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FROM ATHLETE TO POLITICIAN: WOMEN'S SPORTS AS A MEDIUM FOR POLITICAL  
PROGRESS

by

ABIGAIL BOWEN

Under the Direction of Sarah Gershon, PhD

ABSTRACT

Using data from an original survey experiment, this dissertation explores various ways that women's sports might impact American politics. In the first empirical chapter, this project investigates how sports participation works through confidence and competitiveness to impact the political ambitions of women. I find evidence of a conditional mediated relationship between sport participation and political ambition. The second empirical chapter utilizes an intersectional approach that considers how sport participation impacts White and Black women differently. The data reveals an indirect relationship between sport participation and ambition for White women and a direct relationship for Black women. In the final empirical chapter investigating how exposure to women's sports impacts attitudes, the data demonstrate that exposure to professional women athletes reduces prejudice toward women politicians for Democratic and Independent men while worsening prejudice for Republican men.

INDEX WORDS: Political ambition, Gender politics, Gender bias, Descriptive representation, Women's sports, Women's athletics, Sports and politics

FROM ATHLETE TO POLITICIAN: WOMEN'S SPORTS AS A MEDIUM FOR POLITICAL  
PROGRESS

by

ABIGAIL BOWEN

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2021

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Abigail Catherine Lea Bowen  
2021

FROM ATHLETE TO POLITICIAN: WOMEN'S SPORTS AS A MEDIUM FOR POLITICAL  
PROGRESS

by

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May 2021

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this dissertation to those who made it possible for this queer woman of African descent to receive a PhD. I owe everything I have to the women, men, and people beyond the gender binary who committed their lives to liberation. I dedicate my work to the women who ignored societal limitations and pursued athletics. Women like Serena Williams and Megan Rapinoe who have shown us that a woman's power is limitless. Lastly, I dedicate my work to the girls who love to play sports and to the trans kids being bullied out of athletics.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

“I cannot escape the fact that I come to the Senate as a symbol of hope and change. Nor would I want to, because my presence in and of itself will change the U.S. Senate.”<sup>1</sup>

Carol Moseley-Braun, the first Black woman elected to the United States Senate

“As WNBA players, we are athletes. We are allies. We are Black and brown women. We are members of the LGBTQIA+ community...by simply existing in spaces that weren't built for us, women athletes are doing something revolutionary.”<sup>2</sup>

Nneka Ogwumike and Sue Bird, Women's National Basketball Association Players

This dissertation explores the potential political impact of women's increasing involvement in sports by asking the following questions: Does participating in sports foster political ambition for women? Is this process different for Black and White women? Does watching women participate in sports impact men's attitudes toward women in other masculine domains, such as politics? I explore each of these questions in the chapters that follow. I study American sports and politics because of their shared history of exclusion and their shared opportunity for improvement.

As an institution, American sports resemble U.S. politics in that they were both constructed by straight White men for straight White men. Further, both American sports and politics remain places of power dominated by straight White men. However, the image of the American athlete, as well as the image of the American politician, has slowly changed over time to reflect the diversity of the American population.

The slow acceptance of women and women of color into these historically White masculine spaces is due in no small part to brave women like Shirley Chisholm and Wilma Rudolph, who were willing to push against their confines. Shirley Chisholm was the first Black woman elected to Congress in 1968 and later made history for her presidential campaign in 1972. Congresswoman

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://history.house.gov/People/Listing/M/MOSELEY-BRAUN,-Carol-%28M001025%29/>

<sup>2</sup> [https://phenomenalmedia.com/articles/wnba-op-ed?fbclid=IwAR0hPFmobaM215kanWW8ynsdw2R\\_eRvNBW4-hbILOVQrbTBcnfz3IKQVz5Y](https://phenomenalmedia.com/articles/wnba-op-ed?fbclid=IwAR0hPFmobaM215kanWW8ynsdw2R_eRvNBW4-hbILOVQrbTBcnfz3IKQVz5Y)

Chisholm faced backlash from both White women and Black men for her presidential campaign.<sup>3</sup> Though her presidential bid was unsuccessful, she expressed hope for the future: “The next time a woman of whatever color, or a dark-skinned person of whatever sex aspires to be president, the way should be a little smoother because I helped pave it” (Chisholm 1973, 162).

Wilma Rudolph also experienced criticism for her decision to disregard stereotypes and expectations by participating in sports. In her autobiography, she highlights hearing what she calls the “distorted views” that sports cause too much strain on women’s bodies and are inappropriate for women (1977, 43). Rudolph ignored the nay-sayers and went on to not only make history by breaking records at the 1960 Olympics but also by refusing to attend a segregated celebration in her honor upon her return to the United States, leading to the first desegregated events in Clarksville, TN.<sup>4</sup> Similar to Congresswoman Chisholm, Rudolph knew her battles would pave the way for coming generations: “The triumph cannot be had without the struggle. And I know what struggle is. I have spent a lifetime trying to share what it has meant to be a woman first in the world of sports so that other young women have a chance to reach their dreams.”<sup>5</sup>

Today, some of the most famous professional athletes in the United States are women. Serena Williams, Venus Williams, Alex Morgan, Lindsey Vonn, and Michelle Wie all appear in ESPN’s World Fame 100 list.<sup>6</sup> Of the five people named 2020 Sports Illustrated Sportsperson of the Year, two are women: Naomi Osaka and Breanna Stewart.<sup>7</sup> The number of women playing sports is trending upwards at all levels in the United States. Early data from the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) shows that just 64,390 women played college sports in 1983. That

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-CDOC-108hdoc224/pdf/GPO-CDOC-108hdoc224-2-6-9.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.espn.com/sportscentury/features/00016444.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1989-01-08-8902230553-story.html>

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.espn.com/espn/feature/story/\\_/id/23519390/espn-world-fame-100-2018](https://www.espn.com/espn/feature/story/_/id/23519390/espn-world-fame-100-2018)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.si.com/sportsperson/2020/12/06/sportsperson-2020-james-stewart-mahomes-osaka-duvernay-tardif>

number has more than tripled in the last four decades. The NCAA reports 221,212 women competing in NCAA championship sports in the 2019-2020 season.<sup>8</sup> Numbers from the National Federation of State High School Associations also show that millions of girls play high school sports across the country.<sup>9</sup>

The number of women involved in U.S. politics has also risen over time. Making up 29.3% of state legislatures, 28.9% of state executive offices, and 23.6% of Congress, women now serve in nearly all levels of U.S. government. In 2020, the nation made history by electing Kamala Harris as the first mixed-race woman Vice President of the United States. Though the American political landscape has undoubtedly changed from the time during which laws and leaders excluded women and racial minorities from participating, the United States has yet to reach proportional representation for these historically marginalized groups.

Extant literature outlines several benefits to an increase in the number of women politicians and politicians of color. According to Mansbridge (1999), descriptive representation benefits marginalized groups by fostering communication between the representative and the represented. Mansbridge highlights how one group's historical domination over another impedes trust and communication between these groups and how this can hinder substantive representation for the oppressed. Further, Mansbridge argues that having politicians who may share similar experiences with their constituents allows for the representation of constituents' interests even if those interests are "uncrystallized" and not explicitly stated by the community (1999, 628).

Evidence demonstrates that both women and Black politicians serve the substantive interests of their respective communities (Preuhs 2006; Swers 2013). Further, Mendelberg, Karpowitz, and Goedert (2014) offer experimental evidence that in majority-rule settings, such as

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.ncaa.org/about/resources/research/ncaa-sports-sponsorship-and-participation-rates-database>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.nfhs.org/articles/participation-in-high-school-sports-registers-first-decline-in-30-years/>

U.S. legislatures, women are best able to advocate for women's issues when they hold numerous seats. As it stands, women, and especially women of color, are at a numerical disadvantage when advocating for their communities.

Additional research demonstrates that increasing representation positively impacts attitudes among political minorities. Having candidates who mirror their constituents in race or gender serve in and run for office is positively associated with women and African-Americans' political engagement and efficacy (Atkeson 2003; Atkeson and Carrillo 2007; Clark 2014). Beyond the substantive policy and individual benefits of descriptive representation, Phillips (1998) contends that there is no defense for the continued underrepresentation of women from the standpoint of justice. Phillips goes on to argue that justice calls for gender parity in representation. Any discussion of justice in political representation must not only include gender but race as well.

The ongoing sparsity in representation for women and women of color perpetuates the belief that these groups lack the ability to rule and do not belong in politics (Mansbridge 1999). Scholars speculate that the historical exclusion of groups exacerbates representation gaps by limiting political interest and knowledge among the excluded (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001). In interviews with women following educational paths that historically lead to politics, Shames (2015) finds that women of color are particularly disenfranchised from a political system they view as unfavorable toward them.

Research supports the notion that women are at a disadvantage in the current U.S. political system. Scholars show that gender-neutral election outcomes obscure gender bias against women candidates. Lawless and Pearson (2008) show that women face greater competition in primary elections, thereby adding barriers to their electoral success. Pearson and McGhee (2013) find that women candidates are more likely than men candidates to have held office prior to running for the



U.S. House. Using an original measure of candidate quality, Fulton (2012) demonstrates that women candidates tend to outqualify men candidates, meaning that women running for office have to outqualify their competitors to be equally successful. Given the barriers against them, it is unsurprising that fewer women express a desire to pursue elected office compared to men.

