


ARTICLE

How to Run for Office

Lynn Mills Eckert 

Marist College, Poughkeepsie, NY, USA

Email: lynn.eckert@marist.edu

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Abstract

The article describes the challenges of running for local political office and explains the significance or political parties, interest groups, and informal support structures created by women to help women and minority candidates win and successfully govern. Additionally, the article addresses a political context where women and minorities face increased concerns about running for political office in a highly polarized environment.

Keywords: LGBTQ; Elections; Women; Local Office; Minority Candidates; Women and Elections

In 2015, despite hesitations, I jumped into running for local elected office. As a political science professor at a nearby college, I knew both the challenges and the potential contributions that I could make to city government as a teacher, woman, and an “out” lesbian.¹ The potential challenges of running for office were real. Female candidates, especially lesbian and trans women, face greater degrees of bigotry and physical threats while campaigning and governing.² I worried about the effects of running for office on my spouse and three children. I asked myself questions that other candidates would likely never consider such as should I place a picture of my spouse and kids on campaign pamphlets or would such exposure lead to threats against them? Even more practically, would such a photograph cost me votes?³ At the same time, I understood that diversity in political office leads to better, fairer, more equitable policy outcomes for the people I would represent. Women tend to bring more citizens into the policymaking process, produce outcomes that benefit women and minorities, and reach across party lines.⁴ Moreover, my background in political science would provide an advantage in understanding the legislative process and in producing desired policy results.⁵ In short, I felt like the costs of staying on the sidelines outweighed the sacrifices and challenges of running for office.

¹ Holman 2015.

² Brant and Butcher 2022.

³ Sanbonmatsu and Carroll 2017.

⁴ Holman 2017.

⁵ Andersen 2007.

1. The context

In 2015, I ran for Alderwoman in the City of Kingston, New York, a small metropolitan area northwest of New York City with a population of approximately 23,000 residents. The City of Kingston was and is a largely Democratic town but the label obscures deep divides between more cosmopolitan progressive New York City transplants and Blue Dog Democrats who tend to be more culturally and fiscally conservative. In 2016, many of these Blue Dog Democrats would cast ballots for Trump confounding conceptions about Democratic and Republican loyalties and policy preferences.

The Dutch founded Kingston in the 1600s as a trading outpost. In 1777, New York named Kingston its first state capital, which the British promptly burned on the way to the Battle of Saratoga. Every other year, Kingston observes the burning with re-enactments and celebrations. In the 1880s, workers in Kingston harvested ice to send to New York City. Around the same time, the Hutton Brickyards, now a riverfront hotel and entertainment venue, produced bricks selling them throughout the northeast. In 1994, the city's largest employer, IBM, closed after 38 years, leaving medicine and education as the largest employment sectors. In short, Kingston's economic past in many ways seemed brighter than its future.

In fact, in an effort to redress an aging water infrastructure without raising taxes for the repairs, the city's Blue Dog Mayor sought to sell the public water supply to a bottling corporation. Various public interest groups and constituents fought back to defeat the proposal but the city was raw from the fight. While the public water advocates won, the Alderman from my district who fought tirelessly against the corporation stepped down, in part, from exhaustion. A good friend and founding member of an interest group that led the fight against the bottling company called to ask if I would consider running for the open seat.⁶ She set up a meeting with the current alderman.

I qualified as one of those relatively new transplants having recently moved into the city after living elsewhere in the Hudson Valley. As is the case with most women who become involved in politics, I decided to run because I was asked by the very individual who led the fight against the bottling company.^{7,8} Kingston politics are no different than politics in other communities. Sharp elbows are often thrown, especially at women. The prominent public interest group leader who helped recruit me had been the target of a local anonymous blog that attacked her, suggesting that she should be subject to sexual violence. The blog attacks not only stung but also served as a warning to other women interested in local politics. The data confirms that women, specifically LGBTQ women, are more likely to face violent threats based on their physical appearance and their gender identity.⁹ These sorts of threats have only increased during the Trump era. During our campaign training, a former alderwoman discussed how anonymous individuals attacked the clothes she wore and the decor of her home. None of the male candidates faced similar criticisms.

