

See Jane Run: Women Politicians as Role Models for Adolescents

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Does the presence of female political role models inspire interest in political activism among young women? We find that over time, the more that women politicians are made visible by national news coverage, the more likely adolescent girls are to indicate an intention to be politically active. Similarly, in cross-sectional analysis, we find that where female candidates are visible due to viable campaigns for high-profile offices girls report increased anticipated political involvement. Contrary to conventional wisdom, this effect does not appear to be mediated through beliefs about the appropriateness of politics for women, nor through perceptions of government responsiveness. Instead, an increased propensity for political discussion, particularly within families, appears to explain the role model effect.

“What made the 1994 campaign [for governor] worthwhile was the realization that I had become a role model for women and young girls,” Collins said, adding that a girl told her after the election, “You made me feel I could do anything.”

Susan Collins (R, ME), current U.S. Senator¹

Female politicians often claim that, in addition to providing exemplary public service, their candidacies and terms in office offer positive models of female political leadership for women and girls. Male candidates, on the other hand, rarely trumpet their status as role models, reflecting the fact that men and boys need little additional evidence that the halls of power are open to them. Politics remains an overwhelmingly male profession: In 2004, women were candidates in only about 30% of the races for U.S. House, Senate, and state governor (Center for American Women and Politics 2004).² Proponents of descriptive representation frequently argue that by challenging both the reality and norm that politics is a male occupation, the presence of female politicians transforms beliefs about the appropriateness of politics for women and thus increases interest in political activity among women, especially young women (e.g., Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001; Carroll 1985).

The central hypothesis examined in this paper is that the presence of visible female role models makes young women more likely to express an intention to engage in political activity as adults. Previous research suggests that under certain conditions, the presence of female candidates has a positive effect on political engagement among adult women (Atkeson 2003; Hansen 1997; Koch 1997; Sapiro with Conover 1997; Verba, Burns, and Schlozman 1997), but this paper is the first, to our knowledge, to examine the impact on females prior to adulthood when socialization effects might be strongest. We find, both cross-sectionally and over time, that the presence of visible female role models does in fact increase the propensity for girls to express an intention to be politically active—what we term the “role model effect.”

This paper is also unique in that we offer empirical tests of the various hypothesized mechanisms by which the role model effect occurs. Our analysis indicates that contrary to conventional wisdom, the role model effect does not appear to be mediated through beliefs about the appropriateness of politics for women, nor through perceptions of government responsiveness. Instead, an increased propensity for

¹(Hale 1996). Collins lost her 1994 campaign for governor of Maine (a four-way race in which Collins came in third) and was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1996 with almost 56% of the vote.

²Specifically, women were candidates in 10 of 34 Senate races, 114 of 435 House races, and 3 of 11 governor’s races (CAWP 2004).

political discussion, particularly within families, appears to explain the role model effect.

Previous Research

Although American women have reached parity in some aspects of political participation, notably voter turnout, they lag behind men in other aspects, including donating to political campaigns, encouraging others to vote for a particular candidate, and contacting a public official. Gender gaps also appear on psychological indicators of political engagement such as political interest, knowledge, and efficacy (cf. Beckwith 1986; Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba, Burns, and Schlozman 1997). Even small differences can be consequential. Burns and her colleagues (2001) note that a small gap in participation translates into a large difference in the expression of female preferences in the system as a whole. In the aggregate, for example, women are responsible for about 2 million fewer phone calls or letters to public officials than are men.

Differences in resources and unequal gender roles in the home—the most common explanations—are important, but not sufficient to account for all differences in political participation. Controlling for relevant resources narrows, but does not eliminate, the participation gender gap (Bennett and Bennett 1989; Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001; Powell with Brown, and Hedges 1981; Schlozman, Burns, and Verba 1994). Similarly, repeated studies find that the greater responsibilities for childcare and housework that many women shoulder (regardless of whether they work outside the home) do not appear to hamper their political activity or engagement (Beckwith 1986; Bennett and Bennett 1989; Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001). Different work experiences and power disparity within the home do translate into political advantages for men in interesting and complex ways (see Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001), but are not sufficient to explain all participation differences.

The inability of differences in resources and responsibilities to explain all the variation in political engagement suggests the possible contribution of political socialization, the process by which adults and young people come to learn about their political environment, and their place within it.³ There are a

number of alternative, and not necessarily incompatible, mechanisms by which the presence of female role models might shape the political socialization of young women. Many scholars emphasize that the absence of women from prominent political roles reinforces the widespread conception of women as unfit for political activity (on gendered expectations for political leaders, see Eagley and Karau 2002; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; Rosenwasser and Dean 1989; Rosenwasser and Seale 1988). Indeed, the possibility that female politicians might challenge dominant norms about the suitability of women for politics is a common argument for descriptive representation (Carroll 1985; Mansbridge 1999; Phillips 1995; Sapiro 1981). By modeling the possibility of female political activity, women politicians may encourage greater interest in political participation among girls (see Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001).

Another potential mechanism is that the presence of fellow group members in positions of political power engenders a belief that government is responsive to group interests and that group members are capable of affecting political outcomes. Burns and her colleagues (2001), for example, hypothesize that the presence of women officeholders may lead to a “self-interested assessment” (351) that more women politicians will mean more pro-women policies; that is, that government will be more responsive to women’s concerns.

Finally, female role models may affect participation by increasing girls’ engagement with political topics. The mere presence of fellow group members in political roles may make girls more likely to pay attention to and discuss politics. Moreover, races in which women are candidates tend to feature more attention to women’s issues (e.g., Fox 1997; Kahn 1993), and female officeholders are more likely to pursue legislation on the same topics (e.g., Swers 2002; Wolbrecht 2002) and to frame legislative decision making in terms of women’s perspective (Walsh 2002). Previous research suggests women are more engaged with politics when the issues are more directly relevant to them; for example, Burns and her colleagues (2001) find that school system leaders are the one set of political actors about which women are more

³Older studies of children found numerous sex differences in political engagement; girls offered more “don’t know” responses to political questions than did boys (Rapoport 1981), were less politically efficacious, interested, trusting, and knowledgeable (Greenstein 1961, 1965; Jennings and Niemi 1974, 1981; Orum

et al. 1974; Owen and Dennis 1988), and in some cases were less likely to participate in politics (Hess and Torney 1967). Recent research, however, finds that adolescent girls indicate an intention to participate in more political activities than do boys, although this finding may be in part a function of the survey’s bias toward asking about the sorts of activities (social movement-related) in which girls show a greater interest rather than those (more radical and confrontational) that interest boys (Hooghe and Stolle 2004).

knowledgeable than men. By raising issues of interest to women, female role models may spark girls' interest in political topics and generate conversations about politics, which in turn affect the likelihood of political participation.