For decades scholars have pointed to the gender difference in political ambition as a cause for women's underrepresentation (Costantini 1990). Using original survey data, Fox and Lawless (2004) find that women are less likely than men to express an interest in running for office, even when accounting for concepts such as education, income, and race. Their survey data also shows that party leaders and political activists are less likely to encourage women to run for office. Sanbonmatsu's (2006) interviews with politicians and political activists reveal that these political leaders report difficulty in recruiting women to run for office, often due to women's doubts about their own abilities. Similar to Sanbonmatsu's findings, Fox and Lawless (2010) again demonstrate that women are less likely than men to report interest in pursuing office and that their perceptions of their qualifications and experience likely play a role in their ambition. The literature consistently points to a gender gap in political ambition among adults. Further evidence shows that this ambition gap exists early, with data showing gender differences in political ambition in college students (Lawless and Fox 2013) and prepubescent children (Bos et al. 2020).

In spite of the bias in elections and the disparity in ambition, women still run for office and win. Increasingly, women from a variety of backgrounds are participating in American politics. For example, the newest Vice President of the United States is a woman of Jamaican and Indian descent. Vice President Kamala Harris recognizes that her election is a breakthrough in terms of both gender and racial representation while simultaneously acknowledging the potential for future improvement: "while I may be the first woman in this office, I will not be the last, because every

little girl watching tonight sees that this is a country of possibilities.”<sup>10</sup> I argue that women’s sports facilitate access to the opportunities Vice President Harris references in ways extant literature has not explored. I propose that women’s sports impact U.S. gender politics by developing political ambition in those who participate and by forcing those who witness to re-evaluate what they believe about women’s abilities. Using original data from a survey experiment, I investigate how women’s sports impact political attitudes in the following chapters.

In Chapter 2, I address how women’s confidence and competitiveness might impact their political ambitions. I suspect that low confidence and competitiveness hinder political ambition. I address the political ambition literature, as well as the literature beyond political science that points to lower levels of confidence and competitiveness among women. Further, I engage with the literature on how participating in sports is positively linked with both confidence and competitiveness. I analyze these propositions using original survey data and find a positive link between sport participation, confidence, and political ambition.

Given that women’s experiences vary by race, I expand on the findings from Chapter 2 in Chapter 3 by taking an intersectional approach to the impact of sport participation. I find that sport participation is positively associated with political ambition for both Black and White women; however, the relationship is nuanced. Sport participation is directly related to the political ambitions of Black women. For White women, on the other hand, the relationship between sport participation and political ambition is mediated.

In the final empirical chapter, Chapter 4, I move beyond individual sport participation and explore how exposure to women’s sports impacts political attitudes. Using a survey experiment, I find that exposure to professional women athletes conditionally affects attitudes toward women

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/11/07/kamala-harris-victory-speech-transcript/>

in politics based on gender and partisanship. Exposure reduces bias against women in politics among Democratic and Independent men while worsening bias among Republican men. Women are unaffected by the experimental treatment.

The research I present here demonstrates that women's sports can impact individual attitudes, which has implications for American politics. I do not suggest that women's sports are a cure-all for achieving justice and equity. However, women's sports offer an opportunity for girls and women to grow in unique ways that could lead to more women participating in politics. Further, women athletes establish that women can succeed in spaces crafted and maintained by men. By doing so, these women force others to re-evaluate gender stereotypes and normalize the degradation of gender barriers into historically masculine professions.

## 2 THE DIRECT AND INDIRECT IMPACT OF SPORT PARTICIPATION ON POLITICAL AMBITION

“Playing sports taught me how much fun it is to win, and how much you can learn when you lose. And in the world of electoral politics, I’m reminded of that lesson every day. Sports also taught me that a loss, political or athletic, is not the end of the world; it’s the end of the race. It made me less scared to take risks and take on challenges. We need women and girls in this country to feel like they can take risks and try bigger things.”

-Stephanie Schriok, President of EMILY’s List

### 2.1 Introduction

The day after the 1992 elections, *The Washington Post* published an article declaring “the ‘Year of the Woman’ a reality” after several women won their Senate races, “tripling the number of elected women currently serving” (Gugliotta 1992). Some observers following the midterm elections similarly called 2018 “Another ‘Year of the Woman’” due to the number of women running for office and winning their elections (Kamarck 2018). There were record numbers of women running in and winning elections in 1992 and in 2018, but declaring these years “of the woman” might obscure the reality of the gender imbalance in American politics. After the 1992 elections, there were still only seven women Senators in the following Congress.<sup>11</sup> The “Second Year of the Woman,” or the “Pink Wave,” of 2018 should also be considered in context. While more women ran in 2018 than in any previous year, the number of men running also increased. Even with the surge of women candidates, women still made up less than a quarter of all candidates in 2018 (Dittmar 2018).

The obvious result of so few women candidacies compared to male candidacies is a gender imbalance in representation. In the United States, women hold just under 24% of

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<sup>11</sup> <https://cawp.rutgers.edu/history-women-us-congress>

Congress, less than 30% of all state legislative seats, and account for only nine of the nation's governors.<sup>12</sup> The gender disparity in individuals seeking office may reflect what scholars have repeatedly noted as a gender gap in political ambition. Political ambition, in this work and in the literature, refers to the expressed interest to pursue political office. The literature shows that women, compared to men, are less likely to have run for office and to have even contemplated running for office (Lawless and Fox 2010). The causes of the ambition gap are certainly as complex as the larger political system in which it exists; however, the socialization of women likely plays a role in the gap's persistence. The gender gap in ambition may be partially explained by women's beliefs in their own abilities and by an aversion to competition, both of which are products of women's socialization. I theorize that sport participation will attenuate the ambition gap between men and women by fostering confidence and competition among women participants. While extant scholarship offers several potential explanations for the gender gap in representation, it offers little exploration of the means of reducing the gender difference in political ambition. I address this gap in the literature by illuminating the possible causes behind the gender gap in ambition and investigating how sport participation can mitigate the disparity in ambition.

Several successful women politicians acknowledge the role their athletic backgrounds played in shaping their pursuit of office. In reference to her sporting history, Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) suggests, "it takes a level of fear out of something like running for office and putting yourself out there in a competitive contest and letting people choose" (Starr 2014). Growing up around sports also impacted Representative Cheri Bustos (D-IL) and her career, evidenced by her decision to self-describe as "Athlete" on her Instagram and Twitter

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<sup>12</sup> <https://cawp.rutgers.edu/current-numbers>

biographies. According to an article written about women athletes turned politicians for Sports Illustrated, Bustos' socialization in a competitive sports environment helped propel her into politics (Schnell 2016). Several women who have run for office have athletic backgrounds, such as Senator Tammy Duckworth (D-IL),<sup>13</sup> former Senator Kelly Ayotte (R-NH), Illinois Comptroller Susana Mendoza, Denise Juneau, who served as the Superintendent of Public Instruction for the state of Montana, and Katie McGinty who ran for a Senate seat in Pennsylvania (Schnell 2016).

Using original survey data from a nationally representative sample, I find that sport participation works through confidence to increase the likelihood of an individual expressing political ambition and that this mediated relationship is not gender-dependent. However, I also find that sport participation exerts a direct effect on political ambition, but only for those who identify as women in the sample. The results suggest that sport participation is directly related to political ambition and that this relationship is particular to women.

## **2.2 Explaining the Representation Gap**

While the gender disparity in political ambition is frequently cited as a potential contributor to the representation gap, it is not a complete explanation. Who actually runs and wins an election is determined by factors beyond an individual candidate's interest in the pursuit of office. One factor partially explaining why so few women run for office is that women are less likely to be recruited to make a bid for office and often rely heavily on recruitment when considering to run (Fox and Lawless 2010; Sanbonmatsu 2002). The women who choose to run for office often compete in unequally matched races.

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<sup>13</sup> [https://www.sas.edu.sg/cf\\_news/view.cfm?newsid=1546](https://www.sas.edu.sg/cf_news/view.cfm?newsid=1546)

Election outcomes in the United States might lead one to believe that elections are gender-neutral. However, the literature suggests that women candidates face greater competition than male candidates in primary elections (Lawless and Pearson 2008). Further evidence demonstrates that women candidates frequently out-qualify their male counterparts, which obscures voter bias against the women who choose to run for office (Fulton 2012). The incumbency advantage when running for office and the historic male domination of politics further burdens the advancement of women in U.S. politics (Palmer and Simon 2001; Schwindt-Bayer 2005).

Women's underrepresentation, like all political phenomena, is complex. The ambition gap is a single piece of a larger puzzle. However, the only way to expand our understanding of the gender imbalance in the political system is to analyze the puzzle piece by piece. This work focuses on how the gender gap in political ambition contributes to the continued gender disparity in political representation and how women's sport participation might diminish the ambition gap.