Studies tell us that women are more likely to make decisions about whether to run based on how campaigning and office holding will affect the people about whom they most care.¹⁰ For me, I worried most about my children. Any candidate for public office must publish their

⁶ Kreitzer and Osborn 2018.

⁷ Carroll and Sanbonmatsu 2013.

⁸ Sanbonmatsu 2010, 2015.

⁹ Imse and Magni 2024.

¹⁰ Carroll and Sanbonmatsu 2013, 45.

home address. In a polarized environment, especially for women and minorities, such information can make one feel vulnerable.¹¹ In terms of my children, I wondered if their peers would harass them or whether teachers or childcare providers would treat them differently. Other candidates place photos of their families on campaign information as a way to demonstrate that they have a stake in the community and to transmit their commitment to family. For the LGBTQ+ community and other minorities, such information can provide more fodder for threats. In the end, after consulting with my spouse, I posted a picture of my family but I did so with a degree of trepidation.

Despite these concerns, the issues that mattered to me, my family, and my community were under consideration at City Hall. Not only did the previous Mayoral administration attempt to sell our public water supply to a private corporation, one that would be entitled to their allotted gallons before the public even in times of drought, but they also supported placing a gun range within a short distance of the local high school and YMCA. The proposed area for the gun range would be located in a disproportionately minority neighborhood that struggled with poverty and drug violence. The City faced ongoing concerns about gentrification and climate change too. While I was in office, Trump would win the election, raising concerns about undocumented workers in our community and whether the City should cooperate with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in detaining such workers. These issues were just some of the controversies that seemed too important to remain uninvolved.

2. How to run and win

Running for political office in the United States is a complicated affair – even with a PhD, the byzantine hurdles can discourage anyone.¹² As someone who taught Introduction to American Politics for years, I quickly understood that I had underestimated the importance of parties. In our politics, independents often brag about being unaffiliated and voting for “individuals” rather than a party. Our founders like George Washington and James Madison warned us about the evils of political parties yet no democracy in the world exists without them. In the absence of local Democratic party members, I would have struggled to understand election rules, to collect enough signatures to place my name on the ballot, and to excite citizens to go to the polls. Contrary to what independent voters believe, it is not a mark of a healthy democracy when citizens disengage from political parties. When parties fail to represent your views, the task is to join, engage, and persuade rather than withdraw. Nor is it a mark of independent thinking to become unaffiliated; it is a mark of confusion about how democracy works.

The first practical step in running for local office is not only to state your intentions but also to garner the support of party leaders, which entails phone calls, interviews with party members and community leaders, and a clear sense of why you want to run and what you hope to achieve. Convictions and policy positions matter not only in their own right but also because they foreshadow how the candidate may vote on unanticipated policy matters: voters should know your values and how you think. Moreover, candidates should demonstrate that they understand the local political system and that they are following the current controversies before their local councils. Kingston has a Mayor-Council structure of government, with a part-time legislature. Like all legislatures, the Common Council operates through the committee system. While campaigning I attended several Common Council and

¹¹ West 2019.

¹² Maisel 2013.

committee meetings. In legislative systems, committees discuss, debate, and mark up proposed legislation before sending proposals to the full Common Council for a vote. At the committee level, candidates quickly come to understand the various arguments and influences that determine the final outcome of proposed legislation.

Given that Kingston is largely a Democratic majority town, the real competitive race for the Council seat took place in the primary rather than the general election. I faced a candidate who had been a long-time Kingston resident and was supported by the current Blue Dog Mayor. In response to the water controversy, divisions within the Democratic Party led to competing slates of candidates. The more progressive division within the party supported myself as well as a Mayoral challenger. The primary election quickly became one where “New Kingston” was pitted against “Old Kingston.” The Mayoral challenger bridged the gap between “Old” and “New” as an environmental leader from a longtime Kingston family.

After extensive interviews and conversations with party leaders, I received the nomination from the Democratic party. It wasn’t easy: those who supported the current Mayor also served on the Democratic committee that made endorsement recommendations. I was also running against another woman. Identity-based politics can sometimes mislead. While women or members of the LGBTQ community, for example, may have similar experiences of prejudice, it does not mean that all come to the same political conclusions or fight on the same team. Nonetheless, after winning the party’s endorsement, I had a group of experts with the necessary knowledge, networks, and people power to help me win the primary and general election.

