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The Journeys of Women in Local Elected Office: From Community Engagement to Making Meaningful Contributions

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THE JOURNEYS OF WOMEN IN LOCAL ELECTED OFFICE: FROM
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT TO MAKING MEANINGFUL CONTRIBUTIONS

By

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

Women remain underrepresented across every level of elected office in the United States. More than 30 years after the supposed "Year of the Woman," women hold less than 30% of the elected positions in local, state, and federal office. In the past, researchers attributed the paucity of women in office to structural barriers, including sexism in the electorate, fundraising difficulties, and discrimination by party gate keepers. A growing body of research, however, attributes the dearth of female politicians to a lack of political ambition among women and to gender socialization that prevents women from seeing themselves as political leaders.

The purpose of this study was to use a grounded theory approach to understand the journeys of women to local elected office and the skills they deployed to make meaningful contributions once elected. To date, most studies of women in office rely on large national surveys and focus almost exclusively on federal office holders. Interviews with eleven women already in local elected office in California provided rich information about the experiences that led these women to run for office and how they served once elected. Specifically, this study identified that early community engagement – acts of voluntarism, advocacy or activism – served to prime women to think of themselves as potential political candidates. Recruitment, training and support, especially from those who were already elected, catalyzed their decisions to run for office. Once elected, the women in this study described deploying communal and relational skills and strategies to make meaningful contributions in their roles.

These results stand in contrast with the notion that women perceive themselves as lacking the confidence and qualities of an elected leader and suggest that further study is needed, particularly as it relates to local elected officials. Understanding what motivates

and inspires women to successfully run for office, despite structural and gendered

barriers, may inform efforts to bring gender parity to our politics.

DEDICATION

To all the women fighting to be fiercely, authentically themselves when it would be

easier not to be – keep fighting.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

While gender is one of our most important societal organizing principles (Burns et al., 1997), there remains a significant gap in the data because of the historical absence of women's voices across all fields of study, from medicine to politics (Perez, 2019). As this study will demonstrate, that fact is especially true for women in local elected office. While many people may think of high-profile members of Congress when they think about electoral politics, in practice there are hundreds of thousands of local elected offices across the United States. This study seeks to hear the stories of women who successfully ran for local elected office, not to compare them to men but to understand their journeys and the skills and strategies required to make meaningful contributions in their roles.

Background of the Problem

The year 1992 was hailed as the "Year of the Woman" after four women, Carol Moseley Braun, Patty Murray, Barbara Boxer, and Dianne Feinstein, won election to the U.S. Senate. The election of these women brought the total number of women in the chamber to six. Over 30 years later, the paucity of women in elected office remains a fact of American politics. The Center for American Women in Politics (CAWP) at Rutgers University tracks the number of women serving in office at the federal, state, and mayoral level. As of January 2023, those numbers remain staggeringly low with women holding only 27.9% of the seats in the 118th U.S. Congress, 30.3% of statewide elective executive offices, and 32.7% of the seats in state legislatures (Center for American Women in Politics [CAWP], 2023). At the local municipal level, reliable national

statistics are more difficult to come by, but in California at least, women made up only 31% of the city council seats in the state as of 2017 (Michelin, 2017). The underrepresentation of women in elected office is the underpinning of most research into women and politics.

In literature published as far back as 1980, the disparity between men and women in politics was attributed to structural barriers—institutional, financial, and social roadblocks that prevented women from ever being considered for positions in the first place (Clark, 1991). Scholars have also noted the role of sexism by both party gate keepers and by the electorate (Dolan, 2018). More recent literature suggests that this ongoing disparity between men and women in elected office can be attributed to women's aversion to the competitive nature of the political process (Byrnes et al., 1999; Preece & Stoddard, 2015) and traditional gender socialization that even now keeps women from seeing themselves as politicians (Banaji & Hardin, 1996; Bauer, 2015; Fox & Lawless, 2011). Current scholarship emphasizes personal, internalized factors as opposed to external barriers to account for women's underrepresentation. Jennifer Lawless and Richard Fox are prominent political science researchers who have together published more than 20 papers and two books on the subject of women and politics. They summarize their overarching conclusions as follows:

> Women are less politically ambitious than men. They're less likely to think about running for office, less likely to be recruited to run, less likely to think they're qualified to run, and less likely to actually throw their hats into the ring. (Lawless & Fox, 2015, p. ix)

This theory of political ambition, or lack thereof, has gained popularity among a number of other researchers in the last several years, but there are methodological reasons to be skeptical. Lawless and Fox, for instance, relied almost entirely on data collected by surveys administered to large, national groups of respondents. In practice, much of the research conducted to date falls in one of two extremes: either it relies on large, national surveys to gauge public sentiment about political candidacies, or it assumes that running for Congress is no different than running for city council. There are more than half a million local offices in this country (Dolan & Lynch, 2016) but very little attention has been shown to those local offices within the research.

By measuring impact, researchers know that once elected, women are often more successful than their male counterparts at passing legislation (Volden et al., 2013) and securing funding for their districts (Anzia & Berry, 2011). Similar to research that correlated increased profitability to the presence of women on corporate boards (Post & Byron, 2015), a growing body of scholarship indicates that there are true societal benefits to increasing female representation as measured by the types of legislation that women pass and who it ultimately benefits (Goetz, 2007; Hardy-Fanta et al., 2007). Still, it is not clear that these quantitative data tell a complete story about women's performance in office, just as they do not explain why women are underrepresented in political office.

There is also a general lack of scholarship regarding women of color who serve in elected office. A pattern of outright dismissal is evidenced throughout much of the literature because either the sample size is too small, or the existing theory struggled to account for intersectionality. Among researchers who do study elected women of color, findings indicated that these women have a different conception of the value and nature

of political power than White women, and as such, articulated their own sense of purpose differently (Brown, 2011, 2014; Jaramillo, 2010).

In 2019, I conducted a mini study of women in elected office in which I interviewed one local school board member and one local city council member to understand the way in which they considered their own sense of purpose in elected office. Both office holders were women I considered friends and colleagues, but I had never taken the time to explicitly ask them about their experience in office overall. What emerged from those interviews was a profound realization that despite the dearth of women in office, the current scholarship has failed to adequately dive into the motivations, nuance, sense of purpose and complexity of women who chose to run for office and were elected. While the scope of this study extends past that of the exploratory study, the experience of uncovering themes upon which very little had been previously written motivated further investigation into the lived experiences of women in public office.

Problem Statement

The focus on the underrepresentation of women in electoral office yields a theory of knowledge dominated by deficits. As a feminist researcher, I want to understand what motivates the women who do run and win, rather than simply study what attributes most women seemingly lack.

The relationship between running and serving is not an abstract one; clearly gendered conceptions are not limited to political candidacy alone. For those women who do run and win, it remains unclear how they overcame internalized fears of inadequacy, a lack of political ambition, or any of the other deficits associated with women who run for

office in the current literature. Did women knowingly overcome these challenges or were they never viewed as challenges in the first place? In short, the current theory of knowledge lacks the ability to understand women who do decide to run for office and who then serve in an elected capacity.

The existing literature has an additional limitation: the previously referenced studies pertain almost exclusively to those women pursuing state and federal office. The absence of scholarship about local elected office holders is unfortunate given that cities, as compared to the state or federal levels, have a disproportionate impact on the daily lives of most Americans. Often, cities are the first point of citizen interaction with policy and policymakers, from park maintenance to public safety to parking requirements (Shields, 1999). As a city councilmember myself, I am often surprised by the latitude that local governing bodies have to make important public policy decisions and an overall lack of citizen understanding of the power of each level of government.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to gain a richer and more nuanced understanding of women who successfully run for office and how they conceptualize the journey from before candidacy to after the election. Running for office is not a separate, unrelated act that stands apart from serving in office; in fact, it is part of the fabric of an elected official's story. I am also interested in understanding what skills and strategies women deploy once they are elected such that they are able to make meaningful contributions in their roles.

For women in particular, the focus on underrepresentation has resulted in a shallow and lopsided perspective that fails to tell stories that illuminate the complexity

and nuance of both running for and serving in office. The intent of this study is to make meaning of the sum of these experiences. My research questions are as follows: 1. How do women elected to city council conceptualize their own journeys to local elected office? and 2. How do women in elected office describe the skills and strategies required to make meaningful contributions in their political roles?

Methodological Approach

In this study I used grounded theory to collect, analyze, and make sense of my data, constantly comparing results and themes and constructing meaning based on what was revealed within the data (Charmaz, 2006). I was inspired by *Preserving Self: Theorizing the Social and Psychological Process of Living with Parkinson Disease* in which Vann-Ward (2016) identified a theory by which those living with the disease use their own unique frames to conceptualize how to think of the disease as well as subsequent behaviors. This powerful idea, that our own conception of ourselves drives everything we do because it frames the way we think, was developed using a grounded theory approach and served to influence how a theory of local elected women might be created.

Chapter 3 details my research design and specifically how I interviewed eleven women from across California who each serve in elected office. Those interviews were transcribed and coded. From those codes, thematic areas emerged that are described in more detail in Chapter 4. In Chapter 5, I used those thematic areas to construct a theory to explain the journey of women who run and serve in local office.

I have been intentional about including my own experience and positionality within this research. Following Arendell's (1997) guidance to recognize our own filters, I

have embraced the notion that my positionality may add trustworthiness to the data because my findings rang true to me. Chapter 5 contains reflections that explore my own experiences relative to the results of this study.

Significance of the Study

An opportunity exists to consider all of the experiences of women who attain elected office, rather than just the decision to run for office. When Lawless and Fox (2010) conceptualized running for office as technically only two phases (considering a candidacy and then actually deciding to run), I believe they miss adequately considering the pre-candidacy experience that forms the basis of how women see themselves as future political leaders. Further, the "path" to elected office is described by most scholars as though it is linear; the notion of a required sequential progression from candidate to local office to higher office is notably rejected by some scholars who study women of color (Hardy-Fanta et al., 2007) but also has the potential to obscure the complexity of how and why women run for office.

The question of substantive versus descriptive representation also requires more investigation, especially in the context of women in leadership more broadly. If women have the capacity to lead differently than men, what does that mean for policy making? Are those policy priorities different for women of color as they achieve greater numbers in legislative offices? Eagly (2005) wrote from the approach of difference feminism:

> If female leaders become the ethical and ideological clones of male leaders, women's access to leadership roles would constitute a gain for equality of opportunity but would not transform organizations in any consequential way. However, contrary to this male clone possibility, research suggests that women in

powerful roles do promote a somewhat kinder, more socially compassionate

version of organizational goals and social policies. (p. 467)

The parallels to substantive representation are clear: how do we expect legislatures to

change as more women are elected? While I do not propose to answer this question in

this study, it is important to better understand what types of skills and strategies women

deploy and whether they are in any way gender based.

Attention should also be paid to the way in which existing research about the

experiences of women in politics is siloed by discipline. The literature in Chapter 2 spans

political science, social science, psychology, public policy, and leadership. Ackerly and

True (2019) called on feminist researchers to break down barriers of all kinds, especially

somewhat artificial barriers imposed by the organization of the academy. In addition to

understanding the range of experiences of women who run for office and win, further

research should continue to look for opportunities to blend disciplines and approaches in

the interest of gaining new insight.

Lastly, given the emphasis on survey and quantitative data analysis within the

existing research, scholars interested in thick and rich description have a significant

opportunity to gain new knowledge about women who run and serve in office. I am

particularly interested in extending Frederick's (2013) narrative work to understand how

women serving in office conceptualize their roles.

In practical terms, there are a number of organizations across the United States

dedicated to recruiting women to run for office, namely by trying to overcome structural

barriers that are increasingly dismissed by the literature. How could those organizations

more effectively make change if they were to conceptualize the experience of running for

office differently? How might more women actually run for office and win if we better

understood their experiences and what are the potential implications when more women

serve in public office?

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a significant body of extant research on women in political office. Here I

have provided a discussion of the most prevalent theories – including a paucity of women

in office as a result of structural barriers and a lack of women's political ambition – and

positioned them within the context of women in leadership, civic engagement and local

office holding. Given that I am interested not just in how women run for office but also

what they do once they are elected, I have included a summary of the current literature on

how women serve as well as a discussion of the absence of meaningful data about the

experiences of women of color.

Structural Barriers

Explanations for women's underrepresentation have evolved over time.

Traditionally, most scholars blamed structural barriers for preventing more women from

running for office. These included sexism within the electorate, women's lack of ability

to fundraise, the gatekeeper nature of male-dominated political party infrastructure, a

dearth of women's professional networks, and similar underrepresentation in "pipeline

professions" including law and business (Clark, 1991; Dittmar, 2015; Dolan, 2018;

Karpowitz et al., 2017; Lovenduski, 2005).

Gradually, scholars have come to dismiss some of these initial beliefs. Dolan

(2018) found that "levels of bias are low enough to no longer provide a significant

impediment to women's chances of election" (p. 50). Brooks (2013) did not find "any

evidence that the public makes less favorable underlying assumptions about female

candidates" nor did she find that the public "has more challenging rules for the behavior of women on the campaign trail" (p. 4).

According to Clark (1991), writing more than 32 years ago, "discrimination by party gatekeepers has been receding in recent years as the increased legitimacy of women politicians makes overt discrimination potentially costly" (p. 73). Similarly, Burrell (1996) argued that the fundraising barrier had similarly diminished over time, and that even in the mid-1990s, some female congressional candidates had outraised their male opponents. Both Dolan (2018) and Ford (2018) were quick to emphasize that "when women run, women win," suggesting that structural barriers, including fundraising, have all but vaporized.

Not all scholars agree. As recently as 2015, the Pew Research Center identified 37% of the electorate that was simply "not ready" to vote for a woman (Parker et al., 2015). Bauer (2015) found that while the public may not recognize themselves as being sexist or demonstrating sexist behavior, even subtle mentions of gender in the media could activate gender stereotyping that leads to bias. This is particularly true of issues of national security, where Democratic women are more negatively evaluated, regardless of experience (Holman et al., 2011). In her introduction to *He Runs, She Runs: Why Gender Stereotypes Do Not Harm Women Candidates*, Brooks (2013) suggested that the media is responsible for perpetuating and exaggerating the extent to which the electorate exhibits sexism; Ross (2002) blamed the media, not the consumers of media, for reinforcing the gender stereotype narratives of political candidates. Regardless of the origin of the bias, I hesitate to so quickly dismiss the notion of structural barriers, particularly those rooted in gendered discrimination, based on the existing scholarship from the fields of business,

law enforcement, and the military, that make clear that institutional sexism still runs rampant (Bonnes, 2018; Hughes, 2011; Oliver et al., 2018). A very recent study of the 2016 election showed "a robust relationship between sexist beliefs about women's ability to hold political office and voting for Donald Trump among White voters, and a more limited and contingent association among non-White voters" (Bracic et al., 2019, p. 17).

Fundraising has historically been a significant marker of political participation. A 2014 study by the Institute for Women's Policy Research added nuance not accounted for in many of the other studies on women's political candidacy (Baer & Hartmann, 2014); that study identified that "the money barrier" is three separate components: learning to ask, cultivating fundraising networks, and access to existing fundraising networks (Baer & Hartmann, 2014, p. iii). These results came from 45 interviews and several focus groups with candidates, legislators, and staffers.

Socioeconomic status is a barrier to all candidates who run for office, and most scholarship suggests that women are at a great disadvantage due to the disparity of women who are breadwinners (Bernhard et al., 2021; Burns et al., 1997, 2001). Less prominent cultural barriers, like the lack of role models and mentorship, also have a part to play that is rarely discussed in the literature of politics but is noted frequently in research about the advancement of women in the academy, for example (Mena, 2016).

Political Ambition

Gender Socialization

The role of a biblical Eve determined how women should think and behave for most of Western history (Hamlin, 2014). Instead of being liberated by Darwin, evolutionary theory only compounded the notion that women were to live in "separate

spheres…Even anti-feminist arguments that did not explicitly mention Eve were grounded in the basic premise that women were created as an afterthought and destined for treachery" (Hamlin, 2014, p. 29). President John Quincy Adams, speaking about the origins of democracy, referenced Eve's corrupting influence as a reason why women should be excluded from politics altogether (Adams, 1842).

The legacy of societally assigned gender roles is significant. Lawless and Fox (2010) described how traditional gender expectations impact women in the political arena:

> Women, in essence, tend not to be socialized to possess the qualities the modern political arena demands of its candidates and elected officials. Whereas men are taught to be confident, assertive, and self-promoting, cultural attitudes toward women as political leaders, expectations of women's family roles, and the overarching male exclusiveness of most political institutions leave an imprint suggesting to women that it is often inappropriate to possess such characteristics. And when women do participate in historically masculine environments, they often come to believe that they have to be better than men to succeed. (Lawless & Fox, 2010, p. 13)

A vast body of research on gender socialization exists to support these findings. In multiple social psychology experiments, women participants were assigned communal associations like helpfulness, affection, and sensitivity to women and women's roles while agentic associations like ambition, self-reliance and assertiveness are ascribed to men (Cheryan et al., 2009; Eagly & Steffen, 1984; Eagly et al., 2000; Lambe & Maes, 2018, Venkatesh & Morris, 2000; Williams & Best, 1990). In a 30-nation study of gender

stereotypes and role associations, Williams and Best (1990) confirmed that this is a worldwide phenomenon.

Moreover, most scholars believed that gender socialization begins in early childhood, if not at birth (Chick et al., 2002; Fagot et al., 2012; Gunderson et al., 2012; Lindsey, 2015). Lawless and Fox (2015) noted that "adults' ideas about good citizenship, political activism, and political interest can be traced back to the childhood home" (p. 46). Among the high school and community college students surveyed for their book *Running from Office*, those who discussed politics and current affairs with their parents were far more likely to express an interest in politics later in life. This is supported by data gathered by Andolina et al. (2003). Lawless and Fox (2015) reported the following:

> Our surveys of lawyers, educators, and political activists found that women were nearly 20 percent less likely than men to remember speaking about politics with their fathers; and they were 15 percent less likely than men to report that their parents had encouraged them to run for office. Perhaps as a result of these family experiences, men were two-thirds more likely than women to have first considered running for office before they graduated from high school. (p. 65)

Clark (1991) posited that only women who have experienced "counter socialization" to traditional gender stereotypes will seek public office (p. 71). This theory is unsupported by any available empirical data, but it does beg the question: is there something different about how women who run for office conceptualize gender or gender stereotypes? This question remains unanswered by the literature.

Ambition Theory

In contrast to purely structural barriers, Lawless and Fox (2010) attributed the underrepresentation gap to a lack of women considering candidacy in the first place. In their study of 3,800 men and women, only 47% of women, compared to 64% of men, said that the idea of running for office had "crossed their mind" (p. 50). In the same survey, women were consistently less likely than men to have investigated how to put their name on the ballot or discussed running for office with friends and family. Lawless and Fox traced this gender difference to the prevalence of traditional family roles, childhood influences, and perceptions of qualifications. Each of these factors are inherently personal and have the potential to develop over time; as Lawless and Fox (2010) noted, "for most people, choosing to run for office is not a spontaneous decision; rather, it is the culmination of a long, personal evolution that often stretches back into early life" (p. 172). They labeled this a lack of "political ambition" on the part of women (p. 3). The prevailing opinion among leading researchers is that resolving this question of ambition is what stands in the way of equal legislative representation rather than sexism alone or any one structural barrier (Ford, 2018; Lawless & Fox, 2010; Schneider et al., 2016).

The idea that a lack of ambition might prevent women from running for office is mirrored by research on women's appetite for competitiveness and risk aversion. Preece and Stoddard (2015) dissuaded both men and women from expressing an interest in running for office by providing them with information about the competitive nature of politics. Women were dissuaded at twice the rate as men. Outside of politics, Gneezy et al. (2003) found that women were less competitive when they competed against men,

even when they had shown previous increased competitiveness and success against women. A number of studies identify that even mild priming results in reinforced traditional gender roles (Banaji & Hardin, 1996; Cheryan et al., 2009; Davies et al., 2005; Kray et al., 2001; Rudman & Phelan, 2010). In a meta-analysis of 150 psychology studies, Byrnes et al. (1999) reported that women were consistently more risk averse than men in making personal and professional decisions. Relatedly, Niederle and Vesterlund (2007) found that men consistently sought out more competition and did so with more confidence than women.

Feeling Qualified

A consequence of this competition aversion is that women doubt whether they are qualified for office, regardless of their professional standing, life accomplishments, or education (Clark, 1991; Fox & Lawless, 2011; Lovenduski, 2005).

Anzia and Berry (2011) suggested that women pay a performance premium for their minority status: "If women anticipate discrimination by voters, or simply underestimate their own qualifications, then only the most formidable women will run for office to begin with" (p. 480).

The problem is that researchers lack a standard for formidableness. Just as there are no studies of how women who run for office conceptualize their own gender conformity, there are no studies proving that women who decide to run for office are more competitive or less risk adverse than their counterparts who do not run. Anzia and Berry (2011) suggested a logical fallacy in comparing the outcome of elections in which women are inherently more qualified:

If the average female candidate is of higher quality than the average male candidate but receives the same amount of funding and wins the same number of votes, she is clearly not on equal footing with the man. Therefore, existing studies that simply compare women's and men's vote shares are not directly informative about the presence or absence of discrimination by voters. (p. 481)

In other words, perhaps the "when women run, women win" mantra should be revised to "when very qualified women run, women win."

Women in Leadership

The challenges of being a woman in any leadership role are many, regardless of the setting or profession. Women in politics are not just policymakers, they are viewed as leaders within their communities. While by no means comprehensive, it is worth providing a high level review of some of the literature on women in leadership, if only for context.

Female leaders are judged more negatively than men for their voices, their handshakes, and their nonverbal affect (Butler & Geis, 1990; Ross & Comrie, 2012). Women in leadership are held to role congruity standards that puts them in a double bind: when they are too feminine, they are perceived as lacking leadership capacity; when they are too masculine, they are judged as equally ill fit for leadership (Koenig et al., 2011; Ritter & Yoder, 2004). These effects are only exacerbated for women of color (Livingston et al., 2012). Moreover, women who deviate from stereotypical femininity in either presentation or role are subject to increased harassment and discrimination (Leskinen et al., 2015). Women in male-dominated professions face gender biased evaluative judgements, even when they are shown to be successful in their roles (Brescoll

et al., 2018; Heilman, 2001; Heilman et al., 2004; Hoyt, 2010; Robertson et al., 2011).

Put succinctly, "the self-assertive and tough, achievement-oriented, agentic behaviors for

which men are so positively valued are typically prohibited by women" (Heilman et al.,

2004, p. 416).