### ***2.2.1 The Ambition Gap***

The gender gap in political ambition refers to men being more likely than women to express an interest in running for office and to actually run for office. In their survey of potential future candidates, Fox and Lawless (2004) find that women in the "eligibility pool" are less likely than comparable men to express political ambition. One of their measures of political ambition captures if the participant has ever "considered" running for office. Even with such a broad measure meant to reflect even the slightest inclination toward political office, Fox and Lawless still find a statistically and substantively significant gender difference in political ambition. They also include a measure of if the individual has run for elective office and again find a significant gender disparity, with men being more likely to have run. In a later wave of

their Citizen Political Ambition Study, Lawless and Fox (2010) replicate their previous findings, demonstrating again that women are less likely to consider running for office and less likely to run for office than men.

Moving beyond individuals deemed “eligible” to run for office (meaning those in careers that tend to lead to political office), the gender difference in political ambition persists. In a survey of individuals ages 18-25, Lawless and Fox (2013) find that women in their sample were far more likely than men to have “never thought about” running for political office, while the men were more likely to have thought about running for office “many times.” This trend continues when looking at even younger individuals. Research by Bos et al. (2020) conducted on children ages six to twelve reveals that gender differences in interest in politics and political careers already exist, with girls being less interested than boys.

### ***2.2.2 Confidence and the Ambition Gap***

Though Schlesinger (1966) and Black (1972) discuss political ambition exclusively in terms of men, their approach to political ambition is relevant for the current discussion on women’s ambition. Both Schlesinger and Black argue that the desire to pursue political office is shaped by the expectations of what one can achieve. The literature suggests that the gender gap in ambition is related to gender differences in expectations. In her research on candidate recruitment, Sanbonmatsu (2006) finds that party leaders and activists report difficulty in recruiting women to run for office because women often doubt their qualifications.

Sanbonmatsu considers that the heavy emphasis women place on their qualifications could be because they doubt themselves or because they expect others to doubt them. In their study of how men and women pursue legislative candidacies, Carroll and Sanbonmatsu (2013) again stress the importance of outside encouragement on a woman’s decision to run for office.



They find that “Encouragement from those in their political and personal networks—party leaders, elected officials, spouses, family members, friends, coworkers, organization members—often figures critically in women legislators’ decisions to run” (Carroll and Sanbonmatsu 2013, 61). I contend that the significance of this encouragement on a woman’s decision to pursue office is because it bolsters confidence in their ability to succeed in the political arena, which potential women candidates are more likely to need than their male counterparts.

Using survey data, Fox and Lawless (2004) demonstrate that men are more likely than women to perceive themselves as qualified to run for office. Further, their research shows that women rely more heavily than men on these perceptions when considering political office and that the gender differences in perceived qualifications play a major role in the gender disparity in ambition (Fox and Lawless 2004). Additionally, Bledsoe and Herring (1990) conclude that women who view themselves as electorally vulnerable are less likely to pursue higher office, whereas the same perception is unlikely to impact the ambitions of men.

Literature outside of political science provides further evidence that women are often less confident than men in terms of their own qualifications and expectations of success. An individual’s perceptions of success based on their opportunity structure, as discussed by Black and Schlesinger, is what Bandura (1977) might describe as an “efficacy expectation.” According to Bandura, “an efficacy expectation is the conviction that one can successfully execute the behavior required to produce the outcomes” (1977, 193). Bandura speculates that what one expects they can achieve will determine whether or not they choose to pursue their desired goal. Beyer (1990) discusses how girls are socialized to underestimate their competence, which reduces their future expectations of success. Using experimental evidence, Beyer (1990) demonstrates that men tend to have higher expectations for their own performances and evaluate

their performance more positively, on average, than women do. Beyer and Bowden (1997) offer further experimental evidence that women are more likely than men to underestimate their performance and to have negative expectations of future performances.

Women's lowered expectations for future success is evidenced in the business literature as well. Wilson et al. (2009) find lower levels of entrepreneurial self-efficacy for women compared to men across middle school, high school, and MBA students. Further, the authors find that the disparity in self-efficacy is related to future intentions of pursuing an entrepreneurial venture (Wilson et al. 2009). Wilson et al. conclude that what an individual expects they can accomplish influences their future career interests. The literature from across disciplines consistently points to the importance of expectations of success in determining pursuits and that women are less likely than men to expect to succeed. The gender differences in confidence or self-efficacy likely worsen the gender disparity in political ambition; however, efficacy is not the only contributing factor.

### ***2.2.3 Competitiveness and the Ambition Gap***

An election is a competition, and evidence suggests that women are disinclined to compete. Using experimental evidence, Kanthak and Woon (2015) find the men and women in their student sample are equally willing to serve as group representatives when they volunteer for the position; however, they also find that women are less likely to consider being the group representative when they must compete in an election. Based on this evidence, Kanthak and Woon label women "election averse." Additional experimental evidence demonstrates that priming subjects on the competitive nature of elections lowers the likelihood of women expressing interest in running for office while not impacting the interest of men in the study (Preece and Stoddard 2015).

The literature shows that women's aversion to competition extends beyond elections and is likely tied to confidence (Kamas and Preston 2012). In a laboratory experiment in which participants can select their payout structure, Niederle and Vesterlund (2007) find that, based on their performance on addition tasks, men in their study elect to compete in a tournament more frequently than is in their interest, while women decline to compete more often than is in their interest. Their evidence also suggests that the decision to compete is based on individual perceptions of performance, and the men in the sample tend to be overconfident while the women are more likely to underestimate their performance. In their own experiments, Vandegrift and Yavas (2009) similarly find that women are less likely than men to choose to compete, and men choose to compete even after receiving information on their performance that should deter them from doing so.

### **2.3 The Impact of Sport Participation on Confidence and Competitiveness**

Extant scholarship points to gender differences in confidence and competitiveness as potential contributors to the gender gap in ambition. I contend that participating in sports should foster confidence and competitiveness in women, thereby promoting the development of political ambition. Extensive research links sport participation with self-confidence. A longitudinal study of children at ages 10-12, 13-15, and 16-18 reveals a positive relationship over time between sport participation and self-esteem (Wagnsson, Lindwall, and Gustafsson 2014).

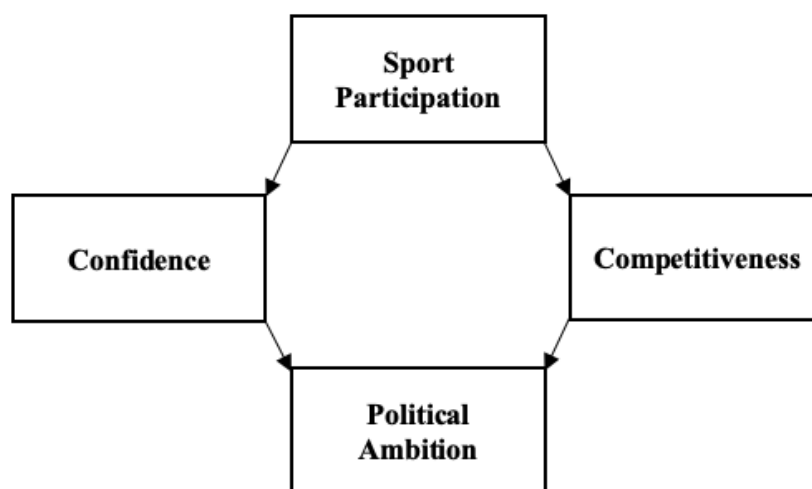
Evidence suggests that sports participation improves self-confidence through perceptions of sport competence, physical competence, and/or physical appearance (Bowker 2006; Wagnsson, Lindwall, and Gustafsson 2014). Sports may also build confidence by forcing participants to re-evaluate their perceived limitations. In her book detailing "How the confidence women build in sports translates into the rest of their lives," Samuels explains how her

achievements in sports gave her confidence in her abilities in other areas (2011, 11). Samuels states that her participation in sports led her to view herself “as someone with more potential, broader horizons, bigger possibilities. [She] saw that [she] could push [her]self and take risks, not just in sports, but elsewhere, too” (2011, 12).

Additional cross-sectional work also supports the notion that participating in sports is associated with higher self-confidence. Studies reveal a link between current sport participation and self-confidence in children in middle school (Bowker 2006; McHale et al. 2005) and high school (Perry-Burney and Takyi 2002). Research on college students finds that those who previously participated in sports tend to report higher self-confidence (Collins et al. 2018). Additionally, when studying a sample of women college students, Richman and Shaffer (2000) find that previous sport participation is positively linked with more positive perceptions of personal ability and academic competence. Various studies use different measures of concepts such as self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-efficacy, but the overarching message is consistent: participating in sports is positively associated with belief in one’s abilities. The evidence indicating that sports participation improves confidence in combination with the literature documenting how women tend to underestimate their own abilities and how their estimations impact their ambitions (Beyer 1990; Bledsoe and Herring 1990; Fox and Lawless 2004; Sanbonmatsu 2006; Wilson et al. 2009), suggests that sports participation can indirectly increase the likelihood of being politically ambitious by improving personal confidence.