Once the party endorsed my candidacy, they held weekly meetings for all Common Council candidates. Additionally, they provided access to the political consultants who were managing campaigns higher up on the ballot like the Mayoral and state representative races. Local candidates received a crash course on how to target voters in their district with data showing where party voters lived and whether they voted consistently in primaries. Other members of the party told candidates where to buy lawn signs, door knocker pamphlets, pens, and magnets for the campaign. They helped fundraise and explained complicated campaign finance rules. While it is certainly possible to run an independent campaign, political parties make running a lot easier and more efficient. At these party meetings, common council candidates traded strategies, information, and encouraged one another. Party leaders also used their expertise to defend ballot signature petition challenges from opponents. Opponents often contest the signatures and information on petitions, which the state requires for candidates to appear on the ballot. Savvy campaign managers can challenge ballot petitions, sometimes knocking a candidate off the ballot before the campaign even begins. In hotly contested races, an experienced party member is essential to defend against such challenges.

In the spring of 2015, I set out to campaign door-to-door in my district. Every weekend and, at least once a week, I attempted to knock on a set number of doors. I would try to speak with voters about the issues. If I missed them, I would place a pamphlet at their doorstep with a handwritten note. If I was able to speak to someone directly, I learned that it was important to ask if I could count on their vote. Additionally, I would ask if they would be willing to place a sign on their lawn. In this way, I could tally likely voters prior to the primary election. My work at the ward level also provided important data for candidates running higher up on the ballot. In speaking with voters, I relied upon the same skills that I used in the classroom. I framed issues in succinct, clear ways and I tried to connect with them through humor.

In relying upon the advice of party members, I knocked on specific doors within my district. I targeted people who consistently voted in off-year elections, meaning contests with no big-ticket candidates such as a Senator, Governor, or President on the ballot. These voters were a subset of Democratic party members who were engaged in politics and open to persuasion: They could be counted on to vote. With limited time and resources, no candidate can reach every potential voter. Moreover, candidates want to persuade those who actually vote in primaries, not those who only appear for big presidential elections. Once those off-year, primary voters had been visited, I communicated with those party members who inconsistently voted in primaries. After the primary is won, the last attempt to contact voters entails reaching out to everyone. Nonetheless, the cold reality of elections is that a winning candidate turns out more supporters than their opponent. With limitations on time and resources, strategy about who to target matters.

Not only did the Democratic party help with fundraising, social media messages, and campaign content but also public interest groups contributed to my campaign through endorsements, invitations to speak at events, and lending their volunteers to the campaign. Like political parties, interest groups suffer from disrepute. Whereas elected officials are more like generalists, interest groups are specialists with the luxury of focusing on a handful of issues with depth and expertise. Interest groups seek to influence public policy but do so without running for political office themselves. As a local elected official in a part-time legislature, I was expected to know a lot about every issue that crossed our council desks. Even with committees that evaluate policy proposals on the basis of jurisdiction or content, part-time legislators cannot know all the nuances of complex technical issues. Interest groups educate legislators and candidates in substantial ways: They're invaluable to candidates and office holders when utilized in an appropriate manner.¹³ While Interest groups do not always represent the wider public, candidate, and advocacy group concerns sometimes coincide. Candidates must be savvy about when to utilize interest groups, ensuring that advocacy positions reflect the common good versus narrow self-interests. While I would not advise candidates to coordinate their campaigns with interest groups, those organizations can amplify candidate messages through their own independent means where issue convergence exists.

With targeted information, volunteers, fundraising efforts, knowledge, and advice about issues on the political horizon, I was able to win the Democratic primary and the general election for Alderwoman in District One of the City of Kingston. After one term in office, I would seek election to the Ulster County Legislature, ousting a longtime member whose family played a role in Kingston politics for generations. In fact, in challenging that candidate, a member of his campaign team lectured me about how his mother, a prominent elected official, "left that legislative position for him to continue the family tradition." In winning the County legislative position, my presence along with the election of several other candidates who also ousted longtime incumbents led to the passage of greater environmental legislation. The campaigning lessons that I learned from the Alderwoman race successfully translated to success for an elected position with more constituents and a larger district. Nonetheless, the political dynamics in the Ulster County legislature were far more complex. In the County legislative body, I encountered attacks on my sexuality from fellow Democrats in the context of a controversy about holding a fellow legislator accountable for claims of sexual harassment. The accused legislator eventually faced censure and declined to run again.

¹³ Matsusaka 2020.

3. Conclusion

After winning the election for the Common Council and County Legislator, I spent a total of four years in elected office. I valued the experience in the office and felt like I contributed to making our community a better place. We won important victories such as preventing a gun range from locating in a downtown minority-majority neighborhood. In the Ulster County Legislature, the County passed legislation banning plastic bags and straws. There are indeed sacrifices for family time and peace of mind, particularly when addressing divisive issues. People occasionally attack your integrity or your identity. Yet, I'm convinced that everyone should take a turn and serve in an elected position. Not only do individuals develop stronger bonds with their community but also they come to better understand how hard it is to govern. Those who sit on the sidelines in their communities often have little knowledge of what it takes to build consensus or what it means to compromise while retaining your core principles: they become cynical. Elected officials are hardly perfect: it can be difficult to confront attacks on your integrity. The public can hold women and minorities to different standards, especially in expressing anger and frustration. Yet when citizens develop greater knowledge of our political system and what it takes to make it work, they are less likely to lose faith in democratic institutions.

Citizens through participation come to understand that democracy, however flawed, functions through hard work and engagement rather than empty idealized passive forms of worship. Having other women as role models who not only inspire but develop training programs and support structures for female and minority candidates encourages those underrepresented groups to see the benefits of running for office and close an ambition gap.¹⁴ In my experience, women created an unofficial "kitchen" cabinet to help female legislators with advice, knowledge, and constituent outreach.¹⁵ Within my own circle, I relied upon a group of informal advisors to develop legislative strategies, conduct research, and interact with community and constituent groups. This informal group of advisors understood the burdens of work and family and sought to share the load in whatever way possible. Perhaps they themselves could not afford the time to run and serve in political office while raising a family. At the same time, they sought to volunteer in an effort to make running and serving more manageable for those women who were able to serve. The informal cooperation was an acknowledgement that women must be present in legislatures and that we must help one another to make such service realizable.

So many activities compete for our time. Yet democracy cannot survive if ordinary citizens do not take turns participating. Moreover, representation matters. Citizens need to see women and minorities performing in elected office in order to normalize the broader democratic commitment to inclusion. In ancient times, Athenians chose citizens to serve in office by lot. The idea that any individual might be called to serve, I suspect, added a seriousness to the business of being a citizen. After participation in administration by lot, one would presumably better comprehend the challenges of democracy and appreciate the service of others. Many commentators have lamented the end of democracy, the rise of career politicians, and the decline of the common good. While not everyone can afford to run for state-wide or national

¹⁴ Sweet-Cushman 2018.

¹⁵ The term "kitchen cabinet" harkens back to President Andrew Johnson's group of unofficial advisors. The term was meant to be derogatory in the sense that these advisors were not qualified to be a part of his official cabinet. Yet Jackson relied on these individuals to provide him with unvarnished political advice. The analogy is meant to explain the importance of an informal support structure for women in elected positions.

office relocating to faraway capitals, campaigning for local office is within the grasp of many more people, especially women raising families. In fact, post-Trump, it is the very place where we witnessed more diverse candidates taking office in an effort to counter the sexism, homophobia, and racism displayed in his campaign. We may not be able to return to the participatory ideal of the ancients, but we can become more politically involved in our local politics by running for the school board, the library commission, the common council, and even party leadership positions. It all matters in keeping alive the fragile and organic conditions necessary for democracy to thrive at a time when the attacks on women and minorities are meant to chill their participation. Moreover, taking turns in running for office ensures that we avoid the perils of career politicians who spend more time pursuing the perks of office rather than representing the people's will. In my own experience, I found that political parties, interest groups, and female community leaders matter in recruiting diverse individuals to run for, win, and find success in elected offices.

Lynn Mills Eckert is a Professor of Political Science at Marist College. She is the author of *Free Speech Law and the Pornography Debate: A Gender-Based Approach to Regulating Inegalitarian Pornography*, Lexington Press (2020).

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