresses American women's overall levels of political ambition. American women are also more likely to leave political office if it clashes with their family responsibilities (Thomas, Herrick, and Braunstein, 2002, 414).

Other scholars initially attributed the ambition gap to women's lack of qualifications for office. Early work found women underrepresented in the professions from which American politicians were usually drawn, such as law and business (Darcy, Welsh, and Clark 1987), making it perhaps unsurprising that they did not feel qualified to run for higher office (Diamond, 1977, 121). Although women are now entering these professions at rates similar to men, their subjective assessments of their own qualifications for office have not risen; in samples of equally qualified American men and women, women still feel less qualified to hold elective office (NWPC 1994, Lawless and Fox 2005). As Senator Barbara Mikulski observed based on her conversations with women and men considering a run for office:

Men ask 'Is it worth it?' Then they want to talk 'strategy, tactics, organizing, who's a good pollster...' The women all went to talk about their issues: 'It's almost like they are prepping for their SATs or their doctoral orals. They think they have to have answers to every question they are going to get, everything from the water quality of the Chesapeake Bay to solving the savings and loan crisis (quoted in Witt et al, 1994, 119)

This is especially detrimental to women's political ambition because women are more likely than men to believe that qualifications are an important factor in determining whether one should run for office (Fox and Lawless, 2004; Fox, Lawless, and Feeley 2001).

American women are also concerned they would not know how to run for office even if they wanted to – a feeling that similarly-placed men did not share (NWPC 1994).<sup>10</sup> Perhaps women's lower levels of confidence in their abilities have to do with the fact that they fear sex discrimination if they were to run for office (Lee, 1977, 132), they feel they have less of a chance of successfully raising funds than men (Fox, 2000, 238-9), and are more likely than men to believe that women have a tough time getting elected and are less likely than men to think that they could win (NPWC 1994). Empirical research has repeatedly found that American women are not handicapped in either fundraising or winning elections, however, suggesting that women's concerns are misplaced (Darcy, Welsh, and Clark, 1987; Seltzer, Newman, and Leighton, 1997; Duerst-Lahti, 1998, 15).

#### Implications of these Internal Explanations

All of these findings, even the more recent ones, tend to blame the victims. If American women were only to become more confident in their qualifications and less dependent on their husbands' good will, these findings imply, they would be better represented in American politics. Over and over again, the literature on American politics concludes that women's under-representation in Congress and elsewhere is due to their lack of ambition. If more women decided to run, the argument goes, more women would be represented. A

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<sup>10</sup> Although Fowler and McClure, 1989, found that some men shared these concerns as well.

study conducted in the 1970s attributed 70% of the variance in women's representation in almost 800 municipalities to the number of female candidates (Flammang, 1997, 157). As Ruth B. Mandel put it in 1983, "until many, many more women see themselves as candidates, public leadership will remain one-sexed" (1983, 8). Later that decade, Darcy, Welsh and Clark argued, "If more women run, then more women will be elected" (1987, 62). Duerst-Lahti echoed this call in 1998 after it was found that in 1996 only 14.2% of House candidates and 12.1% of Senate candidates were women (Selzter, Newman, and Leighton, 1997, 121). Fox and Lawless's (2004) pessimistic assessment of American women's political ambition expressed concern that women's unwillingness to run for office in the U.S. means that women will be perpetually underrepresented here.

#### How Students of Western Europe Can to Contribute to the American Debate

In light of these conclusions, conditions in western Europe raise some interesting questions. Clearly more women are running for elective office in most of Western Europe than in the United States. There are (at least?) three possible explanations of why this is the case. First, it may be that in especially northwestern European countries, women are inherently more politically ambitious than their American sisters.<sup>11</sup> Women's socialization there may differ considerably from that in the U.S., eliminating the ambition gap and leading to more female candidates and more women serving in elective office. A second possibility is that the ambition gap observed by American political scientists is not caused by women's socialization or internal factors but by the context of the political opportunity structure in the United States. The internal barriers to ambition observed in

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<sup>11</sup> That they have not reached parity with men may be an indication that they still remain less ambitious than western European men, however.

the US may be present in western Europe as well, but political structures there may have nonetheless reduced or closed the ambition gap. That is, the use of PR combined with gender quotas and the high profile of women in politics may have increased western European women's willingness to run for elective office, despite their gender role socialization. A third possibility is that the ambition gap exists in western Europe as well, but that gender quotas and other political structures have simply forced parties to look long and hard until they can find one of the few women willing to run for office.