Research not only links sport participation with confidence but also with competitiveness. In an experimental study, Comeig et al. (2016) find that previous sport experience relates to greater levels of self-confidence and that confidence is tied to a willingness to compete. Comeig et al. infer that the promotion of confidence via sport participation could impact women’s

decisions to enter competitions. Sports participation may relate to competitiveness by reducing aversion to competition through exposure. For decades mental health experts have practiced various forms of exposure treatments to reduce stress, anxiety, and phobias (Tryon 2005). Repeated exposure to a given stimulus, such as competition, should decrease fear and aversion to the concept (Marks 1973). Additionally, research suggests that exposure can not only reduce aversion but also increase favorability toward a stimulus (Mrkva and Van Boven 2020; Zajonc 2001), suggesting that repeated exposure to a competitive environment could improve attitudes toward competitive environments.



*Figure 2.1 Mediated Relationship Between Sport Participation and Political Ambition*

I contend that participation in a competitive sporting environment should increase competitiveness among participants, which should translate into a willingness to compete in electoral politics. Extant literature offers some evidence of a link between sports participation and political ambition for women. Lawless and Fox's (2013) survey of college students reveals that women with sporting backgrounds are roughly 25% more likely to be politically ambitious than their non-sporting counterparts. The authors suspect that sport participation helps women

develop “a competitive spirit” that may be necessary to pursue political office (Lawless and Fox 2013, 11). The expected impact of both competitiveness and confidence from women’s sport participation on their political ambitions is shown in Figure 2.1. I derive and test Hypothesis 1 from this modeled relationship.

H<sub>1</sub>: Sport participation raises the likelihood of women expressing political ambition by increasing confidence and competitiveness.

## 2.4 The Direct Impact of Sport Participation

I argue that sport participation impacts political ambition indirectly through confidence and competitiveness, as shown above in Figure 2.1. Like all models in the social sciences, this oversimplifies the relationship of interest. I contend that in addition to a mediated relationship, sport participation also has a direct effect on women’s political ambition. Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand seems to agree that sport participation sets women apart for political careers, tweeting that “Women with a background in sports make terrific candidates for office!”<sup>14</sup>

The number of ways sports impact participants is boundless. Women athletes turned politicians offer a few examples. Rep. Val Demings (D-FL) attributes her work ethic to her time on her school’s track team (Schnell 2016). Sen. Gillibrand credits her sport participation for taking “the fear out of losing.”<sup>15</sup> Massachusetts Attorney General Maura Healey recalls that sports taught her “about hard work, discipline, how to win, how to lose, and come back from failure.”<sup>16</sup> Stephanie Schriok, president of EMILY’s List, has repeatedly linked women’s sport participation to their involvement in leadership and politics. During a speech at American University’s Washington College of Law, Schriok praised Title IX: “I don’t think there’s a better

<sup>14</sup> <https://twitter.com/SenGillibrand/status/794246684096233472>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>16</sup> <https://sponsored.bostonglobe.com/scholarathletes/maura-healey-sports/>

example of advancing women’s leadership than Title IX. Title IX eliminated gender discrimination in school sports and opened so many doors for young girls” (Schriock 2014, 242). Schriock later tied the growing number of women who are “willing to take risks and run for office, who like the competition and have the leadership skills” to Title IX (Schnell 2016). The experiences of women politicians and those who work closely with them suggest that participating in sports directly fosters women’s ambitions. Based on this information, I propose and test the second hypothesis.

H<sub>2</sub>: Sport participation raises the likelihood of women expressing political ambition both directly and indirectly.

## **2.5 Empirical Approach**

### ***2.5.1 Data***

This research uses original data from a sample of 702 U.S. adults to analyze the theorized relationship between sport participation and political ambition for women. The sample was commissioned through Qualtrics, a survey firm, which recruits participants from several sources and uses screening questions to create samples matching various quotas. The racial breakdown of the sample is 68.39% White, 20.98% Black or African American, 6.32% Asian, 1.72% two or more races, 1.29% Native American or Alaska Native, 0.43% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 0.86% of the sample identifies as another race, which they self-describe.

In terms of gender, 53.42% of the sample identify as women, 45.97% identify as men, 0.43% as non-binary or belong to a third gender, while two individuals prefer not to identify their gender or to self-describe. Subjects are adults over the age of 18, and the average age is 43.30 years. The partisan composition of the sample is 34.81% Democrats or Democratic leaners, 47.65% Republicans or Republican leaners, and 17.55% pure independents. More detailed information on the sample is available in Appendix A.

### 2.5.2 Variables

The aim of this work is to examine which factors impact political ambition. As such, political ambition is the focus of all the empirical analyses. To measure political ambition, I use **Has Run**, which is a dichotomous variable denoting if the subject has ever run for elective public office. **Has Run** is the dependent variable in all of the statistical models below.

Measuring political ambition in this way deviates from the approach established by Lawless and Fox in which participants are asked if they have ever considered running for office.

Lawless and Fox (2004; 2010) describe candidate emergence as a two-stage process in which individuals must first decide they are interested in running for office and then decide to actually pursue office. Lawless and Fox focus their measure on the first stage of this process, while my measure captures the second stage. Gender differences in both stages of the candidate emergence process contribute to the continued disparity in representation. That said, it is the second stage decision to run that carries the most practical significance. Even if participating in sports increases the likelihood that women will consider running for office, sports would have no discernible impact on representation if women ultimately decline to run. Therefore, I use the variable **Has Run** because it reflects the ultimate expression of political ambition, which is pursuing elective office, and because it has the greatest real-world importance.

Unsurprisingly, the majority of the sample (79.34%) have never run for elective office. Also, in line with expectations and previous research, more individuals in the sample who identify as anything other than women have run, with 28.31% reporting having made a bid for office.<sup>17</sup> Comparatively, only 14.13% of those identifying as women in the sample have run. The difference is statistically significant at  $p \leq 0.001$ .

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<sup>17</sup> 27.95% of those identifying as male report having run for office. Of the three people who identify as non-binary or third gender, two report having run for office (66.67%).



The primary independent variable of interest capturing sports participation is **Sports Years**. **Sports Years** is a continuous variable ranging from 0 to 25 and reflects the number of years subjects participated in sports. Subjects were asked, “How many years did you participate in competitive organized sports?” The question does not offer any further description or examples of what is meant by “sports” to ensure that any unnecessary descriptors do not limit what subjects consider to be sporting experiences. In several of the analyses below, the variables **Woman** and **Sports Years** are interacted to create the variable **Woman Sports Years** to investigate if the number of years spent playing sports impact women participants differently than subjects of another gender or sex.

While **Sports Years** is the primary focus of the analyses, I theorize that it works indirectly through competitiveness and competition. To capture personal competitiveness, I use a modified version of Krishnan, Netemeyer, and Boles' (2002) four survey items to create the **Competition Index**. The survey items ask respondents their agreement with the phrases, “It annoys me when other people perform better than I do,” “In my job, I like to outperform my coworkers,” “I am a competitive person,” and “Performing better than my peers is important to me.” Because the literature suggests that task-specific confidence more so than general self-confidence predicts behavior (Bandura 1977; Fox and Lawless 2004), I include a measure of task-specific confidence, or efficacy, which captures the extent to which subjects believe that if they ran for election, they would win. The **Would Win** variable serves as a proxy for confidence and ranges from one to six, with higher values reflecting a greater belief in the likelihood of winning the election.

I include several additional independent variables that are likely to influence an individual’s decision to pursue public office. I expect personal engagement with politics to be

positively associated with the likelihood of having run for political office. I use an updated version of Lawless and Fox's (2010) measure for **Political Engagement**, which ranges from one to seven and reflects how many political activities respondents' have engaged in in the last four years.

Because previous research reveals a positive relationship between age and running for office (Fox and Lawless 2004), and because the key independent variable of interest is years spent playing sports, it is important to consider the role age plays in the expression of political ambition. **Age** is measured continuously in years. Additionally, Palmer and Simon (2001) find that the growth rate for women candidacies varies by party, with women running more frequently as Democrats. To account for the potential influence of partisanship, I include a variable capturing affiliation. The party affiliation variable, **Democrat**, is measured using a seven-point scale, ranging from "Strong Republican," which is coded as one, to "Strong Democrat," coded as seven.<sup>18</sup>

Previous work suggests that the resources and opportunities provided from higher levels of education and income make the expression of political ambition more likely (Fox and Lawless 2004; Fox, Lawless, and Feeley 2001); therefore, I anticipate both of these concepts will positively relate to an individual having run for office. **Education** is measured on a scale ranging from "Less than a high school diploma," which is coded as one, to "Graduate degree," coded as six. The **Income** variable measures household and income and ranges from one, "Under \$20,000" to six, "\$100,000 or more."