Despite the perceived disadvantage of being a woman in leadership, "the qualities

that constitute good leadership have changed in ways that lessen this role incongruity for

women" (Eagly & Carli, 2007, p. 158). In the last several decades, the Great Man style of

leadership has gradually been replaced by transformational and authentic leadership

theories that require emotional intelligence and awareness of followership (Eagly, 2007;

Liu et al., 2015; Yoder, 2008). The emphasis on collaboration, participation, and

compassion required of these leadership paradigms provide hope for the future of

gendered bias but are by no means a panacea; as Ford (2018) noted, even as recently as

2016, Hillary Clinton was forced to "demonstrate sufficient masculinity to be seen as

presidential" (p. 44).

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Community Engagement

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Much of this study focuses on the way in which women participate in the

community before entering politics. Given that the process of engaging in politics is

"strongly shaped by the experiences of everyday life" (Clément & Zhelnina, 2020, p.

122), it is important to understand the existing literature on how women engage civically

and communally. The existing literature does an insufficient job of capturing these types

of activities because of the inherently fuzzy boundaries around what might be considered

political in nature (Burns et al., 2001; Eliasoph, 1998; Schlozman et al., 1994). The

challenge is compounded by further definitional ambiguity; terms like "political

participation" usually refer exclusively to voting, donating to campaigns, or volunteering

on campaigns (Burns et al., 1997). Verba et al. (1995) used "civic voluntarism" to mean

volunteering in the political process but excludes non-political acts like volunteering in

the PTA and paid acts like serving on city councils (even when the pay for many city

councils is less than $12,000 per year). That leaves acts of advocacy, activism, and

voluntarism to fall into categories like "collectively organized social activity" (Calhoun,

2015) or "civic engagement" (Fisher et al., 2005; Schlozman et al., 1995; Scott et al.,

2021).

  While clear distinction and categorization may be necessary for the sake of

disciplinary rigor in academia, there is a cost to these narrow definitions. In a study that

measured the likelihood of female candidates winning office compared to male

candidates, Thomsen and King (2020) describe men as "more prominent actors in

electoral politics" (p. 991); the authors were only using "political participation" in the

narrowest sense; the basis of their conclusion was that men historically donate more than

women to political campaigns. Such overly broad inferences based on a limited definition

of participation are simply misleading because they ignore the myriad of other ways in

which women participate in the public sphere.

  Similarly, what might be thought of as activism is sometimes sanitized or made

simplistic for the sake of thematic congruence. This was the case in Carroll and

Sanbonmatsu's (2010) study of mayors wherein they recall the story of why US Senator

Barbara Mikulski first decided to run for office. She opposed the construction of a 16-

lane highway through a neighborhood in Baltimore and subsequently ran for city council.

As Pink (2012) noted, the word "activism" is too often "linked to the public, explicitly, explosive and sometimes even glamorous elements of political life" (p. 4).

Even assuming the broadest definition of public participation, women's work has traditionally been disregarded, as Vogel (1997) observed:

> Women and their role in the city have been overlooked, since women have tended to be active in neighborhoods and their schools and with developing and working within coalitions focusing on service delivery or safety issues. In urban politics, the scholarly focus upon the public versus the private sphere of the home has led away from understanding the kind of political involvement in which women have participated. (p. 115)

As with much of women's work, the role of community volunteer and conscientious advocate has been oft-discounted in the literature and most significantly in the study of women in politics (Schlozman et al., 1995; Stapleton, 2021). Women have long been "active on behalf of issues involving children and families, human welfare, broadly shared interests such as consumer or environmental concerns, and international peace" (Schlozman et al., 1995, p. 268).

Very few of the scholars who study women in electoral politics have considered local volunteers and activists among their pools of potential emerging candidates (Bernhard et al., 2021). Instead, there has been focus on women in the types of professions and institutions from which male politicians have typically begun their journeys, including elite law schools (Shames, 2017) and political donors who were lawyers (Thomsen & King, 2020). Another body of research exclusively considers those who start their political careers by running for Congress without recognizing how small

and insignificant this pool of candidates is in comparison to the thousands of elected

offices in this country or recognizing that local office may have been a precursor to

running for Congress (Bucchianeri, 2018). This focus on elites has resulted in a myopic

approach to the candidate pool by failing to consider more broadly who might run for

office (Scott et al., 2021). For example, Thomsen and King (2020) suggested they wanted

to cross-reference the responses of different types of candidates across different candidate

pools but still chose candidate pools of elites. They selected those who were state

legislators and thus potential candidates for Congress, those who expressed an interest in

running for US Senate, and lawyers who had donated politically, all groups that are

hardly representative of a broad candidate pool. Shames (2017) looked at political

ambition using a sample of elite law school students: "by the time I reached them, they

were already a highly selective group, vetted by multiple people and committees before

me (the admissions committees of their various colleges and graduate schools)" (p. 15).

This suggests that only elite, well-vetted candidates run for office. The existing

literature's obsession with focusing only on those who have been sufficiently vetted or

who have migrated through a specific career path has its roots in early political science

that assumed that women would join the ranks of men in politics in equal numbers as

more women became lawyers (Fox & Lawless, 2004).

There are three problems with the focus on elites. The first is simply that the

foundational argument has been disproved: elected women do not predominantly come

from traditional men's occupations. Carroll and Sanbonmatsu (2013) note that the

historical number of women in elected office over time has no correlation whatsoever to

the number of women in the legal profession. In fact, the most significant single-year

jump in elected women occurred in 2018 and has been tied to the policy and politics of the Trump administration (Brown & Gershon, 2021).

The second is that even if we do look to women in elite professions to understand their paths, we fail to recognize their privilege which makes them far from representative of most women. This privilege includes "strategies to balance family demands and professional demands and… infrastructure within their professions [e.g., flexible work schedules, on-site childcare] as well as higher levels of financial resources, that enable this balance" (Crowder-Meyer, 2020 p. 362). There are a few scholars who have made notable departures from the conventional wisdom of the "elite candidate" and suggested that the candidate pool be expanded to consider a broader range of women who might run for office. These include Frederick (2014) who is explicit in identifying the ways in which women of color in particular utilize social and political activism to position themselves as future elected leaders.

Castells' (1983) description of women's historical participation provides a basis from which to better understand that while women may have been marginalized and under studied, they nevertheless played critical roles and may in fact have been relied on by men for specific types of activism:

> Throughout history male domination has resulted in a concentration and hierarchy of social tasks: production, war, and political and religious power – the backbone of social organization – have been reserved for men. All the rest, that is, the immense variety of human experience, form the bringing-up of children and domestic work to sensual pleasure and human communication, have been the women's domain…. The role of women as organizing agents of social life is

extended to the struggle for a better, or even an alternative, form of life. Their concern for a variety of issues, which is sometimes remote from immediate political instrumentalism, creates a predisposition among men to accept women's leading role in these struggles, and, more importantly, makes participation appealing for women in the defense or transformation of a world whose meaning is closely connected to their daily lives. … at some fundamental level, there is an intimate connection between women and the city, between urban movements and women's liberation. (p. 68)

The reduced barrier to women's involvement at the neighborhood level has resulted in significant voluntary activity by women, especially over the last several decades (Vogel, 1997). That voluntary activity is associated with increasing amounts of political capital and "those who believe they can make a difference are voting, working on problems in their community and following news about politics and government" (Andolina et al., 2003, p. 279).

The Activism of Women of Color

The story of Senator Mikulski's political origins and the tendency to conflate activism and policymaking is particularly harmful to accurately telling the stories of women of color. While the literature may fail to adequately account for the way in which this work formed the basis for their later political runs, the connection between informal organization and political action is better established in literature on movement building and the civil rights movement (Williams, 2004). Carroll and Sanbonmatsu (2013) note that "the drive to overcome racial subordination has played an important role in the activism of both minority men and minority women in the United States" (p. 96).

Frederick (2014) credits the legacy of the civil rights movement with instilling women of color with the sense that their activism could not just make them good elected leaders but most importantly was a necessary expectation of their role as community leaders. Frederick calls these political origin stories "efficacy narratives" because they rely on women of color being fueled by their activism to create change.

Local Office

The current research into running for office often lacks context because not all elected offices are the same. The calculus behind deciding to run for a seat on city council in Los Angeles, with over 200,000 residents in each district, is inherently different than the decision to run for a local school board seat to represent 20,000 residents in a small town in the Midwest. Both seats are considered local offices, but they require an entirely different political apparatus. The literature, much of which is either specific to congress or written broadly enough to encompass all elected offices, fails to account for vast differences from one elected position to another. Thomas (1992) is one exception to this; her study of local city council members controlled for type of district and partisanship of the office, because most city councils are nonpartisan in nature, but some are not. Kathlene (1994) made a point of noting the differences between state legislatures in "political culture, length of session, salary compensation, staff resources, size of chamber, number of standing committees, use of subcommittees, degree of party competition, and parliamentary rules" (p. 560). These factors are important because they may ultimately play a role in whether a woman decides to run for office. The absence of local municipal focus may have a compound effect on the study of women in politics, in

light of research that shows women find greater electoral success in local office (Ford, 2018; Gavan-Koop & Smith, 2008; Trimble, 1995).

Shames (2017) provides an example of how research into candidate emergence is methodologically challenged due to an inability to identify an appropriate pool of individuals to study. While her findings help elucidate the challenges faced by potential candidates, most of her data came exclusively from studying students at one law school in the Northeast. While she reports finding representative samples across race and gender, I have concerns that this research only contributes to notions that only ambitious, academically advanced people do or should run for office. The bias towards exclusively studying elites runs deep within the political science literature (Holman & Schneider, 2018; Sidorsky, 2019).

There is an ongoing debate among scholars about the importance of women as substantive representatives as opposed to merely descriptive ones (Childs & Krook, 2008; Ford, 2018; Lovenduski & Norris, 2003; Mackay, 2008). To what extent do female elected leaders have an obligation to act for other women? In other words, is their presence within legislative bodies sufficient, or do they also have a moral obligation to work on so-called women's issues? And does that moral obligation stem from their status in the minority?

Mackay (2008) took issue with the simple notion that more women in office is good for women, given that women are not a homogenous group, and not all elected women subscribe to a common identity or policy platform. Crowley (2004) went so far as to postulate that perhaps fewer women in office results in better legislation because they can mobilize independently. In an article assessing the current state of political science

research into women in office, Childs and Krook (2006) asked researchers to stop focusing on when women make a difference but how, condemning the former to exploring only when women act for women rather than tackling the complexity of issues and politics in which both men and women engage. The nuanced nature of what women do in office and why it matters may be further complicated by what has been described as the Jackie Robinson effect in politics: women have to work harder and be more qualified than men to achieve the same ends (Anzia & Berry, 2011).

How Women Serve

In her study of the U.S. Congress, Swers (2002) found that while political party mattered significantly in terms of the type of legislation women passed, "gender provided the added intensity of interest to make feminist bills a priority and to encourage Democratic and Republican congresswomen to risk exposing partisan cleavages and mobilize opposition interest groups to place feminist issues on the national agenda" (p. 42). In other words, women were willing to work together and across the aisle for the sake of implementing legislation aimed to combat domestic violence, sexual assault, and workplace equality.

Some scholars note that women in office simply work differently than men (Brown, 2011; Edwards, 2018; Thomas, 1992). In a remarkable nationwide study of 975 local elected office holders, Thomas (1992) found that women spent up to 3 more hours per week than men on constituent service, including meeting with residents, local businesses, and local activist groups. Although most city council positions are either volunteer or part-time jobs, that same study showed that women worked an average of 25 hours per week as city council members while men averaged 20 hours.

Underpinned by critical mass theory, researchers also suggest that increasing the number of women in office leads to an increase in the number of bills written to address issues that were previously considered to be purely societal issues rather than policy issues, like sexual assault prevention and improving access to early childhood education (Lovenduski, 2005), and that in state legislatures, this effect is more pronounced for Democrats than for Republicans (Bratton, 2002).

While somewhat dated, there is evidence to support the idea that "women speak and act in ways that are more altruistic, more communal, more peaceful and more nurturing" (Schlozman et al., 1995, p. 268). Similarly, researchers claim women are more likely to participate in projects that benefit the good of the community overall including environmental activism and issues involving children and families (Elshtain, 1993). Schlozman et al. (1995) actually demonstrate using the Citizen Participation Study that women are not more likely to participate in grassroots or local political activities.

Women of Color

To this point, very little of the research described in this review included the experiences of women of color, a trend that is pervasive through the literature on women in politics. Hardy-Fanta et al. (2007) traced this to the beginning of political science research upon which our current understanding of women and politics is built: "the dominant paradigms in political science for understanding path to political office are male-centered, white-centered, and individually centered, and, hence, do not adequately capture the experience of people of color—women or men" (p. 1).

In their *It Still Takes a Candidate* chapter entitled "I am not a corrupt liar only out for myself," Lawless and Fox (2010) revealed that their national survey yielded quite

different results for Black and Latino students who were less likely to associate

politicians with negative attributes, and more likely to conceive of politics as a way in

which to improve peoples' lives. But rather than dig deeper into these results, the authors

dismissed the cause of this anomaly as attributable to the inspirational nature of the

Obama candidacy. The survey was completed before the 2008 election.

There is a pattern of minimizing non-White perspectives within the political

science literature, especially when the data are inconvenient. This concurs with

Frederick's (2013) assessment of the landscape:

> The experiences and priorities of white, middle-class women have too often been
>
> taken as the norm for all women, and the experiences and consciousness of
>
> women of color in the United States and women outside of the Western world
>
> have largely remained unrecognized and unexamined. (p. 115)

Lovenduski's *Feminizing Politics* (2005) acknowledged "compounded tokenism"

for women of color (p. 79) but does little to further discuss how women of color might

contribute to their goal of making politics more feminine.

Despite the dismissals, there is clear evidence that women of color experience

different journeys to political office than White women and also conceptualize their roles

differently (Brown, 2011, 2014; Jaramillo, 2010; Montoya et al., 2000; Moore, 2005).

Carroll and Sanbonmatsu (2013) note that "historically, the drive to overcome racial

subordination has played an important role in the activism of both minority men and

minority women in the United States" (p. 96). Puwar (2004) recalled Doreen Massey's

term "space invaders" to describe women of color in the United Kingdom's House of

Commons:

While accepting the agnostic perspective that there are 'no guarantees' that the

arrival of these 'new' bodies will articulate a different politics, in terms of policy

outcomes and political debate, this article asserts that the sociological terms of

their presence deserves in-depth attention. (p. 65)

The idea of a "different politics" is striking. Rather than simply rehashing the

debate about substantive representation and the degree to which women's policy making

supports women, some investigators suggest that women of color want to fundamentally

change the system and not merely represent minority interests (Brown, 2010; Prindeville,

2000; Puwar, 2004; Takash, 1993). Writing about Latina political power, Takash (1993)

suggested that researchers have it wrong when they assume that "minority demands for

representation are generally equated to their desire for access to the status quo" (p.330).

She goes on to suggest that instead, we might consider them "movements to change

existing relationships to power" (p. 330).

There is clearly more to review and understand within the landscape of both

intersectional identities and relationships to power amongst those who have been

historically disenfranchised.

Summary

Some scholars frame all the lack of gender parity in politics as a "supply and

demand problem" (Dolan & Hansen, 2018; Holman & Schneider, 2018) – on the supply

side, fewer women are interested in running due to a lack of self-confidence or ambition

or the career choices that inevitably omit them from the candidate pool. On the demand

side, party gate keepers and the general public challenge whether women are even wanted

in public office. Both are rooted in gendered norms.

Shames (2017) places the problem of underrepresentation within the context of Millennial's overall tepid feelings about politics. While the original research for her book *Out of the Running* was focused on why women were not more interested in running for office, she found that the problem permeated an entire generation as a "result of complex, critical thinking on the part of these young people about what politics is, how it currently operates, and what it can and cannot do" (p. 6).

Fundamentally, women's participation in politics and representation in elected office is important for democracy itself (Barnes & Burchard, 2012; Burns et al., 1997). Clayton et al. (2019) found that "across decision outcomes and issues areas, women's equal presence legitimizes decision-making processes and confers institutional trust" (p. 113). In contrast, "low levels of women's representation has implications for the quality of decision making" because "women's involvement in decision-making processes can increase the decision-making capacity of the group, improve cooperation, and lead to alternative solutions to public problems" (Schneider et al., 2016, p. 526). Facilitating an increase in the number of women in office and supporting them, especially during their first years in office, has wide ranging implications for our trust in government, especially during a time in which that trust has been significantly eroded.

By not having women visibly active in politics, the likelihood of women volunteering, donating, and participating in politics at all is significantly reduced (Burns et al., 1997). This recalls a common refrain that was shared during the Emerge candidate training program: "if you're not at the table, you're on the menu." The reciprocal of this may be true also; however, by increasing the number of women in politics, we might further excite and encourage women to engage in political activity.

However, we should be mindful not to consider women's participation as monolithic. Following the election of Donald Trump, Junn (2017) warned that "the hypothesis that more women voters would be influenced in their vote choice by gender identity and consciousness… is in need of conceptual reconsideration" (p. 345) given how many White women voted for Trump.

This research seeks to better understand women's stories including the journeys they take to office and the meaningful contributions they make once elected.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to better understand the experiences of women who run and serve in local elected office. This chapter details the methodological approach used to make meaning of the experiences that were conveyed to me and how that information was collected. The chapter begins with a discussion of the necessity for a qualitative approach and then details the constructivist grounded theory method used for this study. The role of the researcher is discussed in detail, as understanding my own positionality was critical to ensuring both the trustworthiness of the data and the place from where my own reasoning began. I then review data collection procedures, including how individuals were chosen for interviews, and briefly describe an exploratory study that helped influence this one. This chapter provides an overview of the context in which I conducted interviews, a summary of who was interviewed, and a discussion of the experience of interviewing before discussing the data analysis approach. Here, I relied heavily on Saldaña (2021) and Charmaz (2006) for guidance on coding and the treatment of my emergent theory. The chapter concludes with a review of the evidence of trustworthiness as well as limitations of the study.

Research Design

Qualitative Approach

From a methodological perspective, the existing research on women in political office has three critical drawbacks that have limited our understanding of why women go into politics and how they view their service. What follows is a summary of those three drawbacks and how I intend to use the methodology to combat those drawbacks.

Rich Data

The first problem with the existing research is the absence of rich, qualitative

information. To date, much of the work on the subject of women in politics is predicated

on large national surveys and quantitative analyses of large data sets that fail to provide

adequate complexity around how women decide to run for office and what they

experience when they do. By relying heavily on quantitative methods to study female

politicians, researchers miss the opportunity to obtain a deeper, richer understanding of

the complex phenomena that interest them (and me), including their motivation for

running, whether they held reservations about being sufficiently qualified, and once

elected, how they viewed the experience of serving in office. Childs and Krook (2006)

stated unequivocally:

> Unravelling these complexities [specifically, in their case, the challenge of
>
> understanding how women legislate] will require careful case-by-case analysis,
>
> and . . . will need to draw on methods and approaches that facilitate in-depth case
>
> study, such as interviews, participant observation and process tracing. (p. 24)

Following Childs and Krook's advice, Frederick (2013) interviewed 33 political

candidates to interrogate their "presentation of ambition" (p. 117). This study is important

because it went below the surface of the argument that women don't go into politics

simply because they lack political ambition. Frederick's study articulated the value of

listening to women's stories and in doing so, began an important investigation into their

motivations. Frederick stated, "The strength in my findings does not lie in their

generalizability. Rather, it lies in my attention to the particulars of the context and to the

complexities and contradictions embedded in my participants' 'deciding to run' stories" (Frederick, 2013, p. 123).

For this reason, I am conducting a qualitative study in the spirit of Eisner (2017) who said that "Qualities are candidates for experience. Experience is what we achieve as those qualities come to be known. It is through qualitative inquiry the intelligent apprehension of the qualitative world, that we make sense" (p. 21). Making meaning of the world around us and of the experiences of women cannot be done through survey research methods (Berger & Luckman, 1966). Moreover, if we assume that our social contexts are inherently subjective and constructed, we require an interpretivist approach to understand them (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I chose to use qualitative interviews to collect information about women in public office and to understand their journeys and sense of purpose.

All Elected Offices are Not the Same

The second drawback of much of the current research is that it obscures the differences between the states, level of office, and type of seat that the women hold. For example, other than the fact that both positions require an election, a local city council member shares very little in common with a member of Congress. With the exception of a few large cities (e.g., Los Angeles, San Diego, San Francisco), city council in California is not a full-time job; most city council members are paid less than $1,000 per month. The responsibilities and obligations of those in local elected positions vary dramatically from state to state, as does compensation. Most city council members do not have independent staff support, and the level of support they are provided varies dramatically from city to city. For example, as a city council member, I am "staffed" at

major events, but I share that staffer with six other elected officials. In Los Angeles,

members of city council have several staffers while members of Congress are paid

$174,000 annually and have the authority to hire up to 18 full time professional staff in

both Washington DC and in their home district[1]. All of this is important context because

it changes the nature of what women are committing to when deciding to run for office –

is it a full-time job, leading a team and managing a budget, or is it part-time job they will

have to fit around their existing professional and personal obligations?

While there are some surveys in the literature that fail to note the structural and

contextual differences between levels of elected office, this lack of distinction is most

obvious in the literature about women's political ambition. Expressing an interest in local

office is fundamentally different from expressing an interest in running for Congress

because of the different levels of commitment required of each, but there is little

distinction in much of the literature. In the Citizen Political Ambition Panel Study that

formed the basis of Fox and Lawless' (2010) book, *It Takes a Candidate*, only one

question was asked in each survey (there were two rounds of surveys) that distinguished

between levels of elected office. This is significant because the authors claim that their

research demonstrates that "eligible women candidates are dramatically less likely than

men to consider running for office and to launch an actual candidacy" (Lawless & Fox,

2010, p. 15) without clarifying what type of candidacy was considered. While they note

that the breadth of their survey "comes at the expense of analyzing the political

opportunity and structural aspects of the decision calculus in any particular race or set of

races," that limitation failed to constrain their claims about women in politics overall. I

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[1] https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/RL30064.html#_Toc29291962

posit that this is a fundamental methodological flaw – if we were to ask 3,000 women about their thoughts on flying, it might be important to tell them if we were referring to a commuter flight between Boston and New York or a hot air balloon ride across the Atlantic. As will be discussed relative to data collection procedures, this study was careful to only consider women serving on city councils in California and not to conflate their experiences with other elected positions.

What's Wrong with Women?