In order to determine which of these hypotheses is correct, a large scale survey of potential candidates for elective office in western Europe would have to be conducted in order to compare western European men's and women's political ambition. To my knowledge<sup>12</sup>, however, such a survey has never been conducted. As stated earlier, the literature on the European case usually does not mention the concept of political ambition or, if it is investigated, the studies focus only on women or only on people who made the decision to enter politics, i.e., those who have already shown political ambition (e.g., Norris and Lovenduski 1993, Geißel 1999a, 1999b, 2000). Literature from the American case, however, suggests that *once elected*, women tend to be as ambitious as men (Carroll Carroll 1985a, Fox and Lawless 2004), so these studies are not necessarily representative of the underlying population. Clearly, this empirical gap in our understanding of western European women's political ambition represents an important opportunity for future research. Below I weigh the likelihood of various outcomes to such studies.

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<sup>12</sup> This conclusion is based on a survey of the English and German language literature. One exception to this rule is Hoecker (1985, 67), who found anecdotal evidence that female German rank and file party members in the city of Bremen were more politically ambitious than their male counterparts. This conclusion was based on an extremely small sample, however.

### Internal Factors and Political Ambition in Western Europe

First, it is possible that western European women – especially those from northwestern Europe – are indeed inherently more politically ambitious than their American counterparts. They may have been socialized to view themselves as political actors and may be more willing to compete than American women. Inglehart and Norris' 2003 analysis of the World Value Study data does show that Finns and Swedes have the world's most progressive attitudes towards gender equality, a measure strongly influenced by citizens' tendency to disagree with the statement "men make better political leaders than women," while Americans score considerably lower (pp. 32-33). On the other hand, Canadians, and Norwegians had virtually identical attitudes toward gender equality but Norway ranks second in the world in terms of women's representation and Canada only 44<sup>th</sup>. Similarly, the U.S. and New Zealand have similar scores while there are almost twice as many women in New Zealand's parliament than in Congress.

Other methods of measuring internal factors causing the ambition gap seem equally problematic. For example, Protestantism has often been associated with women's increased interest in politics (Inglehart 1981) and likelihood of parliamentary representation (Norris 1997: 217-18; 2004:207; Paxton 1997; Rule 1987; 1994:20). Eleazar's "moralistic" political culture, found to be conducive to American women's political representation, had its roots in northern Europe (1966; see also Nechemias 1987). The Scandinavian social-democratic welfare state is associated with high levels of

women in the work force and generous social programs to facilitate working mothers (Esping-Andersen 1999). It seems plausible that women from these countries may be more willing to view themselves as political actors and better able to combine family responsibilities (and potentially hostile spouses) with a political career than American women can.

However, these variables cannot account for women's high levels of representation in Catholic countries such as Spain and Austria. Catholicism has been found to dampen both women's interest in politics (Inglehart 1981) and their parliamentary representation (Norris 1997: 217-18; 2004:207; Paxton 1997; Rule 1987; 1994:20). In comparison to the welfare states in Scandinavia and the U.S., the paternalistic welfare state typical of these Catholic countries inhibits women's labor force participation (O'Connor, Orloff and Shaver, 1999, 68) and the provision of services which ease women's household burdens (Iversen and Rosenbluth 2006). It strains the imagination to argue that women in these southern European countries would be significantly less burdened by family responsibilities or more likely to have supportive spouses (or care less about their spouses' views) than American women do.