The final demographic variable in the analyses is a racial dummy variable. Race is measured using a "select all that apply" method for various racial categories and then

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<sup>18</sup>I also ran each analysis with dummy variables for Democrats and Republicans with Independents serving as the reference category for a robustness check. The results were substantively the same.

dichotomized to create the dummy variable **White**,<sup>19</sup> coded as one for all respondents who only selected “White” and did not classify themselves as Hispanic or Latinx, and zero for all other identities. Silva and Skulley (2019) find that the candidate emergence process is different for women of different races and ethnicities, while additional research suggests that white women tend to be more resource advantaged, making their participation more likely than that of most racial and ethnic minorities (Brown 2014). Previous evidence also indicates that white individuals are more likely to report having considered a candidacy than members of other racial groups, which suggests that those who identify as white will be more likely to express political ambition (Fox and Lawless 2004).

### *2.5.3 Testing the Mediated Impact of Sport Participation*

In Hypothesis 1, I propose a mediated relationship between sport participation, competitiveness, and confidence that is conditional on gender. To test the first hypothesis, I use two structural equation models shown below. The structural equation models use MLE to estimate how sports works through confidence and competitiveness for those who identify as women and for those who do not. Figures 2.2 and 2.3 reveal that sport participation positively impacts both confidence and competitiveness for women and participants of other genders.<sup>20</sup> However, only the variable measuring confidence, **Would Win**, impacts the likelihood of the participants having made a bid for public office. Further, this relationship holds regardless of gender. The marginal impact of sports years on confidence and of confidence on political ambition vary slightly by gender, but not in a substantively meaningful way. The results offer

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<sup>19</sup>The dichotomization of race into White and non-White oversimplifies reality; however, that is a critique that could be levelled against nearly all work in political science. The inclusion of this variable is meant to acknowledge the likelihood that race plays a role in the expression of political ambition. An in-depth intersectional approach would be appropriate but is beyond the scope of the current project.

<sup>20</sup> The full tables for the SEMs are available in Appendix B.

limited support for the first hypothesis by showing that sports participation is indirectly related to political ambition via confidence; however, there is no evidence of an indirect relationship through competitiveness or for a relationship conditional on gender.

#### ***2.5.4 Testing the Direct Impact of Sport Participation***

As a test of the second hypothesis, which proposes a direct relationship between sport participation and political ambition for women in addition to an indirect relationship, I again use two SEMs to look separately at subjects grouped by gender. Figures 2.4 and 2.5 illustrate that while the mediated relationship between sports and political ambition is not conditioned by gender, the direct effect of sports is. The SEM results offer evidence in support of the second hypothesis. The years spent playing sports work through confidence in winning to impact the likelihood of having run for office, regardless of gender. However, the number of sporting years has a direct positive impact on the expression of political ambition only for those who identify as women.

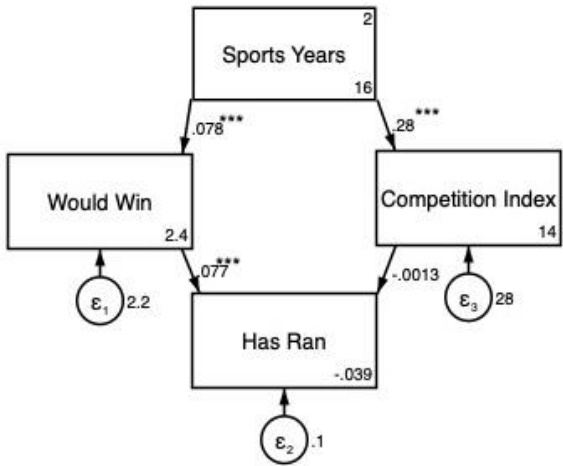


Figure 2.3 Mediated Relationship for Women

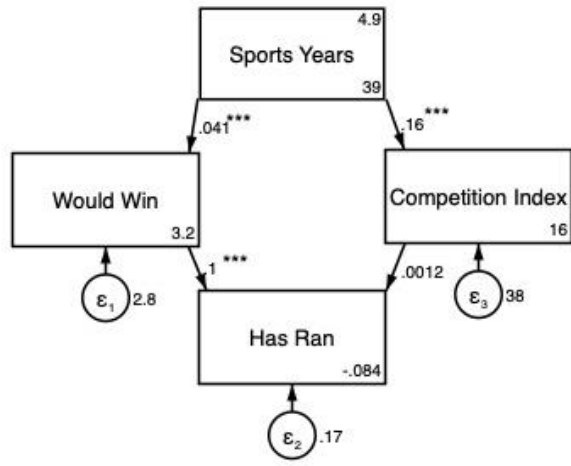


Figure 2.2 Mediated Relationship for Non-Women

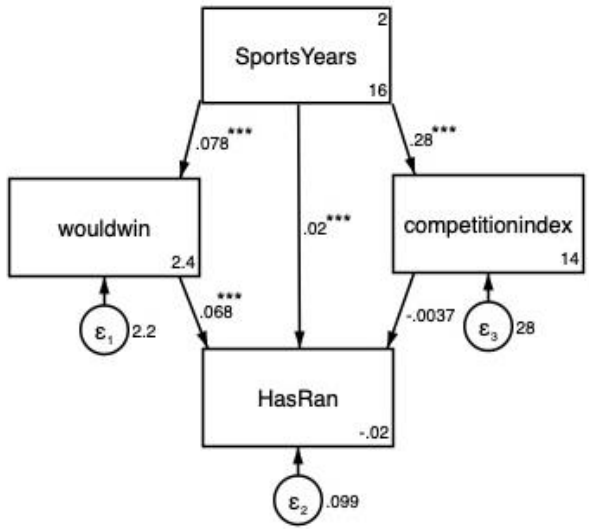


Figure 2.5 Direct Relationship for Women

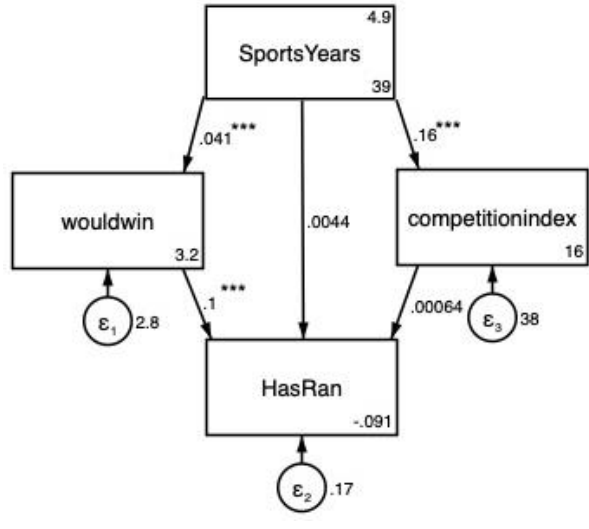


Figure 2.4 Direct Relationship for Non-Women

I use a logit model to more closely examine how the years spent playing sports impact political ambition in women.<sup>21</sup> The results in Table 2.1 are consistent with previous literature and show that identifying as a woman is negatively related to the expression of political ambition. Many of the other independent variables are not significant predictors of having made a bid for office. However, **Would Win** is statistically significant and positive as expected, suggesting that confidence in one's ability to win an election is positively associated with having run for office. Stronger Democratic identity and higher levels of education are also positive predictors of having run while increasing **Age** reduces the likelihood of having participated in an election.

Table 2.1 further shows that while **Sports Years** is statistically insignificant, the interaction variable, **Woman Sports Years**, is statistically significant and positive. Holding all other variables constant,<sup>22</sup> for women, going from zero years of sports to 25 years of sports, the probability of having made a bid for office increases from 34.35% to 91.50%. For participants who are not women, the probability of having run for office is 58.70% at zero years of sports and is 60.96% at 25 years of sports. Figures 2.6 and 2.7 illustrate the marginal probability by gender conditioned on years in sports. These results offer further evidence that playing sports impacts political ambition conditionally by gender.

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<sup>21</sup> Because the dependent variable is not evenly distributed, I also conduct a scobit analysis as a robustness check. The results are substantively identical and available in Appendix B.

<sup>22</sup> Each variable is held constant at the value which theoretically should maximize the likelihood of an individual pursuing office. White=1, Competition Index=28, Political Engagement= 7, Would Win=6, Education=6, and Income=6. Age was set to the average for women participants at 41.29 years and for participants who are not women at 45.37 years.

Table 2.1: Predicting Political Ambition

	Coef. (Std. Err.)	p-value
Woman	-1.081 (0.358)	0.003
Sports Years	0.004 (0.027)	0.887
Woman*Sports Years	0.121 (0.051)	0.019
Competition Index	-0.017 (0.023)	0.475
Would Win	0.424 (0.092)	0.000
Political Engagement	0.003 (0.110)	0.977
White	-0.373 (0.325)	0.252
Age	-0.044 (0.011)	0.000
Democrat	0.113 (0.063)	0.074
Education	0.361 (0.102)	0.000
Income	0.131 (0.096)	0.177
Constant	-2.883 (0.771)	0.000
$\chi^2$	161.04	0.000
N		555

Note: Coefficients come from a logistic regression (logit) model run on the dichotomous dependent variable "Has Run."

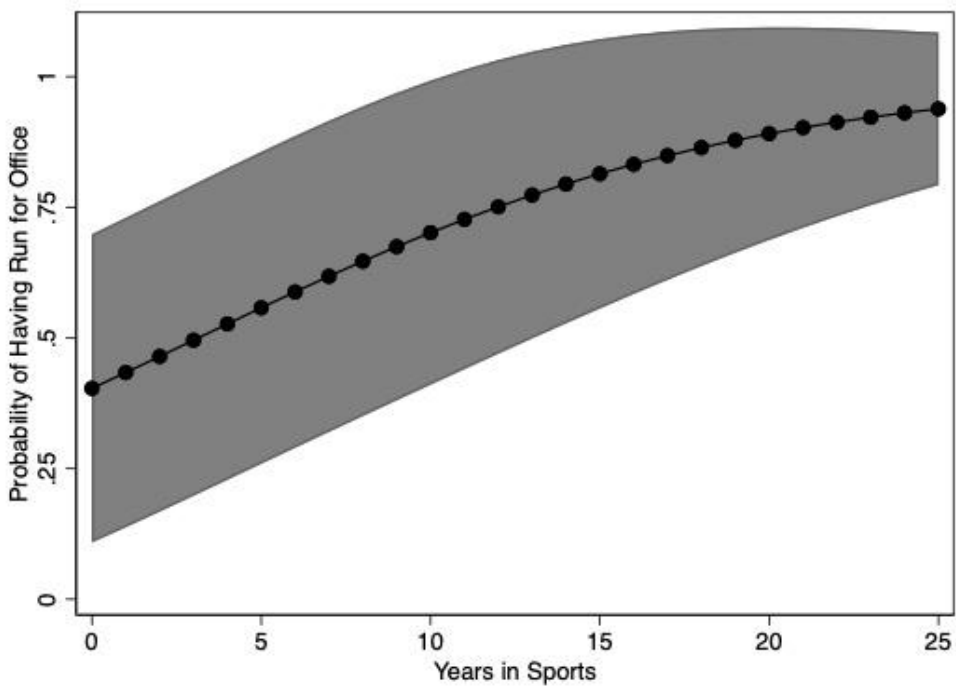


Figure 2.6 Probability of Having Run for Office for Women

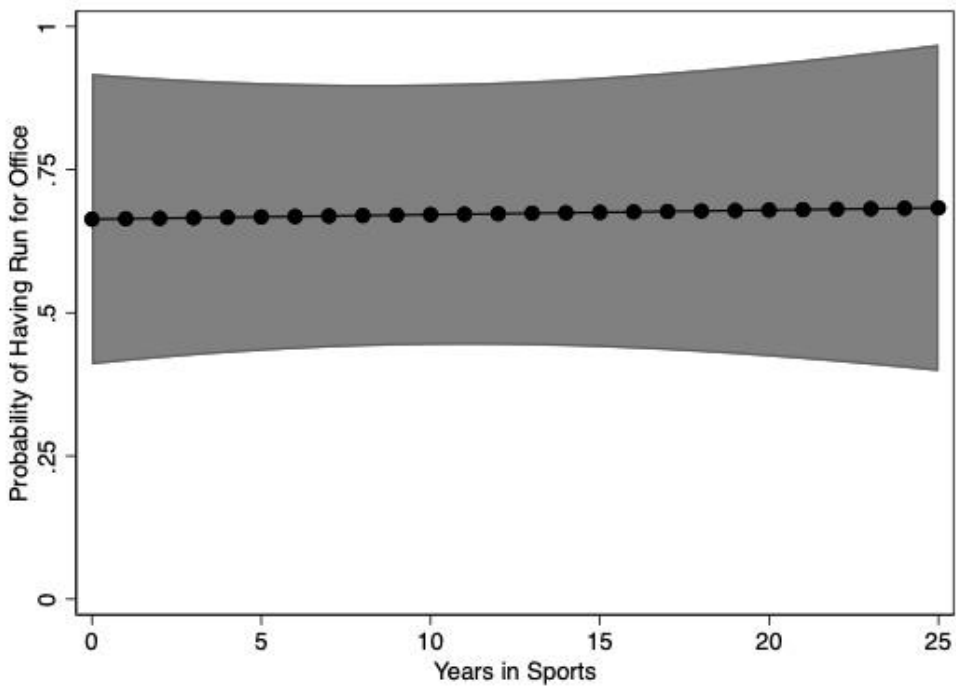


Figure 2.7 Probability of Having Run for Office for Non-Women



### 2.5.5 *Limitations*

The results clearly demonstrate a positive relationship between playing sports and having run for office among women, which I argue is evidence that playing sports aids in the development of political ambition for women. However, we must acknowledge the limitations of this research. The possibility of confident, competitive, and ambitious women electing to play sports is certainly a concern. Given that 77.91% of the sport participants in the sample report that they chose to play sports on their own, rather than being forced to participate, concerns over self-selection are warranted. While there is not a statistically significant difference by gender in terms of choosing to play as opposed to being forced to play sports, there are gender differences in the reported motivations for playing sports.

Less than half of the women (45.52%) with sporting history selected the competitive nature of sports as a motivation for their participation, whereas 62.19% of participants who are not women report competition as a draw. This difference is statistically significant at  $p \leq 0.05$ . Additionally, more women reported an interest in making or spending time with friends as their motivation for sport participation than did participants who are not women.<sup>23</sup> The motivations for participation, however, do not preclude the possibility that the women who participate are systematically different in relevant ways from those who do not. Even if the competitiveness of sports is not necessarily why some girls choose to play sports, it is not enough to stop them from choosing to play, where it may be enough to deter others.

I argue that the best evidence of the impact of the socialization that happens from sport participation is that it is the years spent playing sports that is related to having run for office, not

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<sup>23</sup> 57.46% of women participants compared to 46.27% of participants who are not women, with  $p \leq 0.05$ .

simply having played sports. Each of the previous analyses was conducted with a dichotomous variable for sport participation rather than the continuous measure, and the results were not statistically significant. Even if the women who choose to play sports are more likely to express ambition than the women who do not, the results suggest that the time spent playing sports is important. This implies that playing sports can impact the ambitions of women who are drawn to (or at least not deterred by) competitive environments.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

The paucity of women in U.S. politics is worth noting because of the advantages increased women's representation provides to a group that has been historically excluded from political participation, such as improving substantive representation (Mansbridge 1999). There is evidence that women's descriptive representation is pivotal to policy responsiveness and the representation of women's interests (Schwindt-Bayer 2005). Research also shows that increased women's representation is positively related to self-efficacy for women and anticipated political involvement for girls (Atkeson and Carrillo 2007; Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006). Beyond the argued benefits of increased women's representations, Phillips contends, "There is no argument from justice that can defend the current state of affairs" (1998, 232). If for no other reason than as a matter of justice, we should be concerned over women's ongoing underrepresentation.

When investigating the underrepresentation of women in office in the United States, one quickly realizes that there are few women politicians, in part because there are few women candidates. The literature points to a gender gap in political ambition as a partial explanation of the candidate shortage. Extant scholarship further suggests that the ambition gap is related to low confidence and aversion to competition in women. I argue that participating in sports facilitates the development of confidence and competitiveness in women, thereby bolstering political

ambition. Further, I theorize that sport participation directly impacts political ambition. The theory is supported by the literature, by women politicians, and by experts on women in politics who have stressed a connection between women's sports and women's pursuit of office. I investigate this connection here and find evidence that sport participation is positively related to women's political ambition. The evidence suggests that the more years a woman spends playing sports, the more likely she is to have pursued political office.

### 3 AN INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH TO WOMEN'S SPORTS AND POLITICAL AMBITION

“As a black woman I always felt growing up I had to do above and beyond stuff to be noticed, to feel like I could hang with everybody else...I tried to implement so many different things in my game so that I’m not just known for my speed. It’s a stereotype that black players are just really fast, but at the end of [the] day I want to be skilled.”<sup>24</sup>

-Crystal Dunn

“Sport allows for US to uplift those around US and continue to fight for those who came before US and those who will follow after US. #together”<sup>25</sup>

-Adrianna Franch

#### 3.1 Introduction

For decades scholars have investigated the causes of women’s ongoing underrepresentation in American politics. The literature points to several possible explanations, including competitive political primaries (Lawless and Pearson 2008), the incumbency advantage (Palmer and Simon 2001; Schwindt-Bayer 2005), gendered stereotypes (Bauer 2015), regional culture and ideology (Arceneaux 2001), and bias in recruitment to run (Fox and Lawless 2010; Niven 1998; Sanbonmatsu 2002). A gender-based difference in the desire to pursue political office is another possible explanation for the gender disparity in political representation. The literature reveals that women, in general, tend to report lower levels of political ambition compared to men (Costantini 1990; Fox and Lawless 2004; Lawless and Fox 2010). While this literature is valuable, it tends to treat women’s experiences as monolithic without consideration of how race and gender interact to shape individual experiences. This critique can be leveled against much of the literature on women’s characteristics and behaviors within and beyond political science.

