

UC Berkeley

Working Papers

Title

The Primary Reason for Women's Under-Representation? Reevaluating the Conventional Wisdom

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6qv019hj>

Authors

Lawless, Jennifer L.
Pearson, Kathryn

Publication Date

2006-06-06

**The Primary Reason for Women's Under-Representation?
Reevaluating the Conventional Wisdom**

**Jennifer L. Lawless
Department of Political Science
Brown University
Jennifer_Lawless@brown.edu**

**Kathryn Pearson
Department of Political Science
University of Minnesota
kpearson@umn.edu**

Preliminary draft—please do not cite without the permission of the authors.

It is well documented that, when women run in general elections for the House of Representatives, they win at approximately the same rates as their male counterparts. This conventional wisdom derives from numerous studies of House elections that span the last two decades – studies that have all but eliminated discrimination at the polls as an explanation for women’s under-representation in the U.S. Congress. With the exception of studies of selected congressional districts in particular years, however, scholars have virtually ignored primary contests. This omission leaves a major gap in our understanding of gender dynamics in congressional elections: we do not know whether women win at rates equal to their male counterparts in congressional primaries or whether women face other disadvantages in primaries. In this paper, we analyze data from 1958 – 2004 to present preliminary analyses of women’s success rates in primary races. The results shed light on continuity and change in gender dynamics in the electoral process.

Paper prepared for presentation at “Women in Politics: Seeking Office and Making Policy” at UC Berkeley, May 9 and 10, 2006. We thank John Sides and Sean Theriault for their valuable assistance. And we are grateful to Evan Panich, Jennifer Keighley, Laura Kavazanjian, Jinhee Chung, Marne Lenox, and Eric Kindschi for their research assistance.

The Primary Reason for Women's Under-Representation? Reevaluating the Conventional Wisdom

A central question in the study of women in politics is the relationship between gender and electoral success. Although the first congresswoman, Jeanette Rankin (R-MT), was elected in 1916, as late as 1970, only 10 women served in Congress. And up until the 1970s, nearly half of all congresswomen were elected following the death of their husbands (Gaddie and Bullock 2000). During the last decade, the number of women running for and attaining political office significantly increased. In 2006, 14 women serve in the U.S. Senate and 67 women serve in the U.S. House of Representatives. These numbers represent an eightfold increase since World War Two and a threefold increase in just the last few decades. The fact remains, however, that men comprise 86 percent of the United States Congress (CAWP 2006), and we rank 60th worldwide in the percentage of women in the national legislature (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2004). Even if we focus only on democratic states, as defined by the Freedom House ranking system, the United States places 34th in the world. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that scholarly research and journalistic commentary focus not only on women's increasing electoral success, but also on the relative paucity of women elected to Congress.

Scholarly research finds that, when women run for Congress, women win at the same rates as their male counterparts. But it must be noted that, with a few exceptions limited to particular election cycles, these analyses focus mainly on *general* elections; congressional primaries are virtually ignored. Yet winning a congressional primary is a key component of the difficult winnowing process that serves as a prerequisite to running in the general election. And there are reasons to believe that dynamics in congressional primaries may exert different effects on women and men.

Electoral competition in the United States is unique because it is dominated by candidates, as opposed to political parties, and this candidate-centered model is particularly prominent in contemporary congressional primaries. Gary Jacobson (2004, 23) notes changes between the 1950s and 1980s: “The electoral importance of individual candidates and campaigns expanded, while that of party labels and national issues diminished.”¹ A weak party system exerts little control over who is nominated to run for office and provides only minimal financial and logistical support to candidates for most elective positions. Candidates, therefore, must be entrepreneurs who build their own personal followings. To compete for almost all top offices, candidates must raise money, build coalitions of support, create campaign organizations, and develop campaign strategies. Explicit linkages to political party organizations and platforms, as well as other support networks, are entirely at the candidates’ discretion. Indeed, party organizations tend not to choose nominees or provide resources in primary campaigns.² Technological changes, including mass mailing and the spread of television, allow candidates opportunities to build personal name recognition and a following apart from the party, but this is difficult because primary elections are low-turnout affairs with voter turnout typically below twenty percent.

¹ Party-centered elections characterized the U.S. electoral landscape in 19th century and gradually faded in 20th century. In the 19th century, parties printed and handed out ballots, state and local parties controlled nominations, and a norm of rotation made it clear to those nominated that they were subordinated to the party. The party also controlled the key resources necessary for electoral success: strong party organizations ran candidates’ campaigns, and voters relied almost exclusively on the party label in the general elections. While party cues in vote choice have experienced a significant resurgence in the last decade, primaries today are largely candidate-centered. Hand in hand with other party reforms, direct congressional primaries spread across the U.S. starting in early 1900s, making the United States unique among democracies for having voters—not party elites—chose the party standard bearer to compete in the general election.

² This is true for the vast majority of races we consider. There are, however, some notable exceptions in recent cycles. Dominguez (2005) shows that congressional campaign committees do get involved in primaries for competitive seats.

For fairly clear reasons, this system of competition makes running for public office a much more daunting possibility for women than men. Although all candidates, regardless of sex, might face hurdles in emerging as viable candidates in this entrepreneurial environment, women face a very significant additional obstacle. Navigating the candidate emergence process involves relying on and utilizing the types of backgrounds, experiences, and characteristics that have historically been impressed upon men, but discouraged among women (Lawless and Fox 2005). The candidate-centered system in the United States, therefore, may hamper women's entrance into public office, (Davis 1997; Darcy, Hadley and Kirksey 1993), especially when they need to run in a primary contest.³

Moreover, it is important to recognize that voters in primary elections differ from voters in general elections. They are fewer in number, more partisan, and more engaged in politics. So, while candidates in primaries must be self-starters and build their own organizations, they must appeal to their own partisans to win the nomination. In general elections, voters rely on partisan cues to make their vote choice, particularly when they lack other information (Rahn 2003). In congressional primaries, all candidates provide the same party cue so voters may rely on gender stereotypes absent other information. As experimental research has shown (e.g., King and Matland 2003), these dynamics pose particular challenges for women, especially Republican women.

Before accepting the conventional wisdom that there is no gender bias in the electoral process and that women fare as well as their male counterparts, it is vital to investigate the

³ In fact, other democracies with relatively patriarchal histories tend to see a greater proportion of women in politics because they do not have the winner-take-all and single-member district systems prevalent in the United States. Women candidates are more likely to emerge and succeed in proportional party list electoral systems (Matland 1998; Norris 1994; Rule 1987). This is not to say that systems of proportional representation with party lists do not have costs of their own. Jane Mansbridge (1999, 652) explains that such systems often facilitate party collusion that leads to noncompetitive races and voter demobilization. Overall, however, she concludes that proportional party list systems are a "flexible" way to promote descriptive representation and women's candidacies.

gender dynamics of the congressional primary process. We, therefore, present new data on male and female congressional candidates in their primaries. We employ a rich data set that includes all House candidates in primary elections from 1958 to 2004, allowing over-time comparisons between men and women. Because research on women's electoral success in House elections has been hindered by the lack of systematic data and analysis, our research marks the beginning of a new line of scholarship in women and electoral politics.