The third drawback is less easily categorized but might be broadly referred to as a "deficit model of understanding." Much of the current scholarship seems to be concerned with proving a negative: why aren't there more women in politics? With so much of the existing literature predicated on explaining why women do *not* run for office, it sometimes sounds like researchers are asking "what's wrong with women?" Explanations include a lack of political ambition (Fox et al., 2001), a lack of resources (Baer & Hartmann, 2014), and an insufficient number of women in the "right" professions (Clark, 1991).

In a rare exception, Shames et al. (2020) provided a useful reframing of this deficit. They studied women who entered the Emerge political training program where Democratic women are trained to run for office over the course of more than six weekend-long classes. The women who attend the training program self-select to be there, given the significant time required. When the authors looked at why these particular women had chosen to sign up for the class (indicating some willingness to run for office in the future), they identified what they called an "accumulation of advantage" by some privileged groups (Shames et al., 2020, p. 31). In other words, they weren't asking who wasn't in the class, they were asking who was and why. This is one of the ways in which an increasing number of feminist scholars are trying to shift the narrative away from an emphasis on deficits; how do we think about women in politics without centering the question of why there aren't more of them?

As Glesne (2016) notes, "The research methods you choose say something about your views on what qualifies as valuable knowledge" (p. 4). The methodology determines

the extent to which a study can expose a richer, deeper understanding of the experiences of women in local office. I intentionally asked questions about how the women I interviewed conceptualized their own journeys rather than focusing on the barriers that the existing research assumes they would have to overcome. By centering deficits, researchers run the risk of making the deficit the most valuable knowledge gained from their studies. For example, in my study, it was meaningful to hear women's explanations for why they felt qualified to run for office; many described exactly why they were qualified and what had given them confidence. It would have been less helpful to ask about their doubts.

The goal of this research is not to attempt to solve the problem of the dearth of elected women. Instead, using grounded theory, this study attempts to make meaning of the experiences of the women who do decide to run for office and who are currently serving. This research is rooted in hearing and interpreting the stories these women tell about themselves because "by granting them a voice, feminist methodologists render a human quality to those we are studying" (Ardovini, 2015, p. 20). A constructivist, inductive approach allowed for the consideration of their own meaning-making without making assumptions about ambition or deficits. Varied and multiple meanings were considered throughout in an attempt to derive understanding and build theory.

Grounded Theory

While this was always designed to be a qualitative study because of the need to understand experiences and interrogate their meanings, grounded theory provided the methodological framework to truly explore what the experience of running and serving in office meant for women. Grounded theory is a research method that strives to create

theories rooted in the data collected. While Glaser and Strauss are credited with initially developing the method, starting with their 1967 *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, that original articulation has been criticized for relying too heavily on positivist notions of discovering a single truth. Charmaz's (2014) *Constructing Grounded Theory* continued the tradition of developing theory rooted in iterative data collection and analysis, but her constructivist approach relies on the belief that we are not plucking theory from an existing library of established, acceptable, tested, or proven theories. Rather, constructivist grounded theorists use the data themselves to understand what might be happening. The process starts with data collection, continues with analyzing actions and processes, uses comparative methods to better understand data, and aims to inductively construct a theory. During that process, researchers are encouraged to continue testing their emerging theories by collecting more data (theoretical sampling) and searching for variations that might challenge our thinking. Glaser, Charmaz, and many other grounded theory researchers sum this up as trying to understand "What's really going on here?" (Charmaz, 2015; Glaser & Strauss, 2014).

Given my concerns with the deficit model that seemed so pervasive in explaining the absence of gender parity in elected office, I looked to constructivist grounded theorists to "bring doubt and a critical eye to… appraisals of earlier theories and research literatures" (Morse et al., 2016, p. 160). Grounded theory is interactive in that it allows for the constant interrogation of data but also expects interview questions, analyses, and coding will shift with improved understanding over time. Charmaz (2012) believes that "we can raise the level of conceptualization of these data and increase the theoretical reach of our analyses" by continuing to rigorously interpret and interact with data (p. 4).

As I will discuss later in this chapter, I analyzed transcripts from each of my interviews and then also compared the experiences of my interviewees against one another. This constant comparison is a key component of Grounded Theory because it ensures that all levels of conceptualization are considered (Charmaz, 2017; Corbin, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). While I developed preliminary thematic areas for exploration, it was the constant comparison between themes, ideas, participants, and sometimes individual statements, that allowed me to make meaning of my results. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) call the preliminary thematic results *categories*. These categories become increasingly infused with meaning as the data is analyzed, giving them *properties*. This process is inherently inductive in nature, meaning it is derived from the increasing understanding that comes with comparison and categorization. Charmaz (2014) alluded to the power of this methodology to identify exactly the type of themes I expected to encounter in my research:

> The studied experience is embedded in larger and, often, hidden structures, networks, situations, and relationships… Subsequently, differences and distinctions between people become visible as well as the hierarchies of power, communication, and opportunity that maintain and perpetuate such differences and distinctions. (p. 240)

Corbin (2016) provided an example that mirrored my own experience with assigning themes and categories. She described developing a preliminary concept after listening to a study participant talk about his experience. She wrote herself an analytical memo about the concept but was prepared to "discard the concept if it should prove irrelevant as the analysis progressed" (Corbin, 2016, p. 36). Her willingness to discard or

iterate on a theme or category depending on how her research evolved is representative of

Grounded Theory. In the end, her preliminary concept became one component of a

broader category. Only a few of my original categories made their way into my final

analysis. This willingness to construct an analysis through iteration and search for greater

meaning is of particular importance to Charmaz (2016) who traces her commitment to

constructivist research with frustration early in her career that researchers failed to

recognize their own positionality. Charmaz (2016) noted, "Constructivist grounded

theorists recognize that we play a part in what stands as data and actively shape

interpretations of them" (p. 165). Grounded theory addresses this by providing a

mechanism with which to practice reflexivity – by coming back to the text of each of the

interviews to interrogate the data, I could attempt to disentangle my own perspective

from the words spoken by the participants, as I looked for how they made their own

meaning. This awareness of the researcher's influence is a key component of grounded

theory.

Grounded theory is not, however, just an approach to thinking about the data. It is

focused on actually building theory for what Merriam and Tisdell (2015) refers to as

"usefulness of practice" (p. 32). The intent is not to build a grand, all-encompassing

explanation for all phenomena related to an area of research but rather to contribute in

ways that may develop a greater understanding of that phenomena. In my case, I am not

attempting to build a theory that explains the last few hundred years of women's

gendered political dissuasion. Rather, my goal is to develop more knowledge of the

experiences of women who run for local elected office.

There is significant debate among grounded theorists about the extent to which familiarity with the existing research should be a prerequisite to good research (Bendassolli, 2013; Charmaz, 2021). Glaser has written extensively about the notion of preconceptions in grounded theory (Glaser, 2013) and proposed that grounded theorists entirely avoid extant literature in order to be more open to the story the data is telling us. Because of my existing knowledge (and frustration with) some of the current literature, I appreciated Dunne and Üstűndağ's (2020) article in which they dialogue about the reality of ignoring the literature altogether and whether that is a viable path for researchers and doctoral candidates in particular. While too much attention to the existing literature may compromise privileging the data, for the purposes of this research I have sided with Dunne and Üstűndağ (2020) to ensure that the knowledge gained through analysis and theory building is informed by the existing literature. In fact, contrasting my results with extant theories of women's political ambition in particular provides a perspective that I believe is valuable for our conception of women in political office. Grounded theory lends itself to an exploration of questions for which the existing research feels insufficient, regardless of theoretical preconceptions because of its emphasis on induction (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015); we build meaning from the data and that meaning may or may not stand in contrast to the existing literature.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do women elected to city council conceptualize their own journeys to local elected office?

2. How do women in elected office describe the skills and strategies required to make meaningful contributions in their political roles?

Role of the Researcher

It is appropriate to say more about my own positionality, as that inherently colors not just my interpretation of the data but also the manner in which it was collected in the first place. Rubin and Rubin (2011) suggested that it is "better to recognize our own filters and biases than try to appear neutral" (p. 10). Arendell (1997) observed that our personality identity, which includes our social and "historical baggage," influences all of the interactions in which a researcher engages.

As an elected city council member, I have some increased access to elected officials, but that also means that I have my own thoughts and feelings about leadership and public service based on my personal experience as a woman in political office.

Broom et al. (2009) hold that "qualitative research is as useful as the reflexive nature of the researcher regarding her influence on data production and analysis" (p. 52). To that end, I was very conscious of my positionality during both interviews and during subsequent data analysis. I combatted that concern through self-reflection. Ackerly and True (2019) recommended that feminist researchers engage in regular self-reflection not just about the researcher's current engagement but also about the context and framing of existing, previously studied research questions. The idea that deficit-based constructions—what women do not do—are so prevalent within the literature was one result of my early journaling exercises.

Because of my positionality, I felt a sense of kinship with all of these women. I have a lot in common with all of them – I have knocked on doors and fundraised and

anxiously refreshed the Registrar of Voters website on election night. For this reason, I worried at the beginning of the project that I might lack sufficient objectivity to adequately consider and interpret my data. Stapleton's (2021) study of the healthy cafeteria food movement in Eugene, Oregon helped shape my thinking. In this study, Stapleton was an active participant in the movement she documents. In her study, mothers, who she described as "knowledgeable, active and involved" (p. 89), made incremental change in one school district after years of trying. As a mother who struggled to breastfeed her child, Stapleton said that her "struggles to feed my own child have helped me understand the compulsion of mothers to improve food provided to children" (Stapleton, 2021, p. 96). Given her own positionality, Stapleton was better able to understand her participants, and that closeness fostered compassion and understanding where it might not otherwise have existed. The kinship I felt with the women I interviewed arguably made me a better researcher because I have a unique capacity to understand their experiences. Eisner (2017) claims that too often researchers' "need for objectivity leads to camouflage" (p. 36); I believe that situating myself clearly within this study is important for credibility and only led to better research. I will address this in more detail later in this chapter.

While Ross (2000) warned of the challenges experienced by researchers attempting to interview political elites, including a lack of availability and access and extreme power differentials between interviewees and researchers, I found that most women were excited to share their experiences with me. My own status as an elected official seemed to help break down some of these barriers with many of the women starting our interview by asking how I was balancing my city council role while finishing

my dissertation. Moreover, many local elected officials do not consider themselves to be "political elites," a term applied to all politicians throughout the literature that simply further reinforces the lack of understanding and attention given to local municipal politics. As Thomas (1992) noted, being accessible to constituents is one of the most important criterion for service in local office, and "a reputation for good and reliable constituency service is often cited as an important advantage for re-election" (p. 169).

Ross (2001) also suggested that female politicians are generally more amenable to participating in research of this kind. "In agreeing to participate," she wrote, "women are tacitly agreeing with the underlying premise of the research, that is, that there is something special and unique about being a woman politician" (Ross, 2000, p. 331). I found this to be absolutely true; at the annual California League of Cities conference in September 2021, I had the opportunity to meet two of my research participants (Annie and Jennifer) whom I had previously interviewed over Zoom as part of this research. They were both excited and openly curious about the research and my findings. Jennifer told me that our interview had made her think much more deeply about her own role and her accomplishments in a way that she hadn't previously.

I intentionally avoided interviewing anyone from Orange County, CA as I interact with elected officials there regularly, and I knew that bias may be detrimental to my study for two reasons. First, cities in the same county often compete for resources, and I did not want to carry into an interview any external bias about funding that my city lost out on, for example. Secondly, the political climate has been particularly toxic in the region of late. Orange County was once a bastion of Reagan Republicanism and to some, the "Blue Wave" of liberals to which I was elected in 2018 was a catastrophic event; I was

concerned that this event would prove a distraction. It was important to me, however, that this study remain grounded in local politics rather than state or national politics, and the state of California provides a sufficiently large number of cities from which to draw an interesting sample of women in office.

Exploratory Study

In 2019, I interviewed two women who were currently serving in office in Orange County: a Latina-Vietnamese city council member that I will call Michelle, and a White school board member that I will call Tiffany. I wrote a preliminary study of my findings that served to inform the research for this dissertation. At the time I was less focused on their journeys to office but instead on how they felt challenged and supported in their current roles. What emerged from that study were four key ideas: (1) constituent communication is not just a skill or a trait, it is fundamental to their sense of purpose in elected office; (2) policies were personal to them because they saw the day-to-day impacts that were the result of those policies; (3) they felt compelled to cure injustices; (4) they had both felt obligated to "step up" into positions of leadership.

This exploratory study was formative personally as it provided an initial experience of interviewing female elected officials and the ways in which they might make meaning of their experiences. While the themes that I have identified in this study were less obvious in my early work, I have re-read the transcripts of both Michelle and Tiffany, and they affirm the results of this study. I also interviewed Michelle during this study to understand if my preliminary results resonated with her experience as an elected official. I have included a summary of that discussion in the section on credibility, later in this chapter.

Setting and Context

I obtained IRB approval in Fall 2020 while the COVID-19 pandemic was well underway, and as such, all interviews were conducted over Zoom. COVID also posed a secondary problem – many elected officials found the first six to nine months of the pandemic to be particularly challenging. Certainly, my own experience was that my city council workload doubled during that period of time as we worked to distribute new health guidance, support struggling businesses, and respond to an increasing financial crisis all while entire city departments were either under quarantine or out sick. These circumstances framed when I decided to start interviewing and how much time I felt comfortable taking, knowing that like me, most elected officials were feeling overwhelmed.

My first six interviews were conducted between November 2020 and November 2021. 2020 was an election year, and I did not want to interview women that were in the throws of a re-election campaign, who had recently lost re-election, or who had only been elected for a very brief period of time; those women were avoided when selecting participants. After some preliminary data analysis and recognition that I had not yet reached "saturation" (Charmaz, 2006), I conducted an additional five interviews between February 2022 and June 2022. While some of the women I interviewed were up for re-election in 2022, the interviews were conducted early enough in the year that they had both the time to engage me and were not yet in the grind of an election (many candidates do not start campaigning until after the Fourth of July).

I was also careful not to interview anyone elected in Orange County so as to maintain my current elected position at arm's length from my research. As noted

previously, I was concerned for two reasons – the first is that local elections have become hyper-partisan in Orange County recently, with Orange County "flipping blue" in 2018 the year I was elected. While city councils are nonpartisan offices, most elected officials in Orange County are well aware of the party affiliation of other elected officials. Secondly, cities in the same County are in a constant battle for funding from the same sources, and I was concerned that might be a distraction for anyone I might interview. As such, all of my participants came from cities outside of my immediate county.

<div align="center">**Identifying and Recruiting Participants**</div>

Demographic and Geographic Diversity

My goal was to find women across a range of ages and political persuasions, and look for maximum variation in terms of race, sexual orientation, and religion. During the data collection process, I was intentional about seeking geographic diversity. While city council positions are often considered to be a somewhat homogenous group by those outside public office, California is strikingly different in political make up across the state. There are stark differences in ideology between urban and rural, north and south, and large and small cities. These differences were likely to translate into differences among those who are elected to serve in council positions (Enos, 2017). I include this information not because my intent is to draw conclusions about how geography impacted the women's meaning-making but merely to indicate that I attempted to achieve maximum variation in my sampling, given the importance that social scientists like Enos attribute to location.

To ensure geographic variation of the sample, I started my search by listing all of the cities in each of the 57 counties. I excluded cities in Orange County, the place where I

currently hold office, for reasons previously described. I also ruled out cities with populations greater than 250,000, as the largest cities in California have entirely different forms of government with full-time salaried council members and an extensive council staff. I contacted one woman per city and proceeded down the list alphabetically by county.

All initial outreach was by email, using the templates required by the IRB process. I did not know any of the women I was reaching out to, but I did reference in my email introduction that I was a fellow city council member. I re-sent my introductory email a maximum of three times, knowing that emails like mine frequently go unread or might be dismissed as spam.

In some cities, there were multiple elected women, and I could use discretion to determine which one I sent my request to. However, I simply followed the list of California cities alphabetically, emailing one woman from each city on the list in batches of 24 cities at a time. In total, I sent requests to 48 women, received responses from 15, and scheduled 11 interviews. Three of the women had scheduling issues or did not respond to my follow-up email.

The 11 women interviewed will be identified using a pseudonym for the remainder of this study, shown in Table 1. Further biographical details are provided in the introduction to Chapter 4.

Table 1

Participant Pseudonyms and Demographics

	Pseudonym	Race	Age
1	Annalise	Black	65+
2	Annie	White	35-55
3	Jennifer	Latina	35-55
4	Katie	White	35-55
5	Katya	Black	<35
6	Kim	Vietnamese/Latina	<35
7	Laney	Black	65+
8	Lauren	White	35-55
9	Maria	Black	35-55
10	Samantha	White	65+
11	Teresa	White	35-55

In total, the randomized method of data collection resulted in significant racial and geographic diversity. Six of the eleven women identified as women of color while the rest identified as White. Most of the women were aged 35 to 55, but two were older

than 65 and two were younger than 35. Four of the women were based in Southern California while seven lived in Northern California. Five of the women lived in rural areas, which is generally defined in California code to mean an area of fewer than 20,000 people, not included in the sphere of influence of an urban population center. This is relevant to this study as rural areas inherently have different legislative priorities as well as different governance challenges associated with how many people live in unincorporated areas and are thus in county not city control. As one of the priorities was not to conflate different levels of government, identifying structural distinctions between types of city council at the outset of the study seemed important.

I intentionally did not collect demographic information in advance of interviews to allow for the relevance of those details to emerge through the interview process, if participants chose to disclose that information. In some cases, demographic information was obtained by reading their publicly available biographies after they agreed to be part of the study.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted over Zoom and lasted approximately 60 minutes. All interviews were recorded and then sent for transcription. Interviews were conducted during two separate periods of time – the first seven interviews occurred in 2021 while the final four interviews occurred in 2022. This was largely due to my own availability but also allowed for the final interviews to reflect the learnings of the first set.

Throughout all of the interviews, I tried to heed Rubin and Rubin's (2011) guidance to use qualitative interviews to "hear" meaning and was deeply informed by Brinkmann and Kvale (2015). I used Rubin and Rubin's responsive interviewing style,

which meant I asked a series of main questions that were structured to ensure that the

research questions were addressed, but that the majority of interview time was centered

around follow-up questions that would allow for an exploration of the interviewee's

initial answers to get more detail. The main questions concerned the interviewees'

backgrounds, their experience in deciding to run for office, their overall experience in

serving in office, and their feelings about running for office. I asked follow-up questions

for each main question. I followed the advice offered by Rubin and Rubin (2011) that "it

is far more important to listen to what the interviewee wants to say on a topic than to go

down your prepared list of questions" (p. 125). Charmaz describes a potential conflict

here – on one hand we are trying to hear what is being said, and on the other, we are

conscious of the theory we are trying to build. Unsure of the direction of my theory, I

conducted the first six interviews with essentially the same set of main questions and

simply tried to gather as much data as I could. The seventh interview was cut short by

scheduling conflicts and felt minimalist and superficial, perhaps because it allowed

insufficient time for me to build rapport, and we both felt rushed. The main questions

asked during this first set of interviews were as follows:

1. Can you tell me a little about where you're from and where you grew up?

2. How did you first get involved in politics in your city?

3. When you were deciding to run, what were some of the qualifications you felt you
   had that would make you good in this role?

4. What made you decide to run?

5. What kind of challenges did you face when you decided to run for office?

6. Did you talk about politics as a child? Did you grow up in a political household?

7. What has challenged you the most in elected office?

8. What has given you the most support in elected office?

The remainder of the interview guide can be found in Appendix A.

Broom et al. (2009) pointed out that "the qualitative interview is a context in which cultural practices and social values are not merely recoded, but also performed, contested and reinforced" (p. 52). By engaging in semi-structured interviews (as opposed to completely structured interviews), I felt I was better able to listen to what was really happening with the women I was interviewing. After the first six interviews, I turned back to Charmaz's constructivist interviewing for guidance as I asked better follow-up questions to better make these interviews a "site of exploration, emergent understandings, legitimation of identity, and validation of experience" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 91). This led to interactions that I felt further validated my theory but also forced me to reconcile with the extent to which I was adequately embodying a mindset of co-creation. I became acutely aware of the extent to which I had held back my own thoughts and experiences, particularly in the first six interviews, in an attempt to seem like a more impartial interviewer. In at least one of my initial interviews, I even intimated that I would discuss my experience with campaign consultants *after* the interview, as though this information was separate and apart from the data I was collecting. The reality was that I was worried about injecting my own thoughts and feelings into the conversation too brazenly, so I held back from some of that conversation after the interview.

The second set of interviews with the remaining five women was far less structured and I believe the source of very rich data, as I opened myself up to more co-

construction of information. Ironically, I spoke far less in those interviews, perhaps because of this co-creation and perhaps because I felt less obligated to collect information that was less relevant to the themes upon which I had started to focus. For example, I am interested in ambition and how women thought about their own ambition. After Katya said that running for higher office was "a big lift" because of the obligation to travel to Sacramento weekly, I remarked that "none of these state offices seem designed for women in their 30s," which led to an extended reflection by Katya about achievement, joy, ambition and rest that I found profoundly insightful.

Participants were generally willing to share details of their experience without hesitation, although some did confirm during the interview that the information was confidential. Participants talked to me like a peer, occasionally making recommendations to me, including for example, how I might benefit from participating in the California League of Cities. Covid-19 necessitated that all interviews were remote which made some interviews technically challenging with poor connections and in one case, a dropped connection halfway through the interview.

I paid particular attention to how I might be exercising power or authority, knowing that the "interviewer-respondent interaction is a complex phenomenon" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 130) and power dynamics are fundamental to that interaction (Ackerly & True, 2019; Britzman, 1992; Lather, 1991). Most research warns of a power dynamic biased towards the researcher, but as Ross (2001) warns, when interviewing politicians, it might be biased towards the elected official. In retrospect, many of the concerns voiced by others did not materialize. Just as Ross (2001) found in her study of female elected officials in the Australian parliament, the women I

interviewed were eager to tell their stories and found the nature of my research of interest.

Just as Verba et al. (1995) were concerned that their participants would attribute their voluntarism to civic gratification to make themselves seem more selfless, we should be mindful that the participants of my study may have been concerned with providing socially desirable responses. Eliasoph (1998) documented the extent to which Americans will go to avoid sounding overtly political, instead preferring to talk about community and voluntarism. Frederick (2014) was equally critical and described how White elected women in particular reverted to an "accidental narrative" of political engagement:

> The strategy of presenting themselves as accidental candidates serves the purpose
> of providing a storyline that minimizes women's ambition, which is marked as
> masculine… this story provides an avenue to avoid the narrative disjunction
> between masculinized definitions of leadership and gendered values dominant in
> white communities. (p. 319)

We should retain some skepticism about some of the motivations for community engagement expressed by the women I interviewed and recognize that perhaps civic-minded motives are easier to discuss than both political ambition and even politics itself.