Indeed, virtually all German-language literature on, and this author's interviews with, German women holding either party or elective office indicate that they face the same hurdles to political ambition that American women do; these findings hold both for northern Germany (Protestant) and the southern, Catholic part of the country. Echoing Diamond's findings in the US, Geissel found many women serving in city councils in

Berlin to claim that, rather than strategically deciding to become a candidate, they “fell into it.” As one local politician explained, “It wasn’t a conscious decision, rather it’s more like it just happened” (Geissel, 2000, 48-49). This author’s (2005) interviews with German state legislators found similar responses. When asked how she decided to enter the legislature, one woman responded, “I didn’t plan it.”

While women active in political careers in Germany do not report feeling that doing so is “unfeminine” or at odds with their socialization, many – especially in the Catholic south – report receiving hate mail or other social sanctions for entering politics (Berger, von Bothmer, and Suchardt, 1976, 49; Schmalz-Jacobsen 1981; Horstkötter 1990, 182-183). In addition to receiving threatening anonymous letters, one woman currently serving in the Baden-Württemberg state legislature, a mother of four, was told by the school principal that she should abandon her campaign or her children’s academic performance would suffer.

It is also clear that women in Germany, like their American counterparts, remain disproportionately responsible for childcare and housework (Schmalz-Jacobsen 1981; Berger, von Bothmer, and Suchardt 1976; Hoecker 1986, 1996; Holuscha 1999). This is particularly problematic for German political careers, which involve extensive party meets and other activities that take place at night or on the weekends. As one state representative explained,

Lots of events happen at night and on the weekends ... these things can only happen then because the other party members also work. So things take place at six or seven in the evening. And in addition to [the party activities] there are official events that you must attend. It is simply expected. Maybe they’re going to

cut the ribbon for a new hospital wing or there's a welcoming reception for a new doctor and they simply expect that the party's speaker for health issues will be there. People notice – the Social Democrats and the Christian Democrats were there, where were the Greens.... (Interview, Bremen)

This presents a problem for people with childcare responsibilities,

Yes, you have to admit, that it's an unsettled life. Even if you can manage your time well, there are some things you can't manage, because you don't know how long things will last ... you're always working with unknowns. That's difficult if you hired someone or asked someone to look after your kids and night after night you come an hour later than you planned. That creates tensions and makes people dissatisfied, and who wants to always have to live with that? It's a lot of stress. (Interview, Bremen)

Even politicians who did not have small children mentioned taking spouses' wishes into consideration,

Even with the most supportive husband ... I think you have to discuss with your partner how much time you're actually going to have left to spend together. I think both must discuss how much time they want to spend together in the future and if it's [going to be] OK. (Interview, Bremen)

Just like American women, German women appear to be dependent on spousal approval before deciding to run (See also Horstkötter 1990, 166).

German women, like their American counterparts, also express doubt in their qualifications for office (Berger et al, 1976, 81; Hoecker 1986; Holuscha 1999, 165).

Echoing Barbara Mikulski's observations in the U.S., one German interviewed observed, "When thinking about running for office, women ask themselves if they'd be good at all aspects of the job from A-Z. Men take things much more likely and say 'I'll figure it out as I go along.'" Moving up in party politics in Germany and obtaining a ballot nomination are dependent on an individual making many verbal contributions to debates within the party and speaking in front of a nominating convention. Many women have

little self confidence in their public speaking skills and/or don't like to compete against other people within their party for a nomination (Geissel, 2000; Berger et al 1976; Schmalz-Jacobsen 1981). One state representative in Baden-Wuerttemberg admitted, "At the beginning, I was a little afraid of competing against people who were my friends. That was uncomfortable for me and I mulled it over for a long time. I think it's like that for a lot of women."