The few previous empirical studies of the role model effect among women have reported an impact on just one type of political activity: political proselytizing. Both Atkeson (2003) and Hansen (1997) find that, under certain circumstances, women are more likely to try to convince others to vote for a particular candidate in places where women run for office (but see Lawless 2004). Other research indicates that role models also affect political engagement among women. Burns, Schlozman, and Verba (2001) find that women in states with female Senate candidates or incumbents boast greater political knowledge, and that among women the density of female politicians is associated with greater interest, attention, and knowledge. Atkeson (2003) reports that the presence of female candidates in competitive races has a positive impact on political engagement among women. At least some of the time, women report higher levels of campaign knowledge and interest (Koch 1997) and pay as much attention as men to campaign coverage (Sapiro with Conover 1997) in places in which women run for office.⁴

Visibility appears to be an important mediating factor. Burns, Schlozman, and Verba (2001, 344) focus on campaigns for the Senate, a major office, or measure the "density of female politicians" by weighting the impact of a female candidate or officeholder by the level of the office. Atkeson (2003) emphasizes that female candidates must be "viable" in order to increase political engagement among women. She examines Senate and gubernatorial races due to their high visibility and finds that female candidates affect women's political engagement only in competitive contests. Koch (1997), Sapiro (with Conover 1997), and Hansen (1997) all report that the effect of female candidates is limited to 1992, a year in which the underrepresentation of women and the women candidates themselves received heightened media attention.⁵ Thus, the mere presence of a female politician

is not enough; the degree to which the candidacy is visible—either as a function of the office sought, the viability of the candidate, or the extent to which attention is drawn to the unique phenomenon of female politicians—creates a context in which women's presence as politicians can affect the political engagement of women.

In this research we investigate the hypothesis that girls are more likely to express an intention to be active in politics when they see women running for high-profile offices. Following from previous research, we expect that female role models will have the greatest effect when those women are highly visible. Visibility increases the likelihood that the presence of women will be noted and thus potentially shape girls' interests and behaviors. Visibility suggests that a woman's campaign is sufficiently viable and the office sufficiently important that the woman is viewed as a credible politician, rather than as powerless, not serious, or a token. Visible female candidates are more likely to shape the agenda of the campaign (Atkeson 2003).

Women candidates become visible for many reasons. One central indicator of visibility is the office pursued; a woman running for president would be highly visible, while a female candidate for state controller is likely far less so. Another gauge of visibility is the viability of the candidate (see Atkeson 2003). A woman running for even a prominent office who garners a relatively small percentage of the vote likely receives limited press coverage, is taken less seriously, and has less impact on the content of the campaign. A woman who wins or narrowly loses her race likely receives widespread coverage which treats her as credible and serious, enhancing her visibility and influence on the content of the campaign.

Female candidates and officeholders might also obtain visibility to the extent that their gender itself is salient. Gender becomes salient in numerous ways—when a woman's candidacy is viewed as unique or unusual (e.g., the first time a woman pursues or wins an office), when gender is central to the campaign or agenda, or when attention is otherwise drawn to women in political life. Admittedly, it is paradoxical to claim that when attention is drawn to how unusual it is for women to be in prominent political roles, young girls will be inspired to become more engaged in politics (see Mansbridge 1999). When attention is drawn to the uniqueness of women in positions of power, two conflicting messages are presented: (1) Women are capable of being serious and credible politicians, and (2) It is unusual for women to be serious and credible politicians. We expect that the first message

⁴Scholars have found evidence of a similar effect among other politically under-represented groups, particularly African Americans (Abney and Hutcheson 1981; Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Gilliam 1996; Gilliam and Kaufmann 1998; Tate 1991; but see Gay 2001; Leighley 2001).

⁵Koch (1997) finds no effect on campaign engagement in 1990, and Hansen (1997) reports insignificant results for political proselytizing in 1988, 1990, and 1994. Sapiro with Conover (1997) examines only 1992, but emphasizes the degree to which gender was highlighted by the media and campaigns during that election.

dominates the second and that the second message serves mainly to focus attention on the first. These two messages nonetheless seem somewhat contradictory, a point to which we will return.

This research thus makes three important contributions to the literature. First, we offer the first assessment of the role model effect among adolescents, allowing us to examine the process of political learning at a time when it might be the most relevant and powerful. Second, we examine the role model effect both cross-sectionally (as others have done) and uniquely, over a period of more than 20 years. Finally, we investigate the *mechanisms* by which female role models affect participation among adolescent girls. Previous scholars have offered numerous reasons for expecting that the presence of female role models would spur participation among women and girls, but to our knowledge, none have tested competing explanations directly.

The Role Model Effect Over Time

We begin by considering the temporal relationship. To do so, we employ a rich data set that largely has been untapped by political scientists, the Monitoring the Future (MTF) series (Johnston, O'Malley, and Bachman 2001). MTF is annually administered to a representative sample of high school seniors across the United States.⁶ While it is primarily a study of drug, alcohol, and tobacco use, MTF also includes an extensive set of items about politics.⁷ Each year, about 16,000 students are part of the MTF study, and of those roughly 2,500 complete the version of the questionnaire that includes the political items.

To gauge the expected political participation of adolescents over time, we construct an index of three items. MTF respondents were asked whether they planned to do any in a series of activities, including writing to public officials, giving money to a political campaign, or working in a political campaign. By using questions that ask adolescents to report on what they *expect* to do as adults, we capture the essential idea behind the hypothesized role model effect: Do young people envision themselves as active participants in the political process as they move into adult-

hood?⁸ These items were additively combined into the "Anticipated Involvement Index."⁹

We acknowledge that forecasts of future behavior are speculative and should be viewed cautiously, especially for behavior that has a normative tinge to it. Rather than treat these questions as windows into the future, we consider them as providing insight into adolescents' *present* state of mind. By asking whether they expect to be politically active, we measure how students currently perceive such involvement. It seems unlikely that a youth with a negative impression of political involvement in the present would indicate an intention to be politically active in the future.