Theories for Women's Under-Representation in Congress

Scholars of women and politics have devoted the last few decades to gaining a better understanding of why so few women occupy positions of political power in the United States. Initially, the scholarship attributed women's exclusion from the political sphere to discrimination and overt bias against women candidates. Over the course of the last twenty years, however, cultural attitudes toward women in politics have evolved and an increasing number of women have sought and won election to public office. Scholars, therefore, began to focus on structural barriers, most notably the incumbency advantage and the proportion of women in the "pipeline" professions that precede political careers, to explain the low number of women office holders. More recent studies indicate that lower levels of political ambition also account for the dearth of women candidates and elected officials. Cultural evolution, structural barriers, and political ambition certainly contribute, in varying degrees, to the gender disparities in our political institutions. But the power of these explanations, even combined, is limited, and none tackles the fundamental question of whether women meet success when they enter primary contests for congressional seats.

Scholars have shown that in contemporary congressional politics, after controlling for incumbency status and a variety of district demographics, women do not face widespread bias at the polls (Burrell 1998; Carroll 1994; Cook 1998; Duerst-Lahti 1998; Fox 2000; Seltzer, Newman and Leighton 1997; Smith and Fox 2001; Thomas and Wilcox 1998). Examining women's electoral success in the 1990s, Thomas and Wilcox (1998) conclude that "whereas women may once have lost their elections more often than their male counterparts, that is not the case today . . . When party and incumbency status are taken into account, the evidence is clear that women win races as often as men" (Thomas and Wilcox 1998, 3). Based on her analysis of a series of public opinion polls and election results, Dolan (2004, 50) echoes this claim: "Levels of bias are low enough to no longer provide significant impediments to women's chances of election." And in perhaps the most widely cited study in elite women's campaign circles, the National Women's Political Caucus (NWPC) analyzed every major party candidate in a general election from 1972 to 1992 by office, year, party, sex, and race status. In House general elections, female incumbents won 96 percent of their races compared to men's 95 percent; in open seat elections, women won 48 percent of open seats they sought, compared to 51 percent for men; and 4 percent of female challengers won, compared to 6 percent of male challengers. The findings confirmed that women face obstacles to winning not because of their sex, but because they are not incumbents (Newman 1994).⁴

⁴ Women's electoral success in 1992, the "Year of the Woman," has been well documented by scholars (see, e.g., Cook, Thomas, and Wilcox 1994). In 1992, a record number of 218 women ran for the House, and the number of women serving in the House of Representatives increased from 28 to 47. It is important to note, however, that in this "unique" election cycle, the most significant explanations for women's victories were hardly unique. 1992 was a redistricting year, creating a record number of open seat contests in the modern era (Gaddie and Bullock 2000). Most of the new congresswomen won open seats; only 2 of 41 female challengers defeated incumbents, a rate comparable with the general rate of incumbent defeats. In addition, the women who won were high quality candidates, *i.e.*, those with experience (Jacobson 2004).

Not surprisingly, the contemporary literature on women in politics suggests that the main barriers to increasing the number of women in electoral office are related to limits in political opportunities (Carroll 1994; Darcy and Choike 1986; Darcy, Welch, and Clark 1994; Smith and Fox 2001; Thomas and Wilcox 1998, but see Bledsoe and Herring 1990). Carroll's (1994) landmark study of female candidates running for congressional, statewide, and state legislative office in 1976 concluded that the scarcity of women in electoral office could largely be explained by limitations in "political opportunity variables," incumbency advantages in particular. After all, not only do incumbents seek reelection in more than 75 percent of congressional elections, but their reelection rates are also consistently well above 90 percent (Duerst-Lahti 1998, 19). The 2004 congressional election cycle saw even fewer open seats than usual; only 31 incumbents (7 percent of the total House of Representatives membership) chose not to seek reelection.

Recent research indicates, however, that the dearth of women candidates cannot be explained entirely by the political opportunity structure. Based on data from the Citizen Political Ambition Study, a national survey of almost 3,800 "potential candidates," Lawless and Fox (2005) find that women, even in the highest tiers of professional accomplishment, are substantially less likely than men to demonstrate ambition to seek elected office. Women are less likely than men to be recruited to run for office. They are less likely than men to think they are qualified to run for office. And they are less likely than men to express a willingness to run for office in the future. This gender gap in political ambition persists across generations. Despite cultural evolution and society's changing attitudes toward women in politics, running for public office remains a much less attractive and feasible endeavor for women than men.

We propose an additional explanation for women's under-representation in the U.S. Congress: gender dynamics in the congressional primary process. Low-turnout, low visibility

elections mean that candidates have to work harder to gain credibility and financial support. They can't rely on support from parties or from voters relying on partisan heuristics. The women who emerge from primaries to compete in general elections are more likely to have electoral experience and raise more money than their male counterparts (Pearson and McGhee 2005), suggesting that to make it through the primary process, women must be stronger candidates than their male counterparts.

Data and Hypotheses

Research by Gaddie and Bullock (2000) and Matland and King (2002) provides the most systematic analysis, until now, of women's success in congressional primaries. Even these studies, however, are limited to open seat contests in the selected cycles. Gaddie and Bullock analyze women's electoral fortunes in 230 open seats from 1982 to 1992. In these races, 191 of 1,502 candidates were women (12.7 percent), and women won 61 nominations, or 13 percent of open seat primaries (42.7 percent of nominations they sought). In these open seat elections, female nominees won 56 percent of the general elections (32 of 57) in which a woman ran, in addition to four elections where two women competed. Matland and King (2002, 138) present data revealing that in open seat primary contests from 1990 to 2000, Democratic women won a total of 68 of the 127 open seat Democratic primaries where a woman competed (53.5 percent), and Republican women won a total of 30 of the 80 open seat primaries where a woman competed (37.5 percent). Although this research provides an excellent initial attempt to investigate the role gender plays in primary elections, it is important to examine all races, not just open seat contests, in all years.

Our data include primary and general election candidates and election results for the U.S. House of Representatives from 1958-2004. These data include 33,100 primary candidates. The

names of each candidate and his/her vote total was drawn from each year's *Book of States*.⁵

Perhaps the most laborious aspect of the data collection process entailed discerning each candidate's sex. In many cases, the *Book of States* lists only a first initial, so it was necessary to search newspaper records of candidacies in each district in each year, as well as contact various Secretaries of State and Boards of Election. In the few cases in which we were unable to determine the candidate's sex, we dropped the case from the analysis. Once the candidates were identified, each candidate was coded by state, district, party, sex, vote total, and incumbency status. In future iterations, we plan to include district demographic data, as well as data on candidate quality and fundraising in selected cycles.

Our unique dataset allows us to track change over time. Clearly, the political landscape and opportunity structure for women have changed dramatically since 1958. As the number of women running for and winning general elections has increased, we know that the number of women entering congressional primaries has increased. What about the gap between the success rate of women in primaries and in general elections? The women's movement of the 1970s was a critical catalyst in expanding opportunities for women. Therefore, we expect the number of women entering primaries to have increased most markedly since the 1970s, and that the gap between general and primary election success rates will have narrowed over the same time span.

The data also allow us to compare differences between Democratic and Republican primaries. The progress of Republican women in general elections has been slower than that of Democratic women, and the gap between the ratio of women in the two parties has increased since 1992's "Year of the Woman." Our data enable us to analyze these differences over time and ask whether this partisan gap begins at the primary stage of the electoral process. Are fewer

⁵ Even after the creation of the Federal Election Commission and the concomitant filing requirements, candidates who do not exceed a minimum threshold of campaign fundraising are not required to file. Collecting data from FEC reports would, therefore, bias our results, as we would miss the weakest candidates.

Republican women running in primaries relative to Democratic women? In her analysis of women's representation at the state level from 1971 to 1999, Sanbonmatsu (2002) argues that the incentive structures of Democratic and Republican candidates differ, suggesting that we will find partisan differences in congressional primaries.

We can also compare differences in women's electoral success between the parties. While the number of Republican women serving in Congress has increased, so has their ideological conservatism, particularly as national tides have shifted to favor Republicans in congressional elections beginning in 1994. Republican women—particularly those who are not conservative—may disproportionately suffer in primaries. Women are viewed by voters as more liberal than men. This stereotype may advantage women in Democratic primaries, whose voters tend to over-represent their liberal base, and disadvantage women in Republican primaries, whose voters tend to over-represent their conservative base. King and Matland (2003), relying on data from a national survey, show that both male and female Republican party identifiers are less likely (10.5% less likely and 13.6% less likely respectively) to vote for a fictitious female Republican candidate than a male candidate.

Finally, our data allow us to explore previously unanswered questions about the electoral circumstances women face when they run for Congress. Are women more likely to face contested primaries? Are women more likely than men to draw a crowded field in the other party's primaries when they are running as incumbents? We hypothesize that the answer to both of these questions is yes, as women are seen as more vulnerable than their male counterparts. Have these circumstances changed over time and across party?

Results

From 1958 to 2004, a total of 2,652 women ran in primaries for the U.S. House of Representatives; women comprised eight percent of the total House primary candidates.⁶ Not surprisingly, over time, the number of women running in congressional primaries increased markedly. As shown in Table 1 and Figure 1, the first spike in women's candidacies occurred in 1972, in concert with the rise of the women's movement. The number of women dipped to its lowest percentage in 1970, when only 34 women ran (2.7 percent of the total). The biggest jump in the number of female candidates occurred in 1992's "Year of the Woman," as has been well documented. That year, a total of 219 women ran in the primaries (12.4 percent of the total), compared to 116 women in the previous cycle. By 2004, the total number of women in primaries had dipped to 197, although this comprised 15.4 percent of the total number of candidates, and the number of women winning general elections continued to increase because of the incumbency advantage.

Table 1 and Figure 1 about here

As Figures 1 and 2 illustrate, female candidates in congressional primaries are disproportionately Democratic; Democratic women comprise 60 percent of the total pool of female candidates from 1958 to 2004. Figure 2 breaks these data down by year. In every cycle except 1960 and 1982, Democratic women outnumber Republican women. The gap was at its widest during the late 1970s, as Democratic women responding to the women's movement began to increase their presence in primaries. The partisan primary gap does not directly mirror the partisan gap inside Congress, which widened after the 1992 elections. The gap in partisan primary composition in 1992 does explain, however, why many referred to it as the "Year of the

⁶ In our data set, we have not been able to identify the sex of 302 candidates, most of them in the earliest cycles when there are very few women.

Democratic Woman.” In 1992, eighty-five Republican women ran compared to 134 Democratic women. The partisan gap narrowed in the 1994 and 1998 cycles, when 46 percent and 44 percent of the total female candidate pools were comprised of Republicans. It has widened since, at 63 percent, 61 percent, and 59 percent Democratic in the 2000, 2002, and 2004 cycles respectively. It is important to note that the *overall* number of Democratic primary candidates during this time period is higher than the number of Republican primary candidates. Of the total pool of 33,100 primary candidates, 14,878 are Republicans (45 percent of the total) and 1,045 are Republican women (7 percent of Republicans) while 18,095 are Democrats and 1,605 are Democratic women (8.9 percent of Democrats).

Figure 2 about here

Primary Competition

Primaries vary greatly in their competitiveness, and the dynamics of primary elections differ from the dynamics in general elections. Most incumbent members of Congress do not encounter serious electoral competition in general elections, with incumbent reelection rates consistently well above 90 percent. More than one third of primary candidates faced no opposition at this stage from 1958 to 2004. And for the majority of incumbents facing primary challenges, the incumbency advantage, name recognition, and the perquisites of office minimize the threat of their partisan challengers. But for some incumbents, primary challenges are the most daunting, posing a threat to their congressional career and preventing them from focusing on their career inside of Congress. While congressional scholarship analyzing members’ electoral motivations and concomitant strategic behavior focuses on general elections (e.g., Mayhew 1974), primary elections are the arena of greatest competition in many congressional

districts. In districts that are safely partisan, primaries usually determine the outcome of the general election before the first Tuesday in November of even numbered years. And when incumbents retire or die and their seats are vacated, primaries attract many qualified candidates and create fierce competition.

Is gender a factor in the level of primary competition from district to district? Among male candidates from 1958 to 2004, 37 percent ran unopposed in their primary or advanced to the general election without a real contest.⁷ Among female candidates during the same time period, 35.6 percent ran in the general election without primary competition. While the difference is not large, it does suggest that women are slightly less likely to get a “free pass” from fellow partisans to the general election.⁸

An additional gauge of primary competition that we must consider is the size of the field. Are women more likely to attract a crowd and thus face more competition in primaries? Indeed, primaries that include a woman have more candidates. In primaries with a Republican woman, the mean number of GOP candidates is 3.9. In primaries with a Republican man, the mean number of Republican candidates is 2.2. For primaries in which a Democratic woman competes, the mean number of Democratic candidates is 4.3. For primaries with Democratic men, the mean number of Democratic candidates is only 2.5.

Female *incumbents* are also more likely to generate a crowd. As shown in Table 2, incumbent Republican congresswomen attract more opposition in their own party’s primary than their male counterparts (a mean of 1.49 candidates compared to 1.28 candidates) and they also

⁷ In earlier cycles, many incumbents ran in general elections without actually needing to enter their primary.

⁸ Including those candidates who are unopposed distorts the results and the competitive dynamics of primary elections in our multivariate analyses. Thus, we omit candidates who faced no primary competition in the later sections of this paper.

attract more candidates in the other party's primary, 1.73 Democrats running in primaries to compete against Republican congresswomen compared to 1.59 running in Democratic primaries to compete against Republican congressmen.

Table 2 about here

Democratic congresswomen also attract more candidates in Republican primaries than do Democratic congressmen (1.6 compared to 1.3), but in their own primaries, they attract fewer candidates than Democratic congressmen (1.46 compared to 1.58). Differences in views toward women's roles between each party's activists may partially explain our findings; further investigation is needed.

Both Republican and Democratic female primary candidates are more likely to run in their party's primaries to challenge a female incumbent of the other party. In Democratic primaries to challenge a Republican congresswoman the mean number of women is .25, compared to an average of .15 women challenging Republican congressmen. Among Republicans, an average of .2 women run in primaries to be able to challenge a Democratic congresswoman compared to an average of .09 women to challenge Democratic men. Women may view running against another woman in the general election as less daunting, as the presence of two women would hopefully defuse any gender biases in the course of the campaign.

Primary Victory

Women have made significant advances in their victory rates since 1958. Table 3 presents the percentage of female and male primary candidates, by year and by party. These data include races where primary candidates win without opposition. Overall, women win at slightly lower rates than their male counterparts (57.6 percent of the time compared to 58.6 percent of

time). Republican men have a clearer edge, winning at a rate of 62.5 percent compared to women's 60.1 rate. Democratic women, however, have a slight edge over their male counterparts: 56.0 percent to 55.3 percent. Women's rates of victory in the primary have surpassed their male counterparts' during the last decade. Democratic women fueled this success; Democratic women outperformed men while Republican men were more likely to win than Republican women. There is considerable variation from year to year that we will explore below in multivariate analysis.

Table 3 about here

Multivariate Analysis

How does being a woman affect vote share in primaries, controlling for other factors, from 1958 to 2004? We analyze gender effects using separate OLS models for each year and party and plot the coefficients in Figures 3 and 4. The dependent variable is the candidate's percentage of the vote share in the primary. The key independent variable in our analysis is the candidate's sex. In this analysis, we omit all cases where a primary candidate ran unopposed. Because incumbency is such a powerful force in contemporary congressional elections (see, e.g., Jacobson 2004), we control for the presence of an incumbent in the primary. Also, we expect that someone who has faced voters in the district in the previous election cycle has an advantage over someone facing voters for the first time, so we include a dummy variable indicating whether the candidate ran in the past election cycle. We also control for the total number of candidates in the party's primary, as an increase in candidates decreases the vote share of every candidate.

Figures 3 and 4 about here

Figure 3 presents the coefficients for the effect of being female on vote share among Republican candidates in every election cycle; Figure 4 presents the results among Democratic candidates. The points on the graph represent the coefficients; they are surrounded by 95 percent confidence intervals (plus and minus two times the standard error). As more female candidates enter primaries, the confidence intervals decrease. The confidence intervals of the significant coefficients do not cross zero.

For Republicans, gender does not have a statistically significant impact on vote share in most primary elections. In a time series fixed effects model (not shown), the coefficient across all races, however, is negative, although it does not reach statistical significance. The year by year analysis we present here indicates the variation from year to year, illustrating that models that aggregate across years do not adequately capture the dynamics in particular election cycles and that more investigation is needed to determine dynamics in individual election cycles.

Among Democrats, the effect of being a woman also varies from election to election. In seven recent elections beginning in 1988, it significantly increases vote share in congressional primaries. This advantage, then, did not begin during the “Year of the Woman,” but had been building. Elections during the 1990s became increasingly polarized, which may have actually helped Democratic women, as they are viewed as being more liberal. According to *Congressional Quarterly*, Democratic women’s party loyalty scores have consistently been higher than their male counterparts’. Among Republican congresswomen, this trend was reversed in 2003.

In a time series cross sectional fixed effects model (not shown), the effect across all elections is not as large as running as an incumbent, but it is nonetheless statistically significant

at $p < .001$. Among Democrats, experience running in previous cycles also decreases vote share, as does running in a crowded field.

The results for Democratic women in recent cycles, then, run counter to our hypothesis. In our analyses of primary results from 1958-2004, female candidates appear to have an advantage in vote share, all else equal, in seven of the most recent elections, and a distinct disadvantage only in 1986. Clearly, we have many more analyses to run in order to disentangle gender effects in primary elections. But the results of our first cut are striking. If they hold as we continue to extend our analysis and add additional control variables, this is an important finding.

We also ran two logistic regression models with the same controls, but our dependent variable is victory. We present the results in Figures 5 and 6. The results are similar to those in which the dependent variable is vote share. When it comes to victory, however, the news is slightly less encouraging for women. Female Democrats' advantage shrinks to only four of the most recent cycles. Among Republicans, the differences are smaller.

Figures 5 and 6 about here

Comparing the effect of sex among Democrats and Republicans confirms, in part, our hypothesis that the dynamics differ between the two parties. Female candidates in Republican primaries may have a disadvantage, but again, while the coefficients are often negative, they do not achieve conventional levels of statistical significance. We will need to perform more analyses on a year by year basis to understand these differences, but it is clear that women are more likely to attract support from the voters who comprise the Democratic base than the Republican base.

Conclusion and Discussion

The conventional wisdom derived from the literature on women's electoral success is that congressional elections yield gender-neutral results. That is, when women run in congressional elections, they win at rates equal to their male counterparts. These conclusions, however, ignore a critical step in the electoral process—primary elections, which pit members of the same party against one another. This preliminary analysis marks the beginning of a research agenda analyzing gender dynamics in congressional primaries.

In this paper, we have shown that gender effects in primaries vary from election to election and within each party. Before the 1980s, women in both parties rarely ran, and when they did, they sometimes fared significantly worse than their male counterparts. In a few distinct election cycles, 1960 and 1986 in particular, running as a woman was a clear disadvantage for Democratic women. In seven of the election cycles from 1988 on, however, running as a woman was an advantage for Democratic candidates in terms of their overall vote share and victories. This is significant news for Democratic women considering running in congressional primaries, as well as for organizations that recruit female candidates. Republican women do not enjoy the same advantage, but they do not fare worse than their male colleagues except in a few isolated cycles.

Our results confirm that the prospects for near-term parity for women in electoral office are bleak. Women enter primaries at much lower rates than men, and unlike the slow but steady increase in the number of women elected in general elections, the number of women entering primaries is actually decreasing slightly. And, women are more likely to enter primaries to challenge another woman in the general. Most notably, our results complicate the oft-cited “gender neutral election results” refrain. In primaries, running as a Democratic woman in recent

years has increased vote share, all else equal. Not so for Republicans. Despite this good news for women's representation, however, we provide further evidence that the terrain for women is more difficult en route to the general election. Analyzing the dynamics of primary elections suggests that they pose additional barriers for women that may prevent women from even entering the race. The presence of a female primary candidate attracts other candidates—men in one's own party and women from the other party. In addition, female incumbents are more likely to draw a crowd in the other party's primary.

Beyond reiterating that this is the first cut of a larger project, it is important to emphasize that these results do not mean that primary election campaigns are gender neutral processes. Men comprise the vast majority of primary candidates. Running in congressional primaries requires candidates to build their own campaigns without support from the party. Such campaigns require candidates to build name recognition and support from the ground up. They also require candidates to engage in sometimes difficult intra-party battles. It is unclear how these dynamics particular to primary elections affect the initial decision to run. Only the most qualified women may be willing to take on such a battle, winnowing women from the field before the contest begins.

Many questions remain. In future iterations, we will analyze how the dynamics of primary elections—in particular the vote margins and the number of candidates of both sexes—affect women's success in general elections. We will assess regional differences as well. Some states still use pre-primary caucuses, and we will control for this process. We hope to collect data on candidate quality and campaign finance, at least in more recent cycles for which there are available data, to identify other potential domains in which gender dynamics affect primary campaigns.

References

- Biersack, Robert and Paul S. Herrnson. 1994. "Political Parties and the Year of the Woman," In E. A. Cook, S. Thomas, and C. Wilcox (eds.), *The Year of the Woman*, Boulder: Westview.
- Bledsoe, Timothy and Mary Herring. 1990. "Victims of Circumstance: Women in Pursuit of Political Office." *American Political Science Review* 84(1): 213-223.
- Burrell, Barbara C. 1994. *A Woman's Place is in the House: Campaigning for Congress in the Feminist Era*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Burrell, Barbara. 1998. "Campaign Finance. Women's Experience in the Modern Era." In *Women and Elective Office: Past, Present, and Future*, eds. Sue Thomas and Clyde Wilcox. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Carroll, Susan J. 1994. *Women as Candidates in American Politics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Carroll, Susan J. and Wendy S. Strimling. 1983. *Women's Routes to Elective Office: A Comparison with Men's*. Rutgers, NJ: Rutgers University, Center for the American Woman and Politics, Eagleton Institute of Politics.
- Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP). 2006. *Women in Elective Office 2006 Fact Sheet*. New Brunswick: Center for American Women and Politics.
- Cook, Elizabeth Adell, Sue Thomas and Clyde Wilcox, eds. 1994. *The Year of the Woman: Myths and Realities*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Darcy, R., and James R. Choike. 1986. "A Formal Analysis of Legislative Turnover: Women Candidates and Legislative Representation." *American Journal of Political Science* 30: 237-55.
- Darcy, R., Charles D. Hadley and Jason F. Kirksey. 1993. "Electoral Systems and the Representation of Black Women in American State Legislatures." *Women and Politics* 13(2):73-89.
- Darcy, Welch, and Clark 1994. *Women, Elections, and Representation*. 2nd ed., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Davis, Rebecca Howard. 1997. *Women and Power in Parliamentary Democracies: Cabinet Appointments In Western Europe*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska.
- Dolan, Kathleen. 2004. *Voting for Women: How the Public Evaluates Women Candidates*. Boulder: Westview Press.

- Dominguez, Casey Byrne Knudsen. 2005. *Before the Primary: Party Elite Involvement in Congressional Nominations*. Ph.D. Dissertation, UC Berkeley.
- Duerst-Lahti, Georgia. 1998. "The Bottleneck, Women Candidates," in Thomas, Sue and Clyde Wilcox, eds. *Women and Elective Office: Past, Present, and Future*. Oxford University Press
- Fox, Richard L. 2000. "Gender and Congressional Elections," in S. Tolleson-Rinehart and J. Josephson, eds. *Gender and American Politics*, Armonk: M.E. Sharpe.
- Fox, Richard L., Jennifer L. Lawless and Courtney Feeley. 2001. "Gender and the Decision to Run for Office," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 26: 411-35.
- Gaddie, Ronald Keith, and Charles S. Bullock, III. 2000. *Elections to Open Seats in the U.S. House*. Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.
- Inter-Parliamentary Union. 2004. "Women in National Parliaments." <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm> (February 17, 2005).
- Jacobson, Gary. 2004. *The Politics of Congressional Elections*. 6th ed., New York: Longman Press.
- King, David C., and Richard E. Matland. 2003. "Sex and the Grand Old Party: An Experimental Investigation of the Effect of Candidate Sex on Support for a Republican Candidate." *American Politics Research* 31(6): 595-612.
- Lawless, Jennifer L., and Richard Fox. 2005. *It Takes a Candidate: Why Women Don't Run for Office*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Mansbridge, Jane. 1999. "Should Blacks Represent Blacks and Women Represent Women? A Contingent 'Yes'." *Journal of Politics* 61(3):628-57.
- Matland, Richard E. 1998. "Women's Representation in National Legislatures: Developed and Developing Countries." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 23(1):109-25.
- Matland, Richard E., and David C. King. 2002. "Women as Candidates in Congressional Elections" in *Women Transforming Congress*, ed. Cindy Simon Rosenthal. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Mayhew, David. 1974. *The Electoral Connection*. New Haven: Yale University.
- National Women's Political Caucus (NWPC). 1994. *Why Don't More Women Run? A study prepared by Mellman, Lazarus, and Lake*. Washington, DC: National Women's Political Caucus.

- Norris, Pippa. 1994. "The Impact of the Electoral System on Election of Women to National Legislatures." In *Different Roles, Different Voices*, eds. Marianne Githens, Pippa Norris and Joni Lovenduski. New York: Harper Collins.
- Pearson, Kathryn, and Eric McGhee. 2004. "Strategic Differences: The Gender Dynamics of Congressional Candidacies, 1982-2002." Paper presented at the Midwest Political Science Association conference, Chicago, Illinois.
- Rahn, Wendy. 1993. "The Role of Partisan Stereotypes in Information Processing About Political Candidates." *American Journal of Political Science* 37(2): 472-496.
- Rule, Wilma. 1987. "Electoral Systems, Contextual Factors, and Women's Opportunity for Election to Parliament in Twenty-Three Democracies." *Western Political Quarterly* 40(3):477-98.
- Sanbonmatsu, Kira. 2002. "Political Parties and the Recruitment of Women to State Legislatures." *The Journal of Politics* 64 (3): 791-809.
- Seltzer, Richard A., Jody Newman, and Melissa Voorhees Leighton. 1997. *Sex as a Political Variable: Women as Candidates and Voters in U.S. Elections*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.
- Smith, Eric R.A.N., and Richard L. Fox. 2001. "A Research Note: The Electoral Fortunes of Women Candidates for Congress," *Political Research Quarterly* 54(1):205-21.
- Thomas, Sue and Clyde Wilcox, eds. 1998. *Women and Elective Office: Past, Present, and Future*. Oxford University Press.

Table 1. Women Running in Congressional Primaries, by Party, 1958-2004

Year	All		Republicans		Democrats	
	Women	Percent	Women	Percent	Women	Percent
1958	43	3%	12	2%	31	4%
1960	48	4	24	4	24	3
1962	41	3	15	3	26	3
1964	44	3	16	3	28	3
1966	34	3	13	2	21	3
1968	45	3	14	2	31	4
1970	34	3	14	3	20	3
1972	79	5	23	4	56	6
1974	93	6	29	5	64	7
1976	100	6	32	5	68	7
1978	78	6	31	5	47	6
1980	84	6	37	6	47	6
1982	100	7	50	8	50	6
1984	133	10	56	10	77	10
1986	135	10	50	9	85	11
1988	103	8	43	8	60	9
1990	116	10	45	8	71	12
1992	219	12	85	10	134	15
1994	204	13	93	12	111	15
1996	209	14	79	10	130	18
1998	170	14	74	12	96	17
2000	160	13	59	9	101	17
2002	181	14	71	10	110	18
2004	197	15	80	12	117	19
TOTAL	2650	8.01	1045	6.98	1605	8.87

Cells contain the number of women running in congressional primaries and their percentage of all primary candidates.

Table 2. Gender Differences in Incumbents' Primary Competition

	Mean # of Primary Challengers			
	Democrats	Republicans	Democratic Women	Republican Women
Female GOP Incumbents (N=200)	1.73	1.49	0.25	
Male GOP Incumbents (N=3547)	1.59	1.28	0.15	
Female Democratic Incumbents (N=355)	1.46	1.6		0.20
Male Democratic Incumbents N=4845	1.58	1.3011		0.09

Table 3. Primary Victory Rates by Sex and Party, 1958-2004

Year	All		Republicans		Democrats	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
1958	55.81%	57.31%	58.33%	62.66%	54.84%	53.68%
1960	56.25	62.83	45.83	66.03	66.67	60.38
1962	53.66	58.21	53.33	64.11	53.85	54.37
1964	34.09	59.82	37.50	66.37	32.14	54.89
1966	68.57	62.60	76.92	67.34	61.90	59.29
1968	46.67	58.99	42.86	64.97	48.39	54.30
1970	70.59	64.57	71.43	68.08	70.00	61.76
1972	41.77	56.29	52.17	64.47	37.50	50.43
1974	45.16	53.14	58.62	64.88	39.06	45.72
1976	48.00	52.43	50.00	63.18	47.06	45.05
1978	56.41	57.23	67.74	64.48	48.94	51.80
1980	55.95	56.80	62.16	60.16	51.06	53.94
1982	54.00	57.77	60.00	61.38	48.00	54.86
1984	49.62	59.51	64.29	66.93	38.96	54.15
1986	48.15	62.60	72.00	71.28	34.12	56.48
1988	60.19	65.67	72.09	67.39	51.67	64.21
1990	58.62	67.89	66.67	68.79	53.52	67.04
1992	47.95	46.52	45.88	47.69	49.25	45.34
1994	59.80	52.44	52.69	53.44	65.77	51.36
1996	58.10	54.80	58.23	54.14	58.46	55.54
1998	72.94	64.67	70.27	62.25	75.00	67.63
2000	73.13	63.84	64.41	63.32	78.22	64.43
2002	63.54	59.45	59.15	58.21	66.36	60.93
2004	69.54	61.96	65.00	61.74	72.65	62.13
TOTAL	57.62	58.60	60.10	62.52	56.01	55.33

Cells contain the percentage of candidates winning their congressional primaries.

Figure 1. Women Running in Congressional Primaries, by Party 1958-2004

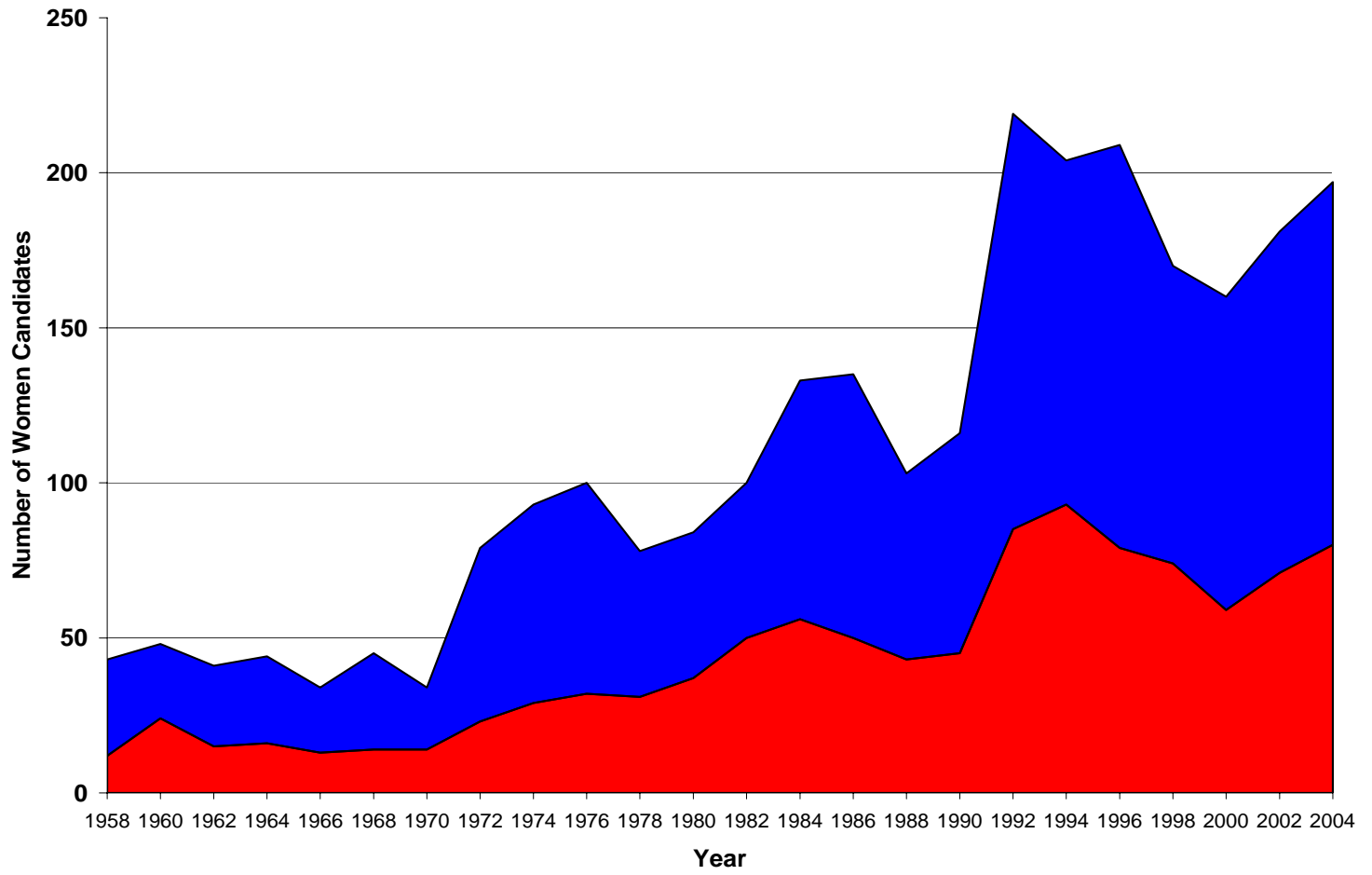


Figure 2. Party Composition of All Female Primary Candidates

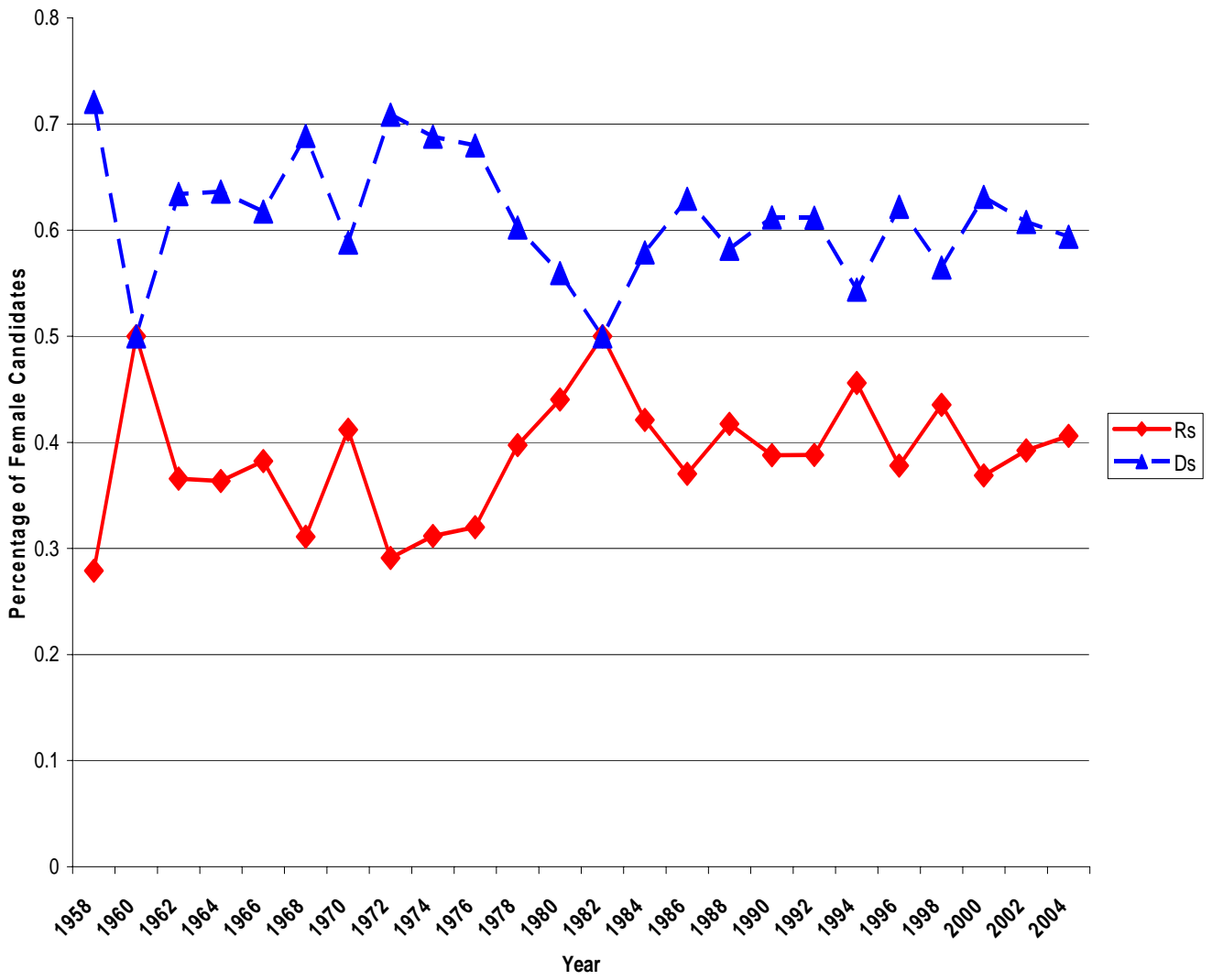


Figure 3. The Effect of Sex on Vote Share in Congressional Primaries, 1958-2004

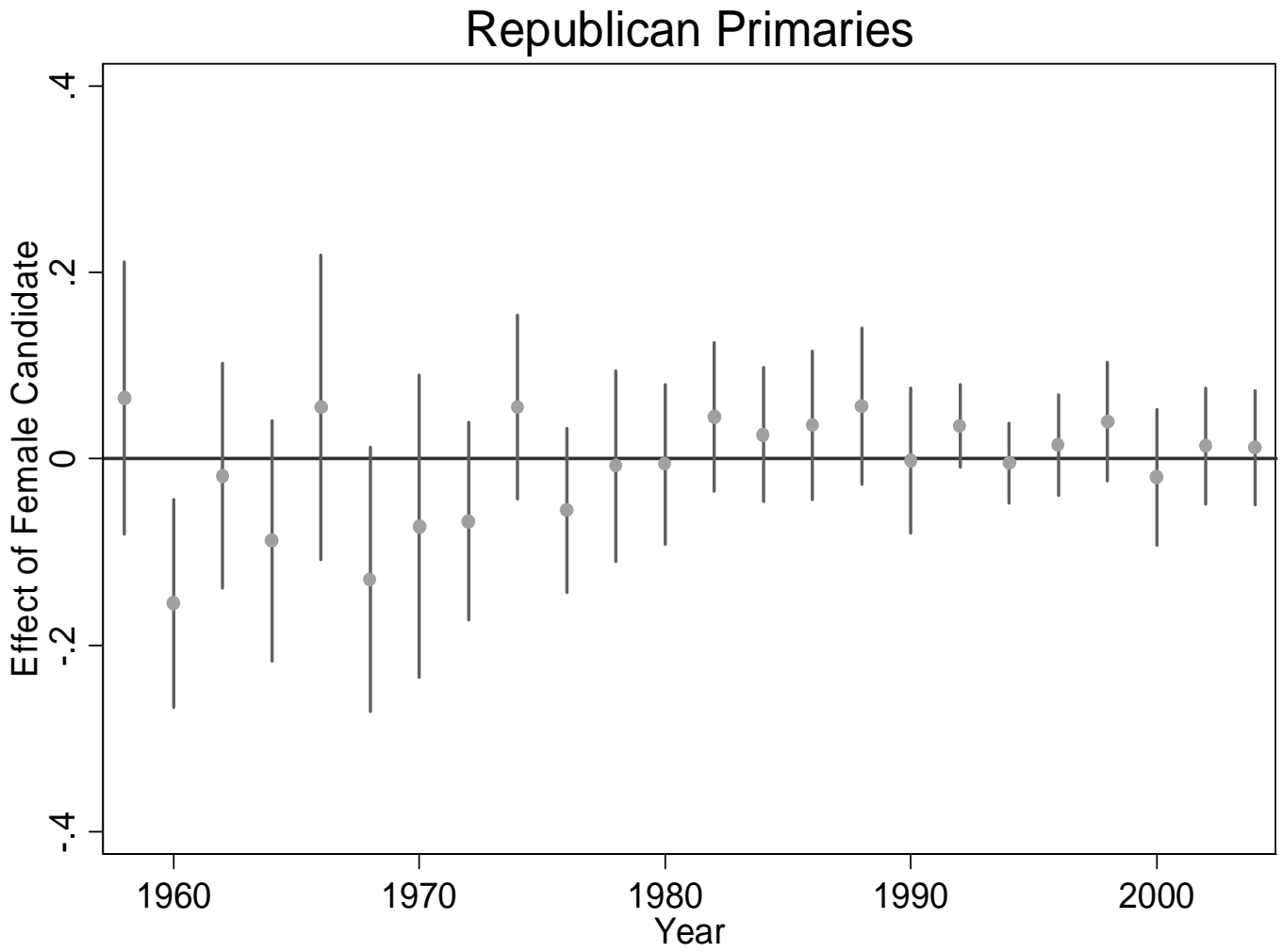


Figure 4. The Effect of Sex on Vote Share in Congressional Primaries, 1958-2004

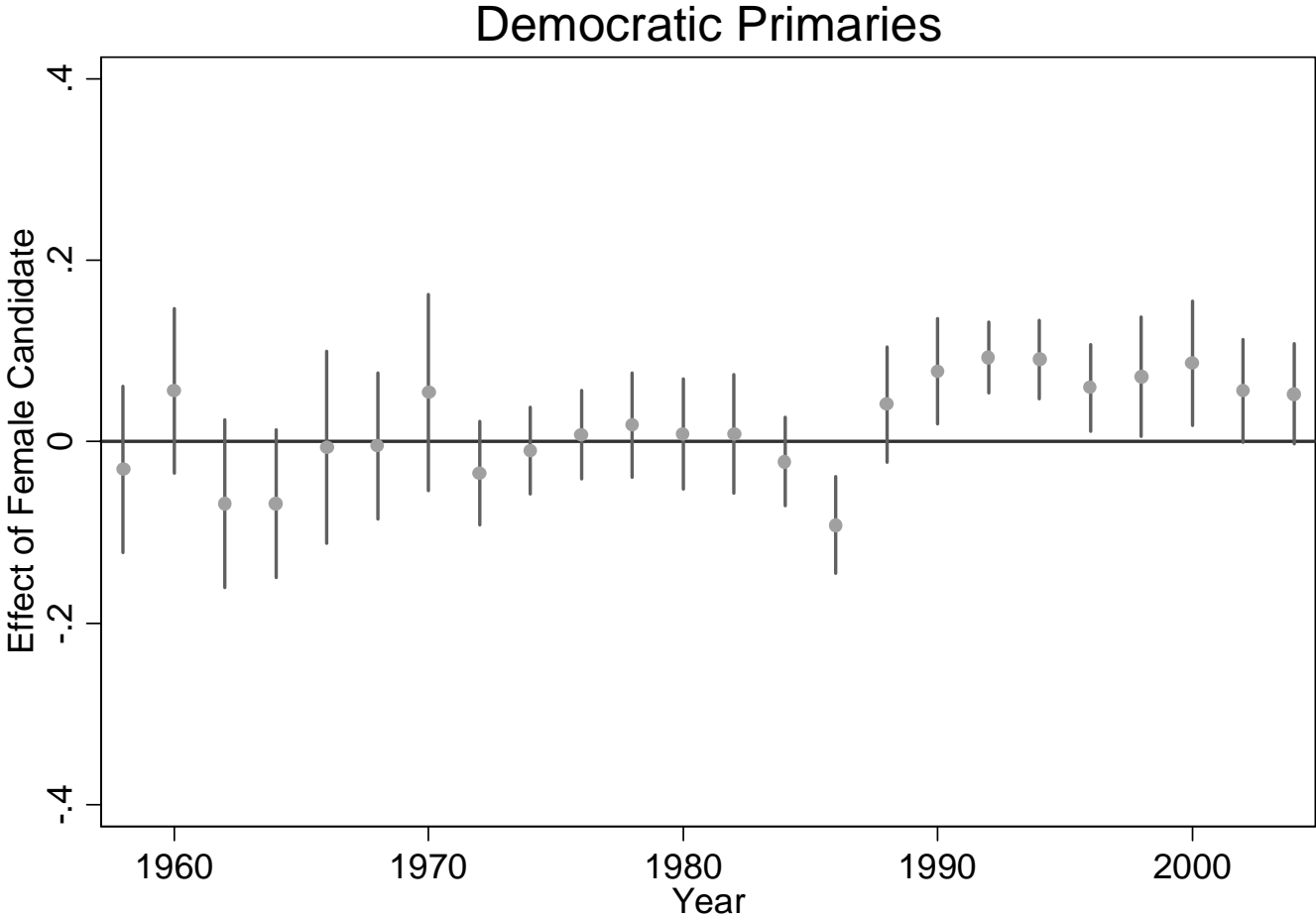


Figure 5. The Effect of Sex on Victory in Congressional Primaries, 1958-2004

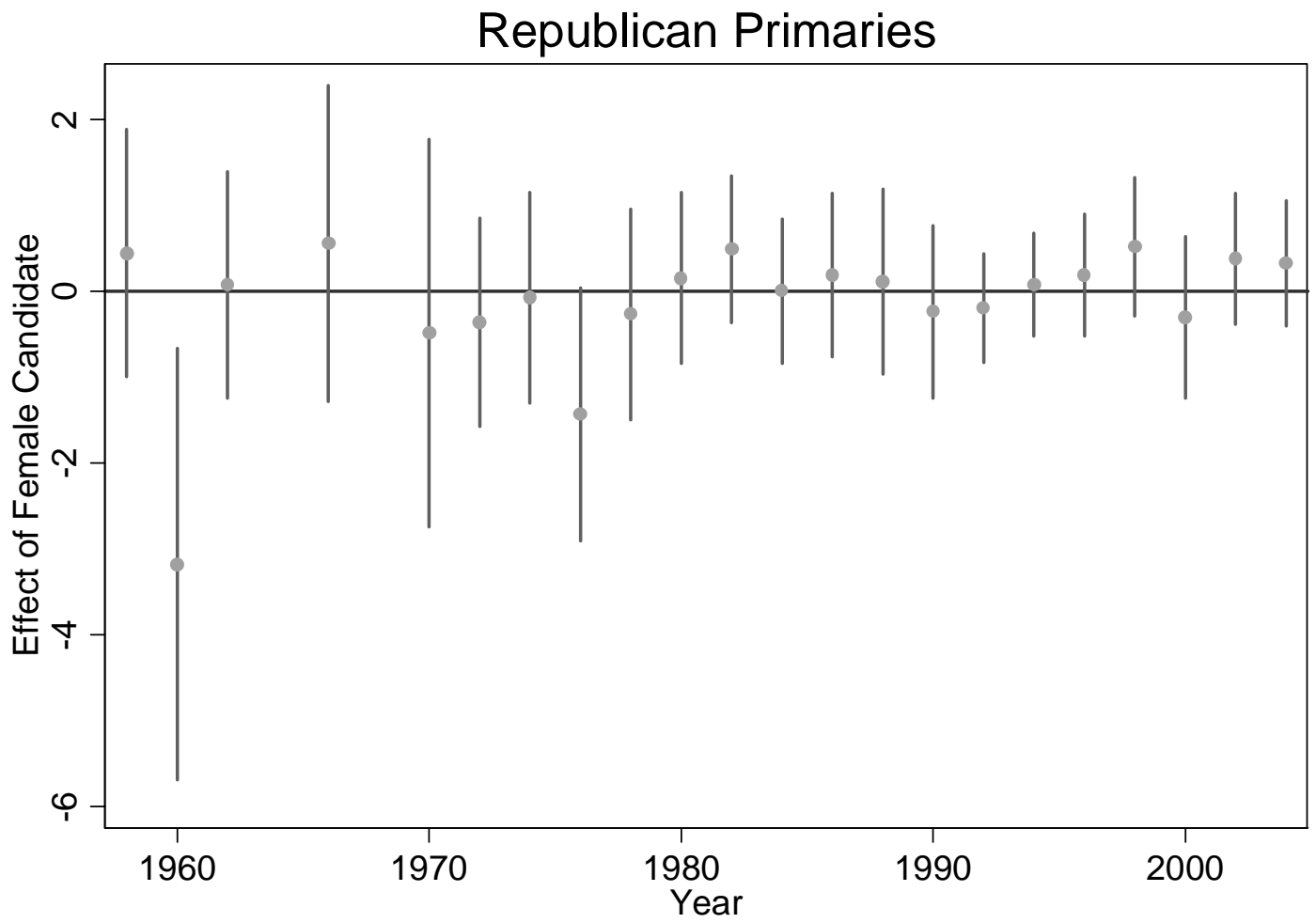


Figure 6. The Effect of Sex on Victory in Congressional Primaries, 1958-2004

