RESEARCH PLAN

Why Women Run (and don’t run) for Parliamentary Office: Evidence from Germany

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Introduction

Women make up an average of only 15.6% of parliamentarians in national legislatures worldwide, ranging from 0% in Saudi Arabia to a high of 48.8% in Rwanda. Germany is ranked fifteenth in the world, with 31.8% of the sixteenth Bundestag’s seats filled by female deputies (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2005). The percentage of women in Germany’s Landtage, or state parliaments, currently range from 22.6% in Baden-Württemberg to 45% in Bremen. Although these percentages may be high on a global scale, women remain underrepresented compared to their proportion of the German population (52%). As a result, German women are underrepresented both descriptively (i.e., German parliaments do not mirror the composition of German society) and substantively. This latter point is supported by an increasing body of literature which shows that female MPs have different policy preferences and bring different issues to the floor of parliament than do their male counterparts (Inglehart and Norris, 2003, 99; Fiber and Arsneault 2005; for the German case see Hoecker, 1985, 77).

Considerable scholarly attention has been given to explaining the sources of women’s perpetual legislative underrepresentation across the globe. Matland and Montgomery’s three step classification of the sources of women’s political underrepresentation provides a useful framework for reviewing this literature (2003). For a candidate to enter
parliament, the authors point out, first she must decide to run for office, then she must be selected to appear on the ballot, and finally she must be elected by voters.

Many scholars have examined voting data to investigate whether voters are less likely to vote for a male than a female candidate. There is scant evidence that this is the case in the advanced industrial democracies, leading to a scholarly consensus that, in countries like the U.S. and Germany, “when women run, women win” (Sanbonmatsu 2005; Darcy, Welch, and Clark 1987; for the German case see Wessels 1997).¹

A multitude of other scholars have focused on what has come to be known as the “demand side” for female political candidates (Norris and Lovenduski 1993), that is, they investigate which factors influence whether or not female candidates will be selected to appear on the ballot. Variables including, but not limited to, political culture, economic development, electoral systems, candidate nomination procedures, party ideology, gender quotas, and party competition, all have been found to play a role in women’s chances of appearing in an electable position on a ballot. As a result of this extensive body of research, the effects of these variables on women’s representation are relatively well understood.

**Research Question and Hypotheses**

Rather than focus on the “demand side” of the equation, that is, the factors that influence the success of women’s candidacies, I want to focus on the first step in the above chain –

¹ The case for developing areas is quite different (Kenworthy and Malami, 1999).
what motivates women to choose or reject the idea of running for elected office in the first place. The variables shaping women’s own decisions about pursuing a political career, often called “supply side” factors, are relatively understudied. Further, the literature that has appeared on this subject is hampered by methodological limitations. I am applying for a Summer Research Fellowship in order to contribute both theoretically and empirically to this strand of the political science literature.

The research on the supply side of the equation, at least in the long-term democracies, has primarily developed by studying the English-speaking countries (Fox and Lawless, 2003, 2004, and 2005; Fox, Lawless and Feeley 2001; Norris and Lovenduski 1993). This research suggests that one of the reasons why women are highly underrepresented in Anglo-Saxon countries is that relatively few female candidates come forward. Women’s unwillingness to run for office has been attributed factors such as their lack of political ambition (Constantini 1990), their home and family responsibilities (Fox and Lawless 2003; Sapiro 1982), their underrepresentation in fields such as law, from which candidates are traditionally drawn (Duerst-Lahti 1998; Darcy, Welch, and Clark 1987), their lack of confidence in their own qualifications for office (Fox and Lawless 2005), and their alienation from male political structures (Lowndes 2004, 57; Metzler 1999, 116).

These findings raise an interesting question for Western European countries where women’s legislative representation is considerably higher than in the U.S. and the U.K.

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2 There also have been some anecdotal studies of women’s political ambition in developing countries (Lawless and Fox 1999) but given the stark differences between women’s status in such societies and in western Europe (Inglehart and Norris 2003) this literature is not discussed here.
Are women better represented in legislatures like Germany’s because they have overcome the aforementioned obstacles and are more willing to consider a run for elected office? That is, do German women have fewer family responsibilities, better standing in the workforce, more political ambition, and a different socialization – leading them to be more confident of their abilities and comfortable in the political arena – than their Anglo-Saxon counterparts?