Data Analysis

I recorded interviews and then used a third-party transcription service (Transcription Panda and Rev.com) to transcribe them verbatim. I coded interviews using MAXQDA software. Line-by-line coding was first used, as recommended by Charmaz (2006) to break up data into its component parts and to recognize any nuances. I used a descriptive code for almost every line and then grouped the codes thematically. I also left

notes to myself in the transcript itself, a feature that MAXQDA allows you to associate with codes. This was done as soon after the interview as possible to capture initial ideas and to frame questions that might be asked in subsequent interviews. Additionally, some In vivo codes were also identified during the first cycle of coding; these were specifically for later use as potential quotes but were also visible as descriptive codes (Saldaña, 2021).

According to Saldaña (2021), descriptive coding is "essential groundwork for second cycle coding" (p. 104). While I did not code every single line, I still had 573 codes after I had completed coding all eleven interviews. It was immediately obvious that some of them could and should be grouped. I began my next stage of analysis by dividing my existing codes thematically into "Running for Office" and "Serving in Office." That resulted in the preliminary themes shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Preliminary Codes

Running for Office	Serving in Office
Affirmation	Knowing what to know
Why Run	Leadership
Early Exposure	Getting it right in government
Experience of Bias	Decision Making
Traits	Responding to Sexism
Moved Here	Community Leader
Activated to Run	Proud of Record
Committed to Running	Most Challenging
Espousing Feminism	Being Brave

Motivated by Local Issue	Support from Community
Campaign contributors	
Endorsements	
Felt Qualified	

I used constant comparison across all of the interviews within those two major areas of Running for Office and Serving in Office. The distinction between the two seemed important because I was interested in the idea of a journey. But while helpful to sort codes preliminarily, the idea of sorting by "before" and "after" an election seemed limiting because there were more than two steps to their journeys. Further, for most women, running, winning, and serving in office often ran together in their narratives. They didn't tell their stories in purely chronological or linear terms, and there certainly wasn't a clear distinction of how they identified "before" and "after" their election. The distinction was only useful as mere waypoints along their journeys, and these journeys were the subject of my first research question.

I kept coming back to the idea of "getting it right" in government. Specifically, many of the women expressed that it was really important to them personally that government did the right thing, and to that end, they sometimes took action that was either unpopular or controversial. For Annalise, that was raising water rates and in effect levying a tax on the community. For Annie, that was changing the town's seal to remove the vestiges of its racist past. "Getting it right" also showed up when Teresa told me that I really needed to join the League of Cities if I wanted to maximize my effectiveness as a city council member. I returned frequently to "getting it right" during my early line-by-line coding of my first five interviews, and I found myself returning to it during a second

pass at coding. Charmaz (2014) emphasized that "we must dig into our data to interpret participants' tacit meanings – and interact with these meanings again and again" (p.116). While I coded for "getting it right," it did seem that there was another meaning there that I couldn't quite understand but required further analysis.

While Glaser (2013) may not agree with the notion of consulting the literature during analysis, this proved pivotal as I looked for other ways in which I might consider "getting it right." Fisher et al. (2005) identified "a sense of efficacy" as critical to the reason why people engage in civic voluntarism and tie it to empowerment. Changing my conception to a desire for efficacy or effectiveness unlocked a new way of thinking about this data as it allowed me to distinguish the skills and strategies the women deployed from the ways in which they saw themselves as effective. However, effectiveness in government might also suggest that I was interested in how well a city's streets were maintained and how well budgets were managed. I was not interested in these facets of governance; I was interested in how the women conceptualized their own experiences serving in office. I kept asking myself the question, "Why did they bother to run? What did they hope to contribute?" After several coding iterations, "Sense of Efficacy" became "Making Meaningful Contributions."

This experience of evolving meaning was common for many of my categories and themes, and I wrestled with large buckets of ideas that all felt too simplistic at first. As I interrogated the data, continuing to probe for connections and meaning-making, a theory to explain how these women thought of their own journeys began to evolve. Saldaña (2021) was right to call coding "a task that is sometimes quite easy and sometimes quite

slippery" (p. 220). In the end, the theory I developed resonated with me on a fundamental level – it felt true to my own experience.

In their final form, the data (and subsequently Chapter 4) are organized as shown in Table 3:

Table 3

Final Themes and Codes

Theme	Code
Before Candidacy	Frustration
	Involvement in the Community
	Public Employment
	Resulting Connections
Deciding to Run	Intrinsic Motivation
	Extrinsic Motivation
	Knowing they were Qualified
Learning the Job – Skills and Strategies	Navigating the Learning Curve
	The Support the Received while Navigating the Learning Curve
	Being a Generalist
	Building Relationships
	Listening
	Dismissing Criticism
	Recognizing their Agency

Making Meaningful Contributions	Being a Voice for Others
	Pursuing a Policy Agenda

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

The goal of ascertaining the credibility of research is to determine how close to reality it is. As Merriam and Tisdell (2015) note, this can be particularly challenging for constructivist researchers who reject the notion of a single interpretation of reality; if we are co-constructing meaning, how do we even agree on a single definition of reality? I pursued two approaches in an attempt to affirm the credibility of my data. In the first, I conducted member checking with two of my interviewees: Kim and Annalise. Kim provided some initial feedback via email when I shared my initial thematic areas and also participated in a follow-up Zoom call months after her initial interview to further discuss those thematic areas. She described how the themes had been "living rent-free in [her] head" for months and how she'd started to see them everywhere with other elected women she interacted with. Annalise suggested I was missing an opportunity to say more about leadership, and I subsequently added a section in Chapter 5 in response to that critique.

The most meaningful validation came from Michelle, one of the women I interviewed during my exploratory study. I conducted a follow-up interview with her with the goal of getting her input specifically on my findings so far as a kind of peer review. While many of my findings rang true for her, she pointed out two important limitations of the study that revolved around the credibility of the participants

themselves. The first is the fact that interviewees were unlikely to attribute any of their motivation to purposes that were not altruistic. In other words, no one was going to tell me about how much their ego benefitted from the attention they experienced in the role. Similarly, she felt the theme of Community Engagement was overly broad and that I should not be so quick to dismiss Fox and Lawless' (2005) notion of "nascent ambition." Michelle was always interested in politics – she wanted to be the President of the United States when she was in elementary school. She worked in a congressman's district office right after college. While she had engaged in some early community participation related to voting districts, she believed that in retrospect, she would have found a way to run for office anyway. I discuss nascent political ambition in Chapter 5, but Michelle's story raises an important question. While none of my participants in this study acknowledged any childhood interest in politics nor any inclination that they planned to run long before they were civically engaged, it is possible that they were not being truthful. As Morse et al. (2016) notes:

> Interviews give us a way to learn about our participants' lives and to hear their stories from their perspective. Are these stories inaccurate? Perhaps occasionally. But from a grounded theory perspective, what matters analytically is the theoretical plausibility of a given story. (p. 166)

In this case, it is important to acknowledge this question of participant credibility as a potential limitation of the study; however, enough of the women confirmed a lack of early political ambition that I believe my analysis accurately reflected their realities.

Morse et al. (2016) encourage researchers to pursue data collection until saturation, which is the point at which a researcher can "anticipate the behaviors, beliefs,

attitudes and actions of the participants according to the research questions" (p.296).

While this is clearly an inherently subjective task, I recognized after my first six

interviews that I simply did not have enough data because categories still felt

incongruous. I conducted an additional five interviews to obtain more data, after which I

felt better able to anticipate participants' conception of the journeys and their sense of

purpose.

Lastly, I should acknowledge again my own positionality because I believe the

connections that I had with the women I interviewed contributed to the trustworthiness of

the data. As Morse et al. (2016) notes, "Constructivist grounded theorists recognize that

we play a part in what stands as data and actively shape interpretations of them" (p. 165).

In other words, whether I was an elected official or not, I was unavoidably co-creating

meaning as a researcher.

Transferability and Generalizability

This research is not intended to be representative of all women in politics but

rather, it provides a window of understanding into a group of women in local office about

which little qualitative research has been conducted. Eisner (2017) referred to the

accumulation of knowledge over time, and I do believe that this research helps us better

understand women who are contemplating running for office, have run for office, or are

currently serving in office. I sought to obtain maximum variability in my sample while

limiting the universe of potential participants to city councils in California with the intent

that this research might be extrapolated to the studies of others. Merriam and Tisdell

(2015) observe that maximum variability can facilitate knowledge transfer while quoting

Wolcott (2005): "every case is, in certain respects, like all other cases, like some other

cases, and like no other case" (p. 167). It is incumbent on researchers to determine the extent to which these results might "fit" with their own conception of the world.

Methodological Limitations of the Study

While I provide more comprehensive limitations of this study in Chapter 5, here I will detail the methodological limitations. As discussed, the interpretative and constructed nature of this research means that credibility will remain a limitation, despite my attempts to mitigate it. Further, my own positionality means that I cannot separate my own identity or background from the analysis. However, every attempt was made to center women's voices while acknowledging my own experience, bias, and interpretation.

Misunderstandings and misinterpretations are always a possibility. As my exploratory research participant Michelle observed, the credibility of my participants should also be considered as a possible limitation; interviewing politicians inherently means risking that they are only telling you what you want to hear.

One critique of my study is the length of time over which I conducted interviews. More than 18 months passed between my first interview and my last. In that time, a national election occurred as well as the re-elections (successful and unsuccessful) of some of the women in this study. While I do not suggest that my results are generalizable and I do not believe that this time period impacted my data in a meaningful way because of my journaling and reliance on the transcripts themselves for information, I should nevertheless acknowledge that the environment in which the interviews occurred may have changed with shifts in macro forces like the election of President Joe Biden, for example.

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the methods used to collect and analyze my data. Previous research into women in elected office is characterized by large quantitative data sets that improperly consider all women elected to political positions to be the same, even when dramatic differences exist between hierarchies of elected office (federal versus local, for example). Moreover, much of the literature is devoted to understanding why there are fewer women in office than men. This research is narrowly focused on what I call the deficit model because it usually concludes by determining that because women lack something – funding, stature, confidence, ambition, or networks – they choose not to serve. Previous methodological approaches lacked a richness of qualitative information, sufficient distinction between types of elected office, and inappropriately blamed the lack of women in office on perceived deficits. Given these drawbacks, I followed Keddy et al. (1996) and their guidance to use methodology itself as a way for feminist scholars to redefine what knowledge we consider to be valuable as I sought to understand the experiences of women in local office and how they conceptualized both their journeys to office and their understanding of purpose once they were elected.

Constructivist grounded theory was selected because it relies on making meaning from the data collected, without imposing positivist notions of discovering truth. Instead, it relies on an iterative process of constant comparison that encourages researchers to probe the data and let ideas emerge.

My experience of data analysis was very much in keeping with Morse et al.'s (2016) description: "I could see the words but I wanted to get beneath the surface to find out what those words were telling me. I tried out various interpretations and discarded

those that were not supported by data" (p. 36). My preliminary analysis led to a second round of interviews as I sought to better understand the themes that emerged. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) compare this to going back and forth from the forest to the trees; the change in perspective and the comparisons it provokes are fundamental to identifying an overarching theory.

I also gave thought to the role of the researcher and the extent to which, by virtue of my own experience, I was inserting myself into the research. This, too, is perhaps emergent, as Morse et al. (2016) notes "the researcher's own subjectivity is always socially and temporally located" (p. 155). My own experiences are themselves not static; I am quite sure my interpretation and understanding, and likely even the questions I asked during interviews, were influenced by what I was experiencing at that time also. To assume my interviews or my interpretation could otherwise have been truly objective is to dimmish our own human experience and the meaning we make of our own experiences.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The goal of this research is to better understand how women conceptualize their own journeys to local elected office and the strategies and skills they deploy once elected. The focus of this research is on the experiences of women who serve on city councils in California. I begin with a brief summary of the biography of each of the eleven women I interviewed.

Annalise is Black and lives in a very small town in Northern California. She is retired after spending her career in public works in a major city and briefly serving in the Navy. She started watching city council meetings out of curiosity and increasingly paid attention to them over the course of several years before running for office. She is in her second term and in her sixties.

Annie is White, trained as a chef, and now owns a café and a sausage-making business. She is in her thirties and lives in a rural, medium-sized city in Northern California. She had no previous involvement in politics but felt well-connected within her community because of her businesses. She was encouraged to run for office by a group of historic preservationists. She is in her first term.

Jennifer is now a city planner after previously working for the Clerk of the Board of Supervisors in her county. She lives in a very small town in rural Northern California and identifies as Mexican-American. She felt she was always engaged in her kids' school but was intimidated by elected officials until she started working for the Board of Supervisors. After witnessing them up close and becoming increasingly engaged with

how policymaking impacted her community, she ran for school board and lost. She ran for city council a few years later and is now in her second term. She is in her forties.

Katie is White and a long-time county employee. She credits her experience living overseas as a child as helping her become more aware of current events. She was not involved in her community at all but was encouraged to run for council by a friend and mentor. She lives in a mid-sized city in Northern California. She has served on the city council for more than a decade and is in her fifties.

Katya is Black and lives in an affluent city within Los Angeles County. She is in her thirties and is an attorney and a single mother who ran for council after becoming increasingly involved in first, her daughter's school PTA, and later, the fair housing initiatives within her city. While she had not previously been involved in politics, her family was close family friends with several New Jersey politicians. This is her first term.

Kim is the daughter of Vietnamese and Mexican immigrants and has worked exclusively in the non-profit sector. She is in her twenties and previously volunteered with other political campaigns including for district attorney and mayor. She lives in a small rural town in the Central Valley and was the youngest woman I interviewed. This is her first term.

Laney is Black and lives in a large city in Southern California. She spent most of her career in the Parks and Recreation department of the city where she is now the mayor. That city traditionally relied on volunteers from the community to serve as coaches and staff, and she was charged with recruiting and organizing them. She credits that experience with providing her with the foundational skills needed to run for office and

serve. She served as a city council member for four terms and was elected mayor to serve a fifth term. She is in her seventies.

Lauren is White, owns her own law firm, and lives in a very affluent community in Southern California. The building that houses her law firm was being impacted by the policies of the city council at the time. She also felt that the city council was allowing the "mansionization" of her community by failing to enforce existing building codes that protected the historic nature of the city. She started rallying fellow homeowners and business owners to pay more attention to the council's policies. While her mother was involved in a Republican women's club, she had not previously been engaged in political activity. She is in her second term.

Samantha is White, in her seventies, and recently retired. She lives in a mid-sized Southern California city. After her husband passed away, she became increasingly involved in fighting speeding on her street, including attending meetings at City Hall. Frustrated by that experience, she ran for office and lost the first time. She ran again and won the second time. She is currently in her second term.

Maria is Black and currently a program manager at a nonprofit that fights human trafficking. She previously worked in administration for a local private college. She lives in a city on the outskirts of a large metropolitan area of Northern California. Her parents grew up in the South during segregation, and her mother pushed for her to be engaged in politics. She volunteered on campaigns from local to presidential and volunteered for the "Fem Dems" at the college at which she was working. Her political involvement eventually led to her being encouraged to run for office by an assemblywoman with whom she had become friends. She is in her third term and in her fifties.

Teresa is White, owns her own business doing IT consulting, and lives in an affluent, rural community in Northern California. She considers herself an environmentalist and first volunteered on a political campaign when her dentist ran for office. That participation led to more campaign volunteering where she often helped with IT-related issues. She first started paying attention at the local level when she became aware that the city council at the time was misusing an ordinance designed to contain urban sprawl, called an "urban growth boundary." She joined other environmental activists to fight the council's actions. She is in her second term and is in her forties.

Summary of Findings

The goal of this research was to better understand the experiences of elected women and how they made meaning of their experiences. Specifically, my research questions were: 1. How do women elected to city council conceptualize their own journeys to local elected office? and 2. How do women in elected office describe the skills and strategies required to make meaningful contributions in their political roles?

What follows is a description of the themes that emerged from the data, organized under three main ideas. The first is their experience with community or political life *before candidacy*, which describes what most women point to as the true beginning of their journeys to political office; notably, most women only came to that conclusion in retrospect because they described deciding to run only after they recounted their early community work. There was one notable exception in my data and that was with participant Katie. I describe how her experience was different and why that matters to this discussion.

Next, I describe the second phase in their journey to public office: *deciding to run*. It is important to distinguish their early involvement described in *before candidacy* from *deciding to run* because most of the women I interviewed were not thinking of themselves as candidates during the period of time in which they were only participating civically. Instead, becoming actual political candidates was a distinct act that occurred later in their journeys. The *deciding to run* theme is subdivided into three main components that describe the factors that influenced their decisions to run: intrinsic motivation, encouragement and recruitment, and knowing they were qualified. Each of the women spoke to at least one of these factors when describing how they made the decision to throw their hat into the ring.

Next, I focus on what these women experienced once they were elected. This is categorized as *navigating the learning curve* because it documents how these women often struggled to figure out how to work within the system to which they had been elected. This is followed by a discussion of the skills and strategies they used while in elected office.

Lastly, it was important to also include how the women I interviewed talked about political ambition and how perceptions of their gender influenced their experience in elected office. Both of these topics are covered at great length in the literature, and I wanted to take the opportunity to hear their thoughts on both subjects in an attempt to contribute to our overall understanding of women in local elected office. I conclude with a reflection on the way in which this information helps answer my research questions.

Before Candidacy

I was very interested in understanding where women believed their journeys to political office first began. Most women traced the origin of their political careers to sometime before they were formally candidates for political office. Those experiences were largely about either their frustration with a policy or their desire to be engaged in the community and sometimes about both.

While I later discuss many catalyzing factors that led the women to decide to run for office, it is first important to introduce what they were doing before that decision occurred and how their early political activity manifested for each of them.

Frustration

Often community engagement coincided with a deep sense of frustration at some of the problems that persisted within their cities. For example, Samantha worked with her neighbors to fight speeding on her street. That experience led to years of interactions with city staff and city commissions. She said it made her cry when something was finally done because she realized it had taken two years for the city to take action on what she thought was an important public safety issue.

Lauren was similarly frustrated with the inaction of her city officials in situations she felt were inconsistent with the community's desires. After she took over her father's law firm and moved back to her hometown, she began efforts to create a business district that would include her law firm offices. She was motivated to run for office when she saw her neighbor remodel their home into a massive mansion. Lauren felt this was contrary to the city's efforts to preserve historic neighborhoods with their small (typically Craftsman) cottage feel. She became increasingly involved with efforts to organize

neighbors and residents to pay attention to what was going on at City Hall, as it related to development. She explained her initial motivation this way:

> I was very active and involved and started watching what was happening in our local government because of creating that business district and being invested in property. You're like, what's the city council up to? Because it now affects my bottom line.

She also went on to write a ballot initiative and collect signatures to limit growth throughout the city. After several years, she had built a large coalition of activated residents focused on the City Council's actions or inactions. This coalition helped her get elected to the city council twice.

While Teresa had volunteered on political campaigns for state office, she became involved in local issues because she felt that the city council at the time was failing to correctly use the urban growth boundary. Designed to prevent urban sprawl, the council was extending the city's boundary to include more businesses, including wineries, so that they could extend their own sphere of influence. Together with her friends, she started organizing residents to speak up at City Council meetings and educate the public on why they should care about this issue:

> I was like, there are too many favors being done here. They don't really understand what the purpose of [an urban growth boundary] is, and these practices are not really good for our long-term economic sustainability, the sustainability of our natural resources. Basically, they're trying to use the urban growth boundary as a land grab, which is the exact opposite of what it's supposed to be for. At that point, it wasn't just me, it was several of my friends and other

residents who got involved and just said, "Hey, this is ridiculous" so that's how I got involved.

Teresa's sense that the current Council was only acting in their own interests and against the best interests of the community as a whole, led her to get involved in local activism and ultimately, to run for office.

Annalise started watching city council meetings out of curiosity when she first moved to her small town. She was new to the area and curious about how the town was run, especially as it related to the water supply and water rates. She explained how she "started listening and there were things that were irritating...I was frustrated with the city, and with how they were managing things".

Katya got involved in her local PTA after her daughter started getting into trouble in school. She was concerned and started to pay attention to school board meetings and then the city council. She volunteered for a city committee and then started speaking up on issues related to fair housing. Even after she moved her daughter to a magnet school outside of the district, she remained involved in her local school district, serving on the district's equity advisory committee and helping to write a district-wide equity plan. This gradual progression across several different focus areas (school, the city committee, housing) led to her meeting a broad network of advocates in a very short period of time, including the council member who appointed her to the city committee.

Katie, who worked for the County, also pointed to her level of frustration at the city prior to seeking office. She explained that she was concerned that her city was not adequately using the resources at its disposal when other surrounding cities were. "Why

isn't [my city] using government at its best to bring these resources and bring these changes?" she kept asking herself.

Involvement in the Community

The women in this study shared the fact that they were frustrated with the way the government was being run. They also shared the fact that they had all been very involved in their communities in some capacity – from volunteering in their kids' school to environmental activism. Ten of the eleven women I interviewed explained that before they ever thought about running for office, they were volunteering in some capacity. While this looked very different from person to person, their involvement ultimately shaped how these women saw themselves in the context of the community and the work they were doing in and with that community. Only Katie said that she had not been involved in any way. I will discuss her case specifically later in this Chapter.

Jennifer couldn't point to any specific example of activism but she explained she had been involved with the local aquatics club through her children. She said, "I think because I had done so much volunteering, over the years, a lot of people who I spoke to, or who were in the community already knew who I was."

Maria was an active volunteer on local political campaigns, knocking on doors and making phone calls as well as volunteering as a faculty advisor to the "Fem Dem" Club on the college campus at which she worked at the time. Her mother had campaigned against segregation in the South and had encouraged her to volunteer on the Obama campaign in 2008. Her campaign involvement eventually led to trips to the State Democratic Convention and exposure to local grassroots political activity. While Maria was not active in a specific cause or frustrated with any specific policy in her city, her

political activism itself was the gateway to running for office. Similarly, Kim volunteered for a local district attorney race, a mayor's race, and her local congressional race. By virtue of Kim and Maria's involvement and exposure to politics and politicians, the process of running for office was demystified and seemed possible.

Laney had long organized groups of volunteers to coach youth sports. Although she had a paid position at the city within the Parks and Recreation department, she relied on hundreds of volunteers to do everything from running the snack bar to maintaining the fields. She attributes her ability to organize volunteers and her large network of support to her decision to run for office.

Annie's experience with local government was unrelated to politics or advocacy but she too was already involved in her community. She had very little exposure to politics, in part because she said she identifies as an independent and busy restaurant owner and a young mother. She did, however, spend Saturdays with her mother operating a booth at the local farmer's market. Between the farmer's market and her restaurant, she felt engaged with her community. She was well known and while not an activist, she was nevertheless engaged in a way that gave her credibility and exposure:

> I think that I was just really well-known in the community not for being a political figure. I had never taken political positions on anything, I just served people good food and just a lot of people knew me from that. They knew me as being a hard worker and a businessperson and someone that treated my employees well. It was a family business I owned with my husband and my mom did the farmers market with us.

Public Employment

Jennifer, Katie, and Laney all worked in local government. All three indicated that this experience positively benefited them when they later decided to run for office. Later in this Chapter, I share how Jennifer and Laney gained confidence from their early exposure to government and elected officials. Here, however, I want to note how Katie's experience differed from the women described above who had experience engaging with the community. Katie was the only woman interviewed who said she had not been active in the community whatsoever and, in the context of the other ten interviews, this stood out as unique. She said she was actually worried that it would be a liability for her during her first election, tacitly acknowledging that community involvement is a common precursor to running for local elected office. However, she believed that she knew how to run a city thanks to her county employment, her educational background, and her experience as a city planner. And although she didn't organize her neighbors or participate in any activist groups, she described feelings of frustration that mirror that of the other women interviewed. As a County insider, she was aware of the resources that were available to cities and couldn't understand why her own city was not taking advantage of those resources.

While her story feels unique from the others in the context of community engagement, her County perspective served to supplement her lack of involvement. She still had a similar feeling of frustration as the other women did at the status quo which motivated her to make a change. Her position at the County also provided her with the confidence that she was qualified to run – a decision I will discuss later in this Chapter.

Resulting Connections

While very different from each other, all of these women's stories make an important point: playing a somewhat public role in the community often meant that these women felt able to challenge the issues that were frustrating them. Challenging those issues often came as a result of the personal connections they had made and their network of support. Laura's and Katya's stories are both examples of this. Their networking experiences were surprisingly common. As for many of the women, their relationship with community engagement was shaped by how they believed they were seen by others. These connections – with policymakers and with other citizens – were empowering and set them up as potential political leaders, even before they contemplated that part of the journey themselves. Katya referred to herself as "being in the mix", signaling that she was someone who was both engaged and known. Annie explicitly attributed her later electoral success to *how* she was known and connected in the community. Maria's activism caught the eye of an Assembly member who was looking for someone to run for the city council. Lauren had built an entire organization with dozens of committed volunteers. While their initial engagement may have started when they heard something in the paper or from a neighbor, many of them became deeply committed volunteers for grassroots groups, leading them to rally their neighbors, and meet other members of the community concerned with the same issues. In some cases, this level of engagement also gave them opportunities to encounter city staff and elected officials and opportunities to speak publicly about their issues to groups of volunteers and at city council meetings.

Deciding to Run

I asked each of the women about how they actually decided to run for office and what factors motivated them to make that decision. While they may previously have been actively involved in their communities, sometimes in overtly political causes, most of them had not yet decided to actually run for office. The literature refers to this period of time as "candidate emergence" (Fox & Lawless, 2005), in other words, the moment when they began to lay the groundwork for a run for office. This laying the groundwork is informal – many candidates do not actually file paperwork or publicly announce until months after they have decided to run. Instead, *deciding to run* is characterized by gaining endorsements from others, rallying volunteers, building a mailing list, and in some cases, engaging with party gatekeepers. The women I interviewed attributed their final decision to either the way in which they were recruited and encouraged or to something inside of themselves that simply compelled them to run. I also asked each of them about how they knew they were qualified, given the emphasis on qualification in the literature. Next, I describe their decision-making process and evolution to feeling they were qualified to run.

Intrinsic Motivation

Many of the women couldn't point to a specific reason why they wanted to run for office or what pushed them to make that decision but rather that they simply wanted to do it or they felt they should do it. Laney struggled to answer the question of why she decided to run or serve in office. "I'm doing it because I want to", she said, somewhat defiantly, as though she didn't need a reason at all. She continued: "I always said I was going to be the mayor of the city. It was on my things-to-do list. It was on my bucket

list." Kim talked in broad terms about racial and economic justice and said that she had just always been interested in public service and said, "it felt natural… to be serving this way". She attributed her motivation to cultural factors. As a first-generation college graduate, she felt compelled to do work that took care of others and improve the lives of other immigrants in particular. Samantha echoed the idea that the decision was deeply personal: "I wanted to run and I knew it was a long shot, but I would have felt really badly about myself [if I hadn't run] because I was thinking, the only reason I would not do this is fear."

As women conceptualized their own journeys, they often described how their community engagement bled into an intrinsic sense that they should do even more for their community. For example, Katya described her involvement with the PTA and with local housing initiatives: "People knew who I was". Lauren, who was an activist against "mansionization" efforts in her city, echoed that sentiment: "I was just running because someone had to do it...this is for the greater good of the whole community".

Jennifer also felt the need to run for office. She explained that she "wants to make a difference in where I live now. I really like government. I'm already working for the County. So I'll just run for office in the City." Later in her interview, she doubled down on the idea that she didn't have a problem she was specifically trying to solve: "I didn't really feel like [my city] was crashing and burning… I just wanted to contribute."

Some women, like Annalise, expressed a mix of external and intrinsic motivations. She was frustrated by her city council's refusal to raise water rates, believing it was fundamental to the long-term success of the city. But she also despised one of the incumbents. "I don't want Mike in charge of my life. I think I should be in

charge of my life. So I ended up running," she said. She clearly wanted to run but she might not have if she didn't hate Mike quite so much. In her case, her intrinsic motivation was seemingly layered on top of the frustration at a government that caused her to pay attention to her local city council in the first place.

Extrinsic Motivation: Encouragement and Recruitment

The women I interviewed also made the decision to run because they were encouraged or recruited by others. They received support and encouragement from a wide network of friends, employees, community members, and elected officials. Encouragement from those who were already serving in elected positions had the greatest impact on many of the women. Maria tells the story of being recruited by her local Assemblywoman who told her that she was getting noticed for her political volunteerism and encouraged her to run right before Maria went on a cruise. A week later, while she was clearing customs on her way home, the Assemblywoman followed up with her and asked if she'd made a decision yet. Maria felt encouraged and confident that she could run since she was being pursued so aggressively by a local official she respected. Similarly, Annalise was encouraged by a lot of different people in her small town, including the Mayor. She told the story of what she called "the setup":

> After the election, Budd, who was the Mayor at the time, goes "Well, you know,
> we set you up. We decided. We just kept coming at you from different angles.
> You finally gave in." They were right. I finally gave in.

> Katya had the sense that she might as well run because she was spending so much
time working on community issues: "When I thought about it, it's like, "I'm doing all this stuff anyway. I'm sitting at these meetings anyway. We're spending a lot of time, a lot of

resources doing this. Why not?" Support from others supplemented her intrinsic motivation and her decision was finalized once she "was affirmed by people, like leadership, progressive leaders, local electeds, previous electeds." One elected city council member in particular had already approached her and encouraged her to get more involved in the city. She explained the way in which that affirmation made clear that she would have support:

> I don't know if endorsement is the right word but support from… people who have been here a long time, who have been in the mix, and then who believe that I could do it made me feel like, "This is something that I could consider." I [knew I] would have a group of support.

Not all initial encouragement came from elected leaders. Katie was originally recruited by a fellow County employee who she described as a mentor. She and her mentor often commiserated about their city's lack of planning and then "out of the blue" her friend suggested she run. She says she had never thought about it at all until that day. After that, she contacted elected officials that she knew from her County work and asked for guidance. She said that "having the advice and guidance of people who were elected officials certainly helped me go on the path forward [to running]".

Annie, who had perhaps the least conventional path to public office of all the women interviewed, was recruited to run for office by a group of "fanatical history preservationists" who ran a slate of candidates to challenge the incumbents that they felt were destroying the town's charm. As noted previously, Annie owned a local restaurant and had a booth at the local farmer's market, and had not previously been engaged in

politics. The "fanatical preservationists" were simply patrons of her restaurant but they decided that they knew enough about her to convince her to run.

For some of the avowed community activists, there was a strong sense that *someone* had to run from amongst their respective groups, which provided more extrinsic motivation. For Lauren, who was involved in local "anti-mansionization" efforts, there was a lot of talk within her group about making sure their efforts were part of the conversation during the election. Lauren explains: "Next thing I knew, everybody was telling me we need somebody to run for city council" and she was quickly talked into doing it. That anti-mansionization grassroots group went on to knock on doors on her behalf and meaningfully volunteer during her campaign. "I wouldn't have gotten elected without them", she said.

For Laney and Kim, there was a sense that a growing number of people in the community wanted them to run although neither could articulate how that happened. Laney said she knew it was time to run based on what people were saying: "I tell everyone, "When the community comes and gets you, it's time for you to run". Kim couldn't point to anyone specifically encouraging her to run but rather that she was affirmed by individuals at all of the groups she had previously volunteered with.

Knowing they were Qualified

All of the women felt they were qualified for public office. While some of them admitted to having doubts after deciding to run about whether they knew enough about all of the current city policy, that doubt did not result in questioning their qualifications. Despite, and perhaps because of, the public nature of much of their community engagement, none of the women I interviewed expressed reservations about speaking in

public or assuming a leadership position, both of which are noted in the literature on women's early political ambition as potential psychological barriers to running for office (Fox & Lawless, 2010, 2014; Lawless & Fox, 2010). On the contrary, in many cases, their activism seemed to only drive them to do more. In Lauren's case, fighting the "mansionization" of her city led to very public efforts to write a ballot initiative and organize a team of volunteers to collect signatures, all before she thought of running for office herself. When she decided to run for office, she had no qualms that she was not sufficiently qualified because of what she had already accomplished.

The idea that their early experiences with community engagement or political participation imbued them with a sense that they were qualified to run for office was true for many of these women. Teresa felt the process was familiar and far from intimidating precisely because of her previous engagement with issues and campaigns. She explained it this way:

> Well, I had worked on our local assembly members' campaign two years before. In 2014, I was working on a campaign, and then I worked on local measures and helped promote other local council members before that, so I was pretty familiar with the process.

For some of these women, it was less about the actual experiences of early engagement that gave them the confidence to run for office but rather, it was the relationships they had cultivated and the support they got from those people that encouraged them to run. Maria described a frank conversation she had with an assembly member and how she wondered aloud to her about her lack of public policy qualifications. The assembly member promptly dismissed her concerns, saying "Half the

men don't have that." While Maria described worrying about her lack of any formal or academic qualifications, she overcame those concerns thanks to the confidence of her supporters.

Some of the women gained confidence just by having the opportunity to interact with elected officials and realizing they were just as qualified. Jennifer and Laney had worked at government agencies. Jennifer explained that she realized elected officials were not "on Mount Olympus… it was no longer those elected people are like Olympians, they are just people." Similarly, Laney had been around elected officials since her very first job as an adult and had always been intrigued by them. As she rose through the ranks of city government, she became increasingly confident in her ability to do the job of a city councilmember better than those she saw in the position. There was no doubt in her mind that she was qualified for the job. However, this is not to say that many of the women did not feel the need for more education. Laney returned to school for a master's degree in public administration before running for office and proudly touted that when asked about her qualifications. A few other women also pointed out the importance of educational credentials and how it made them feel more qualified for the position. Five of the women in addition to Laney held advanced degrees. Interestingly, Maria who had been encouraged by the assembly member, also pointed to her participation in a women's political training program called Emerge (of which I am also a graduate) as contributing to her belief that she was qualified. She said, "it gave me more confidence because I felt like I had tools in my toolbox that I could use."

While some women reflected on the skills they had built as activists and others pointed to their education, work experience, or training, perhaps the most intriguing

responses came from those who were dismissive of the idea that there were qualifications to serve at all. As Annie explained, "what I've found through this [process] … is that apparently, there really is no qualification to be in public office." She went on to say, "I've been unqualified for every job I've ever had and then I just, I quickly bring myself up to speed." After reflecting on the state of regional and national politics, Katie echoed a similar sentiment: "Bartenders can get elected to Congress… there are no qualifications." Annalise also talked about being raised believing that she could do anything. "I had enough self-confidence for probably 10 people," she said. She wasn't worried about being qualified at all.

Learning the Job – Skills and Strategies

Navigating the Learning Curve

In response to my second research question, the following sections describe the skills and strategies that women deployed as elected leaders. The first strategy was learning how to do the job correctly and navigating the somewhat unusual structure of government that currently exists in most cities across California.

Navigating the system of government into which these women were elected was not a straightforward task for most of them. The women seemed to agree that you had to learn how to work the system, and how to navigate the structure of city councils in California was the source of a lot of discussion. Most of the women explicitly noted the steep learning curve that was involved once they assumed the position, often despite their extensive previous political engagement. Lauren, the attorney who wrote a land planning ballot measure, described herself as "shell shocked" after being elected. She went on to say, "I'd been to tons of council meetings, but it's like, well, crap, now what do I do?"

Maria remembered thinking "Oh, now I got to figure out how to do this" after she was elected and was especially intimidated by how she should go about placing her priorities on the city council agenda for consideration by the rest of the city council in a public forum.

Annalise described her experience this way: "my learning curve was actually just recognizing how little... you can actually do. I mean, you can do a lot. I don't mean that you can't, but I think you aren't independent." Here, she was referring to the constraints inherent in the role and the scope of influence that city councils actually have.

Laney acknowledged that in her previous role as a park superintendent, she simply had not been exposed to some of what she had to learn as a city council member:

I had to learn about different things that were going on in the city that I was not privileged to as a superintendent. As a superintendent, you have your hands in every department in the city…I knew about purchase orders…I knew about design and equipment. I didn't know about everything that was involved in [development projects]. I really didn't know about the CDBG[2] funding. I had to get educated on those. Those are things that I had heard about, but I had to put my hands on the why [to understand them].

She goes on to talk about the "why," suggesting that it was not enough to just understand them on the surface; she wanted a deep understanding of how they worked and why they worked that way.

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[2] Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funding is a federal funding source that supports cities with programs focused on low income residents.

The fact that there was a learning curve for most women that included both the technical parts of their new jobs and the structural system and confines in which they were operating meant that most women did not jump in and start to make an impact right away. Most acknowledged that they needed time to learn how to operate and how to get things done. Teresa enthusiastically explained her experience in navigating the learning curve to become effective in part because she wanted me to document the experience to benefit other women who were elected. She thought that recognizing and embracing the learning curve could help others be more effective more quickly. She claimed it took at least a year for council members to understand what was going on around them because of how overwhelmed most were with just doing the basics of governing and participating in meetings. In Maria's example above, it took her an entire four-year term to feel comfortable making policy.

The Support They Received While Navigating the Learning Curve

On most city councils, unlike most other governing bodies with a clear leader, the mayor and vice mayor positions are ceremonial in nature and rotate amongst the council members on a yearly basis in most California cities. The five-member board shares authority equally, and California state law dictates what decisions are up to council members as opposed to the state or the city manager. Within that structure, there are dozens of variations on the theme including seven-member boards – like mine – and cities with their own charters that allow them to follow a different set of state laws than non-chartered cities. Many women pointed to the unique skill sets required to navigate this form of government with shared decision-making and the learning curve involved in getting themselves to the point where they could be effective.

Some of the women had some understanding of how city council worked, like Jennifer who explained that her experience in working for the County Board of Supervisors gave her an advantage when it came to understanding how to navigate a board that is similar in structure: "Every elected decision, or policy decision, is actually a group decision…I was very thankful that I had a really good understanding of the structure of government and how to work within it." But other women had to rely on mentors to help them to learn the system and how to navigate it. Katya looked to mentors and previous city councilmembers to guide her, saying:

> You don't know what it's like until you're there. I'm like, "How do you do this?" Even just the dynamics of making sure that your issue doesn't get lost. That happens. Men don't hear women's voices or whatever. Making sure that my issue is even there. Hold on. Is this going to be on the agenda? What are the next steps?

While Katya struggled with the mechanics of her new role (like adding items to the agenda), she also discussed the pressure she put on herself to be a perfect council member and to attend every event to which she was invited:

> It wasn't until the end of the year. I was just like, "I can't go to all these events. I won't say the right thing all the time. I can't show up in all the ways I need to show up." That had to come from talking to other black women electeds and other electeds being like, "There is no one way to do this." I had to forgive myself and know that if I'm doing my best, whatever that looks like on a particular day, then that's okay.

Some women, such as Jennifer were able to draw from their previous experience working in the public sphere. Jennifer had worked for the county. She felt her experience

attending Board of Supervisors' meetings gave her somewhat of a jump start so that she could "spend her learning curve [learning about] other issues," rather than simply learning the mechanics of how meetings functioned. Similarly, Katie knew how the government itself operated but knew nothing about specific issues, such as water treatment, that were under discussion. She said there were issues that maybe "you just have no concept about." She went on to explain that "When you think you want to improve the community, you're not thinking like, "I want to make sure our water reservoirs are tip-top. There are elements of things that you don't have knowledge about and you have to learn."

These women explained that learning how the system worked was very much about learning how to influence. Teresa summed it up this way:

A lot of people who get elected to a five-member board think, "Oh, I'm just going to straighten these people out," and that's not what it's about. It's really about influencing and setting a tone and setting a direction and finding a way to cooperate with people because you can't get anything done [without them]. The joke…is that you have to be able to count to three. You have to get three votes for anything you want to do.

More than half of the women I interviewed shared comments like the one above from Teresa to describe how best to get the governing body to support your issues. Annalise said she didn't make campaign promises because she knew you need to get others to "buy in." She explained it this way, "Campaign promises are a joke. I don't know why people do that. I don't know why people think that you can make that promise,

because you're not a monarch…You got to get everybody on the council, or at least the majority to buy in."

Part of "getting to everybody" included cultivating relationships with city staff. Katya specifically pointed to how important it was for her to learn that you needed to engage with staff to get things done. Most council members have to rely in some way on their staff, including the city manager and the city attorney, to help them accomplish their goals. Katya admitted that she had no idea of "the importance of leadership on the staff side" when she was first elected and just how much support she would need to actually get something done, given the way in which staff members are assigned to council members in her city.

Being a Generalist

Most women learned that they needed to pivot away from the specific policy concerns they had worked on before becoming elected. Part of learning the system was recognizing that they would not be working to further just the community engagement work that they had been doing before they were elected but would be working on many other issues. Lauren was explicit about not just working on land planning efforts because she knew there was so much more she could do and needed to do as a council member. There were other policy interests or issues that needed to be addressed once she was elected. All of the women who had previously been activists recognized that they needed a new approach and new skills to govern, as opposed to relying solely on the knowledge and skills they had used in their previous activism or advocacy. Teresa, who had volunteered on political campaigns and organized on local environmental issues, summed it up this way:

Running for office [requires] a completely different set of skills than being a council member. When you're running for office you really have to tout yourself and why you're qualified, why people should...essentially you're asking the voters to hire you, so you have to really be about, "This is what I did, this is what I bring to the table, this is my perspective." And then you have to really switch gears when you're elected and be like, well, how do I work with these folks who may not be my favorite people, or I may not have a lot in common with them, but how do I find common ground and get stuff done?

Women were eager to share what they had learned about the structure of government and how they were approaching the job in ways that were somewhat different from what they had expected. While explaining the learning curve, all of the women interviewed eschewed the notion that a specific skill set or qualification was necessary for serving in office. Instead, as Teresa went on to say: "Being a council member is a great place for people who are generalists, who like lifelong learning and like the fact that there are lots of aspects to everything that comes across your plate." Annie felt similarly describing the job as really about learning. She felt confident in her ability to learn the role and had dismissed the idea of qualifications, but rather, she felt that learning the job was just part of the process:

You don't really learn what you need to know until you step into a position and then it's abundantly clear what you need to bring yourself up to speed on. That's how I've just approached everything in my life. I believe in building the plane while you're flying it.

Building Relationships

As part of the learning process, these women learned that building relationships was a critical strategy in developing their effectiveness as council members. While Maria was creating her city's human trafficking policy, she reached out to other cities across the state that had already passed policies that she wanted to model. She also engaged surrounding cities, looking to partner on regional efforts. This idea that a single city shouldn't reinvent the wheel was common for many women. They espoused the importance of involvement in the League of California Cities[3] and regional networking. This theory of action worked to their advantage. Jennifer explained how the size of her city compelled her to think at a regional level. She too was very involved with the League of Cities. She had served as the Chair of several policy committees at the League of Cities which is one of the ways in which city council members can participate in that organization.

> When I am thinking about issues… I am already thinking of county and regional. I just have that mindset from my time in the county, and the fact that we are such a small county, and we are only two little bitty cities in that county. So, it's you can't really limit yourself to just thinking [my city] specifically. Because, alone, we cannot, we can't make it. We can't thrive if the whole county is not thriving. So, I automatically go to the League of California Cities with a city and a county viewpoint.

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[3] The League of California Cities changed its name in 2021 to CalCities but is still colloquially referred to as "the League of Cities" or just "the League" amongst many elected officials. This organization engages in statewide advocacy on behalf of cities across California and convenes several conferences of policymakers annually. It also provides education to city council members across the state on relevant policy related topics.

She went on to describe how this regional perspective has helped her while engaging with constituents: "When I'm out and about in the community and people are bringing issues to me, it's like, 'Oh that reminds me of this.' And, I start linking these things to state legislation, or what our state representatives are saying."

In addition to her city council role and her full-time job, Kim also served on the board of several regional non-profit organizations because she felt it helped her stay abreast of issues impacting the county, which in turn benefitted her in her council role.

Teresa also placed value on relationships to support her work. She called the League of Cities a "game changer" because it gave her access to elected officials across the state. This attitude seemed to affirm the sense that they had figured out how to do the job "right." (These discussions, and the conviction with which they spoke of the League, convinced me to get involved myself.)

Building relationships also gave women a means to share resources and make connections that could increase their effectiveness in city council. When asked about how she views her role on the council, Teresa brought up the sharing of resources as a critical part of her job:

> The thing that makes you effective… is relationships and resources. I don't know the answer to that but I know that person over at St. Helena and I can call them… here, let me give you some resources that you can use… Let me get you in touch with the person at the supervisor's office this is what the city manager is doing on this task force working on this issue.

Kim also relied on relationships and connected those relationships to resources she can provide for her community. She described her presence on social media and the

way in which she transparently shares about her life as helping "people feel more connected" to her and to the community. For example, she attended a Zumba class at the community center and posted videos of herself in the class with the intent of encouraging other people to participate. "Not a day goes by that I don't get a message or a call" because of her social media posts, she said. Kim expressed frustration that other elected officials on her council did not share her interest in "communicating or having relationships." "I think it really hinders all the projects going on and that could be going on or that is going on because there's no communication," she said. She tied the capacity to build relationships with equity – she felt that without engaging all of the community, not everyone is welcome to have a "seat at the table."

Listening

Another key learning that was discussed by the women I spoke with was the importance of listening to their constituents. They felt this to be one of their most important skills because it helped them learn and understand the perspective of others. In most cases, the act of listening wasn't necessarily tied to providing any kind of benefit or service; the act itself was the important thing and fundamental to being a good council member. Maria said it was something she learned in the women's political training program she attended: "I remember from the Emerge program, the role of a really good council member is knowing how to listen, and not listening to answer but listening to comprehend." Annalise explains it this way:

> I think that with leadership, I think that listening is the first and most important thing. Not just listening but actually hearing what's being said to you and taking time to think about it and respond to it in a reasonable manner, whether you agree

or disagree. Being able to listen to opinions that differ from your own without getting worked up or angry and respecting that [constituents] have the right to that opinion.

Kim talked about how she learned the power of listening while she was still campaigning. Despite her three-pronged plan for economic development, she realized when she knocked on doors that people were generally more interested in being heard than in hearing her plans. She described being relieved because she was content to be an active listener and hear people's concerns rather than having to sell them on her plans. The importance of listening has stayed with her, and she emphasized the extent to which it is still an important part of her role. Maria echoed a similar sentiment. She talked about being out in the community and realizing that it didn't matter if she couldn't remember the dollar amount for her city's expected Transient Occupancy Tax (TOT).[4] "The community is like, "I don't know what you're talking about. I just need to know if I can talk to you." She went on to explain that even if she disagreed with what was being said, if she focused on really listening, then she was able to at least understand where that person was coming from.

Listening skills extended to attending and participating in community meetings. Annie considered the ability to engage with constituents and hear the concerns of various stakeholder groups as fundamental to her role. When asked about how she practiced leadership, she blamed the pandemic for stymying her ability to hear the concerns of constituents: "I haven't been meeting with groups and talking with a lot of people face-

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[4] Transient Occupancy Taxes (TOT) are the taxes that a city collects from the hotels, motels and sometimes Short-Term Rentals located within city limits.

to-face, which I kind of imagine is what a leader does." She expressed doubt that she could be an effective leader without hearing directly from people. Katie noted that she tries to attend every community event to which she is invited because that is how she best interacts with and listens to her constituents. For Samantha, "not listening" was a character flaw she ascribed to both the incumbent she replaced and to some of the state legislators she engaged with. In her mind, these people were not doing their jobs because they did not listen for understanding. For all of these women, listening was elevated to a level of fundamental importance.

Dismissing Criticism

Exercising an ability to dismiss criticism and focus on their work was a skill mentioned by several women. While many of the women acknowledged that they had faced criticism on the council, they also described their ability to ignore it or in some cases, combat it. Annie, who was recruited to run by a group of historic preservationists, gave the example of voting to remove a racist symbol from her city's seal and logo: "I'm sure that there's a lot of nasty things that are being said… I think it's just because I voted to remove the noose, which is fine. They can be mad about that if they want to be." Her former backers, the historic preservationists, did not support removing the noose from the city seal and vowed not to support her further. She shrugged off that criticism because she knew she was doing the right thing.

Maria expressed a similar commitment to rejecting criticism on the basis that she knew she was doing the right thing:

> You don't want people or constituents to come to a council meeting or write you
> and just say bad things about you. Deep down there's that whole need, you want

to be liked, I want to make sure everybody is happy. And I always have to stop and tell myself, I'm like, it's physically impossible for me to make everybody in the city happy. There's going to be somebody that feels left out. But at the end of the day, I really have to think overall about what is in the best interest of the city in its entirety, and what is in the best interest that's going to move our city forward.

Unsurprisingly, much of the criticism the women received was centered on their gender. Lauren described publicly correcting one of her council colleagues who kept referring to her as "the lady" and instructing him to use her name. She attributed her ability to dismiss criticism to her experience as a lawyer and recounted a story in which she was pregnant and realized that one of her trials was scheduled to start on her due date. To her shock, the judge asked her if she could have better timed her pregnancy in front of a full courtroom. She felt the years of sexism she had endured as a trial lawyer had prepared her for the sexism she experienced on the city council. Jennifer described receiving sexist remarks from her fellow male council members and deciding to "just blow it off" most of the time. However, Laney, when asked about how she handled sexist criticism, responded this way: "I have more fight in me than some of the men on the city council. If you step on my feet on the city council, I'm going to correct you on the city council. I'm not going to take it." When her political consultant cautioned her against fighting back because it might endanger her chances of re-election, she said "Let me tell you something. When those 15,000 people [who voted for me] come and tell me I'm doing something wrong, then I'll get along. I'm not a career politician."

Making Meaningful Contributions

Recognizing Their Agency

As most of the women were now into at least their second year of service, they expressed confidence and clarity about themselves as leaders, their sense of purpose, and the ways in which they were fulfilling their roles. Just as some women expressed an intrinsic motivation for deciding to run for office, some responded regarding their purpose in elected office that they were doing exactly what they were supposed to be doing. These women were determining their own course independent of external pressures or expectations. This self-confidence is epitomized by Maria's statements about her journey. While she admits to feeling uncertain in her first term about what she was supposed to be working on, she referred to herself in the third person as having evolved into "Term Three Maria" who knows her "true self" and considers herself a leader who has grown into a "stronger and better" version of herself who she trusts to make good decisions.

Katya, who had just finished her first year in office at the time of her interview, said that when she was first elected she felt she had something to prove but that her attitude had changed with some experience. She now feels differently: "I'm very much who I say I am. I hope that God continues to allow me to be in spaces where I can be myself. I can do the work that I want to do, and be grounded, and affirmed, and be okay with that." This mix of confidence and clarity was striking.

When discussing her leadership, Laney offered how she feels she has been able to use her agency to get to a place where she is making a "difference":

You have to identify your purpose. My purpose in life was to do what I'm doing right now. I have to know my purpose. Like I told [the former mayor], my purpose is to make sure that my residents when I leave this city council, are better off than they were when I took it when I was elected… This is fulfillment for me, you know. I want to say that I made a difference in the lives of others when I close my eyes.

Jennifer was clear that she had been elected to be a decision-maker. A self-described policy wonk, she loved the idea of studying issues and then making decisions about them that impacted people's lives because she felt that "people put me in this position to make decisions for them."

Some of the women expressed pride in the way they were willing to defy their fellow council members and exercise their own power independently. Laney described voting against her fellow council members on more than one occasion and was proud of her willingness to vote with her conscience:

My vote is my legacy… I don't vote to be a part of the team. I know the former mayor said, "You know I thought we'd go out as a united front, and we'd all vote for this." I said, "Why? Why would I vote for something I don't agree with just to be in the majority? I'm not doing that." The vote came up 4-1.

Katie expressed a similar sentiment:

From time to time, I've had to stand up and say, "No, that is not right. I don't agree." And I'm kind of, in some sense, the one who's known for not going along all the time on things that I think are important. So, maybe I'm the black sheep or the red-headed sheep. But I've done it from time to time. It's not like I'm a

renegade, or necessarily someone who's always going to go rogue on things. But when I definitely feel it's important to make a stand to say something, people admire me for my strength and conviction.

Not all women felt empowered to be contrarians on the dais. Kim admitted that speaking up against her fellow council members was one of her greatest challenges. She described finding out during a council meeting that she was the only council member not to be assigned any intergovernmental committee appointments by her fellow council members and remaining quiet despite the slight because she was too stunned to argue. She attributed her reaction to being introverted and also to her cultural upbringing that encouraged her not to rock the boat or be confrontational.

Being a Voice for Others

Perhaps the only time when the responses from women of color varied dramatically from their White counterparts was when they talked about the importance of representation and giving voice to their constituents. Five of the six women of color spoke on the subject.

Kim felt a strong sense that her job as an elected official was to speak for underrepresented communities in her city. This has also meant an increased focus on communicating with those constituents and increasing connections through her social media presence. She emphasized the need for "our voices" to be heard, referring to other people of color. When she first thought about running for office, the question she asked herself over and over was "am I the best voice or even the appropriate one" to represent her communities, given that she identified as both Latina and Asian. She was highly

critical of those who did not feel that giving voice to others was part of their

responsibility on council.

Giving a voice to others was also important to Katya:

Because I've been blessed, I have to do this work to support other families like

mine – other children of immigrants, other folks who are having similar

experiences who might not be able to sit at the damn council meeting for five

hours so they can get public time. It's a lot but it's worthwhile… I know who I'm

there for.

She recalled being told "you really spoke to my experience" by members of the public

after she made comments on housing from the dais and how important that feedback was

to her. Maria was just as explicit. "I've become an advocate on the council for people that

don't have their voices," she said, reflecting on her work on human trafficking and how

that had morphed into work on mental health and other social issues that she had not

originally set out to solve, all of which occurred after she was elected.

Laney and Annalise spoke about their responsibility to represent everyone. Laney

used this idea during her city council campaign to convince people to vote for her: "I tell

them I'm their voice on the city council. All 100 of you can't fit on the city council but

you can elect one person that has your best interests… I call it people power." With her

background organizing volunteers, it was critical to her that her supporters believed she

spoke for them and would represent them. Annalise took that attitude to an extreme,

campaigning publicly against a wind farm project even though she personally supported

it because she felt it was her obligation as an elected representative. She spoke to the

importance of speaking up for her constituents:

Being out there and fighting for what your constituents really believe and really

want you to fight for… and willing to do whatever it takes, within reason, to

accomplish what you think is best, but also in a greater sense, what your

constituents or your employees, whatever, what they believe.

Jennifer thought of herself as a conduit from her constituents to policy making,

saying "if it's one of the council members' priorities, it becomes a priority for the city.

So, just being that conduit is extremely rewarding."

Pursuing a Policy Agenda

Many women spoke about the specific policies they had taken on once they were

elected and the ways in which they had successfully pursued getting their policies

enacted. Maria spoke in great detail about her campaign against human trafficking

because, for her, it was emblematic of the type of policy that you could focus on as a

council member and the way in which you could make a difference. Maria explained that

she felt like she wasn't quite sure what she was doing during her first term. She was

studying her agenda and attending community events, but she didn't feel like she was

having a big enough impact. This feeling of dissatisfaction lasted until a catalyzing

incident occurred during her second term in which a young woman from her community

went missing. When the girl was found to have been a victim of human trafficking, Maria

learned as much as she could about the issue. She was shocked to learn just how many

young women from her city were suspected to have been forced into the sex industry and

became motivated to create more local city policies to combat human trafficking.

Together with her city manager and city attorney, she wrote a new policy for her city to

enact. It was her first policy to be approved by the city council and led to Maria engaging

on the issue regionally and at a statewide level. She sought guidance through the League of Cities and through the California Massage Therapy Council and spoke to her counterparts at the county about how they could fight the problem at a greater scale. Her experience with human trafficking motivated her to work on other issues related to sexual violence against women and mental health. She credits that first experience of creating a citywide policy with teaching her what her power could be on the city council:

> I've now become the advocate on the council for people that don't have their voices. It took me a good term and a half to define that that's where my passion is and [the] issues that I really I'm fighting for.

> Annalise described addressing water rates as one of the primary issues that had interested her since she first started following her local city council almost ten years before she was elected. After she was elected, her city was informed by the State of California that it no longer qualified for grant funding because it was out of compliance with a state law that required its locally operated water district to be self-sustaining. Coming into compliance meant raising water rates. She recounted the effort it required to raise rates:

> I was like, "We have to do this. We have to take the hits, we have to sit here and let people yell at us and say whatever they have to say because this is what's best for the city." Now there's a process [for a] citizens vote... If they voted no, then they voted no, but we have to put it out there. We have to try and we have to make the effort because we have to keep our systems going. So that was a big push, and we got that over, and we took a lot of hits, and there were a lot of angry people.

Laney described her success in taxing the refineries located in her city and the way in which she led the effort as mayor:

No one would touch [the oil companies]. I put it on the ballot, and I got it passed. It passed by 75%. That's going to bring the city millions. We're fighting with Shell Oil, Phillips 66, and Marathon. The oil companies spent over $1.5 million to defeat me. I bought some fliers. I walked the fliers and I said, "This is what we need to do." Consequently, we're going to be getting $24 million. That's a big accomplishment for me.

Not all of the women had success in policymaking, however. Lauren described her frustration at trying to get anything done on homelessness and the backlash she faced from the public when she introduced the idea of creating a shelter and offering services to the unhoused. She felt that working to solve a problem was exactly what she was elected to do but that her community was opposed to all solutions because they believed that services would only bring more homeless individuals to her city.

For some of the women, their policy accomplishments seemed less important than the process they had followed to implement those policies. When asked about her accomplishments, Samantha listed freeway sound walls and bike paths but was very interested in sharing with me the process she had undergone to provide more input to a housing project including asking the right questions, engaging the community, and adequately studying the issue. While Katya described her policy work on housing in great deal, she made it a point to note that she was intentional about incorporating a wellness component into her city events, saying:

I always want to make sure that people know there's yoga, mindfulness, gratitude, making sure that there is something that I'm leaving with my communities to make sure that they are taking care of themselves as we do this really important work.

Katie rejected the idea of a policy agenda altogether, however, preferring to focus on good governance:

I have not taken on a specific issue or topic as the one that... I think in some, it would just be good government, trying to model, as a staff person in county government what we believe in which is doing a good analysis of the issues, getting good data, making good decisions, being ethical, being transparent, following all of the Brown Act.[5]

Political Ambition: Future Political Careers

In general, these women were proud of their service and themselves and recognized their own ambition. Because of the focus on political ambition in the literature, I wanted to know how each of the women considered their own ambition. Would they continue to serve? Would they seek higher office? In retrospect, I recognize that most women viewed ambition as separate from political ambition; my lack of specificity led to some interesting answers. Jennifer, Annie, Laney, and Samantha all said that they were unlikely to run for higher office, but both Jennifer and Samantha made it a point to say that they considered themselves ambitious women. Jennifer's disinterest in running for higher office re-affirmed that she was exactly where she wanted to be:

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[5] The Brown Act is a law in California that requires cities and elected officials to do business in public and provide transparency to the public. It determines when the public should be notified of public meetings and how elected officials should conduct themselves before, during and after public meetings.

I thought about maybe state office. But I don't care about a whole bunch of cities and counties, it doesn't build a fire in me. I care about [my city]. I care about [my] county. So, I think I am best suited to stay here.

Samantha echoed that sentiment: "I've always been ambitious, but as far as running for higher office, probably not because I feel like I found my voice [here]." Laney agreed with the idea that local office better suited her: "The higher up you get, the more you lose connection with your constituents. The rubber meets the road at a local level."

Teresa was among those who expressed an interest in running for higher office. She pointed out that in the past she might have been more coy about her response or even using the word "ambition" but that over time, she had become more comfortable with the idea of openly sharing her aspirations. She attributed her previous hesitancy to gender: "Women, you get screwed if you're too ambitious or you're not ambitious enough." But after talking about it with enough people, she decided to start being more upfront about her intention to run for higher office.

Ambition came at a cost for some of the women who felt they had meaningful contributions to make but that it would also be a burden to continue to serve in office. Katya wrestled with her ambition while being keenly aware of taking on too much and the weight that she felt came with trying to achieve and have an impact.

I want to help families like my own, folks who are not typically centered in any policy-making processes. I want to be a part of making the world a little bit better…The balance is trying to figure out how that fits in my specific situation... I'm in a really interesting time just professionally and personally. I know I can do these things. I can get these gold stars. I can achieve but first of all, that shit

doesn't fill you up at night. It can be really stressful. The cost of the shiny

pennies. There has to be a way to have a balance and have a semblance of the

two. Be ambitious. Have an impact. Also, have joy, and have ease, and rest. Rest

is so important in your life. I don't know. I'm still trying to figure it out…. I don't

want to be a mule for this world.

Her last sentence is a reference to the quote "Black women are the mules of the

earth" from Zora Neale Hurston's 1937 book, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Katya's

conflict turns political ambition on its head; she doesn't aspire to climb the political

ladder, but she feels obligated to if it improves the lives of families like hers. Katya was

the only woman who spoke about her political future in this way, but other women also

noted the cost of their service.

This personal cost was felt by other women but in different ways. Lauren talked

about the sacrifice her family had to make because of how much time her elected position

required, but she noted that she could not stop herself from stepping up when she was

needed:

My husband says my problem is I can't say no, so I'm always volunteering to help

out with the PTA, because I'll come home and be like, "But nobody else was

going to do it." He's like, "Wasn't that a clue? That was your first red flag. No one

else would do it. Why are you doing it?"

Annie was worried about housing costs in her city and concerned that her family

had outgrown their existing house. Moving out of her city meant that she would have to

forfeit her seat on the Council; she was considering only serving one term if they weren't

able to buy a larger house within city limits. However, she was also dismissive of the

question of ambition. "I think that this has cured me from wanting to run for a higher office," she said. She later went on to describe her frustration at party politics as one of the reasons she had no desire to continue in elected office.

Summary

The women I interviewed told compelling stories of their journeys to office, characterized by early community engagement and frustration at the status quo, followed by a decision to run for office rooted in encouragement and support from their networks. Of course, there were outliers – Katie, for example, was not engaged in the community but was frustrated at her local city government. Many of them expressed remarkable confidence and clarity about their desire to run for office, which itself defies much of the conventional wisdom about women who run for office.

Once in office, all of the women reported a steep learning curve as they figured out how to navigate the structure of government into which they had been elected. Many of them sought support to navigate the learning curve and relied on skills like listening, building regional networks, and making connections to begin to accomplish their goals. Despite the criticism that many of them have faced, they found ways to stay true to their own core beliefs. The skills and strategies they learned allowed them to be more effective in government where they pursued policy agendas, served as a voice for others, and exercised their own agency.

Many of the women I spoke to openly acknowledged their ambition, although many were content to continue serving at the local level. For some women, service has come with a sacrifice either to their families or to themselves as they struggle to balance their commitments and their ambition.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Despite significant gains in 2018, women remain significantly underrepresented at every level of government. The existing literature has attempted to explain this gender gap first by focusing on structural barriers like party gate keepers and fundraising and then later by identifying psychological barriers tied to gender roles (Fox & Lawless, 2010; Fox et al., 2001; Schneider et al., 2016). To date, as explained in Chapter 3, there are significant challenges with the existing literature because it has not focused on the successful representation of women serving in elected office at the local level. We need a new way of thinking about how and why women choose to serve locally if we are to understand the persistent underrepresentation of women serving in elected office more generally.

This study focused on two research questions to better understand women in elected office and the paths they take to get there. Those questions are: 1. How do women elected to city council conceptualize their own journeys to local elected office? and 2. How do women in elected office describe the skills and strategies required to make meaningful contributions in their political roles?

In order to answer these questions, I interviewed eleven women who serve as city council members in California. I asked about how they decided to run for office and tried to gain an understanding of what had first motivated them to decide to run. I also sought to understand their experience actually serving in office and the skills and strategies required of the role. I analyzed the transcripts of those interviews and after several rounds of coding, several thematic areas emerged that are described in Chapter 4. Drawing from

the experiences of the successful elected women officials who participated in this study, and rooted in the tenets of grounded theory research, I have created a five-part theory I call the *local leader pathway* to describe these women's journeys and experiences. This theory offers a set of principles that may guide other women interested in serving in public office; I have also identified opportunities for better infrastructure to support, encourage, and recruit more women to run for elected office and overcome the problem of underrepresentation.

In this Chapter, I have outlined that theory, first by providing a brief introduction to the problem at hand and followed by a discussion of each of the principles of that theory. The Chapter concludes with a reflection on the research process, a summary of the five key implications of this research and a discussion of areas of further research.

The Local Leader Pathway

The *local leader pathway* consists of five key principles. In this Chapter, I describe these principles first in the context of the participants experiences (my data) and then for each principle, demonstrate how those results do or do not reflect the current literature. This is important, given the absence of research focused on local elected office. My intent with this contrast is to indicate areas of further research such that the experiences of all elected women can be better understood. For each principle, I have also included a personal reflection, in keeping with my intent not just to clarify my positionality but to speak to the credibility of my results based on my own experience as a local elected city council member.

Principle 1: Primed by Community Engagement

Based on the stories of ten of my eleven participants, being active in the community as a volunteer, advocate, or activist is an early catalyst for eventual political office. It may consciously or unconsciously, obviously or subtly lay the groundwork for a political run and shapes how future candidates see themselves and how they come to believe the community sees them. The women I spoke to were motivated by frustration at the status quo, at incumbents, or at the current government. For some women, like Katie, public employment was an alternative path to community engagement because it provided a similar level of insight into the functioning of elected bodies that removed barriers that might otherwise exist.

Identifying community engagement as a precursor to women running for office is significant because it suggests an opportunity to expand the pool of women that could be considered eligible candidates. The current literature focuses on elites and does not recognize the value of community work. Expanding the candidate pool would allow a reframing of where and how we identify candidates by including the women who organize hundreds of volunteers for PTA events, are the activists protesting at city council, and are those who have assumed a mantle of community leadership, even if from the outside that work might look insignificant or not sufficiently political.

To better understand this first principle, I have first provided a brief review of what is meant by community engagement, followed by a discussion of what motivated women to be engaged. Then I will describe how community engagement played a role in these women's journeys to political office.

Defining Community Engagement

In this study, I have defined community engagement broadly. It includes everything from Lauren's anti-mansionization activism to the way in which Kim and Maria volunteered on local political campaigns to Jennifer and Katya's work in the PTA. It includes Sharon speaking up at traffic commission and Teresa's advocacy at city hall. I have taken all of these activities together – protesting, volunteering, campaigning, participating - under an intentionally broad category for the purpose of understanding how this activity served as a starting place for so many women's political journeys. For me, "community engagement" evoked the idea of local involvement but not explicitly political involvement.

Several of the other women I interviewed including Teresa, Samantha, Lauren, and Katya, began their journeys by speaking up about policy issues, but only Teresa called herself an activist. Teresa was concerned about the way in which the city was defining the urban growth boundary around the city and thought that the existing city council was simply short sighted in their attempts to acquire additional land under their jurisdiction. Lauren did not call herself an activist but she organized efforts to fight the building of mansions in her neighborhood, long before she thought about running for office.

This principle exposes two significant gaps in the literature. The first is that too narrowly defining civic engagement or too broadly defining "policy-making" may prevent stories like those told by Lauren and Teresa from being understood or recognized as precursors to political office. Carroll and Sanbonmatsu (2010) reduced the origin story of Senator Barbara Mikulski to simply that of a policy maker despite the fact that

Mikulski was a community activist who emerged from complete anonymity to fight the construction of a highway, years before she even ran for city council. Ironically, that same Carroll and Sanbonmatsu (2010) study surveyed sitting state legislators about their civic engagement but only gave them the option of picking from the following: church groups, youth organizations, service clubs (with the example being the Rotary club), civil rights organizations, teachers' organizations, and labor organizations. Where does campaigning against a 16-lane freeway fall if these are the only types of civic engagement considered? By not asking women about their early advocacy or activism and not understanding the relevance that work, this facet of their journeys is completely overlooked as it relates to their later participation in politics.

The second gap relates to the way in which women's work is traditionally considered in the research. Katya first became involved with the PTA after her daughter was getting in trouble at school. For more than a decade, Laney organized volunteers and community members in her professional role before using that platform for elected office. As Vogel (1997) noted, the "focus upon the public versus the private sphere of the home has led away from understanding the kind of political involvement in which women have participated" (p. 115). Even with a more nuanced view of community engagement, work that is specific to women or that women are more likely to engage in is likely to be overlooked by the existing research (Schlozman et al., 1995; Stapleton, 2021).

Civic Gratification or Frustration?

For all of the study participants, early community engagement was fundamental to their journey to elected office because it laid the groundwork for their eventual political candidacy. Before discussing the key ways in which their engagement led to a political

run, it is worth noting that none of the women ever suggested that they were volunteering or participating because they thought it would benefit them later. However, several of them suggested that they felt their work was important and necessary. Teresa and Lauren dedicated tremendous time and resources to organizing people for their respective causes while Katya was explicit in saying that she wanted to "be a part in making the world a little better."

Verba et al. (1995) studied why people bother to volunteer in their communities and found that "civic gratification" was the primary reason. They defined civic gratification as a sense of duty and a desire to contribute. While the role of civic gratification varied across demographics and socioeconomic status in their study, what surprised the researchers was not the number of people who selected it as the reason they volunteered but the intensity of the response. While I do not believe that every woman I interviewed was motivated by civic gratification, I believe this holds true for many of them.

"Civic gratification" suggests a purely altruistic sense of duty, but it is important to recognize that in many cases, participation was motivated by frustration at either policy or the system. The origins of Teresa and Lauren's civic engagement was a deep sense that the current city council was making bad policy. While Katie was not active in her community in a traditional sense (a fact she was concerned with before she ran for office), she did have a strong sense of frustration about the way in which her city was operating that motivated her to run for office. Silva and Skulley (2019) observed that "policy threat is a motivator for political activism," (p. 345) and while they were

specifically referring to large national policy battles like those around abortion, the sentiment rings true for many of the women I interviewed.

What follows are three outcomes of the community engagement practiced by the women in this study. These outcomes provide an important foundation for these women and their later political activity. I conclude the discussion of this first theoretical principle with a discussion of nascent ambition – which is considered the primary precursor to political activity by many current political science scholars – and end with a reflection on my own experience with community engagement prior to being elected.

Networks

The networks these women built while they were working in their communities were an important part of the groundwork they laid for their later runs for office. Teresa and Lauren both organized large communities of fellow activists; Lauren described how this community later helped her with both her election and her re-election campaigns. Jennifer volunteered in her kids' school and at the local aquatics center and believed it was part of the reason she did not have to campaign very hard for election – she was well known. Katya was active in the PTA and then later within the housing advocacy community and sufficiently drew the attention of local community leaders such that she was encouraged to play a bigger public role and serve on a city committee. Laney organized hundreds of volunteers as part of her professional responsibility and had a reputation in the community as someone who was well connected and had lots of contacts within the community. Even Annie, who was never overtly political in any of her community activities acknowledged that people just *knew her* because of her restaurant and her presence at the farmer's market. Shames et al. (2020) acknowledged the way in

which this type of activity was reciprocal; being more involved in the community meant building networks and building networks only further put these women in the public eye. Schlozman et al. (1994) found that networks acted as mediators of political participation because they facilitated further engagement even within nonpolitical situations.

Sense of Confidence

For most of the women, their participation in the community led to an increased sense of confidence about the role they might play in the future. Maria had not necessarily built a network, but she was very active on political campaigns, so much so that she attended several statewide Democratic conventions. That level of voluntarism and engagement was recognized by political leaders, including an assemblywoman. When Maria first expressed doubt about running for office, it was that assemblywoman who reassured her of her qualifications and gave her the confidence that she could run for office. While the link wasn't direct - it wasn't the political participation itself that gave her confidence - she would not have been in a position to even know state elected officials if it had not been for her work. On the other hand, Kim turned directly to her network to see if she had the support she needed to run for office; they gave her the confidence to decide to do it. Samantha was less overt about the connection between her work and her confidence. She had spent years fighting speeding on her street, an effort that led her to speak publicly at the traffic commission and engage with city staff. She credited that experience with convincing her that running for office is something she could do.

They Were Seen to Be Leaders

These women saw themselves as leaders in the context of the community and the work they were doing in and with that community. Lauren, Teresa, and Katya in particular were practicing leadership in their capacities as prominent community voices. Annie indicated no early childhood political ambition; she was not an elite, and she was not an activist. Annie was a restaurant owner and active in the community insofar as she was known at the local farmer's market and "as someone who served good food." She described herself as being a busy, working mom but by no means civically engaged. She would not have been considered by even the broadest definition of a potential candidate pool in the existing literature. She described herself as well-known in the community and respected, but as a restaurant owner. Her characterization suggests that the factor most important to her was not *what* she did in the community but rather how she was *thought of* by the community.

Shames et al. (2020) called the process of emerging as a leader "imaginative" (p. 71) because it may be the first time that these women can imagine themselves as leaders, much less elected officials. Many political science scholars however, do not articulate this level of influence as community *leadership* (see Schlozman et al., 1994, for example).

Where is the Nascent Ambition?

None of the women I interviewed expressed a long-held desire to run for political office nor could any of them point to any early childhood political ambition with the exception of Laney who called running for mayor a "bucket list" item. In fact, only Tiffany, who I interviewed for my exploratory story and later for this study as a check on credibility, expressed that she had been interested in politics as a child. Her last name

rhymes with the word "win," and she had childhood stories of making up campaign jingles for her eventual presidential run that included her last name. Katya referenced a godfather who was a long-time New Jersey politician and remembered knocking on doors for him as a child; however, she repeatedly said that she did not believe she had grown up in a household that talked about politics very much. Similarly, Maria talked about her mother's commitment to voting in the context her of mother's childhood in a very segregated South. Katie lived overseas as a child and said that geopolitical talk was common at her kitchen table. However, there was really no consistent thread that suggested that these early influences had fostered nascent ambition in these women. None of the women believed that early political exposure had played a role in their decisions to run. Instead, what emerged were political origin stories that began with community work rather than with nascent ambition. In the context of women's political journeys, this suggests that candidate emergence *follows* community engagement as opposed to being preceded by nascent ambition.

This is a stark departure from the literature. Fox and Lawless (2005) coined the term "nascent ambition" to mean a long-held desire, sometimes since childhood, to run for office. This ambition might be nurtured over time by growing up in an overtly political household and having early exposure to activism and politics. Their research notes the disparity between men and women's nascent ambition as a contributing factor to the dearth of women in political office and is supported by empirical evidence. Carroll and Sanbonmatsu's (2010) study of mayors, for example, showed that only 8% of the female mayors they interviewed expressed "a longstanding desire to run" compared to 17% of men.

The following section provides a brief reflection on the data and the literature based on my own experience in elected office.

A Reflection

Most of the women in this study were primed to run for office by their community engagement, but none of them claimed to have decided to run for office at that stage. This data stands in contrast to much of the literature that assumes their journeys began with a long-held desire to run (Fox & Lawless, 2005; 2014).

I am cognizant of my own experience in my community. I did not consider myself an activist, but I was active in a myriad of causes and events. That engagement began with starting to attend meetings of the newly formed Democratic Club which was something of a novelty in a city where Republicans outnumbered Democrats by a significant margin. At one of the Democratic Club meetings, I met a woman who spoke eloquently about the affordable housing crisis in our city, an issue about which I was woefully ignorant. She invited me to a meeting of housing activists at her house. From there, I started paying more attention to the city council including a group of elected Tea Party Republicans that wanted to outsource government.

So how should we think about the early parts of these women's political journeys? Are these the stories of women who wanted to make change in their communities and because of their exposure to networks, combined with confidence and leadership experience, they eventually saw themselves as candidates? Or were they already interested in politics and just needed the right set of circumstances to push them into running? I believe both can be true, as articulated by Schlozman et al. (2018):

The factors that foster political participation are not independent of one another. Those who have the skills and information to take part are more likely to want to do so. Reciprocally, those with a concern about politics are predisposed to make efforts to learn the relevant skills. Similarly, those embedded in social networks are more often asked to take political action and to get involved politically. Moreover, those with the capacity to participate effectively – those who are able to contribute generously to a campaign or to make a coherent statement at a school board meeting – are more likely to be the targets of such requests. (p. 11)

Annie's story epitomizes this contradiction. In some ways, she was an outlier; as I have discussed, she was recruited to run for office and claims no previous political inclination. Her story suggests Frederick's (2014) accidental narrative – she fell into politics only because she was asked. But simultaneously, she was very much embedded in social networks and had the capacity to participate effectively.

Annalise provides an interesting counterpoint that affirms that community engagement itself was important in motivating her participation in politics because of the extent to which she was involved. Annalise was paying attention to city council meetings and was critical of sitting council members. Unlike Lauren and Teresa, she had not established large networks of politically active volunteers nor did she emphasize their civic engagement bona fides during their interviews. Instead, she identified an intrinsic motivation; she ran because they wanted to and felt she could contribute. Because of her engagement – speaking at city council meetings, attending city events, acting as a watchdog on issues related to water – she was encouraged to run by a number of politically connected people. A research study conducted by Andolina et al. (2003) found

that for some people, engagement correlated to how they viewed citizenship; working on a problem in their community and participating in government were natural extensions for people who believed deeply in the value of our democracy and the power of government to solve problems. In their comparative study of women in office in 1981 and 2008, Carroll and Sanbonmatsu (2013) identified "an increasing recognition of the importance of government as an arena for social change" (p. 98). The idea that real social change could be made manifest through political service was affirmed by Ripley (2017):

> It turns out that the gender gap [in political ambition] disappears once women start thinking of politics as it should be. When women see political office as a way to fix problems and improve their communities, they become just as eager to run as men.

Annalise's story affirms the what might be an obvious idea – improving your community may start by paying attention to what local government leaders are doing and then pushing them to do it better. And in so doing, many of the women in this study became political leaders themselves.

Principle 2: Catalyzing the Decision to Run

So far in this chapter I have reviewed the components of the women's early engagement and the groundwork that eventually led to their decision to run for office. The decision itself, however, was catalyzed by extrinsic and intrinsic motivation as well as a sense of qualification. The second principle of my theory is Catalyzing the Decision to Run and in this section I describe the three components of that principle: Motivation, Recruitment and Sense of Qualification.

Motivation

The stories told by the women in this study indicate that the decision to run for office was shaped by extrinsic motivators like encouragement and support from friends, mentors or elected officials, or by intrinsic motivation, or by both. In some cases, encouragement and support served as a catalyst that propelled them from just working in the community into becoming candidates for elected office. For others, their idea to run came from an internal source of motivation which aligns most closely with Lawless and Fox's conception of ambition as an "attitudinal disposition" (Lawless & Fox, 2010, p. 34); Laney is a good example of this. She had clearly been interested in politics for a long time, and while she worked in parks and recreation in her city, she also mentioned the name of several famous politicians when telling me about her mentors. Was she interested in politics because she had been encouraged by these people? Or did she gravitate to them because of her interest in politics? When I asked her about what made her decide to run, she said "I'm doing it because I want to," suggesting that she didn't need any other reason.

The idea of purely innate motivation is still relatively unexplained in the literature, and Laney's story illustrates the challenge of attributing her ambition to any specific structural or institutional influence. Her internal sese of confidence defies many of the theories rooted in gendered expectations that assume women typically lack the confidence required to seek political office (Fox & Lawless, 2011; Holman & Schneider, 2018). Nevertheless, Laney's motivation was not created in a vacuum; she was clearly influenced by her mentors as well as her decades of organizing volunteers.

It appears that each of these women had an innate sense that they should run but that decision-making did not happen in a vacuum. Instead, a mix of factors played out in their lives that created an opportunity for these women to believe this was a decision that made sense. Kim, Jennifer, Lauren, and Katya more closely conform to Shames et al.'s (2020) conception of ambition as fluctuating "based on contextual, structural, institutional, and psychological factors" (p. 7). Kim struggled to provide a specific reason for why she decided to run. She talked in generalities about her family and her feelings of obligation to give back to her community, but, like Laney, had made it a point of volunteering on other campaigns and meeting local elected officials. Jennifer spoke broadly about "wanting to contribute."

Intrinsic motivation was only a minor consideration for some women, especially those who were buoyed by their activism. Lauren and Katya had the network, the confidence, and the encouragement such that the decision to run seemed like a next step that made sense to them. However, they still felt an internal compulsion that could not be attributed to just external factors as demonstrated by Lauren's comment that "someone had to do it… this is for the greater good of the whole community." I posit that those community engagement experiences imbued these women with confidence, positions of leadership, and built-in networks that significantly contributed towards their desire to run for office by providing the contextual and psychological foundation that Shames et al. (2020) described. In other words, it is not merely innate factors that constitute ambition but rather the structure and context in which these women operated.

Recruitment

Recruitment, affirmation, and encouragement by elected officials as well as friends and mentors were significant contributing factors to women's decision to run. Maria directly attributed her decision to seek elected office to the persistence of her assembly member who called her repeatedly to convince her to run. Annalise was similarly recruited by those who were already elected while Katya described elected officials "affirming" her decision in addition to others she respected. Katie was recruited by a mentor while Annie was recruited by historic preservationists.

The findings in this study are consistent with Carroll and Sanbonmatsu's (2010) study of mayors in which most mayors were recruited by a friend, coworker, acquaintance, or other elected official. In their 2013 study, the same authors referred to the decision to become a candidate as a "relationally-embedded decision" (Carroll & Sanbonmatsu, 2013, p. 45). Crowder-Meyer (2020) found that encouragement by others had a greater impact on women's political ambition than any other factor used in their model including feelings of qualification, political participation, and education. They observed that women were "powerfully affected by the signals others send regarding whether they should seek office" (p. 374). Both recruitment and validation by others serve as a broad indicator to women that they will have support and assistance once they decide to run, especially if those women are already well positioned through community engagement or other means (Crowder-Meyer, 2013; Fox & Lawless, 2010; Sanbonmatsu, 2006).

Sense of Qualification

Interestingly, all of the women I interviewed considered themselves qualified to run for office. This stands in stark contrast to much of the existing theory that suggests that the dearth of women in office is due to women's lack of confidence in their qualifications. Carrol and Sanbonmatsu (2010) found that confidence from past experience really mattered for women who ran for mayor who had previously been city council members. Feeling unqualified causes many women not to run for office (Carroll & Sanbonmatsu, 2010; Crowder-Meyer, 2020). The results of this study suggest otherwise. Instead, the women in this study suggest that they felt very qualified. This sense of feeling qualified seemed to stem from their community engagement: the women who were outspoken advocates or active volunteers were already practicing many of the skills required for public service including speaking in public, organizing volunteers, and in many cases, fighting for policy changes. Annalise described herself as having the "confidence of 10 people," while Laney was almost dismissive of the question whether she felt qualified. While not every woman had this same level of confidence about their qualification, the implication is that feeling qualified is less of a psychological barrier when women are deciding to run for higher office. This finding suggests that more attention needs to be paid to women who are already working across all levels of political office as they may be the population that are ready and eager to run for office.

Much of the literature that attempts to account for the lack of women who run for office attributes causation to a combination of structural and psychological barriers including ambition and confidence (Fox & Lawless, 2011; Holman & Schneider, 2018). Yet, for most of the women I interviewed, when asked about the extent to which they

considered their qualifications to run for the office, they dismissed that concern because by the time they decided to run in part because they had developed and were already using many of the skills needed for the job. My research suggests that while qualifications may have been part of their internal calculus, the women I interviewed knew they were qualified and instead, attributed their final decision to the encouragement, recruitment, and support they received from others.

A Reflection

Being engaged in the community may prepare the groundwork for running for office, but actually deciding to become a candidate is a distinct and separate act. The difference between considering a run and becoming a candidate is illustrated by the statistics of the group Run for Something that provides a national mentorship network for local political candidates. In 2018, more than ten thousand people signed up on their website indicating that they were thinking about running for office. However, only 10% of those people actually put their names on the ballot (Conroy & Green, 2020).

When my city was threatened with a lawsuit under the Voting Rights Act for failing to elect a Latino at any point in 60 years despite the demographics of the city, the remedy was to move to district elections to increase the ethnic representation on the city council. In many ways, my community engagement had laid the groundwork, and as a Latina, I seemed like a natural fit to run for the newly created seat. Community engagement propelled me into political candidacy.

My family disagrees in part with this narrative. My parents claim that I joked as a child about wanting to run for president. I grew up in a family that talked frequently about politics, and my grandmother was a precinct captain for the local Republican Party.

My mother believes that there was some amount of political ambition lurking beneath the surface when I attended my very first Democratic Club meeting, although I simply do not recall anything like that. I cannot pinpoint exactly when I even started thinking about running for office or thinking of myself as a potential candidate.

Fox and Lawless (2005) conceived of a two-stage progression to elected office. The first is "considering a candidacy" wherein candidates contemplate running for office. This stage is characterized by political ambition and the extent to which women see themselves as qualified. The second stage is "deciding to enter a first race" in which women determine if they can overcome some of the cultural and structural barriers to running for office. Bernhard et al. (2021) attempted to update Fox and Lawless' political ambition model and inform it with a combination of qualitative and quantitative studies on women who do run for office. They outlined that the final decision comes down to resources (time and money), the institutional/political environment, and psychological and personality barriers or fears. The women I spoke to blurred the lines between Fox and Lawless' two stages and spoke about deciding to run thanks to the encouragement they received (i.e., the extrinsic motivation) and/or their own intrinsic motivation with little mention of resource constraints, the political environment, or psychological fears. I agree with this blurring – I do not know when I first thought about running and based on my family's input, I may have had some nascent ambition.

Frederick (2014) makes the important point that candidates and elected officials are often asked "What made you decide to run for office?" and has studied the ways in which women in particular answer that question. She observed that answering that question is part performance art because that narrative is shaped entirely by what the

politician wants you to know about them and their motivations; "women must strategically cultivate personal narratives to justify their presence in this highly masculinized sphere while staying within the bounds of acceptable femininities" (p. 301). Their narratives may only tell part of the story.

Principle 3: Navigating the Learning Curve

Despite their sense of qualification, the women in this study claimed they also had to navigate a steep learning curve for at least their first year in office after election as they learned the ropes of their new role including placing items on the agenda, the structure of government, and how to make policy. Navigating the learning curve is the third principle of my theory of local elected leaders. Only Jennifer and Katie who had previously worked in government felt that they were able to quickly embrace the nuances of their new roles. Many of the other women I interviewed struggled to get up to speed quickly after they were elected. Maria described not feeling confident about being able to make policy for almost all of her first four-year term. Even Lauren, who did believe she was qualified and who might be considered "elite" based on her educational background, employment as an attorney, and attendance at many council meetings prior to being elected, described herself as "shell shocked" after she was elected because there was so much to learn about how to govern. Laney, who had also previously worked for the city in which she was elected, also noted the challenge of learning areas of policy to which she had not previously been introduced.

To date, researchers have overlooked elected women's experience of needing to navigate the learning curve. By better understanding it, however, we might understand the kind of meaningful support that women need to be successful and further catalyze

their decision to run for office. I found no extant research at all on how women learned

their new jobs and responsibilities when they were first elected, nor any on how they

responded to the pressure of their new roles. The research on women who are serving in

office typically focuses more on the types of legislation they pass and less on the way in

which they govern or learn to govern.

The consequence of failing to understand this learning curve is that we miss an

opportunity to support these women during a period of time in which they are challenged.

Katya's reflection on her first year in office was both about her self-imposed pressure to

be the perfect elected official and also her difficulty with putting items on the agenda.

She noted that "In terms of the learning curve, you don't know. People can tell you but

it's nothing like being in that seat, making those decisions, and feeling also the pressure

and the weight of people [and their expectations]." The fact that she had people tell her

something about the learning curve suggests that the learning curve itself may serve as a

deterrent. I was not expecting to hear so much about the learning curve when I first

started talking to women for this study and the following reflection describes how I have

been thinking about this unexpected principle.

A Reflection

When I was elected, I knew there was going to be a period of adjustment and in

my city, the city staff was very intentional about helping newly elected officials get up to

speed. I had not considered until this research that my experience was uncommon; that

finding has been reinforced by my recent experience as a mentor for a woman I will call

Natalie. Natalie was elected in November 2022 and represents a small city in Orange

County, California where resources and access to city staff is limited. While I served as a

sounding board during her campaign and helped organize a fundraiser for her while she was running for office, I have found myself spending even more time helping her with the learning curve now that she has been elected. We talk weekly about items on her city council agenda, how to read a budget book, and how to navigate the politics of her city. My hope is that my help will make her more effective in her role more quickly. The problem, however, is that she like many others lack institutional support to navigate the learning curve.

While reflecting on my own experience as a newly elected council member, I remembered how on several occasions, the Mayor – who had supported my election – would remove my agenda items without discussion. This was an incredibly frustrating process because I had to find at least two city council colleagues who would agree to overrule the Mayor and allow the item to be heard, and I felt like she was targeting my items because I was new and less experienced. I found out about one such occurrence while on my way to meet a group of friends, and I showed up livid and venting about how hard it was to get anything done without having to constantly battle for my priorities. In retrospect, it seems difficult to imagine that my frustration would not have impacted how those women viewed my experience in political office. Seeing the extent to which this experience challenged me might have served as a deterrent among other women considering running for office, either consciously or subconsciously.

My own experience and those of the women interviewed for this study suggest that institutional support by devoted to recruited and training women to run for office and that those same institutions also devote time and resources to mentoring women after

they are elected. There is clearly an opportunity for additional support for newly elected women.