Figure 1 displays the mean of the involvement index by sex, from 1976 to 2001.¹⁰ A few trends are noticeable, including the sharp decline in the anticipated political involvement of both sexes over time, and the sawtooth pattern corresponding to the timing of national elections. In many years boys' anticipated involvement is slightly higher than that of girls, or the two are essentially indistinguishable. At a few points, however, the girls' mean rises sharply, exceeding that of their male peers. The two most prominent spikes occur in 1985 and 1993, and in both cases there is a statistically significant difference between boys and girls, at $p > .01$ (two-tailed t-test). These are two points in time characterized by heightened attention to women in politics. The 1985 survey was the first conducted following the 1984 election in which Geraldine Ferraro, the first woman to run on a major party ticket, attracted considerable media attention, much of which highlighted the uniqueness of her candidacy. A similarly sharp spike is observed in 1993, right after the 1992 election season. A number of events that year—the relatively large number of women running for both the House and the Senate and the recent Hill-Thomas hearings, in particular—drew attention to women's campaigns to such an extent that 1992 was dubbed "the year of the woman" by political pundits

⁸Recent work (Mondak and Anderson 2004) has found gender differences on political knowledge to be at least partially attributed to the greater propensity of male respondents to venture a guess rather than admit a lack of knowledge. Neither the expected activities items, nor any of the other variables employed in this research, concern political knowledge in a way that might tap into the potential bias introduced by the gendered propensity to guess.

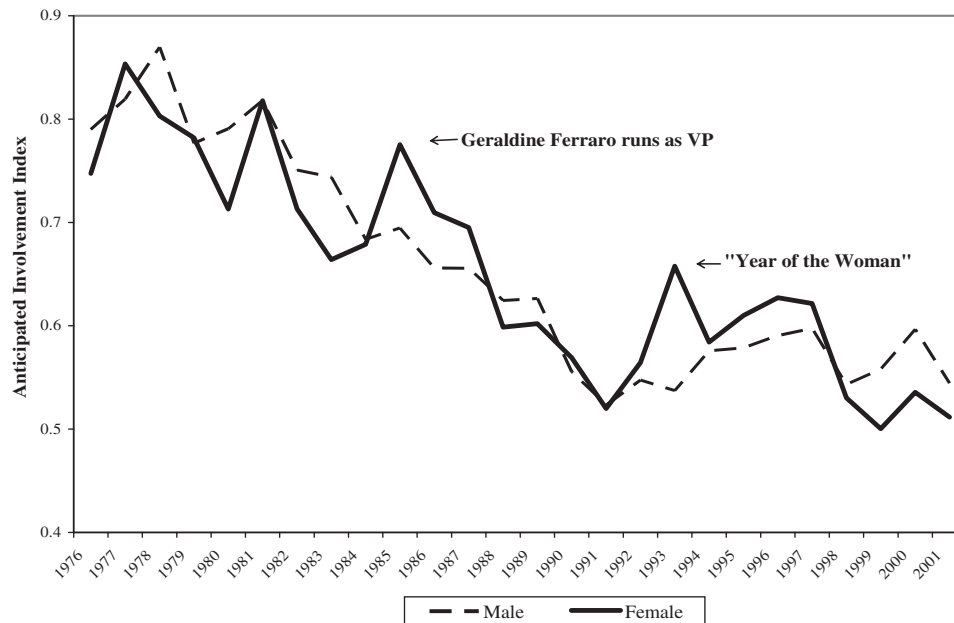
⁹The web appendix available from the journal website includes details on how the variables have been coded. Results are similar when each of the three items is graphed separately, and so we have opted to combine them to simplify the presentation.

¹⁰Across the entire time-span of the MTF series, the overall mean for the Anticipated Involvement Index is 1.01.

⁶For more information on these data, see the web appendix available on the journal website.

⁷For examples of other political science studies that have employed data from MTF see Rahn and Transue 1998; Putnam 2000; Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001; and Campbell 2002.

FIGURE 1 Adolescents' Political Engagement



Source: Monitoring the Future series.

Note: Anticipated Involvement Index has a range of 0–3.

(see Cook, Thomas, and Wilcox 1994). In short, both the 1984 and 1992 election seasons were characterized by an unusually large amount of attention paid to women politicians. Girls appear to have responded with an increased desire to be involved in politics.¹¹

Thus, the presence of female role models is one possible explanation for the variation in the difference between boys' and girls' anticipated participation over time. Yet, the number of national-level female candidates has been increasing in a fairly linear fashion over this period (Center for American Women and Politics 2004), while the relative level of girls' anticipated involvement (that is, compared to boys) appears to vary in a nonlinear fashion, spiking upward in 1992, for example, but then declining thereafter.¹² The cor-

¹¹A close examination of Figure 1 suggests girls' political engagement also experienced a particularly large relative increase in 1977 (significantly different from boys, $p > .01$). Figure 2 indicates that 1977 also has the third largest (after 1985 and 1993) number of news stories about women in politics. It is likely that this increase in news stories (and we believe, resultant increase in girls' political engagement) was a response to the 1977 National Women's Conference and the state conferences that preceded it. These events attracted considerable press coverage and focused attention on gender and politics. The National Women's Conference was created by the U.S. Congress in response to the United Nations' International Women's Year (see Davis 1991).

¹²The appendix available from the journal website contains a figure showing the series for the number of women candidates plotted against the series for the difference between boys' and girls' anticipated involvement.

relation between the number of female candidates and the difference between boys' and girls' anticipated participation indicates no relationship ($r = -.045$, $p = .88$).¹³

It is perhaps not surprising that female adolescents would be unaffected by the sheer number of women candidates nationwide. After all, most of these women candidates would be unknown to the average adolescent—a teenager in Portland, Maine is likely unaware of a woman running for the House from Portland, Oregon. As we argue above, the visibility of female politicians is crucial. At the national level, we suggest that the visibility of female role models is at least partly a function of the degree to which attention is drawn to the uniqueness of female politicians. Emphasis on the unusual presence of women politicians draws *national* attention to state and local female candidates to a degree distinct from their actual numbers. To test this hypothesis, we coded stories in the national press which drew attention to women politicians *as women*. In other words, we focused on how many stories specifically noted the fact of the female politician's sex. We do not aver that stories which emphasize a woman politician's sex lead young women to anticipate future political involvement.

¹³A similar pattern is revealed when we examine the number of women holding, rather than seeking, political office. As one would expect, that series has also increased more or less linearly since 1976. Results available upon request.

Rather, these stories serve as a gauge for how much attention is being drawn to women politicians nationally at any one time. That attention (in the press, among elites, perhaps among girls' parents and teachers) means women politicians are more *visible* and thus more likely to affect girls' anticipated involvement.

Two data sources are used to measure this phenomenon: the Vanderbilt Television News Archive and the *New York Times Index*.¹⁴ By examining both nightly television news coverage and newspaper coverage, we seek to obtain the most accurate gauge possible of the extent to which the press emphasized the gender of women candidates and officeholders. The result is two highly correlated ($r = .77$, $p > .01$) event-count time series of the number of such stories per year which specifically draw attention to a female politician's gender.¹⁵ We compare these series to the difference between boys' and girls' engagement over time. By using the difference between males and females we control for the overall decline in the degree of anticipated involvement over this period of time and focus, appropriately, on the relative level of females' anticipated involvement. The difference is calculated by subtracting the mean for males from that for females; a value of greater than 0 indicates that girls' anticipated involvement exceeded boys' in that year. Figure 2 displays gender differences in anticipated political involvement as a function of coverage of women politicians in network television news and the *New York Times* respectively. In both cases, we see a relatively close correspondence between media coverage of women politicians and gender differences in engagement. The correlation between gender differences and TV news coverage is .61 ($p > .001$), while the correlation with the *New York Times* measure is .52 ($p > .01$). While correlation does not prove causation, the relationship between media coverage of women in political life and adolescent girls' anticipated involvement is nonetheless highly suggestive.

The bivariate comparisons suggest that girls are more likely, relative to boys, to see themselves as involved in politics as adults when the media draw attention to women politicians. This is not to say that we assume many adolescents view network TV news

regularly, let alone read the *New York Times*, but rather that national news coverage is a reasonable proxy for the general attention paid to women candidates and officeholders by local news sources, opinion leaders, parents, educators, and other sources of direct influence on adolescents.

In sum, the over-time data provide evidence that gender differences in anticipated involvement are explained in large part by the visibility of women politicians, not merely the aggregate total number of women holding or competing for political office.¹⁶ However, while these results are informative and, *prima facie*, supportive of the role model effect, the time-series data are nonetheless exploratory at best. In particular, the limits of aggregate-level measures significantly restrain our ability to examine the causes of the role model effect in greater detail. For that reason, we turn to a more detailed analysis using individual-level cross-sectional data.

The Role Model Effect in Cross-Sectional Data

To test whether variation over space in the presence of visible female role models affects the anticipated political activity of adolescent girls, we employ another data source that has been underutilized by political scientists, the Civic Education Study (CES).¹⁷ The CES is the U.S. component of a 28-nation study of civic and political attitudes among adolescents. The CES was conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, under the auspices of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, the same

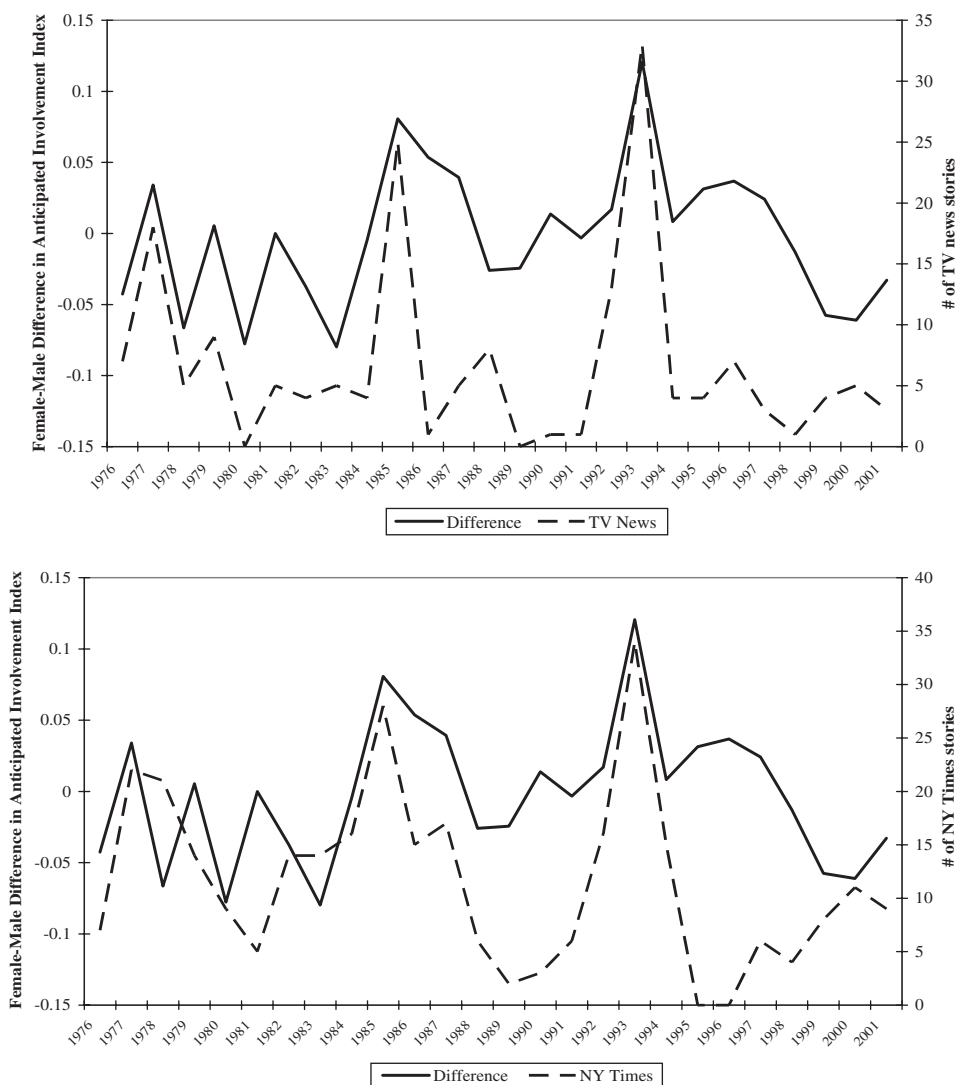
¹⁴See the appendix available from the journal website for more information on how these series were coded.