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2019/jun/08/crystal-dunn-uswnt-black-players-world-cup>

<sup>25</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/p/CDR7\\_-kpfHT/](https://www.instagram.com/p/CDR7_-kpfHT/)

For example, extant scholarship demonstrates that women tend to be less confident and less competitive than comparable men (Beyer 1990; Beyer and Bowden 1997; Kamas and Preston 2012; Niederle and Vesterlund 2007; Vandegrift and Yavas 2009; Wilson et al. 2009). Further research suggests that differences in competitiveness and in confidence in one's self and abilities could impact political ambition (Fox and Lawless 2004; Lawless and Fox 2013; Preece and Stoddard 2015; Sanbonmatsu 2006). Additional literature demonstrates that sport participation is positively linked with confidence and competitiveness for women (Comeig et al. 2016; Perry-Burney and Takyi 2002; Richman and Shaffer 2000).

I argue elsewhere that the disparities in confidence and competitiveness play a role in the gender disparity in political ambition. Unfortunately, my previous work and much of this literature do not consider race. Given that women athletes of color face racism in combination with sexism, it stands to reason that participating in sports impacts White and minority women differently. I argue that sports participation increases political ambition for women in general; however, sports participation works indirectly through confidence and competitiveness for White women and directly influences ambition for Black women. Using original survey data, I offer evidence of the different pathways sport participation takes to influence political ambition for Black and White women.

### **3.2 Political Ambition and Sports for White Women**

I theorize that playing sports impacts the political ambitions of White women through confidence and competitiveness. Evidence shows that women are less likely than men to perceive themselves as qualified to run for office and that the impact of perceived qualifications is greater for women than it is for men (Crowder-Meyer 2018; Fox and Lawless 2004). Lawless and Fox conclude, “women's self-doubts are more likely than men's to keep them from

considering a candidacy” (2010, 113). If a gender gap in confidence contributes to the disparity in political ambition, then sports may be a potential remedy.

The literature uncovers a positive link between sport participation and confidence. For example, in a study of middle-school children, McHale et al. (2005) find that children who participate in sports report higher self-esteem compared to those who do not. They find this relationship holds regardless of gender.<sup>26</sup> While they describe the sample as “ethnically diverse,” McHale et al. (2005) do not describe any tests for racial or ethnic differences, much less any intersectional analyses. Therefore, we cannot be certain that this relationship holds for various subgroups in the population. Further, in a study using a sample of African American high-school girls, Taylor and Turek (2010) find that while sports participation is related to social acceptance and competence, the relationship between sports participation and confidence for African American girls is statistically insignificant.

However, based on other literature, we can be reasonably assured that the relationship between sports participation and self-confidence holds for White women. Richman and Shaffer (2000) use a predominantly White sample of college women to investigate how precollege sport participation is related to current self-esteem and find a positive correlation. In another study using a predominantly White sample of women students, Perry-Burney and Takyi (2002) find that 90% of women athletes in their sample report that their participation in sports influenced their self-esteem, and over half of participants report that sports improved their self-confidence.

In addition to confidence, competitiveness may also play a role in the gender disparity in political ambition. Elections are a competitive endeavor. Preece and Stoddard (2015) find that priming experimental subjects on the competitive nature of elections decreases women’s interest

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<sup>26</sup>Though they do find that boys report higher self-esteem than girls, they do not report if there are gender differences in the magnitude of the impact of sports participation on self-esteem.

in pursuing political office but does not impact the interests of male subjects. Additionally, Kanthak and Woon (2015) conduct an experiment testing subjects' willingness to be group representatives. They do not find gender differences when the selection method is volunteering; however, women are far less willing than men to be group representatives when they must face an election. Kanthak and Woon conclude that women are "election averse," likely due to the competition involved in elections. Lawless and Fox (2013) offer evidence from a survey of college students that women's sports participation mitigates the ambition gap and suspect that this occurs through fostering competitiveness.

Each of these studies expands our understanding of why women tend to be less politically ambitious and how sports may diminish the gender gap; however, we are left uncertain as to which women are deterred by competition and if sports participation boosts ambition through competitiveness for all women. Preece and Stoddard (2015), Kanthak and Woon (2015), and Lawless and Fox (2013) use predominantly White samples and do not interact race and gender in their analyses. This is not an attack on their work; instead, this is an effort to expand our knowledge on how sports participation may impact political ambition for different women.

### **3.3 A Different Experience for Black Women**

In addition to the scarcity of evidence directly linking sports participation to confidence and competitiveness, and therefore indirectly to political ambition for Black women, there is reason to believe that Black women have a different experience than White women in organized sports. Further, given the combined impact of racism and misogyny that Black women experience, it seems likely that the development of political ambition differs for this doubly oppressed group.

Seminal work in the ambition literature emphasizes how expectations of success based on one's position in society impact pursuits (Schlesinger 1966). In her work on Black political ambition, Stone contends, "It is almost an axiom of contemporary social science that human aspirations are a function of where one is located in the social structure" (1980, 106). With Black women living in a political world described as "a system of white male rule" (Combahee River Collective 1977) and "dominated by white male privilege" (Lorde 1984), it is unsurprising that Black women express low levels of political ambition (Fox and Lawless 2005; Shames 2015).

The road to political empowerment and enfranchisement for Black women did not mirror that of Black men or White women (Junn and Brown 2008). Brown (2014) theorizes and demonstrates that the intersection of gender and racial oppression results in different patterns of political participation for minority women in the United States when compared to minority men and to White women. Shames (2015) finds that expectations of discrimination within the political system are higher for Black women than for Black men or White women and suggests these expectations may deter Black women from being interested in running for office.

Discrimination against Black women in the United States goes beyond politics into all facets of life, including athletics. Abney highlights the historical struggles of African American women to participate in sports: "they competed during times when women were not encouraged to become athletes and African American were not given equal opportunities" (1999, 35). Smith (1992) stresses that women of color have not had the same opportunities for participation or advancement in sports. We have also repeatedly seen that even when Black women are successful in sports, they are the victims of discrimination.



During coverage of the 2007 NCAA Women’s Basketball Championship, announcers Don Imus and Bernard McGuirk referred to the predominantly Black team from Rutgers as “nappy-headed ho’s” and “jigaboos.”<sup>27</sup> After a verbal dispute with an umpire during the 2018 U.S. Open, Marc Berman wrote a scathing critique of Serena Williams, describing her as “los[ing] her mind,” “unhinged,” and having “flipped out,”<sup>28</sup> portraying Williams as the stereotyped angry Black woman. More recently, Adrianna Franch was the target of racial slurs during a Utah Royals soccer game. Franch took to social media following the incident, sharing an image that said, “I am a woman. I am BLACK! I AM HUMAN!” In the caption on the image, Franch writes that racism against Black women athletes “is not a NEW issue, nor it is a first for [her].”<sup>29</sup> I highlight the experiences of several Black women athletes not to suggest that White women in sports are not also the victims of discrimination, but instead to demonstrate that Black women in athletics have a different experience than their White counterparts due to race.<sup>30</sup> In spite of the discrimination Black women face in entering sports, and once established within athletics, I contend that there are potential benefits as well.

### **3.4 The Potential Benefit of Sports for Black Women: Social Capital**

Sport participation primarily impacts the political ambitions of Black women by expanding their social capital. While scholars define social capital differently, I use Portes’ definition of social capital, which is “the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of

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<sup>27</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/07/arts/television/07imus.html>

<sup>28</sup> A link to the article is here: <https://nypost.com/2018/09/08/serena-acted-like-a-sore-loser/>. The same author described an incident in the 2020 U.S. Open in which after losing a point, White male athlete, Novak Djokovic hit a ball in anger, striking a linesperson in the throat, resulting in his removal from the tournament as “excessive punishment.” See this article here: <https://nypost.com/2020/09/06/novak-djokovics-disqualification-is-terrible-for-the-us-open/>

<sup>29</sup> See the post here: <https://twitter.com/ADizzle23/status/1170761648409198592>

<sup>30</sup> I must also acknowledge the role of homophobia in discrimination against women in sports and how that intersects with race and class to create different experiences for women. Unfortunately, an examination of classism and homophobia is beyond the scope of this project, though it is a potential avenue for future research.

membership in social networks or other social structures” (1998, 6). In this context, social capital is about access to unspecified resources from social connections. Given the patterns of racism and sexism against Black women in the United States, Black women, in the aggregate, tend to have lower levels of the resources shown in the literature to be relevant for running for office. For example, Fox and Lawless (2004;2005) offer survey evidence positively linking both education and income with political ambition. Data shows that Black women tend to have lower rates of both education than income than White men and women.<sup>31</sup>

Given the lower levels of other forms of capital available to them, I argue that social capital plays a more important role in the development and expression of political ambition for Black women.<sup>32</sup> Further, I point to sports participation as an opportunity for Black women to cultivate social capital. Though Taylor and Turek (2010) find no evidence linking sport participation to confidence for African American girls, these scholars do uncover a relationship between playing sports and social acceptance and social competence. Taylor and Turek link Black girls’ sport participation with positive attitudes toward their teachers and better adjustment in schools. Further, the authors point to the development of social skills as the cause of these positive outcomes. They stress the significance of “sport as a social activity, with accompanying social rewards” (Taylor and Turek 2010, 328).

This supposition echoes Putnam (2000), who argues that individuals gain social capital through participation in organizations, such as sports. Participating in activities such as organized sports allows participants to expand their social networks to include individuals they may not

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<sup>31</sup><https://www.dol.gov/agencies/wb/data/earnings>; <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/social-mobility-memos/2017/12/04/black-women-are-earning-more-college-degrees-but-that-alone-wont-close-race-gaps/>

<sup>32</sup>This argument is heavily inspired by the work of Farris and Holman (2014) who investigate predictors of political participation for various gender and racial groups and find that social capital has a larger impact on the participation rates of Black women than any other group.

interact with otherwise. Uslaner stresses that sports are unique in expanding social networks because sports are open to “People of all backgrounds” (1999, 146). Increased diversity in one’s social network has several implications relevant to the development of political ambition.

A wide array of social contacts has been positively linked to hiring (Petersen, Saporta, and Seidel 2000) and promotion and earnings (Parks-Yancy 2006). The evidence suggests that who a person knows greatly impacts their professional opportunities and achievements. The same logic applies in the political sphere. The more social contacts a person has, the more potential campaign donors they know, and the more opportunity they have to receive encouragement to run, which greatly impacts the likelihood of the individual expressing interest in running for office (Fox and Lawless 2004). Additionally, more social ties could lead to larger circles of supporters willing to work on the candidates’ behalf during and after a campaign (Fenno 1978).

Evidence also links diverse social networks with greater levels of generalized trust among Black Americans (Marschall and Stolle 2004). Scholars such as Uslaner and Putnam highlight trust as one of the greatest byproducts of social capital. Brehm and Rahn model a reciprocal relationship between social interaction and trust: “The more that citizens participate in their communities, the more that they learn to trust others; the greater trust that citizens hold for others, the more likely they are to participate” (1997, 1002). Under this formulation, recurring interaction and cooperation teach participants to trust others.

Increased trust has pertinent political implications, especially in the discussion of Black women’s political ambitions. In her study of political attitudes among law and policy students, Shames (2015) finds that Black women in the sample are less likely to think that politics can solve problems and are more likely to expect discrimination in politics. The doubt in the

government's ability and the belief that individuals are discriminatory both reflect a lack of trust both in individuals and institutions. Shames (2015) concludes that this lack of trust deters Black women from entering the political system. Improved generalized trust is another avenue through which social capital developed through sports can impact the political ambitions of Black women.

### 3.5 Hypotheses

Because playing sports offers different benefits to White women and Black women, I expect that sports participation takes distinct paths to influence political ambition by race.

H<sub>1</sub>: Sports participation works indirectly through confidence and competitiveness to impact political ambition for White women.

H<sub>2</sub>: Sports participation directly impacts political ambition for Black women.

I expect the relationship outlined in Hypothesis 1 will hold for White women but not for Black women, while I expect the opposite for the relationship stated in Hypothesis 2.

### 3.6 Data, Methods, and Results

Data for this analysis come from an original survey conducted on a sample of 700 U.S. adults. The analyses presented below focus on the 102 Black women and the 170 White women in the sample. The dependent variable in all of the models below is **Has Run**. This dichotomous variable reflects whether or not the respondent has ever run for elective public office. Few women report this level of political ambition, with just 4.11% of White women and 24.51% of Black women reporting having run.<sup>33</sup> Such low levels of political ambition seem to contrast with the literature suggesting a higher portion of women express interest in pursuing political office

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<sup>33</sup> The low rate of political ambition among White women could be due in part to the education distribution in the sample. As shown in the appendix, over 80% of the White women in the sample have less than a college degree. This makes the sample of White women unrepresentative of White women in the United States in terms of education. The nature of this sample limits the conclusions we can make about White women in the United States.

(Fox and Lawless 2004; Lawless and Fox 2013). However, much of the literature on (White) women's political ambition is based on survey data from individuals in college or in professions that often lead into politics, making them not necessarily representative of the average American. To my knowledge, there is no literature noting the rate of political ambition among Black women. My research, therefore, expands our knowledge on a potential factor influencing the political ambitions of those not necessarily in what Fox and Lawless describe as the candidate eligibility pool, as well as exploring the determinants of political ambition for Black women.

Sports participation is the main predictor of interest. 44.55% of Black women in the sample report having played sports compared to 32.73% of White women. For the empirical models, I measure sports participation using the variable **Sports Years**, which captures the years respondents participated in competitive organized sports. The range of years in sports for Black women is from zero to 26 years and is zero to 21 years for White women.

To analyze the hypothesized indirect relationship between sports and political ambition for White women, I include measures of confidence and competitiveness. To capture confidence, I ask respondents to estimate the likelihood that they would win an election if they ran. The variable **Would Win**, reflects their degree of confidence that they would win the election. **Would Win** ranges from extremely unlikely (1) to extremely likely (6). I replicate Krishnan, Netemeyer, and Boles' (2002) factor analysis on four survey items to create the **Competition Factor** measure.<sup>34</sup>

For the multivariate analyses, I include additional independent variables. I modify Lawless and Fox's (2010) scale to measure political engagement. **Political Engagement** is a count variable ranging from zero to 7 and captures the number of political activities survey

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<sup>34</sup> The exact wording of the survey items is available in the appendix.

respondents have engaged in in the last four years. I expect that those who are more engaged politically are more likely to have run for office. Lastly, I include measures for **Education** and **Income**, both of which are likely to be positively associated with the expression of political ambition.

Figure 3.2 Modeling Political Ambition for White Women

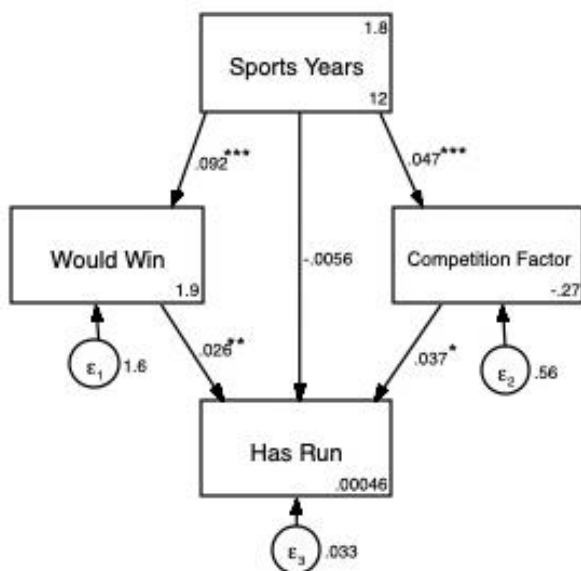


Figure 3.1 displays the maximum likelihood estimation structural equation model for 162 White women survey respondents.  
\* $p \leq .10$ , \*\* $p \leq .05$ , \*\*\* $p \leq .01$ .

Figure 3.1 Modeling Political Ambition for Black Women

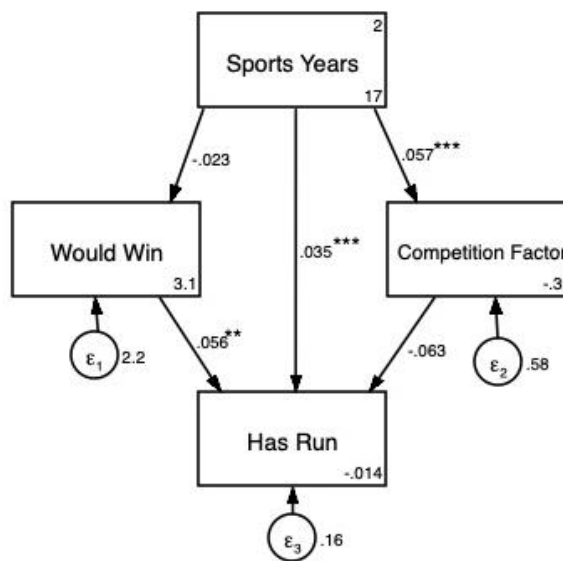


Figure 3.2 displays the maximum likelihood estimation structural equation model for 97 Black women survey respondents.  
\* $p \leq .10$ , \*\* $p \leq .05$ , \*\*\* $p \leq .01$ .

To test Hypothesis 1, I use separate structural equation models for White and Black women. Figure 3.1 displays the SEM results exclusively for White women, and Figure 3.2 holds the results exclusively for Black women. For White women, the relationships from Sports Years to Would Win and the Competition Factor are both statistically significant and positive. Further, we see that the relationship between Would Win and the Competition Factor are also statistically significant and positively related to Has Run, while the direct path from Sports Years to Has Run is insignificant. Figure 3.1 offers evidence in support of Hypothesis 1, indicating that sports

participation works indirectly through confidence and competitiveness to influence the political ambition of White women. Figure 3.2 reveals that the relationship is different for Black Women.

While Figure 3.2 shows that Sports Years positively influences competitiveness and that confidence is linked to political ambition for Black women, the chain of influence is incomplete. Figure 3.2 offers no evidence that sports participation influences confidence for Black women or that competitiveness impacts Black women's political ambitions. Instead, