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Female Electoral Success in State Legislative Races: A Case Study Review of Gender Influence on Incumbency, Fundraising, Recruitment, and Policy

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This Honors thesis entitled

**“FEMALE ELECTORAL SUCCESS IN STATE LEGISLATIVE RACES:
A CASE STUDY REVIEW OF GENDER INFLUENCE ON
INCUMBENCY, FUNDRAISING, RECRUITMENT, AND POLICY ”**

written by

Isabella ‘Izzy’ Baughn

and submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for completion of
the Carl Goodson Honors Program
meets the criteria for acceptance
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

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**FEMALE ELECTORAL SUCCESS IN STATE LEGISLATIVE RACES:
A CASE STUDY REVIEW OF GENDER INFLUENCE ON
INCUMBENCY, FUNDRAISING, RECRUITMENT, AND POLICY**

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SENIOR THESIS

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In Fulfillment for the Requirements

for of the Carl Goodson Honors Program

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of recorded history, female representation in elective office has been drastically lower than that of the U.S. population. Over the years, there have been many records set for women in office, including the 28% of the 118th Congress represented by women. Considering both chambers of Congress, the House and the Senate, women account for 153 of the 540 seats of the body. This number marks a record high, demonstrating commitment and strength in numbers by women in politics. While 28% female is still a small number in comparison to the amount of women accounted for in the United States population, this jump in percentage reflects a 59% increase in the number of women in office from the 112th Congress one decade ago (Leppert and Desilver, 2023). It is no secret that the female population is more heavily represented in state legislatures; however, they only occupy 30.5% of state legislative seats in the United States (CAWP, 2022). This is not just a nationwide phenomenon, as women across the globe have worked hard to break glass ceilings and claim their seat at the table in the political arena. One may ask themselves what the world would look like if we had elected more women since the beginning of our nation's founding. This thought challenges us to consider what our laws, policies, and governmental structure may have become if we had more equal representation. Although we do not have all of these answers, there is work to be done to better understand how our nation can achieve a more representative democracy.

To fully understand the development of a woman's role in politics, it is often best to understand where it all began. For years, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a women's rights leader, was tired of watching women be denied a seat at the table. In 1866, Stanton stood firm alongside her mission and is recognized as the first woman to run for the United State House of Representatives, despite her grueling loss for the New York seat. Her courage started a

movement, and six years later Victoria Woodhull ran for President of the United States. As you can infer, Woodhull was unsuccessful in her attempt, but her courage once again spoke volumes for the female community. In 1884, Belva Lockwood was the first woman admitted to the practice of law. Because of the dedication and bravery of these women and many others, women like me are able to research and write about their stories. While all of these stories are incredibly important, pioneering the way for women today, we still have a good bit of work to do. This past March, I met with State Senator Karen Lewis Young. She told me that she was the first woman elected to represent her region of Maryland, and she was incredibly proud of this feat. In the middle of our conversation, she looked at me and said, “Young lady, it’s about time that women reach equal representation, and I am proud to be a part of it.” I was immediately inspired and reminded of the brevity of this topic.

As mentioned before, there are historically more women serving in state level legislatures than other levels of public service. I have always believed that change often starts small, in this case locally, and causes a ripple effect. Due to this fact, my study focuses on women making a bid for state-level office, and seeks to understand the factors that help them win their seat. When speaking in terms of an election, there are several factors that play a part. We can analyze these factors to create a more holistic look at female electoral success, and achieve our goal of becoming closer to pinpointing the most influential factor in getting women elected. After a job with a local mayor in Northeast Arkansas, I knew then that I wanted to dedicate a piece of my career to public service. Throughout my study, I intend to focus on female electoral success with emphasis on the incumbency advantage, fundraising efforts, recruitment methods, partisan effect, and policy influence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Carl Smith, a researcher and writing specialist for "*Governing: The Future of States and Localities*" studied the rise of women in the state legislature using state-by-state analysis. Upon the conclusion of his study, he noted that over the last decade, our nation has seen more women enter the state-level legislative bodies than any other level of government, particularly in 2020. In 2020, women in office were on record as the largest number of successful women's campaigns were recorded. This included over 2,200 electoral victories for women on the ballot, and since the year 2020 we have only seen improvement in this measure. From 2008 to 2018, female legislators accounted for only one quarter, 25.4%, of the state legislative bodies. Following the 2020 cycle, they now account for 30.6% of state seats across the nation. Factors that have influenced this trend are incumbency advantage, fundraising efforts, recruitment methods, partisan effect, and policy influence.

Incumbency advantage plays a critical role in all elections, regardless of a candidate's gender, class, or district composition. James E. Campbell, author of "The Return of the Incumbents: The Nature of the Incumbency Advantage," defined the phenomenon as one of the most elementary facts of political life, as it is simply the preferential status obtained by an incumbent's previous tenure in office (Campbell, 1983). It is a fact that incumbents are rarely beaten on the ballot, but many cannot agree as to why this is. Male and females alike have the advantage of incumbency available to them; however, statistically there are more men currently in office. The data indicated a disparity between becoming an incumbent, and not the notion of the advantage itself. Once a candidate has the "incumbency advantage," male or female, we can best study the phenomenon through two strong viewpoints: the incumbent's behavior (Mayhew, 1974) and campaign financing (Jacobson, 1980). The first indicating factor, behavior, pertains to

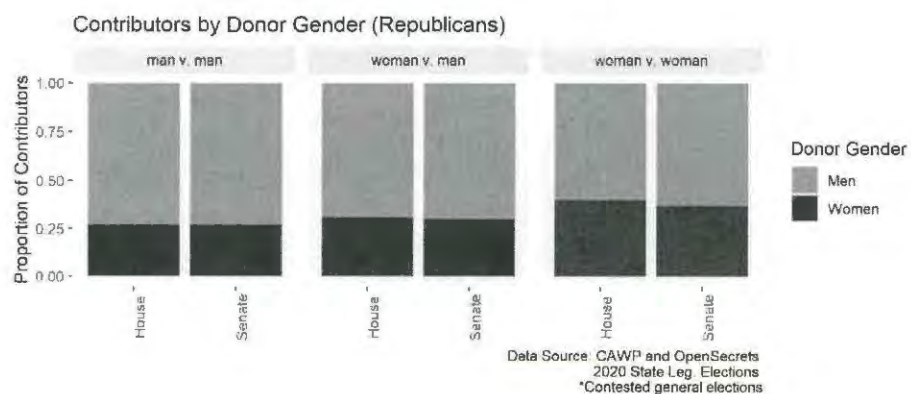
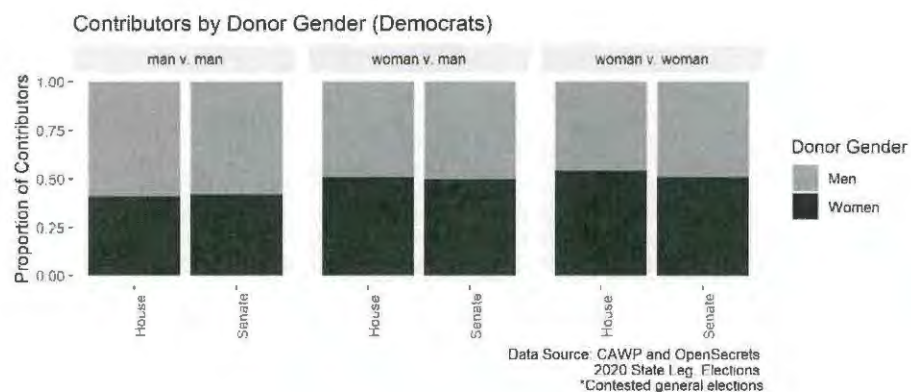
the decisions and actions taken as the candidate was previously in office. If the electorate's opinion on their previous actions were favorable, the incumbent is likely to be reelected due to the claimed credit they maintain from their actions. Since elections are just a few years apart, Campbell noted here that the opinion and choices of the voters are not likely to change in such a short span of time, garnering more votes for the incumbent candidate. The second area of study, campaign financing, highlights the higher amounts of monetary donation that an incumbent typically receives in an election cycle. Incumbents in national level elections had as high as a 98% reelection rate, and on a state level a 95% success rate. With a higher percentage of campaign finances, they are able to run more advertisements, pay higher fees for mailers, and hire full-time campaign staff to boost their presence. Again, this can be credited to their name recognition and established support base from experience, and scholars argue that incumbents always win because money always wins (Smith, 2006). Erickson, on the other hand, was the first to study the incumbency phenomenon in a systematic way, and his study made other individuals extremely sensitive to the problems that arise from this advantage. This idea of incumbency being a positive factor in election, or re-election, is particularly true for males, as they have traditionally dominated the field of politics and the numbers pertaining to electoral success. In the 2020 general elections, 93% of incumbents won re-election bids, which gave a strong lead to generally predicted success. In a study conducted by Ballotpedia, a national election data resource, there were vast levels of success for incumbent candidates seeking re-election. Local-level incumbents had an 89% re-election rate, state-level incumbents weighed in at 95% re-election, and the national incumbents' reelection rate was 96%. State-level incumbents had on average a 95%-win rate, with a range set by Hawaii – 100% and New Jersey – 89%. Overall, we can denote a trend on each level of elected office. Specifically in the state of Arkansas, there was

a 95%-re-election rate for incumbent candidates, which again showed a high level of re-election success. Even with this information, we cannot clearly assign incumbency as an enhancing factor due to other questions. While incumbency is often advantageous for candidates of public office, we must consider the specific election.

Related to the incumbency advantage, campaign finance plays a key role in electoral success.. Methods used to raise funds can often make or break a campaign, as they have become incredibly more complex and costly over the last decade of campaign seasons. In fact, Open Secrets noted the 2020 Presidential election cycle as the most expensive in history with over \$14.4 billion dollars spent. In this campaign season, they also noted the surge of individual donors as well, which accounts for \$200 per donor for each campaign. These individual donors are often the same ones who help fund state races due to their interest in the political arena (Evers-Hillstrom, 2021). With respect to smaller elections, the uptick in costs at the national level ensures an uptick at state and local levels as well, highlighting the crucial role of individual donors in each district.

Donors are a wonderful asset in political campaigning, but it takes a dedicated candidate and team to ensure they have proper access to give money. Fundraising efforts for campaigns often include but are not limited to crowdfunding, grassroots campaigning, mailers, text-to-give, and merchandise fundraisers (Ibrisevic, 2022). Much of the fundraising success, despite gender or other defining factors, often comes from the blood, sweat, and tears poured in by team members and staff to assist in raising funds. Naturally, there are some barriers, as female candidates are the minority of those in office. This means they have to work harder to gain credibility, maintain a positive presence, and essentially prove themselves to those willing to give. Because of these gaps, effective fundraising is crucial to female electoral success.

These measures can be best understood by the 2021 study by the Center for American Women in Politics (CAWP) entitled “The Money Race for the State Legislature.” This insight makes for a strong background for my area of study as it highlights the giving patterns of men and women based on gender, party affiliation, and incumbency. It is clear that women do not exercise equal voice in state legislative elections (Sanbonmatsu and Gothreau, 2021), as more men donated more to state legislative candidates than their female counterparts. This also ensured that men’s total dollar amount was higher than that of women as well. In the 2020 state legislative elections, women gave 32% of the total funds contributed, and men accounted for 68%. This shows that men out-gave women with a 2:1 ratio in state legislative races across the board. On the next page, you will find two tables put together by the Center of American Women in Politics, breaking down the contributors by gender and party in more depth.



The topic remains complex, because despite more money from men, more women voted in state legislative races at the polls in 2020. This determined that women out vote men, but men outgive women (CAWP, 2021). Much research shows that campaign funding directly correlates to political agendas and favors, as well as public support. Because men account for over double of the campaign funds contributed and host the majority in almost all state legislatures, it can be concluded that the agenda setting is predominately male-favored. Additionally, we learned that elections with female candidates appear to mobilize women donors. Based on single-member district general elections with two major party candidates, it was discovered that women were more likely to donate to races that maintained at least one female candidate (Sanbonmatsu and Gothreau, 2020). Due to their loyalty to female candidates, we see a gender affinity effect in

patterns of giving. Despite this trend, the Center for American Women in Politics (CAWP) noted that women are still largely underrepresented in the state legislative candidates and elected official capacities. Smaller scale races often do not weigh in favor of women due to partisan characteristics of their district and fundraising gaps. While the list is already hefty of gender differences in successful fundraising efforts, the Center for American Women in Politics found a noteworthy fact. With factors of incumbency taken into account, their study indicated that men and women typically raise comparable amounts in a woman vs. man electoral contest.

In studies by organizations like Rutgers, Represent Women, and the Center for American Women in Politics, all noted that increasing the recruitment of female candidates would also increase their electoral success rates (CAWP, 2020). The number one reason why women are not as commonly elected can be indefinitely explained because they are not as commonly on the ballot. Kelly Dittmar, a political scientist specializing in gender studies, has done extensive research on this particular piece of the puzzle and notes that encouragement is not enough. Organizations often seek to assist women running for office with training, information overload, and resources, however the proper emphasis on the initial invitation to run leads Dittmar to believe that female electoral success would be higher. In 2007, the Women's Campaign Fund launched a campaign titled "She Should Run." Their campaign was centered around an online tool that has asked 200,000 to consider making a run for office since its conception. Those who took their offer have made comments such as "She Should Run made running for office seem attainable," and "She Should Run is an invaluable resource that serves as a strategic blueprint and springboard." (Ebner and Hardy, 2020). A similar entity with a similar mission arose in 2014 and was named "Vote Run Lead." Their strategy led to the development *Invitation Nation*, which sends e-invites to potential female candidates, and they reached nearly 100,000 women

within their twelve month start up. In addition, the Center for American Women in Politics has invited countless women to run, as well, through online communications, training programs, and recruitment campaigns. As we can see, recruitment efforts on a large scale are present through use of large political organizations. Where we are missing the mark, Dittmar argues, is in the smaller and more personal approach. Formal invitations led by one individual to the next is essentially the most effective way to reach women to run for state legislative office. Many times this level of recruitment spawns from the county party chair's involvement, as well as the state party in order to make the playing field more equal for female candidacy. The disparity in female electoral success often lies in the female victimization based on circumstance, coming from this idea that they are not properly and intentionally recruited (Bledsoe, Timothy, Herring, and Mary, 1990).

In another recent study involving political participation and recruitment, authored by Nancy Burns, gender gaps in participation have been shown to decrease. Burns and colleagues attribute this to the educational gains made by women over time, placing them on a more equal playing field with men than ever before. While recruitment seems minute and inundated with organizations who send out mass invitations and encouragement, it is easily the most crucial aspect to female electoral success. After all, if women are not running, women are not being elected.

With the invention of a two party political system, the way that electorates partisan politics is an increasingly important issue as our nation stands in a more polarized state than ever before. With that being said, its relevance adds to the gender gap in elected office as it has been discovered that candidates directly correlate to a candidate's gender and party. With 31% of state legislative seats filled by women in the year 2021, we can note that 67% of this group serve as

Democrats and 33% serve as Republicans. The distinct difference in party ideology has played a heavy hand in influencing proposed, sponsored, and voted upon legislation over the last decade.

This staunch divide shows strong correlation to gender's influence of one's party and policy proposals when serving in office. An objective of my study was to determine the level that policy proposals and implementations are believed to be a product of women in office, specifically in state legislatures. Many researchers note that women have heftier interests in policies pertaining to education, sexual assault, reproductive health, pay inequality, and medical coverage to name a few. This interest typically spawns from views that women uniquely gain from their gender. To further investigate, I turned to Sue Thomas's study titled "Impact of Women on State Legislative Policies" from 1991. At the time of his study, women accounted for under a quarter of the state legislatures, weighing in at 17%. Even in the two-decade span studied by Smith earlier, we see about a 13% increase in female representation in politics. The reason the study of women's composition in the legislature increased in importance was noted by Sue Thomas and remains true today. With women in the legislature, a broader range of policy proposals is likely to occur due to a larger spectrum in career backgrounds, life experiences, and moral values. Thomas explicitly noted that women are more likely to focus on policy areas that deal with women, children, and familial topics (Thomas, 1991). The research done prior to my case studies have inherently noted that female presence in the legislature is absolutely on the upward trend, but the factors as to why, or why not, are commonly misunderstood. It is my goal to explain first-hand experience of female candidacy and tenure to reach a more equally represented legislature on the grounds of gender. This can be broken down by several factors or theories, including societal standards for gender roles, personality differences, and general preferences for women.

Women's propensity toward higher anxiety levels, risk aversion, and perceived threat can drive desire for stricter gun control laws. Another theory is gender socialization, which insinuates that women are naturally more caring individuals than their male counterparts. This seems to be the primary factor in the gender policy gap. The conscientiousness that women maintain often leads them to support equality and anti-hierarchies policies. (Gothreau, 2019). Regarding gender subgroups, the differences frequently surpass the aggregate gender gap in size. To provide an example, black women are much more likely to support social welfare than white women, and this distinct difference can be attributed to a few measures. Often, these sub-group variations exist due to demographic elements such as race, ethnicity, income, education, and religiosity. Overall, however, gender is not a uniform lens for analyzing policy positions. The totality of one's life experience most closely shapes their ideals and values regarding policy, despite gender, race, ethnicity, or other external factors. Though there are trends based on gender, as to what each female candidate supports, the divide of policy support is more heavily dependent upon partisanship as opposed to gender. Gender influence has often been studied as a monolithic measure, grouping all women into the same category. This only leads to further marginalization in historically underrepresented groups by leaving out cultural nuance from the conversation. There is no simple way to study gender affect, but each day there is more research added to help us understand the different factors and theories affecting policy brought to the floor.

In conclusion, we can note that electoral success is easily influenced by factors of incumbency, fundraising, recruitment, partisanship, and policy effect. Many studies, as well as personal interviews, have shown that gender matters to the conversation of political behavior and public policy. The addition of female victories over the last few election cycles is earth

shattering, sweeping over state legislatures, statewide executive offices, and the United States Congress. With a 5% increase in both legislative bodies, the gubernatorial races have seen the same success. In the year 2022, twelve women have been elected to the role of Governor, with eight serving as Democrats and four as republicans. The Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) noted that this beat the previous record of nine Governors. Among the twelve female Governor-elects, four states elected both a female Governor and Lieutenant Governor to serve their constituency, Arkansas was one of the four who elected a dual female front. The Congressional seats remained consistent, and 147 women served in the 118th Congress. This weighs in at about 27.5%. and matched the 2020 record. In terms of the House, 123 women will take office, which is 28.3% of all seats. Regarding the Senate, at least 24 will be serving in 2023. This is slightly lower than the record set in the US Senate, but this does account for 24% of all Senate seats. There is no doubt that more women are prone to run, and able to win (CAWP, 2022). These gains are momentum for female electoral success, and they are worth studying closely to better understand why and how women have successfully obtained political seats.

While the number continues to grow in all levels of elective office,, it is important that we understand going forward that female candidates are affected by a multitude of factors when running for office. To see more equal representation we must spread the word to garner awareness and support for these discrepancies. The years 1992 and 2022 have proven that women are ready to push through and reach a more representative democracy, both noted as “Years of the Women”, but it is no secret that politics is a man’s game. It is my goal for this study to encourage women to break boundaries set before them and place their name on the ballot to create a stronger state of the union.

METHODS

To complete my study, I interviewed female members of three state level legislative bodies to gain insight and perspective regarding their experience in running for office. Case study interviews were completed by Senator Breanne Davis of Arkansas and Campaign Manager, Jaime Land, of Arkansas. They helped provide a holistic look at the success of female candidates. My first interviewee, Senator Breanne Davis, is a member of the Arkansas State Legislature. My second interviewee is Jaime Land, a female campaign manager and state legislative analyst. Interviews three and four were held with state representatives from two surrounding states. They are both the youngest elected women to their respective roles.

To seek their insight, we had conversations regarding the following: female candidacy, the incumbency advantage or lack thereof, fundraising and recruitment efforts, and policy effect. Senator Davis' personal journey, and Jaime's campaign journey to elected office are different, and the catch phrase of the social science field is always "it depends," but each of the legislative members interviewed brought helpful insight to the table. It is my mission to see more women run for office, and through methods of study and social learning from other's we can grow the number of women elected to office each season. After all, women deserve a seat at any table they are willing to pull their chair up to.

Case Study 1: Senator Breanne Davis, Arkansas, Senate District 16

When women decide to run for office, it is no secret that they must have a level head on their shoulders, an incredible support system, and unmatched drive and dedication. Senator Breanne Davis had just that, and more. As a woman, she has paved the path for other members of the state legislature by working hard to meet campaign goals, promote influential and necessary policy, and bring more feminine advocacy to the table. Currently, the Arkansas State Senate has seven women serving, and Senator Davis is the youngest and most recently elected in the group.

In Arkansas, roughly 20% of State Senators are women, which breaks down to seven out of thirty-five. In the State House of Representatives, roughly 24% of seats are occupied by women. This concludes that twenty-four of one-hundred representatives are women serving in office. With 30 female legislators and 105 male legislators, Arkansas has many strides to make, and while the numbers are disproportionate and unreflective of the over 50% of women occupying the State, they show higher rates than a majority of other southern, conservative states. The women who have sought office are intelligent, empowering, and committed to their job as a public servant.

Breanne Davis is a two-term Senator and brought great insight regarding female candidacy from her experience running for the Arkansas State Senate. In 2017, Senator Greg Standridge (R) passed after a battle with cancer and the district 16 seat was open. Senator Davis had served in other roles in the political arena, including time on the school board and as her local county party chair, which led her to run for this open seat in a special election. She had always been inclined to run for office but hosted a few reservations about the right time to make

her bid for office. Upon learning about the open seat, she decided that no one in life would step aside for her personal dreams to come to life, therefore she had to make the jump and place her name on the ballot. In the 2018 special election, she did just that. Senator Davis defeated Bob Bailey (R) and Luke Heffley (R) in the Republican primaries and went on to defeat Teresa Gallegos (D) in the general special election. An interesting scenario, as both candidates in the general were women.

Senator Davis is well-rounded, and through getting to talk with her I learned that she is a devout Christian, loving wife, exceptional mother, talented youth soccer coach, and devoted volunteer. Her time is filled day in and day out, and she wants to see District 16, and the entire state of Arkansas, succeed. She was an inspiring woman, and she continues to advocate for female electoral candidacy by sharing advice and her personal campaign story with those around her. Davis added that many young women who have hopes to run for office never try because they more harshly criticize and critique their plans and actions. This fear holds many back, but it did not stop her.

As mentioned in my literature review, there are three lenses through which I will assess Senator Davis' success. The first of these is the incumbency advantage. Senator Davis' race was unique, as the seat was open, and she did not face the challenge of an incumbent opponent. She noted that with four children and a family, however, she was often looked down upon for prioritizing career moves, too, but if she did not take the chance herself no one else could for her. As a new candidate, Davis added that asking for support, whether fiscally or at the polls, was the hardest part. As a newcomer to the political scene, many people do not know your name, your character, or your motives, making them reluctant to vote for the "new kid on the block." Senator Davis sought re-election in both 2020 and 2022, and she added that once elected it was

increasingly easier to build connections, fundraise, and garner support on the campaign trail, hinting that there is merit to the incumbency advantage. In 2020, Davis had no opponent in the primary or the general, which gave her all the votes accounted for, and in 2022, she had one primary challenger and garnered 62.4% of the vote against a male candidate.

In the case of an open seat, more women are likely to jump in the race as they feel they have a better shot at electoral success. Another factor that their decision includes is the service status of the legislature. Many operate as “full-time,” “part-time,” and “hybrid.” When a female decides to make a bid for office, the time demand of the legislatures is increasingly important. Arkansas, a part-time legislature, gives women the chance to work or be a mother while also holding their elected office. States that employ a full-time legislature often make it more difficult for women who are also mothers to run and balance other responsibilities.

In political races, fundraising is an obvious need. For many candidates, there is a struggle to fundraise. In fact, Senator Davis noted that if you cannot gather the money to run from inside your district, odds are your name should not be on the ballot in the first place. Support in the form of money is a way that many individuals show their trust in your service. This line of credibility is increasingly important, and a check that is \$20 or maxed out makes a huge difference in American politics. Fundraising can be a difficult task, and many candidates take various approaches to gather these funds. One of the most common ways included door canvassing, where candidates knock on doors within their district, seek conversation, and then ask for money once support is given. As an incumbent, it is often easier to fundraise as individuals and groups send money simply because of their assumption or knowledge that they are running again.

The struggle to fundraise stems from the candidate's fear of asking for money. Senator Davis noted that it is hard to gain the confidence to do this at first, and it is also hard to develop the skill and ability necessary to succeed in fundraising. As a first-time candidate, Davis noted that you will be told yes and you will be told no, both of which you can learn from on the campaign trail. The art of fundraising can be discriminatory in nature, as some groups of people are more advantageous than others. Overall, however, the struggle to fundraise seems to be widespread according to Senator Davis. When I asked her if she felt that raising money was harder for her as a female than it was for her male counterparts, she responded with no. In each of her races that had a male challenger, she out fundraised each candidate in the field. Regarding recruitment, it is evident that the state of Arkansas must do a better job. During my conversation with Senator Davis, she noted that her interest in running for office began at an early age. While it is different for everyone, her interest was almost entirely self-motivated. To provide context to her concern for public service, Davis was elected to the Russellville High School board as the President, Communications Liaison, and Legislative Liaison. She also served on the Arkansas Board of State Athletic Training, the Arkansas Commission on Eye and Vision Care of School-Age Children, the Russellville Downtown Master Planning Commission, and as the Pope County Republican Party Chair. Each of these roles shaped her ideas and values, and in a way acted as a recruitment method on their own.

I asked Senator Davis if anyone from the local or state level of the Republican Party of Arkansas reached out to her or encouraged her to make a bid for office, and she told me that they did not. Her motivation to run was almost entirely self-led, but she believes that the parties could be doing more to promote female candidacy in our State. "It takes courage to put your name on a

ballot,” Davis said, and if more groups and organizations worked to recruit female legislators, we would see numbers shift dramatically across both parties in our State.

Senator Davis noted that policy honestly falls more along party lines than it does gender, but that her role as a wife and mother has unquestionably played a role in her policy scope.

Senator Davis is the wife of John-Paul Davis, and together they have two sons and two daughters. While in office, Senator Davis became the first member of the Arkansas State Senate to be pregnant on the campaign trail and give birth while in office. Senator Davis is the only woman serving in the Senate with children in elementary school or daycare, which gives her fresh insight and an open door to learn how we can improve for Arkansas’ future generations. When an individual is closer in proximity to an issue, their insight is often extremely valuable to the conversation at hand. For Senator Davis, this has been the case time and time again.

In the fall of 2018, Davis’ four-year-old daughter was born with Down Syndrome, which has caused her policy attention to include disability accommodations. She commented on the lessons she has learned through her daughter, and she spoke candidly about the issues that pertain to the disabled individuals of our state. Davis said, “I never thought about the things I am learning now, and if I had not walked through this with my daughter, I would not know just how hard it was.”

It is Senator Davis’ mission to ensure that intellectually and physically disabled children do not fall through the cracks of society. Because of her mission, she sponsored legislation to create “Lila’s Law” in 2021. This law prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities who need an organ transplant. In the 2022 Regular Session, Davis piloted the largest education reform act in Arkansas history. The bill, formerly known as SB294, and informally titled the “Learns Act,” is a 145 page omnibus focusing on school choice, creating a “career-ready” education system, and raising educator salaries to a minimum of \$50,000. Governor Sarah Huckabee

Sanders, elected in 2022, used Davis as a fellow female voice to lead the passage of the Act. We can note that her gender and background as a mother give her strong connections to the education system from the standpoint of a mother, as well as her prior service on the Russellville School Board. Additionally, Davis sponsored legislation to mandate Medicaid coverage of continuous glucose monitors for people with diabetes and to amend the law regulating paid canvassers for ballot issues.

As a measure of a legislator's commitment to certain policy areas, different groups will announce "scorecards" to rate their performance. The Family Council Action Committee 's latest release was from the 2021 session, and Senator Davis received a "B" for votes that relate to "promoting, protecting, and strengthening traditional family values." In addition to this information, we can gain perspective on the policy that Senator Davis oversees or has a hand in through two ways. One is the committee involvement she maintains, and two is the policy she has sponsored or promoted in recent sessions. In 2021-2022, she has been assigned to the following Senate committees with various roles of leadership (see next page):

Chart 1: Committee Involvement

| Committee Name | Rank or Position |
|--|-------------------------|
| Girls State | Chair |
| Senate Efficiency | Vice Chair |
| Senate Children and Youth | Member |
| Joint Budget | Member |
| Senate Public Health, Welfare, and Labor | Member |
| Senate State Agencies / Governmental Affairs | Member |
| Joint Budget Committee | Member |

Chart 2: Recently Sponsored Policy (Passed)

| Bill/Act | Title/Premise |
|-----------------|---|
| SB294, Act 237 | Amends various provisions of Arkansa Code relating to K-12 education. |
| SB120, Act 650 | Allowed the school boards to promulgate rules for school counseling |
| SB155, Act 837 | “Lila’s Law” |
| SB248, Act 1040 | To create the Food Freedom Act; and to exempt certain producers of homemade food or drink products from licensure, certification, and inspection. |
| SB345, Act 496 | To amend the higher education uniform Classification and Compensation Act; and to declare an emergency |

I believe it is fair to say that her gender has played a role in the policy that is important to her, but one could argue that any individual's experience shapes the issues most important to them. For Senator Davis, this top priority issue has always been education, but her time as a wife and mother has furthered her desire to create meaningful change in the Arkansas public school systems. For others, this stems from their life experiences that have shaped their perspective on various policy issues.

Case Study 2: Jaime Land, Campaign Manager and State Government Staff

Land is no stranger to the political scene and has been employed in state government for six and a half years, a campaign manager for two state-level campaigns, and serves as the chair of a statewide party recruitment organization. In her opinion, Arkansas is behind the times when it comes to female electoral success, alongside most southern states. While Jaime has not made a bid for office yet herself, her experience in government and politics in the State of Arkansas provides strong insight to the incumbency advantage, fundraising, recruitment, and policy influence.

Land noted that incumbents have a notable advantage. Much of this can be credited to the title and track record that comes with tenure in office, which in turn provides credibility. There is an aspect of hard work that is involved, per usual, but in her experiences, voters tend to favor the title besides someone's name in a race. In a specific example she spoke of an Arkansas judicial race in which female candidate, Barbara Webb's, name was on the ballot. Barbara had no title or incumbent status but prevailed in the race. Land said that while this is rare, she has seen it happen before. This advantage often seeps into the idea of fundraising, as Land reiterated the point of Senator Davis. Once you are elected, groups have grounds to judge their campaign donations off of. In regard to fundraising, Land noted that it is a challenge to anyone who runs for office. A major part of this is that candidates are asking individuals with both limited and unlimited resources to part with cash dollars. This requires a level of trust, and much of this can be attributed to how you have previously served in office or the reputation you have built within your community or district. Land noted that the number one influence on fundraising is prior established relationships and work ethic. In the case of a primary, the saying "it's all about who you know" rings true. In addition, female candidate fundraising comes down to the position that

the woman is running for. For instance, Land spoke to the difference in judicial and school board races. For a judicial race, many people tend to be skeptical of new candidates, specifically females, making it difficult to raise money. For school board purposes, many women are likely to fundraise more than their male counterparts. A large part of this situational gap is because women have much experience with education and children as mothers, and this is often noticed in these races.

Quite often, a candidate's success in this area comes down to how they handle being told "no." The question at hand is if this response will hinder, deter, or stunt the success of a campaign. The level of grit and determination required to keep trudging can be extremely difficult, despite gender. Land did touch on her gender barriers in electoral circumstances, and said she believes that there is merit to both sides of the argument. Being a female often means you must work twice as hard to raise the funds. Women running for office are scrutinized for taking time from their children, or deprioritizing their family commitments, which men do not often face on the campaign trail. Another challenge that females face is the "joke barrier." When men ask for money and receive a no, they can joke and banter about this response. If a woman were to joke, it is often seen as harsh and demeaning. While this has been the set norm, Land believed that times are changing. It is more appealing for female candidates to run for elected office, and on a national level we are seeing this drastic change. She believes that this trend will continue to trickle to state and local races, and eventually, to the state of Arkansas. In many races, the dollar amount raised is an immediate predictor of success, and Land's experience in this regard would reiterate this fact. Because of her work experience on two state-level campaigns, she knows the barriers that stand in the way of candidates, and particularly female

candidates. She said there are many long days on the campaign trail, but those that include fundraising are some of the longest.

In terms of recruitment, Land has much experience here. She has worked in various governmental roles, served on boards, and worked to recruit candidates for Arkansas elections. Her critique was increasingly insightful, as she noted that the focus should shift from statewide candidacy to local positions, as this is where a large portion of pertinent change stems from. She noted that female candidates are often looked over even if their ability to articulate is strong, they can hold their own, and they are determined to the core. Diligent service is overlooked and should be one of the most important factors to recruitment. Instead, it is often gender or status in a community that prevails when asked a candidate to run for office.

A major flaw of recruitment that Land brought light to is the harsh level of scrutiny that women give other women. She noted that women in politics are often the hardest judges of other women, which provides a major flaw in female confidence. Women already need more affirmation than men to make this jump, which stems from systemic norms of women being the minority, and men are the opposite. While Land noted that Senator Davis has a different story, most women are not ready to run on their own accord while men typically are. Females often need a reason why they should take on this task, and to better recruit in Arkansas we need to provide a stronger “why” to our female go-getters.

There is a combination of factors that compose a candidate’s policy viewpoints, and many of these can be credited back to both life experience and gender. Land noted that both go hand in hand and add to the nature of politics. When I asked her if she thought one measure of influence outweighed the other, she said no. She provided several strong examples, including the fact that a Representative Pilkington, a male, runs many of the feminine bills in the Arkansas

State Legislature. You would not expect a man to run bills pertaining to birth control and the tax of tampons, but many think that the issues that are important to his wife are also important to him on the floor. This is purely life experience, and not based on the grounds of gender equality. Land mentioned that if she ran for office, she would prioritize policy pertaining to women and children, but her primary interest would be with insurance due to her time as an agent, and education reform because of her home school background. Again, gender has an effect, but life experience dominated the conversation.

Being a woman does open your eyes to certain issues, and with a lack of females in office certain issues around education, children, healthcare, and other important topics fall by the wayside. The same is true in being a man. Men are typically more specialized in defense, firearms, and workforce development, and without their addition of knowledge there would be an imbalance in the legislature. Senator Davis and Land both noted that therefore we need to strike better balance in the legislature, garnering more female voices, and valuing the male voices present. Just the way that church, school, or life in general is better with balance, the legislature is too, and with too much of one gender we are often less successful in effective legislation.

CONCLUSION

As previously mentioned, in the political arena you often hear political scientists, researchers, and fans of the field say “it depends.” This statement is the backbone of American politics, as each situation provides a different instance for review and research purposes. Often, each story gives a new perspective, and each campaign and election could have a different result if done all over again. I would say there is much we can take away from the experiences of both Senator Breanne Davis and Land Land. These women, working on both ends of a campaign, understood these factors from first-hand experience and were able to give an honest overview of their beliefs and feelings. No campaign is easy, as it requires strength, determination, and grit for any candidate seeking office. As someone who has both worked on campaigns, and studied the field as an undergraduate, I have seen and come to know these challenges first hand. My goal when writing this thesis was to encourage women to put their name on the ballot. I set out with this goal so that those who read it and may have considered ever running for office would feel at ease about running, and would feel that because others have done it before them they can succeed. It is challenging, and it is rigorous, but our female voices are needed at the table. A balance is always good – whether this be a balance of power, or a balance of gender, it is time that politics on a local, state, and national level strike a better balance between men and women.

Senator Davis has made incredible strides in the Arkansas State Legislature, campaigning as a pregnant woman, and serving as a mom. Her experience with public school education is valued in the rooms she enters, and her experience with children’s disability makes her extremely qualified to fight for young Arkansans just like her daughter. When I sat down with Senator Davis, I saw a fierce spirit in her eyes, and I knew this is exactly what I wanted to do. I want to

use my voice to create meaningful change for Arkansans, and if you do too, there is no better time than the present.

Land, a friend of mine and Arkansas politics extraordinaire, has unmatched campaign experience and several years in Arkansas State Government. These qualifying factors gave her great insight on a candidate's incumbency, fundraising and recruitment efforts, as well as policy influence that one's background or gender reveals. She told me stories of days where she felt like just because she was a female, her talent and skill was ignored. She told me how the system prefers men, but does not make it impossible for women. This glimmer in her voice is what women must understand – it is possible, and you are needed.

Based on their personal experience alongside research done, we can conclude that incumbency advantage is more than likely present in state level politics. Voters do not often take the time to educate themselves on each race they will have the chance to vote on, and this means that when they go to the booth, they often choose the one with a title already. Whether that title constitutes it or not, it does hold weight when placed beside a name on a ballot. In Senator Davis' unique race, she was running for an open seat, which took this factor out in term one. Once in office, however, she noted how much easier it was to fundraise and gain credibility among her constituency. Despite her gender, she had proved herself by winning one seat and working hard in the legislature. In Land's experience with state-level campaigns, she told many stories of how the incumbent is almost always victorious due to the title that comes with their previous service. These challenges of incumbency can be overcome, and a title beside someone's name tends to place them in higher cohorts.

In regards to fundraising, both noted the difficulty of the task at any level, any gender, and any background. Your circle matters here, and while we have seen that to be true, they both

heavily emphasized this. Senator Davis said that she was successful on the campaign trail with fundraising, but not without a challenge. Land noted that fundraising is difficult and complicated for either gender, but not impossible. This means that each candidate must work hard to come up with the funds and finances needed to successfully promote their name to their constituents. Recruitment, another key topic in the conversation, is the area we are lacking most in. After research and conversations, I think it is fair to say that the structure needs more work in this area on a state level, as both women noted that because of their gender they were often overlooked as viable options to recruit for office. Many organizations are present to encourage younger individuals interested in politics to learn the ropes and seek office one day, but there are not enough measures of support. Additionally, many current officeholders or staff members will go to a male first and encourage him to run before a female, or worse, a minority female, is considered for the job. Conversations are needed with state and local party chairs to better recruit those who are ready to invest in Arkansas, and in our other 49 states, because gender should not be the swaying factor.

Lastly, I researched and interviewed through the lens of policy influence. I believe we can note that policy is impacted by gender, but primarily because gender affects our background and experience. Oftentimes, gender has an effect on the career one chooses, or the organizations in which we place our involvement. These experiences shape our worldview, and the way we interact with the situations around us, which in turn affects the way most elected officials vote or fall on specific issues. For Senator Davis, we saw this ring true following her experience with her daughter with down syndrome. She has been able to take her experience as a mom and create impactful legislation for other moms just like her. We can argue that this was a combination of both gender and life experience that swayed her drive to pass this legislation. With Land's

attentive eye to candidates, and campaign experience, she noted that life experience often takes precedence over any other factor when it comes to legislative agenda, but gender still absolutely factors in. Both had great insight, and their sentiments reiterated research that says women are more likely to prompt familial or education issues, while men promote defense and spending. This does often ring true and both conversations gave light to this.

Politics are ever-changing, and the scene is always in need of voices who are filled with passion and experience that promotes the greater good. It is my hope that this thesis encourages more women to replace fear for running with an unmatched zeal for service. Our voices are necessary to balance, our voices are necessary to fight for issues that pertain to our rights and our experiences, and our voices are necessary to stand up for the mothers who cannot. Senator Davis' courage to run is a story that each woman seeking office should hear. Jaime Land's experience with boots on the ground may also be the factor that leads her, too, to seek office. Currently, the National Council of State Legislatures (NCSL) has it that 30.5% of state legislative seats are held by women. This is a number that could most definitely be higher, but in the year 2022 we must note that much success has been made in equalizing gender roles in the legislature.

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