Principle 4: Deploying Communal and Relational Skills

My research participants described two key skills that were required in their city council roles: forging relationships and listening. These skills are evidence of the communal and relational approaches to leadership that most of these women practiced. In this section, I describe those two skills and provide a reflection.

Forging Relationships

Teresa and Jennifer espoused the value of the League of Cities based on the relationships that they had made regionally because of their participation in that organization. Kim tied her relationships to equity because she believed that her role was to help everyone "have a seat at the table," and she was unable to do that unless she was actively building relationships. Maria reflected on thinking "overall about what is in the best interest of the city in its entirety" while Laney said she didn't plan to reign in her fighting spirit until "those 15,000 people" who voted for her told her to do so. Their emphasis on the community suggests that they were keenly aware that they were not independent decision-makers and in fact, that they had an obligation to think more communally.

While some early political science literature attributes communal and relational traits to maternal thinking (Ruddick, 1982), it is helpful to look to more current transformational and authentic leadership theories that emphasize collaboration and emotional intelligence (Eagly, 2007; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Sawer & Andrew, 2014). In this context, women's emphasis on building relationships and listening can be understood

to be simply part of how they were practicing leadership. Embracing a leadership ideal

that eschews conflict and individualism may also explain how many of these women

were able to dismiss criticism, even in the face of very contentious politics.

Listening

Annalise spoke to the value of listening when asked about how she defines

leadership: "Listening is the first and most important thing. Not just listening but actually

hearing what's being said." When Samantha said that "not listening" was a character flaw

of the incumbent against whom she ran, she was pointing out that listening was a quality

she found necessary for political leadership. Kim and Maria both attested to the

importance their constituents seemed to place on being heard by them. Outside of the

realm of political leadership, women also cite listening as a key leadership trait (Fine,

2009), meaning that female constituents may have higher expectations around listening

for their female elected leaders.

The fact that these women acknowledged and embraced a leadership that

dramatically differed from the masculine political leadership stereotype of power and

authority is striking. An aversion to masculine traits like power-seeking and conflict has

long been thought to be a primary reason for women not wanting to run for office

(Holman & Schneider, 2018; Lawless & Fox, 2010), but due to the deficit model

common to political science research, we have yet to ask what necessary traits might

encourage more women to run for office. Shames et al. (2020) observed that female

candidates were well aware that campaigning required a completely different style of

leadership than what was required once they were elected; they perceived "feminine traits

as making better leaders than campaigners" (p. 38). This principle, and the data collected

to support it, suggest that women may already be embracing more stereotypically feminine leadership traits.

A Reflection

The intention here is not to suggest that all elected women embrace a communal and relational leadership paradigm. Politicians can still be narcissists and I have had several experiences with other elected women who believe that leadership means being assertive and self-promoting. However, I have been keenly aware of the rise of a different kind of leadership as evidenced by the comments of the women in this study and my own experience with the Emerge program training. I believe it is important to share that experience here to support this principle.

During Maria's interview, she reminded me about an exercise that the Emerge program uses wherein they ask women to write down 25 things that they are dreading might come up during a campaign. Then, in small groups, each woman talks through their fears and figures out the responses they might give if ever asked about those issues. The goal of the exercise is twofold: by discussing their fears, the women become desensitized to them, and the fears lose their power. The second goal is to lean into the vulnerability of sharing those fears; often something that was said resonated with those bearing witness. The Emerge trainer (who both Maria and I worked with although in different cohorts) was very powerful in her articulation of the power of authentic and relational leadership and suggested that demonstrating vulnerability as an elected political leader is powerful because it confers authenticity. Maria credited that training with helping her overcome any lingering insecurity she had about running for office.

Principle 5: Making Meaningful Contributions

The fifth principle in my *local leader pathway theory* that explains these women's journeys and experiences includes how women described their roles and sense of purpose after they were elected; what did they believe they were elected to do? While some women spoke about the policies they had enacted, others were more concerned with their independence and sense of self. Here I have described the two most significant components of how they made meaningful contributions: through the way in which they exercised their agency and the way in which they made policy. I have also included a discussion of how the women of color interviewed for this study added an additional dynamic to meaning making and a reflection on my own attempts to make meaningful contributions.

Agency

Recognizing their own power, autonomy and capacity to affect change was the first way in which these women made meaningful contributions. While I did not ask women explicitly about their purpose, many of the women in this study indicated that they derived a sense of gratification from their role that I believe can be attributed to their agency. Maria and Katya both articulated the value of their own self-awareness; by knowing themselves and feeling comfortable with who they were as people, they were more confident in the actions that they took. "I can do the work that I want to do, and be grounded, and affirmed, and be okay with that," Katya said. Laney and Katie spoke to their refusal to vote for issues about which they disagreed because of their own integrity.

Burns et al. (1997) asked women about why they volunteered in the political arena and noted that a significant number derived a "satisfying sense of duty or a desire

to contribute to the welfare of the community" (p. 115) which is comparable to the "civic gratification" described previously in this chapter. In the absence of an ability to directly measure agency, we are left to conclude that a "satisfying sense of duty" was prevalent for many of these women.

Policy Making

Contrary to the political science literature, none of the policy-making described by my research participants cannot be aligned specifically to their gender. Samantha, for example, cited issues that were very common to men and women including traffic calming and permitting for new developments. Lauren and Teresa were concerned with land planning issues. In fact, the policy-making cited by the women in this study was varied and included land planning, human trafficking, water rates, taxing refineries, homelessness, and freeway sound walls.

Shames et al. (2020) predicted that women's life experiences made them more likely to prioritize issues like sexual harassment and domestic violence, a sentiment shared by many other researchers (Kathlene, 1994; Lovenduski & Norris, 2003). The fact that the women I interviewed were concerned with a broad diversity of issues is further evidence that the emphasis in the existing literature on studying primarily Congressional candidates obscures important ideas about local elected office that might not be evident for candidates in higher office. Given that even Barbara Mikulski first ran for city council to fight the building of a highway, we should be careful to understand the types of unique policy-making more common to city council offices.

Women of Color – Giving Voice

In general, women of color are thought to express higher levels of political ambition and participation than White women (Holman & Schneider, 2018; Sanbonmatsu, 2015) in part because they are motivated by experiences of bias (Burns et al., 1997). While none of the women in this study were overt about the way in which their lived experiences of racism had influenced their desire to serve in public office, their focus on being a voice for others was shared by Katya and Kim. They suggested that they felt too often their voices as people of color had not been heard. This is consistent with emerging literature about how some women "play up particular identities and messaging to signal to potential voters about shared experiences and ability to represent constituents' interests" (Brown & Gershon, 2021, p. 6).

With the exception of Katya who worked on housing equity as an activist and then later as an elected official, the women of color that I interviewed did not typically work on policies specifically related to race or equity. This stands in contrast to Reingold et al.'s 2021recent study that suggests that electing more women of color can dramatically shape race-related policy. Reingold et al's study however did not consider women running for local elected office.

The women of color that I interviewed emphasized the way in which their positionality gave voice to their constituents. Her identity as a Vietnamese-Latina was central to the way Kim spoke about her experiences but also about what it meant for her role as an elected official. Katya was explicit about her obligation to serve those that had not previously had a voice in electoral politics: "I know who I'm there for" she said.

A Reflection

In my fourth year of elected office, I decided to push forward with an incredibly controversial housing ballot measure. I led the sub-committee that wrote the measure, I chaired the meeting in which it was publicly proposed, and I publicly owned the ballot measure in every way. I was told that I was either very politically courageous or very stupid, especially given that I was up for re-election. My two political opponents in the campaign did everything they could to further tie me to the measure and published flyers that lied about what the ballot measure would do. After a very tough and contentious election, I won with only a 78-vote margin. My ballot measure won with only a 22-vote margin. My response, when asked about why I would jeopardize my own election was that there was very little point in being elected if I wasn't willing to push for policies I believed in and that I knew could change people's lives.

As I discussed in Chapter 3, I struggled with this final principle of Making Meaningful Contributions the most while I was coding and analyzing the data. Samantha said she was committed to "getting it right," and that idea stayed with me for almost a year. What does it mean to "get it right?" How are any of us supposed to know that we're doing it right? I believe the answer lies in how we choose to use the position to which we've been elected. I do not suggest that every local city council member needs to bet their election on a specific policy issue as I did. But I do believe that the stories I heard from women confirm a feeling among many that being a public servant is only worth it if you're doing something meaningful. In short, it answers the question posited by Shames et al. (2020): "Given the vitriol in recent elections and the high level of hyper

partisanship, negative advertising, and animosity in even lower-level elections, it is fair to ask: Why would anyone run for office?" (p. 2).

A Reflection on the Research Process

This research has been constructed iteratively with great attention to the data and is grounded in my own personal experience. Referring back to the data was critically important to ensure that I was rooting my theory and conclusions in the words that had been spoken and not my recollection. I followed Morse et al.'s (2016) guidance to not be afraid of theory or jumping into early analysis and began exploring codes and themes after the completion of my very first interview. I referred to the original transcripts to verify the speaker's original intent before drawing any substantive conclusions even while writing this chapter. However, I have also been intentional about including my own reflections because it was important that what emerged rang true for me and my experience.

Areas of Further Research

This study has identified several opportunities for further research. I have included four thematic areas here.

Primed by Activism and Voluntarism

This research has only begun to touch on the role of activism and voluntarism as a precursor to political candidacy. Several studies point to the way in which early voluntarism primes young people to engage in politics (Burns et al., 2001; Hart et al., 2007; Quintelier, 2008), but it would be helpful to understand how we might extend those findings to actually support women interested or potentially interested in running for office.

Expanding Support, Encouragement, and Training

We might increase the number of women who become candidates by better supporting them through targeted recruitment, expanded political training programs, and providing mentorship after their elections. Only Maria and Katya went through the Emerge program but several other participants were familiar with it, including Kim who said that she only heard about it after she was already a candidate. Based on Hennings' (2011) findings, these training programs have a significant impact on whether women decide to become candidates. Carroll & Sonbanmatsu (2013) called for an expansion of party efforts to train and recruit after identifying training and recruiting as the two most significant interventions for convincing more women to advance to candidacy. However, we know very little about what elements of these programs, what type of recruitment or what level of support is most impactful.

This study did not investigate the power of endorsements but like gaining the support of elected officials, the endorsements of organizations, ethnic groups and high profile community leaders have the power to increase candidates' confidence and perceived viability. Boudreau et al. (2019) found this to be especially true of women of color. Further study is required to better understand the impact of endorsements.

Intersecting Identities

This study has not paid significant attention to the intersecting identities of study participants. While I did include race as a factor for exploration, I did not include sexuality, socio-economic status or motherhood, each of which has been explored to some extent in the literature to explain why women do or do not run for office (Carnes, 2015, 2016). However, very little research exists on those intersecting identities at the

local government level suggesting that this research could be very helpful in our understanding how more women might enter the political sphere where the structural barriers to entry may be the fewest.

Recognizing meaningful contributions

There was very little extant research on how women make meaning of their own service in elected office or the ways in which they contribute outside of purely gender-based policy making. This study identified policy making and agency as central to these women's experience of service but there is significant opportunity to learn more about what women on city councils actually do once they are elected.

<div align="center">Limitations of the Study</div>

I have provided some methodological limitations of this study in Chapter 3. They include recognizing the potential for mistakes and misunderstandings in my interpretation of the data as well as the inherent challenges with credibility while using a constructivist approach to the data. While I have attempted to mitigate for credibility by conducting member checking, receiving external input on my findings from Michelle (who participated in my exploratory study) and engaging in self-reflection and journaling, the most important evidence of credibility was to ensure that my results were firmly rooted in the data.

Other, more broad limitations include the fact that my sample size was limited. While I attempted to gain the maximum amount of geographic and demographic diversity in my sample, eleven women are clearly not representative of all locally elected women in California. While my findings are not intended to be generalizable, it is important to acknowledge that a broader pool of respondents may have yielded different findings. In

some ways, the breadth of my sampling may be a further limitation of the study given that some of the city council members I interviewed represented fewer than two thousand people while others represented more than 30 thousand people. Even though they are all city council members, I may be guilty of committing the same mistake for which I have criticized the literature by blending political offices that are significantly different from each other. Teresa, for example, noted that she had raised less than $2,000 to run for office. By comparison, in my own campaign I raised more than $50,000. Are those two experiences comparable in a meaningful way?

This question gives rise to a further limitation: I did not thoroughly investigate many of the structural factors that researchers have identified to account for why fewer women run for office. While I asked women about what had challenged and supported them while running for office, I did not explicitly ask about how much money they had to fundraise or how they organized their campaign infrastructure or whether they had received a party endorsement. I was more interested in how they conceptualized the experience rather than whether or not they had hired a professional treasurer, for example.

Lastly, I did not interview women who lost their elections which means that my results only reflect the journeys of women who were successful in their elections. I believe there is much to be learned from the women who try but fail including whether and how their motivations may be different for deciding to run for office and to what they attributed their loss. However, this study does not include that perspective.

Significance of the Study

This study has potentially wide-ranging implications for the study of women in political office. The key findings of this study were compared with the peer-reviewed literature, frequently resulting in the confirmation or extension of the ideas presented in previous research. In some instances, the study findings did not support prior research. Drawing from the local leader pathway and the extant literature, I have identified four significant implications of this work.

Failing to Understand Local Office is Failing to Understand Women's Experiences

By failing to study local elected office, we fail to hear and understand the experiences of most women who run for office; thus, many existing studies draw incomplete conclusions. With more than half a million local elected offices in the United States (Fisher et al., 2005), paying attention only to Congress or even state races misses the experience of hundreds of thousands of women. The pathway and attendant experiences of a member of Congress will be inherently different than a local city council member. Local elected office has remained relatively unstudied for many reasons including the sheer number of offices and the way in which they regionally vary in structure (Dolan & Lynch, 2016). Unfortunately, many studies talk about the viability of congressional candidates in terms of fundraising and party gatekeepers without any regard to whether they served previously in a lower level of government (see Bucchianeri, 2018 for example). While Carroll and Sanbonmatsu (2010) did study the experiences of mayors, they provided no further exploration of the way in which city councils work as a starting place for higher office despite the fact that 75% of their respondents said that the first office they sought was a city council position (before the

mayor's seat). The same authors (2013) were explicit about only conducting broad quantitative analyses of state legislators rather than focusing on the individual experiences of women in their book, *Can More Women Run? Reevaluating Pathways to Office.* As they point out: "We are less interested in the individual as a unit of analysis than in the overarching patterns that emerge when we compare women state legislators with their male colleagues" (p. 16). I disagree and as this study has pointed out, by listening to local voices and recognizing the unique pathway of local leaders, we gain a more nuanced understanding of the way in which women run for and serve in office.

Additionally, as noted in Chapter 1, studying women in office requires disciplinary flexibility across multiple fields including public policy, leadership and political science. Heeding the admonition of Ackerly and True (2019) for feminist researchers to break down artificial disciplinary barriers can only benefit the further study of women in elected office.

The Candidate Pool is Wider and Deeper Than Believed

I posit that the emphasis on elites and the lack of focus on local office – both in the literature and by party elites – have resulted in a false belief that it is difficult to find women interested in running for office. The women in my study who ran for office were activists, volunteers, restauranteurs, and government employees, but only Lauren and Katya, who were both educated as lawyers, were likely to fit the potential candidate mold based on the criteria used by much of the existing literature including the influential studies of Fox and Lawless (Fox & Lawless, 2005; Fox & Lawless, 2014; Lawless & Fox, 2010).

The idea of local government is predicated on accessible, local representatives, so it should be unsurprising that local community engagement was foundational for many of the women in this study. As Katya said, people knew her as "being in the mix." Many of the women in this study had extensive networks, saw themselves as leaders, and believed they were qualified, even before they were actively recruited for political office. Schlozman et al. (1994) observed that "nonpolitical institutions can act as the locus of attempts at political mobilization" (p. 967), but "political mobilization" was limited only to voting. How can we better look to the women already serving as community leaders when considering how we recruit for political office?

In part, the problem has lied with the extent to which political and social science has had a blind spot in how women's work and women's participation is considered. Burns et al. (1997) noted that:

> [An] overemphasis upon voting and other electoral activities leads scholars to underestimate women's political involvement because it ignores alternative modes of participation – for example, organization, protest, and grassroots community activity – in which women have always taken part. (p. 63)

Studying more women who are community activists and avid volunteers and who may not yet have contemplated a political run may provide additional insight into the potential candidate pool than currently exists.

The Potential for Increased Recruitment and Support

The support of elected officials was very powerful for Maria, Annalise, and Katya; other women like Laney and Teresa had mentors who were elected. This process

of recruitment is currently informal and haphazard because it relies on elected officials and party officials becoming aware of potential candidates through informal networks.

One method of formalizing this recruitment might be to expand who and how we recruit into political training programs like Emerge. In these programs, women are given access to information about fundraising and campaign strategy but also gain exposure to elected women through hosted fundraisers, panel discussions, and happy hours. Women also have the opportunity to forge bonds with other like-minded women who are considering a political run. Because groups like Emerge are closely tied to the state and county Democratic Party establishment, they might also serve to overcome the challenge of the dynamic of who gets recruited. We know that "party elites fail to look at occupations with high numbers of women, such as the non-profit sector, when identifying potential political candidates" (Holman & Schneider, 2018, p. 3) and that institutional support has historically been lacking for non-elite women (Crowder-Meyer, 2013; Holman & Schneider, 2018). By combing the external support and encouragement that eligible candidates receive with training, we might increase the pool of women for whom running for office is a possibility. Hennings (2011) found that political trainings can serve to inspire women who were on the fence about running. Given the number of women in this study who were challenged by navigating the learning curve, a more formal network of support and mentorship may also benefit women once they are elected.

The Deficit Model Obscures Our View of How Women Serve

By focusing on what women lack in explaining the paucity of women in elected office, we have failed the recognize the way in which women who *are* elected make meaning of their experiences and practice leadership. For example, Dolan and Hansen

(2018) asked men and women about why there were so few women in Congress by asking respondents to evaluate statements like "women don't have the right experience for politics." While their intent was to understand the way in which blame for the gender gap in politics is attributed, the researchers seemingly lacked awareness of the extent to which their framing introduced bias. Similarly, Emerge program[6] graduates who had not yet run for office were asked in another study not about their future plans to run for office but about what was "holding them back" (Bernhard et al., 2021). The implication was that some barrier must be preventing them from running even though it is unlikely that every woman who graduates from the program will decide to run for office. I believe that because of this focus on deficits, we are only just beginning to acknowledge the way in which women uniquely serve including the type of leadership they exhibit and what they consider to be meaningful about their service. This gap is evidenced by the lack of existing literature around both findings.

The drumbeat of perceived deficits and inadequacies have consequences for women considering politics. Holman and Schneider (2018) identify that "internalizing arguments that women's lack of fit with politics is their own fault may cause women to disidentify with politics in the long term, thus producing damaging consequences for women's potential to seek public office" (p. 10). By better articulating the way in which women serve, women might better identify with political leadership.

Summary

The goal of this study was to understand how women elected to city council conceptualized their own journeys to local elected office and how they described the

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[6] Emerge is a political training program for Democratic women with a deep presence in California politics

skills and strategies required to make meaningful contributions in their political roles. Based on the results articulated in Chapter 4, I have identified five principles that explain the *local leader pathway theory*. Together, this theory offers a new way of understanding the experiences of women in local office.

The first principle identified that women who have been successful in running for city council are often primed by their engagement in and with the community. While this is sometimes characterized by frustration at policy or local city officials, it might also look like community service or volunteering. Their experience has built networks of support as well as leadership capacity.

The second principle provides an explanation of the journey experienced by women who have taken the leap from community activist or volunteer to political candidate and is characterized by receiving support, often from those who are already elected. In most cases, women were recruited or asked to run.

Once elected, women have to navigate their new roles and it can sometimes take years to feel proficient. This idea was elevated to being the third principle of the theory because it was very common across my research participants but relatively unmentioned by the literature or within the realm of the political training programs in which I've participated.

The fourth principle explains that women who are successfully electeddeploy communal and relational skills in their roles, relying heavily on listening and building relationships as a way to best perform their roles.

The fifth principle explains that when women who run for elected office answer the question, "Why do this at all?", we find that they are motivated to make policy but they are also motivated to simply exercise their agency.

This study has broad implications for how we think about recruiting women, about the size of the existing candidate pol, about how we might increase the support women receive and about how we should study the question of women's underrepresentation. By studying the individual stories of women who have successfully run for office, particularly in local office where the barrier to entry is ostensibly the lowest, we can better understand their experiences and the skills required for them to be successful both in running for office and in serving.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Guide

Introduction

1. Can you tell me a little about where you're from and where you grew up?

2. Can you tell me how you would prefer to be identified?

3. When were you elected and what position do you hold?

4. Before you were elected, what did you think it was going to be like being in office?

5. How about once you were actually elected, has it been anything like what you thought?

Structure/Context

6. Can you describe the structure of your council? Are you in districts?

7. I've always thought it was interesting that councils were structured so differently than other governing bodies… how do you think that structure might matter?

8. Are you serving in the majority or minority? How does the council tend to vote?

9. Are there any activist groups in the city that you've had a lot of interaction with? How so?

10. Do you feel like the local parties (D/R) have had an impact on you in office?

Culture/Agency – Qualifications & Expectations

11. When you were deciding to run, what were some of the qualifications you felt you had that would make you good in this role?

12. Knowing what you know now, would you add anything to that list?

13. Were you ever worried about being qualified enough? If so, how?

14. What do you think it means to do well in this role?

15. There are some differing opinions about what the job of a city council member really is – can you help describe that for me?

Culture/Agency – Role of Identity

16. How do you think gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation play a role for you on city council?

17. Do you consider yourself a leader in the community?

18. Have any other (women/women of color) ever served in your City? Why do you think that is?

19. Do you think you've faced more scrutiny as a (woman/woman of color) in your City?

Culture/Agency – Running for Office

20. What kind of challenges did you face when you decided to run for office?

21. During your campaign, what did you find the most difficult?

22. How did your gender or identity play a role during the campaign? How were you equipped to deal with those challenges?

23. What factors did you consider when you first decided to run?

24. Was there a lot of talk about politics in your home as a child?

Culture/Agency – Ambition and Confidence

25. Do you want to run for higher office? If so, what office?

26. When you hear the word "ambition" what do you think?

27. How would you describe your leadership style?

Culture/Agency – Supports/Challenges

28. What has challenged you the most in elected office?

29. What has given you the most support in elected office?

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