¹⁵To provide a sense of magnitude, the number of relevant stories in the *New York Times* ranges from 0 (1994–95 and 1995–96) to 34 (1992–1993); the number of stories on the network TV news ranges from 0 (1988–89) to 33 (1992–1993). The *New York Times* mean is 11.6, while the mean number of stories on the network TV news is 6.7.

¹⁶These findings are confirmed when the gender difference in the anticipated involvement index is regressed on four variables: number of women candidates, number of women officeholders, nightly television news coverage, and *New York Times* coverage. Given the relatively small number of data points in this time series we are limited in accounting for the complexities of time-series analysis, but simple models, including a one-year lagged term for the dependent variable, reveal that neither the number of women running for office nor the number of women who win office reaches statistical significance, as expected from the bivariate results. Most importantly, TV news and *New York Times* coverage are both positive and statistically significant when entered into the model, sharing comparable magnitudes and levels of significance. We find that as the number of TV news or *New York Times* stories moves from their minimum to maximum values, the difference in boys' and girls' anticipated political involvement increases by roughly a quarter of the mean value for the index. Tests for Granger causation (using a one year lag) suggest that we have modeled the direction of the relationship correctly. Results available upon request.

¹⁷For a recent use of these data by political scientists, see Hooghe and Stolle (2004).

FIGURE 2 Female–Male Differences and Press Coverage of Women in Politics



organization that produces cross-national comparisons of other academic outcomes like competence in math and science.¹⁸ Like MTF, it is a school-based survey administered in a representative sample of 124 public and private schools across the United States.¹⁹ Surveys were administered to ninth graders in the fall of 1999.

¹⁸For more on the CES, see Torney-Purta et al. (2001). Also, information about the study is available at <http://www.wam.umd.edu/~iea>.

¹⁹The geographic locations of the schools used in the study are not available in the public-release version of the data. They were made available through a restricted data license granted by the National Center for Education Statistics. We appreciate the assistance of Judith Torney-Purta in obtaining these data.

Anticipated Involvement

We employ a series of questions that parallel those from Monitoring the Future. Students were asked “When you are an adult, what do you expect that you will do?” followed by a list of activities that includes: vote in national elections, get information about candidates before voting in an election, join a political party, write letters to a newspaper about social or political concerns, and be a candidate for local or city office. For each political act, respondents indicate whether they certainly will not do it, probably will not do it, probably do it, or certainly do it. While none of these items match the MTF questions exactly, they capture the same general concept of anticipated political involvement. As with the MTF data, we add up the responses to create an index of anticipated

involvement that ranges from 0 to 15, with a mean of 7.2.²⁰

The models also control for a host of other factors that plausibly may be related to anticipated involvement. At the individual level, these include attention to current events (as a control for a general awareness of the public sphere),²¹ the student's expected level of education, race (whether the respondent is African American), and Hispanic ethnicity. We also control for an array of congressional district characteristics associated with the presence of women candidates: percent urban, percent racial/ethnic minority, percent with a college degree, median income, percent voting Democratic in the 1996 presidential election, and female labor force participation (Matland 1998; Burrell 1996; Welch and Studlar 1996).²² The final two contextual variables in particular help control for the possibility of a spurious relationship if the same environments (e.g., more liberal or more supportive of women in nontraditional roles) that facilitate women's candidacies also encourage girls' interest in political participation. Because of the clustered nature of the CES sample, we account for the threat of heteroskedasticity by employing robust standard errors (Huber/White correction). The models also allow for clustering by congressional district. Intuitively, this means that we assume cases are independent across districts, but not within them.

With the time-series data, our key independent variable was attention paid to women in politics nationally. When we turn to cross-sectional data, we again measure the visibility of female candidates. In this case, however, we use a count of the number of women seeking three high-profile elective offices in the 1998 elections: U.S. Senate, U.S. House, and governor. That is, we add up the number of women running for these offices in each respondent's state and congressional district, producing a scale which in theory can range from 0 to 6—two female candidates for each office—although of the communities within

our data, none had more than four female candidates. Campaigns for these three offices are the most likely to generate significant press coverage and thus have the greatest visibility.²³

Gender differences are modeled with an interaction term between being female and the total number of female candidates running in a given community. Using an interaction term in this way allows us to test the specific hypothesis at hand—does the presence of female candidates for high-profile political offices have a differential impact on boys and girls? A positive coefficient for the interaction term means that in areas where there are more female candidates for high profile offices, female adolescents have a higher level of anticipated involvement. Column 1 of Table 1 reports that girls have a higher level of anticipated political involvement as the density of female candidates increases; the interaction term is positive, although it is only statistically significant at the .10 level (two-tailed test).²⁴

As we suggest above, a woman may seek a prominent office, but if she is not viable, her visibility and thus her impact on the campaign is likely circumscribed (see Atkeson 2003). To account for this possibility, we also have regressed anticipated involvement on the number of *viable* female candidates for the U.S. House, U.S. Senate, and governor in each respondent's area. Viability is operationalized as either winning the race or coming within 10 points of the winning candidate. This scale ranges from 0 to 2, although it could theoretically have a value as high as 6. Column 2 of Table 1 reports the results. As evidence that viability increases visibility and thus amplifies the impact of role models, the magnitude of the interaction term's coefficient rises when compared to the simple count of female candidates reported in column 1 (which does not take viability into account). Our confidence

²⁰See the web appendix for details on how the variables have been coded.

²¹It is possible that attention to current events could be influenced by the presence of female candidates. However, we have found that this is not the case and thus include this measure on the right hand side of the equation. The results do not change substantively when this variable is excluded from the model.

²²Results are unchanged when county-level characteristics are substituted for those of respondents' congressional districts. It is worth noting that Burrell (1996) finds that constituency characteristics have only a small impact on the election of female House candidates; personal factors are far more important.

²³Owing to the huge differences in local news media in the communities covered by the CES, tracking local news coverage is not only logistically infeasible but of dubious validity. The relevant local newspapers, for example, range from the *Wausau (WI) Daily Herald* to the *Los Angeles Times*. Comparing coverage of local politicians in such a wide array of newspapers struck us as an apples and oranges comparison. Recall that in our time-series analysis, we used news coverage as a proxy for *public attention* to female politicians nationwide. At the local level, that attention can be reasonably inferred by the presence of a woman on the ballot for a high-profile office (which not only generates news coverage, but is also publicized through campaign advertising and the conversations local residents have about political happenings in the community).

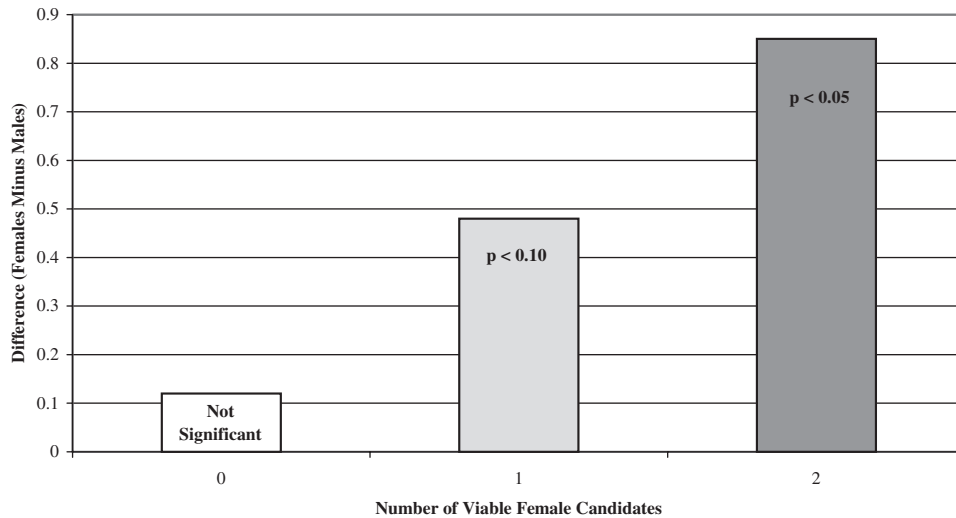
²⁴Technically, since we have a directional hypothesis we would be justified in using a one-tailed test. We have opted, however, for the more conservative two-tailed test.

TABLE 1 Impact of Female Candidates on Anticipated Political Involvement Index II, 1999

	<i>Impact of Total Female Candidates</i> (1)	<i>Impact of Viable Female Candidates</i> (2)	<i>Mechanism 1: Political Roles for Women</i> (3)	<i>Mechanism 2: Government Responsiveness</i> (4)	<i>Mechanism 3: Political Discussion</i> (5)
<i>Gender Variables</i>					
Female X Total Female Candidates	.258* (.147)				
Female X Viable Female Candidates		.364** (.180)	.392** (.192)	.307** (.206)	.170 (.195)
Female	.121 (.156)	.118 (.160)	-.117 (.177)	.007 (.214)	.206 (.200)
Total Female Candidates	-.190* (.111)				
Viable Female Candidates		-.240* (.146)	-.262 (.166)	-.173 (.181)	-.131 (.167)
<i>Mechanisms</i>					
Political Roles for Women			1.024** (.487)	.845 (.548)	.720 (.490)
Government Responsiveness				2.529*** (.526)	2.135*** (.477)
Political Discussion: Parents					2.473*** (.322)
Political Discussion: Peers					.966** (.320)
Political Discussion: Teachers					.389 (.245)
<i>Individual-level Characteristics</i>					
News Consumption	4.909*** (.347)	4.903*** (.347)	4.616*** (.363)	4.427*** (.442)	2.457*** (.469)
Educational Expectations	2.675*** (.355)	2.667*** (.353)	2.717*** (.343)	2.820*** (.471)	2.362*** (.419)
Black	-.402** (.222)	-.390* (.220)	-.305 (.231)	-.013 (.241)	-.113 (.239)
Hispanic	-.500** (.216)	-.502** (.214)	-.390 (.219)	-.193 (.294)	-.184 (.263)
<i>Congressional District Characteristics</i>					
% Urban	-.718 (.506)	-.699 (.496)	-.434 (.527)	-.232 (.497)	-.216 (.450)
% Minority	.606 (.500)	.528 (.491)	.244 (.503)	.417 (.515)	.370 (.461)
Median Income	-.126 (.485)	-.151 (.484)	-.338 (.541)	-.758 (.634)	-.492 (.598)
% w/ College Degree	.748 (.604)	.736 (.614)	.670 (.690)	.814 (.789)	-.274 (.690)
% Democratic vote (96)	-.733* (.347)	-.740** (.349)	-.875** (.363)	-1.151*** (.380)	-1.047** (.348)
% Women in labor force	-.671 (.593)	-.669 (.600)	-1.016 (.641)	-.610 (.659)	.594 (.623)
Constant	3.788*** (.439)	3.800*** (.441)	3.492*** (.514)	2.378*** (.566)	2.055*** (.496)
Observations	1,921	1,921	1,739	1,280	1,267
R-squared	.22	.22	.22	.25	.33

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses (with clustering by congressional district). All independent variables standardized to have values between 0–1. Source: Civic Education Study. * $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$ (two-tailed test).

FIGURE 3 Female–Male Differences in Anticipated Involvement Index



Note: Calculated from results reported in Table 1 (column 2). All control variables set to their means. P values refer to differences in expected values for females vs. males, based on confidence intervals generated through simulation by CLARIFY (Tomz, Wittenberg, and King 2003).

in the result is also strengthened, as the coefficient now falls below the conventional .05 threshold for significance (two-tailed test).

All the variables have been coded on a standardized 0–1 scale, allowing us to make a rough comparison of their magnitudes (Achen 1982). The interaction between Female and the Number of Viable Candidates has about the same absolute impact on anticipated involvement (.364) as being African American (–.390). It is much smaller in magnitude, however, than educational expectations and news consumption. Thus, while clearly only one of multiple determinants, the presence of visible female role models has a nontrivial impact on girls’ anticipated political participation.

To simplify the interpretation of the interactions in Table 1, Figure 3 presents the results from Table 1 (column 2) graphically. As in Figure 2, we focus on the differences between the sexes. Each bar represents the difference between males’ and females’ scores on the anticipated involvement index as the number of viable women candidates rises from 0 to 2, with controls set to their mean (for continuous variables) or modal (for dichotomous variables) values. Males’ expected values have been subtracted from females’, so a positive value means that the females’ average score exceeds that of the males. Using CLARIFY, a program which simulates expected values based on the parameters of a regression model (Tomz, Wittenberg, and King 2003), we also have generated confidence inter-

vals to test whether the differences between males and females are statistically significant.²⁵ In a community with no viable female candidates running for office, there is no statistically significant difference between the sexes. When one viable female candidate runs girls have a higher level of anticipated involvement, with the difference achieving a significance level of .10. With two viable candidates, the difference is even more pronounced and has a *p* value below .05. Figure 3 thus provides visual confirmation of the role model effect—girls are more likely to envision themselves as politically active when and where they see women run viable campaigns for high-profile political offices.

Mechanisms

We now turn to investigating the mechanisms whereby the presence of female role models may lead to greater anticipated political involvement among girls. We employ a straightforward methodological approach: We build on the models presented in the first two columns of Table 1 by entering each of our mechanism variables into the equation and examining the impact on the interaction between Female and Number of Viable Candidates. If the role model effect is mediated through one of these mechanism variables, its inclusion in the model will lead to a decrease

²⁵Results based on 1,000 simulations.

in the magnitude and statistical certainty of Female X Number of Viable Candidates. We add the mechanisms sequentially so that the reader can see which has the greatest impact on the interaction term. While other methodological strategies exist, this method has the advantage of demanding the fewest assumptions about the interrelationships among the variables. As our substantive conclusions do not change when other methods are applied, we present results from the most straightforward approach. See the appendix posted on the journal website for more details regarding how all of the following variables have been coded.

Political Roles for Women. Advocates of descriptive representation have long expected female role models to help girls see politics as an appropriate arena for women (see Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001; Mansbridge 1999). To test whether the presence of visible female role models affects anticipated involvement by influencing adolescents' opinions regarding women's role in politics we employ a three-item index with items asking whether women should run for office, whether they should stay out of politics, and whether men are more qualified to be political leaders than women.

The results displayed in column 3 of Table 1 indicate that while a higher score on the women in politics index is positively related to anticipated political involvement, its inclusion in the model has no bearing on the role model effect, and thus cannot explain why adolescent girls become more likely to indicate that they will be active in politics when women run for office. In fact, the coefficient for Female X Number of Viable Candidates actually increases when we account for the respondent's opinion toward women in politics, although the slight difference is more accurately characterized as no change, given the uncertainty surrounding the estimates.

The failure of attitudes toward women in politics to emerge as a mechanism is significant given its popularity as an explanation in previous empirical and theoretical work. Part of the explanation may lie in the low variance in these variables among current adolescents: For example, 96% of girls and 85% of boys agree or strongly agree that women should run for public office and take part in government just as men do.²⁶ Living in a place with visible female candidates has a negligible impact on such attitudes. At the very least, adolescents appear to have been socialized to *claim* to

believe in gender equity in politics, regardless of the presence of female role models.

Government Responsiveness. Another potential mechanism for the role model effect is that female candidates lead girls to have greater confidence in political institutions. Because fellow women are involved in politics, girls may view political institutions as more responsive to their concerns (see Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001) and worthy of their trust. Previous research on African Americans finds that the presence of group members in elective office led to higher levels of political trust and efficacy, which in turn facilitate participation (Bobo and Gilliam 1990).

To test this hypothesis, we employ an index that combines six items, each highly correlated with the others, that ask the respondent to evaluate the democratic responsiveness of the nation's elected officials, ranging from 0 if one "strongly disagrees" with a statement indicating that elected officials respond to the electorate to 3 if one "strongly agrees," thus producing an overall index of 0–18 (mean = 8.3).²⁷ Not surprisingly, the more young people perceive government as responsive to the public, the more likely they are to anticipate being involved in politics themselves (fourth column, Table 1). However, accounting for one's perception of the government's responsiveness soaks up an almost negligible amount of the role model effect—the coefficient for Female X Number of Viable Candidates drops from .392 to .307. There is still room for much more of the role model effect to be explained.

Political Discussion. The presence of role models may increase girls' engagement with politics, particularly to the extent that female politicians are more likely to raise issues of interest to women and girls (e.g., Fox 1997; Kahn 1993). As a result, the presence of female politicians may increase the likelihood that girls will engage in conversations about politics. By contributing to familiarity and ease with politics and political ideas, greater propensity for political discussion may contribute to greater likelihood of anticipated political involvement.

To test this hypothesis, we employ three measures that gauge the propensity of girls to engage in discussions about politics with various groups of people: peers, teachers, and family. Each of the three discussion variables is an index gauging how frequently the

²⁶There is, however, more variation in the other items in the index. As well, remember that each item is a four point scale (ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree), which also increases the variation in the overall index.

²⁷Note that what we have labeled "government responsiveness" is analogous to external political efficacy. We have chosen not to use that particular term, however, because none of the items in the index match the wording of the standard efficacy questions in other well-known surveys like the National Election Studies.

student discussed American and international politics with each group. One appealing aspect of this approach is that it taps the multiple ways in which the presence of female role models may affect girls' propensity for political discussion. Girls and their peers may react to the presence of female politicians by adding politics to the list of topics they discuss among themselves, and that they discuss with their teachers and parents. In addition (or alternatively), parents or teachers may become increasingly likely to engage girls in political conversation as part of the adults' own reaction to the presence of female role models.

When all three measures are included simultaneously in the model (see column 5), there is a substantial decrease in the impact of the role model effect. The coefficient drops sharply in magnitude to .170, and the coefficient's *p* value rises well past any conventional threshold for statistical significance (.39). Thus, of the three possible mechanisms for the role model effect, we find the most evidence for political discussion. We also find that of the three groups of potential discussants, by far the greatest impact is for conversations with parents or other adult family members. We base that conclusion on two pieces of evidence. First, as seen in Table 1, the relative magnitude of political discussions at home (2.473) is much greater than discussions with peers (.966) or teachers (.389). Second, the coefficient for the role model effect drops most precipitously upon the inclusion of political discussions with parents, indicating that it is those conversations that explain the largest component of the role model effect.

In sum, of the three mechanisms, political discussion, and specifically political conversations with parents, takes us the farthest in explaining the role model effect. Visible female candidates trigger conversations about politics between parents and their adolescent daughters, familiarizing girls with the political world and leading them to envision themselves as participants in politics. The singular importance of discussions at home underscores the primary role played by family in the process of political socialization. The presence of visible female role models apparently transforms political socialization for girls by making politics a more likely topic of conversation in their homes.

Discussion

There is little question that women in the United States suffer from a dearth of descriptive representa-

tion. Greater descriptive representation has long been advocated on a number of grounds, including compensation for past and present injustice, representation of overlooked interests, and the legitimacy of democratic institutions (Phillips 1995; also Dovi 2002; Mansbridge 1999). Proponents also have speculated that the presence of descriptive representatives will serve "to inspire and to be an example" to other group members (Dovi 2002, 720 fn. 6; see Carroll 1985; Mansbridge 1999; Sapiro 1981). We term this basic intuition—that the presence of descriptive representatives will transform the political engagement of fellow group members—the role model effect. In particular, we are concerned with the possible impact of role models on the political intentions of adolescent girls.

We find evidence—both across time and cross-sectionally—for the role model effect. The more politics is infused with visible female role models, the more adolescent girls report an expectation of being involved in politics. Significantly, where previous research on activity has shown a role model effect only for political proselytizing (Atkeson 2003; Hansen 1997), our work is the first to report a role model effect on a wide range of political activities, albeit *anticipated* activities. Our research thus supports expectations that female role models change the political socialization of young girls. However, the mechanism for the effect is slightly different than has been supposed: We fail to find evidence that the role model effect operates through changed conceptions of the appropriateness of politics for women, despite the popularity of norms about women and politics as an explanation for such an effect, and as a rationale for greater descriptive representation for women. Instead, our research indicates that the presence of female role models leads to greater propensity for political discussion within girls' homes. While we cannot determine if these conversations are initiated by the girls or by their parents (or both), these findings suggest that female politicians change the degree to which politics is a topic for debate and conversation as girls are socialized into their roles as democratic citizens.

The finding that the role model effect functions largely through increasing girls' propensity for political discussion with their parents bodes well for girls' long-term participation, as political discussion likely has an "increasing returns" effect—the more you discuss, the more you learn, and the more interested and knowledgeable you become. Since political knowledge is one of the most powerful predictors of political involvement (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996), we should expect girls who have encountered visible

female role models to have a positive trajectory for participation, although such claims are of course conjecture in the absence of panel data. We can speculate as to a few other possible long term effects. Political socialization has been identified as an important explanation for the dearth of female candidates (see Elder 2004; Fox and Lawless 2003); by helping to transform the socialization of girls, female role models may even encourage a few women to join their ranks in the future. Moreover, in both our time-series and cross-sectional analysis, the role model effect is contingent on the visibility of female politicians. A highly visible woman politician in the future—perhaps even at the top of a major party presidential ticket—has the potential to generate significant interest in political activity among adolescent girls with possibly long-term effects on the political engagement of women.

Our results also suggest a few potential ironies. The time-series data indicate that nationally, it is not the number of women running for or holding office, but the degree to which attention is drawn to the candidacies and leadership of women as women that affects girls' engagement in politics. This is a paradoxical finding: When the press makes women politicians more visible by highlighting how unusual female politicians are, young girls find future political activity more attractive and possible. As more women run for and secure high-profile offices, women's presence will be less unusual and thus, less newsworthy. This leads to another potentially paradoxical outcome: As female political leaders become more prevalent, their very commonness may make them less visible and thus less likely to stimulate anticipated involvement among girls. On the other hand, perhaps eventually the numbers of women candidates and officeholders will be sufficient so that the press need not direct particular attention to female politicians for girls across the country to be aware of them. Special media attention may be necessary only when the small numbers of women politicians limits their visibility on the national stage, and thus their impact on girls across the country as a whole.

The cross-sectional analysis is encouraging: Girls are more likely to anticipate their own involvement with politics when they live in places where women credibly pursue high-level political office. While adolescents may be unlikely to know about female politicians in other parts of the country without press coverage that highlights their gender, viable female candidates for major offices in one's own community are apparently visible enough to have an impact.

To the extent that women and girls continue to lag behind men and boys, even slightly, in terms of many

forms of political activity, the representation of the interests and concerns of half the population is lessened relative to the other half. By their presence and their contribution to political debate, this research indicates that female politicians help encourage increased political socialization of girls via discussions about politics in their homes that leads in turn to greater anticipated political involvement. In doing so, female politicians may improve the quality of representation in the United States not just by their public service, but by their contributions as role models to future generations of female citizens.

Acknowledgments

Authors' names are listed alphabetically to reflect their equal contribution to the research. We thank Quin Monson, Kira Sanbonmatsu, and Tim Carter, as well as the anonymous reviewers and editor John Geer, for useful feedback and advice, and Ericka Benavides, David Fleming, Beth McLeod, and Philip Wells for excellent research assistance. Research support was provided by the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program (College of Arts and Letters) and the Behavioral Research in American Politics Fund (Department of Political Science) at the University of Notre Dame.

Manuscript submitted 24 February 2005

Manuscript accepted for publication 25 May 2005

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