The first two of these hypotheses seem unlikely. Germany does have a lower birthrate than the United States, on average 1.4 children per woman compared to 2.1 in the United States (United Nations 2004); however, despite having fewer children, German women still perform more unpaid hours of domestic work than their American counterparts (Esping-Andersen, 1999, 63). This may be due to the fact that services such as childcare are more costly in Germany (Esping-Andersen, 1999, 66). Research to date on female politicians in Germany indicates that balancing home and family responsibilities is indeed a challenge for women holding elected office (Scholer-Macher 1994) and even for women who wish to assume an active (non-elected) role within their political parties (Hoecker 1987, 161).

Further, the United Nation’s Gender-Related Development Index, which measures not attitudes but objective conditions including women’s health, education, and standard of living, ranks Germany 18th, below the US (7th) and UK (13th).3 Comparative research has also shown that in practice German women are less likely to be employed full-time than their American counterparts (O’Connor, Orloff, and Schaver, 1999, 72), due to incentives

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present in Germany’s welfare state and tax code (Esping-Andersen, 1999, Chapter 4). When German women are employed they are even more underrepresented in typically male professions than American women are (Esping-Andersen, 1990, 212). Thus it seems unlikely that German women have fewer professional or personal barriers to running for office than American women. Instead, it seems likely that other variables are responsible for the greater percentages of women running for parliamentary office in Germany.

I hypothesize that in order to understand women’s willingness to come forward as candidates we need to understand the influence of demand-side factors on women’s choices. The Anglo-Saxon cases where supply-side factors appear to cause women’s underrepresentation are also cases in which demand-side factors are more unfavorable to women than in the continental European countries where many women run for office. Both the US and the UK utilize single-member district electoral systems which have been found to be associated with low levels of female representation (Caul 1999, Duverger 1955, Rule 1987); party leaders often (incorrectly) believe that voters are less likely to vote for a female candidate in their district and as a result are reluctant to nominate women as their party’s candidate (Niven 1998; Sanbonmatsu 2005). Moreover, gender quotas, which have a strong positive effect on women’s representation worldwide (Reynolds 1999), are difficult to combine with the plurality electoral system. As most of the supply-side literature to date focuses on single countries where demand-side factors do not vary, these studies are unable to determine what causal effect inhospitable demand-side factors have on the low supply of female candidates. However, it seems logical to expect that women may be reluctant to declare a candidacy in a setting where
female candidates are not sought after or even discouraged from running. Women’s lack of political ambition and self confidence are likely to be amplified in such a setting.

Research in countries with more hospitable demand-side factors is needed to determine the effects of such variables on the supply of female candidates. The Federal Republic of Germany provides just such a setting. Most of the country’s major political parties have adopted voluntary gender quotas and pledged to increase the proportion of women in their parliamentary party groups. In light of parties’ demands for their services, German women are likely to become more politically ambitious and more confident about running for office and therefore more willing to do so. Within Germany, however, the degree to which state-level political structures are compatible with these quotas varies, as does state party leaders’ willingness to implement these quotas (Davidson-Schmich, Forthcoming). This variance in demand-side factors allows us to investigate their influence over the supply of female candidates from state to state in Germany.

To date, not much is known about what prompts women to aspire to elected office in Germany. The limited research that has been done on women’s decisions about running for political office there contains methodological limitations. It almost exclusively focuses women who have chosen to run for office and have been elected (e.g., Geißel 1999a, 1999b, 2000, Hoecker 1987, Meyer 1997); it does not tell us anything about the motivations of women who ran and were not elected nor of women who decided not to run for office. Geißel’s work clearly indicates that her small sample of Berlin women who had chosen to run for local elected office did not usually join their parties with the
goal of becoming politicians. Rather this desire emerged over the course of their experience within their parties. This suggests that a party quota-driven demand for women candidates may help change traditional supply-side factors such as women’s limited political ambition. However, because Geißel only studies women who held elected office, it is not possible to know whether these women are typical or atypical examples from their parties.

Further, the German studies that explicitly examine women’s motivations for political participation fail to include men, so it is not possible to test whether German men’s motivations for entering or avoiding the political arena are different from or similar to German women’s.\(^4\) What is needed in order to understand women’s decision-making regarding running for office is an examination of the broader sample of qualified women and men who choose not to run for elected office in addition to those who do. Only with variance on the dependent variable (the decision to run for office) can we assess the impact of the independent variables hypothesized to influence women’s, but not men’s, decisions in this regard.

This is the methodology utilized by Fox and Lawless in their Candidate Emergence Study conducted in the United States.\(^5\) The authors surveyed both male and female members of the “candidate pool” for the U.S. Congress including lawyers, business people and

\(^4\) An important exception to these criticisms is Hoecker’s 1985 study of party members in Bremen. She briefly examined their interest in running for political office and noted that more women than men expressed interest. That few women were represented in Bremen at that time, she argued, was a testament to demand-side factors (p. 67). However, this aspect was only a minor component of her research and I know of no such studies outside Bremen. Further, her research was conducted before the adoption of quotas in Germany.

\(^5\) Details of their survey questions and methodology can be found in Fox and Lawless (2005).
educators as identified in professional directories. As mentioned above, their results indicated that women were much less likely to consider (or actually undertake) a run for political office than similarly-placed men. While Fox and Lawless note that being asked to run for office by a political party exerts a large and significant effect on an individual’s decision to run, and that women are less likely to be asked to run for office than men, the authors conclude that women’s underrepresentation in American politics is mainly due to factors including their lack of political ambition, their doubts that they are qualified to run, and their lack of willingness to run for office even when asked to (Fox and Lawless 2005).

If this survey were replicated in a context where women were frequently recruited by those who select candidates to run for office and where high percentages of women served in elected office, I believe the results would change. First, where there is great demand for female candidates, women are likely to become more politically ambitious. The literature on women’s motivations for becoming politically active repeatedly finds women motivated not by an intrinsic desire to hold powerful positions but rather by the desire to improve their communities or by the pursuit of a particular policy goal. Unlike the desire to hold a powerful position, these latter goals can be obtained by methods other than running for office, such as working within a political party, lobbying elected officials, or joining an interest group. In contexts where demand-side factors are not conducive to women’s candidacies, it is less likely that women pursuing policy goals would consider running for elected office as a means to obtaining these goals. In contrast, where female candidates are actively sought after, women may be more likely to aspire to
elected office as a route to achieving a desired policy outcome. In preliminary interviews, many female politicians in Germany indicated that they had initially entered the public arena working for a union or other interest organization and had eventually decided the most fruitful route to achieving their groups’ goals was to seek elected office.

Second, where parties are committed to nominating female candidates, women are likely to become more confident in their qualifications for office. This may occur through several mechanisms. In a context where a high percentage of women already serve in elected positions, the “role model” effect may occur and potential female candidates may become more inclined to believe that they too hold the appropriate qualifications for public office because more public officials share their characteristics. In addition, parties searching for women to run for office are certainly interested in attracting qualified women for these posts and may work not only to attract women but to prepare them for holding public offices as well. German parties, for example, have begun to offer public speaking courses and mentoring for female aspirants, helping the latter feel better suited for a run for office and more comfortable with political institutions. Finally, as mentoring programs become institutionalized and parties routinely encourage certain women to run, individual women may become more confident in their own abilities due to the outside confirmation of their qualifications. Interviewees stressed the role that outside encouragement had on their decision to run for office. One typical respondent stated, “I would have never come up with the idea of running for office. Without my mentor encouraging me I would have never had the courage [to seek my party’s nomination].”

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6 See below for details of the interviews.
Even if female-friendly demand-side variables have a positive impact on women’s political ambition and self-confidence, women’s disproportionate share of household responsibilities may still cause women – at least women with young children – to remain less likely than men to agree to run for elected office when asked. Rather than hindering women’s political representation in a setting with gender quotas, however, this fact simply means that parties will have to approach more women than men to find enough candidates to fill their quotas. Interviewees in the state of Bremen, where women compose 45% of the state legislature, all mentioned that balancing home and family responsibilities complicated a political career, but this fact clearly did not hinder women’s legislative representation there.

Preliminary Interviews, Future Research Methods, and Timetable

To test these hypotheses, I plan to conduct a written survey, similar to Fox and Lawless’s, of potential candidates in two German states, Bremen and Baden-Württemberg. These states have been selected because they represent not only the highest and lowest percentages of women in the German Landtage, respectively, they also have two very different demand-side contexts for female candidates. Bremen’s political context is highly conducive to women’s representation. For local and state elections this Land uses a list proportional representation electoral system that is easily combined with the parties’ gender quotas. It is a city-state, meaning that its candidates solely come from urban areas.

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7 Both Bremen and Baden-Württemberg use Germany’s mixed electoral system for federal elections. However, since the candidates chosen to run in Bundestag elections are selected by individuals from each state, the atmosphere in which potential candidates consider a run for the national parliament differs from state to state even if electoral rules do not.
and only 12% of its population is Catholic. These demand-side factors have been shown in comparative research to be conducive to women’s political representation. In contrast, demand-side variables in Baden-Württemberg are less promising for women aspirants than those in Bremen. The electoral system used in local and state elections is incompatible with the use of voluntary gender quotas and more akin to the plurality system used in the U.S. and U.K. than to list proportional representation. Further, the population is three times as Catholic as Bremen’s (39%) and its large geographical size gives it a considerable rural population. Again, all of these variables have been associated with lower levels of women’s political representation. If demand-side factors shape the supply of female candidates as I expect, my survey should find women more reluctant to consider running for office in Baden-Württemberg than they are in Bremen.

Since German legislators are drawn not necessarily from the ranks of professionals (as in the US) but rather from the ranks of political parties, I plan to survey individuals active in local party organizations (OrtsvorsitenderInnen, SchatzmeisterInnen) in the two states. However, since some of the supply-side literature cited above argues that women are particularly likely to feel alienated by male political structures such as political parties, and German parties occasionally choose candidates with non-party backgrounds, I will

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9 At the state level, Baden-Württemberg voters cast a single vote for an individual candidate much like voters in the US and UK. At the local level, Baden-Württemberg uses a form of preferential list voting, which has been shown to be detrimental to female candidates in traditional political cultures (Ellis 2002, Jones 1998).

10 Of Baden-Württemberg’s working population, 2.1% was employed in agriculture in 2004, compared to only 0.02% in Bremen (Federal Republic of Germany, Statistical Yearbook 2004).

also survey state leaders of NGOs such as unions, women’s, and professional associations as well. By surveying both women and men situated in very different demand-side contexts, not all of whom have chosen to run for elected office\(^\text{12}\), I will obtain the data necessary to draw conclusions about the variables shaping the supply of female candidates.

Preliminary interviews strongly suggest that demand-side factors significantly influence women’s willingness to come forward as candidates. In the summer of 2005 I conducted a round of preliminary interviews with 22 women from both states, two-thirds of whom served in the state legislatures and one-third of whom did not hold elected office at the state level.\(^\text{13}\) In both states the women interviewed mentioned that family responsibilities made it difficult for women with young children to hold political office. However, despite this barrier, all respondents in Bremen agreed that it was not difficult to find women to run for state or local office. In fact, many interviewees reported incidents of several women challenging each other for coveted spots on the ballot and women occupying ballot slots (and inner-party offices) in excess of their quota. In Baden-Württemberg, in contrast, many respondents indicated that their political party had difficulty recruiting women to run in local elections and, at times, in higher-tier elections as well.

This variation in candidate availability correlated with the variance in the demand-side atmospheres depicted by respondents from the two states. In Bremen, interviewees

\(^{12}\) Given that leadership positions within the party are generally a prerequisite for elected office, this sampling methodology will certainly yield respondents who have run for legislative office.

\(^{13}\) Some did however hold elected office in local and county level parliaments.
stressed that gender quotas were taken seriously and female candidates for state-level legislative office were actively recruited. No respondents mentioned incidents in which women who aspired to political office met with negative responses in their communities. In Baden-Württemberg, in contrast, respondents reported a much more difficult demand-side setting. There interviewees noted that parties in the state did not actively work toward gender balance when selecting candidates for the Landtag. Women who were not in state-level elected office complained that their party organizations at times worked against women who wanted a ballot nomination in favor of males within the party. Women both inside and outside the Baden-Württemberg state legislature reported incidents of hostility toward, and belittling of, women who wanted to enter politics, especially in rural, heavily Catholic areas. My survey will indicate whether these preliminary results are generalizable.

Following my quantitative analysis of survey results, I plan to conduct a second-round of personal interviews with representative men and women from both states, candidates and non-candidates alike, to more fully elucidate the mechanisms that my survey results show shape the supply of candidates for legislative office.

I have been in contact with Dr. Konstanze Plett at the Zentrum für Feministische Studien (ZFS) at the University of Bremen and she is very supportive of my project. I expect to soon receive official word from the ZFS Vorstand that they will serve as a host during my stay in Germany. Dr. Ulrike Liebert at the University of Bremen has also agreed to support my work substantively, although her Jean Monnet Centre for European Studies at
the University of Bremen cannot offer me logistical support. My time table for the research is as follows:

Summer 1:
■ Develop survey questionnaire and pre-test on selected respondents (interviewees from summer 2005)
■ Identify sample for survey

Academic Year 1:
■ Administer survey

Summer 2:
■ Statistically analyze survey responses
■ Write up quantitative results

Academic Year 2:
■ Identify respondents for personal interviews

Summer 3:
■ Conduct personal interviews
■ Write up qualitative results
■ Complete book introduction / conclusion

This research will allow me to make a contribution to the study of why women do or do not decide to run for elected office. Understanding the factors that drive the supply of female candidates can aid policy makers in shaping political institutions in a way that will encourage more women to run for elected office, helping to end their perpetual underrepresentation in legislative bodies.
References