Thus it seems highly unlikely that the large number of female candidates for elective office in most of western Europe, and the correspondingly large number of women MPs there, can be explained by merely looking at factors internal to women's lives. Here the similarities with the US are just too great. Instead, I hypothesize that a woman's political ambition is strongly conditioned by her external political context.<sup>13</sup> European women are likely to be more willing to believe they can win elections (and hence more willing to run for office) than their American counterparts because they receive more external affirmation that this is indeed the case.

#### External Factors and Political Ambition in Western Europe

Instead, it seems more plausible that American women do not aspire to elective office less often than many of their European counterparts because the latter's chances of nomination and election are much higher. In Schlesinger's original conception of political ambition he was clear that "ambition for office, like other ambitions, develops with a

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<sup>13</sup> This is not to say that the American literature doesn't take political opportunity structures into account – it certainly does, but authors are vague as to the relationship between the two (Flammang, 1997, 159; compare Carroll 1985b page 4 and 137). Since political opportunity structures within the U.S. do not vary much, it is difficult for Americanists to gain causal leverage over this question. This likely accounts for the weakness of the American literature on this front.

specific situation, that it is a response to the possibilities which lie before a person” (1966, 8). Toward the end of the book he conceded, “in the United States the opportunities to advance have been best for white Anglo-Saxon Protestant males. Before assigning progressive ambitions to a particular ... [individual], we should consider the restrictions facing women” and other racial/ ethnic minorities (1966, 172). Subsequent studies have indeed found that political ambition in American men is closely related to their chances of winning office.<sup>14</sup> Because American women *who are nominated and run* for elective office have been found to be just as likely as similarly placed men to win, many students of American politics have concluded that women who believe they will face discrimination or have a difficult time winning races are simply mistaken. However, this literature may be plagued by selection bias; the women who make it onto the ballot for a Congressional seat are the rare exception, rather than the rule. It is not possible to know how women might fare in the majority of places where women don’t run. It seems at least very plausible that rather than “when American women run, American women win” it may very well be the case that “where American women can win, American women run.” This may be very difficult to demonstrate empirically, but it seems at least a worthwhile exercise to pursue.

As it stands, there are many indications from the literature on American politics that the system of political opportunities in the United States contains many barriers to women’s representation. Worldwide comparative research finds the use of plurality to have a negative effect of women’s representation (Darcy, Welch, Clark, 1987, p.118; Rule 1994). Further, the decentralized nature of American political parties is not conducive to

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<sup>14</sup> See Stone and Maisel (2003, 951) for a review of this literature.

women's nominations (Caul 1999). Moreover the multiple parties present in most of western Europe increase the likelihood of the presence of Green or New Left parties which have been ideologically committed to increasing the number of women in office and have had a "contagion" effect, pushing rival parties to do the same (Caul 1999, Matland and Studlar 1996). The broad, middle of the road nature of the two mainstream American parties have not offered the same incentives for women's representation.

Against this backdrop, women in the "candidate pool" for American politics report being less likely to be encouraged to run for office than their male counterparts (Bledsoe and Herring 1990; Fox and Lawless, 2004). Furthermore, the women who are encouraged to run tend to get asked to run by family, while men are more likely to be asked by colleagues – arguably a stronger signal of potential success (NWPC 1994). Political party leaders are often reported to discourage potential women candidates (Fox, 2000, 245-6) or at least be subconsciously biased against them (Niven 1998). As a result, the American parties approach fewer women to run than men (Carroll 1985b, 44).

Research on American women and political ambition has suggested that being asked to run for office, being mentored to do so, and receiving training on how to run would have a significant positive impact on their level of ambition (Fox, Lawless, and Feeley 2001; NWPC 1994). While such programs exist, they tend to be sponsored by women's organizations and be billed to help women overcome existing hurdles first to getting their party's nomination and then to getting elected – thereby reinforcing the message that there *are* hurdles women have to overcome

In contrast, women in western Europe enjoy very different political opportunity structures. In addition to PR electoral systems with multiple, often more centralized, political parties, in most western European countries political parties have adopted some kind of gender quota for candidates to public office and Belgium has an electoral law quota.<sup>15</sup> Against the backdrop of these external factors – especially gender quotas – western European women may develop a higher level of political ambition than American women, even if they still face the challenges of balancing family responsibilities, personal relationships, and their gains in the workforce with political office. There are (at least!) three mechanisms through which gender quotas may increase western European women’s political ambition.

