

Gender and Representation:

Economic Performance and the Emergence of Women in State Politics

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ABSTRACT

A plethora of literature in gender and representation has been devoted to understanding disparities that occur during campaigns. More recently, the shift has been toward candidate emergence and the decision of individual women to run in the United States. In this vein, I am curious whether women are likely to run for office following times of economic prosperity or disparity, respectively. I hypothesize that when the state of the economy is generally improving in terms of increasing GDP per capita and falling unemployment rates, more women will emerge to run for office. In times of better economic performance, I argue that voters will show more interest in a broader range of topics besides those that will directly affect their personal economic well-being. This will happen because they feel safer in their economic position. I suggest that this will lead to more women feeling encouraged to run for office because they anticipate a higher probability of winning. This may be attributable to asymmetrical partisan gender gaps and increased confidence to run on platforms voters typically ascribed to female politicians like issues affecting women, children, and families, and the promotion of the arts, rather than an economic focus typical to male campaigns. I analyzed state level data from 2009 to 2018 looking at state GDP per capita, unemployment rate by state, incumbency, and the number of women running for state executive in each state.

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INTRODUCTION

Some theories that attempt to explain the gender discrepancies cite geographic proximity as creating both physical (distance from the capitol) and social (familial responsibilities) barriers to women in politics (Nechemias 1985). Others suggest unequal preferences of men to women by the parties for positions of power within the legislature (Fox and Lawless 2005; Sanbonmatsu 2002). These theories are part of an ample literature devoted to explaining structural problems vis-à-vis gender and representation. However, gender disparities in fundraising, vote totals, and overt discrimination have begun to decline. Nevertheless, representation is by no means equal, perhaps making the focus of gender political studies during campaigning a belabored point. To properly identify a potential cause of the disparity, the literature must focus on the stage prior to campaigns: candidate emergence and the initial decision calculus involved in deciding to run (Fox and Lawless 2003; Fox and Lawless 2005; Rosenthal and Jones 2003).

My research seeks to further analyze the female candidate emergence process. In this vein, I am curious whether, in an age of growing candidate-centered campaigns (Pomper 1977; Steger 2000), women are more or less likely to run for office following times of economic prosperity or disparity. I hypothesize that when the state of the economy is generally good, more women candidates will emerge to run for office.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

A linear regression model was used to isolate the relationship between the variables. The data were run four different ways. First, the two economic variables were run separately with concurrent years as the election of interest. That is, the GDP per capita of 2010 for each state was run with the elections during 2010, then the unemployment rate of 2010 with the election of 2010. Second, the two variables were run together: GDP per capita and unemployment rates for 2010 were run concomitantly with the elections of 2010.

The last two tests were run to determine whether the economic output of the previous year had a lag effect on the elections and followed the same model as the first two in which the two economic causal variables were first run separately and then together. The two incumbency measures were run individually with each test and then together to increase robustness.

RESULTS

Initial tests revealed that, for data on the most recent elections in 2018, both unemployment data and GDP per capita from 2017 were statistically significant regarding the female emergence process for state executive. However, only the unemployment data had an effect on female emergence. For each one unit increase in unemployment, that is, as unemployment increased in percentage, the emergence of female candidates running for state executive decreased by 3.557. Incumbency was not a statistically significant measure. Further, unemployment and female incumbency rates exhibited the most compelling and supportive evidence of the hypothesis:

1. The data suggest that having a female incumbent increases the likelihood of other female emergence, while having an incumbent in general, not necessarily a woman, has a negative effect on female emergence.
2. There is a slight pattern by election year and unemployment rate: the election during 2016 produced significant data ($p=0.093$) that did not support the hypothesis, while the remaining five analyses produced during 2018 elections show significant data ($p=0.085$, $p=0.048$, $p=0.062$, $p=0.096$, $p=0.032$) that did support expectations.

Table 1. Regression Results for Non-Lag Years

Election Year		2010	2012	2014	2016	2018
Explanatory Variables	GDP per Capita	0.000 (0.000)	-0.001 (0.001)	-7.051E-006 (0.000)	7.303E-005 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
	Unemployment	-1.610 (1.307)	-1.964 (2.791)	-1.082 (1.754)	3.448 (3.734)	-3.386 (2.172)
	Incumbency+ Female Incumbency	20.680 (16.981)	--- (---)	-6.870 (9.337)	-6.510 (24.266)	6.690 (8.121)
Constant	37.844* (19.850)	69.316* (26.026)	25.282 (17.191)	-7.617 (30.743)	45.474*** (12.019)	
Observations	29	29	29	29	29	
Adjusted R ²	0.010	0.410	-0.010	-0.558	0.109	

Significance Levels: *** $p < 0.01$ ** $p < 0.05$ * $p < 0.1$
Standard errors in parentheses
+SPSS excluded incumbency in 2014 (Collinearity Statistics-Tolerance: 0.000)

Table 2. Regression Results for Lag Years

Election Year		2010	2012	2014	2016	2018
Explanatory Variables	GDP per Capita	0.000 (0.000)	-0.001 (0.000)	6.748E-007 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
	Unemployment	-1.801 (1.286)	-1.550 (2.250)	-0.532 (1.487)	3.792 (3.200)	-3.716* (1.839)
	Incumbency+ Female Incumbency	20.537 (16.681)	--- (---)	-6.721 (9.405)	-5.976 (21.363)	6.266 (7.904)
Constant	41.625* (20.842)	69.706* (25.111)	22.250 (17.423)	-12.912 (27.911)	48.019*** (11.791)	
Observations	29	34	34	34	34	
Adjusted R ²	0.023	0.444	-0.021	-0.396	0.150	

Significance Levels: *** $p < 0.01$ ** $p < 0.05$ * $p < 0.1$
Standard errors in parentheses
+SPSS excluded incumbency in 2011 (Collinearity Statistics-Tolerance: 0.000)

DISCUSSION

Generally, unemployment rates seem to have a statistically significant and negative effect on female candidate emergence. GDP per capita was a statistically significant measure, however, it did not directly play a role in the relationship between candidate emergence. The results of this study offer insight and speculation into female candidate emergence and more generally for understanding gender and representation.

Considering the future of women in politics may be bleak when women have been discriminated against for most of recorded history. Perhaps the only remedy is an entire societal shift in attitudes regarding an egalitarian approach to gender. Ideally this may increase female representation while encouraging younger women to pursue professional careers.

Future research may consider the relationship between temporal variance in public opinion on acceptance of women in politics and subsequent fluctuation in female candidates. Researchers may also seek to use surveys of interested candidates or perception of voters of candidates or issues to capture a fuller understanding. Finally, future research may delineate by race and party in the general topic of gender and representation.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study did not indicate incumbency to be a significant measure. GDP per capita was a significant measure, though had no effect on the emergence process. Unemployment rates were also partly significant; however, this measure played a direct role in the emergence process. For example, in the data collected for 2017 and 2018, a one unit increase in unemployment led to female emergence falling by roughly 3.5 percent

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