*Mechanism 1: Quotas may have an indirect effect on women’s political ambition*

Only very recently have Americanists begun to consider the interplay between the political opportunity structure and individual ambition. Githens (2003) argues that American women may feel underqualified to hold political office because electoral politics have been dominated by men for so long that they determine the normative standards of what constitutes a “politician” – this is the standard by which women judge their qualifications and it is no wonder they then come up short. (See also Holuscha 1999, 72.) Indeed, Fox and Lawless (2005) find that both American women and African Americans are much less likely to show political ambition than white men. Most recently, Campbell and Wohlbrecht (2006) find that the more women running in visible political

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<sup>15</sup> The degree to which voluntary party gender quotas are implemented may vary across political units and party families, however, and may correspondingly affect women’s levels of political ambition. See Davidson-Schmich 2006 for more details.

ances, the more adolescent girls show an interest in future political participation – including running for office. Perhaps it is the case in western Europe that, as a result of quotas, a critical mass of female politicians has been reached that women are now more willing to see themselves as competent to stand for elective office.

While this socialization route is certainly unlikely to depress women’s political ambition, the adoption of gender quotas have often led to sudden, large jumps in the percentages of women holding public office. For example, in Germany the percentages of women in both the Bundestag and state legislatures doubled in the decade after voluntary party quotas were adopted (Davidson-Schmich 2006). When many Scottish parties adopted the practice of “twinning” male and female candidates for elections to the newly created Scottish parliament, the number of women elected in the first election to the parliament exceeded the total number of women Scotland had ever sent to the House of Commons since women could first stand for election in 1918 (Brown 2001). Similar results occurred in Wales (Lovenduski 2005). These rapid increases in the number of women standing for election (and winning) seem unlikely to have been caused by socialization-induced changes, however, as the latter should only have a generational effect (See also Mackay, 2004, 106.)

*Mechanism 2: Quotas may have a direct effect on women’s political ambition*

Because parties that set gender quotas need to find female candidates to fill the slots allotted to them, they may undertake training and recruitment efforts. German parties, for example, have begun to offer public speaking courses and mentoring for female aspirants,

helping the latter feel better suited for a run for office and more comfortable with political institutions. As mentoring programs become institutionalized and parties routinely encourage certain women to run, individual women may become more confident in their own abilities due to the outside confirmation of their qualifications. German interviewees stressed the role that outside encouragement had on their decision to run for office. One city council member in Berlin observed, “I don’t think that, given my self image, I would have ever tried to obtain a place on the party list on my own initiative. The only reason I did was because people said ‘we need women and you’d be good’” (Geißel 2000; see also Horstkötter 1990). Indeed, Geißel (1999a, 1999b, 2000,) found that her sample of Berlin women who had chosen to run for local elected office did not usually join their parties with the goal of becoming politicians. Rather this desire emerged over the course of their experience within their parties. This suggests that a party quota-driven demand for women candidates may help stimulate women’s political ambition. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that initially unambitious women who were nominated and elected to public office became more ambitious once in office (Berger et al, 1976, 16). Other research from the German case suggests that women who are elected to city councils with a lot of other women are more likely to run again (exhibit static ambition) than women elected to councils where few other women serve in local government (Holuscha, 1999, 166).

*Mechanism 3: Women are differently ambitious than men, quotas are needed to spark their ambition*

Feminist scholarship has argued that women view power as *power to* rather than *power over* (Flammang, 1997, 74). The latter is more consistent with pure progressive ambition than the former. Women may appear less ambitious than men because ambition in surveys is measured as the abstract desire to hold a particular office rather than to achieve a particular policy goal. Many scholars have noted that while historically women have tended not to participate in running for elective office, they have been strongly involved in social movements (Githens 2003, Flammang 1997, Kolinsky 1998, Holuscha 1999, 80). When asked why they ran for elective office or decided to become a politician, women are more apt than men cross-nationally to say they got involved out of a desire to act on a certain issue or obtain a certain policy than out of a desire to hold a particular office or make a career (Fox 1997, Thomas, Herrick, and Braunstein, 2002, Constantini 1990, 759; Flammang 1997, 140; Kirkpatrick 1974, Mandel 1983, Berger et al 1976, Horstkötter 1990, 118; Holuscha, 1999, 63; Grolle and Bake, 1995). Unlike the desire to hold a powerful position, these policy goals can be obtained by methods other than running for office, such as working within a political party, lobbying elected officials, or joining an interest group.

In contexts where external factors are not conducive to women's candidacies, it is less likely that women pursuing policy goals would consider running for elected office as a means to obtaining these goals. In contrast, where female candidates are actively sought after, women may be more likely to aspire to elected office as a route to achieving a desired policy outcome. Thus quotas may increase women's ambition to hold office as a

means to obtaining policy goals they were already committed to achieving through other forms of political participation.

### The Ambition Gap May Still Persist in Western Europe

A third possibility is that western European women are indeed less ambitious than western European men, regardless of political opportunity structure. Rather than hindering women's political representation in a setting with gender quotas, however, this fact simply means that parties will have to approach more women than men to find enough candidates to fill their quotas. Given that parties have had difficulty filling quotas at times (Kolinsky 1998), this possibility seems at least plausible.

Besides measuring gender differences in political ambition in settings with quotas, another way to test this hypothesis would be track the careers of women in legislatures in countries with quotas. Do female MPs exhibit greater discrete ambition than their male counterparts, that is, do they tend to retire earlier? Do they manifest less progressive ambition, that is, are they less likely to aspire to positions beyond the backbenches than men? If this is indeed the case, gender quotas may increase the numbers of women in legislatures but have less effect in the executive branches of parliamentary systems.

If women are indeed less ambitious than men but still get elected in ever larger numbers, we are returned to Schlesinger's contention that ambition makes democracies responsive to citizens. If women get elected and tend to desire reelection less, does this mean they are less likely to be responsive to constituents than male legislators? Or do policy

motivations mean that women are less likely to abuse positions of authority for their own gain, instead loyally following the platform they stood for at election time?

Understanding gender differences in political ambition is also a route to helping us understand if women behave differently in office than men.

### Concluding Thoughts

Clearly we know little about gender differences in political ambition in western Europe.

This appears to be a fruitful avenue for political research, however. By extending the study of gender and political ambition beyond the American case we can better understand whether and/or how the political opportunity structure shapes women's political ambition. Further we can better assess the ability of gender quotas to bring women not only into parliament but beyond the backbenches as well.

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**Table 1: Percentage of Women in the National Parliament (Lower House)**

<b>Country</b> (Rank of 138; 1 = most women worldwide)	<b>% MPs who are women</b>	<b>Use of gender quota</b>
Sweden (2)	45.3%	Yes
Norway (3)	37.9%	Yes
Finland (4)	37.5%	Yes
Denmark (5)	36.9%	Yes
Netherlands (6)	36.7%	Yes
Spain (7)	36.0%	Yes
Belgium (11)	34.7%	Yes
Austria (12)	33.9%	Yes
Germany (16)	31.8%	Yes
European Parliament	30.3%	Varies by country
Switzerland (28)	25.0%	Yes
Luxembourg (34)	23.3%	Yes
Portugal (42)	21.3%	Yes
United Kingdom (50)	19.7%	Yes
<b>United States (69)</b>	<b>15.2%</b>	<b>No</b>
Ireland (77)	13.3%	Yes
Greece (79)	13.0%	Yes
France (85)	12.2%	Yes
Italy (89)	11.5%	Yes

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union; Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance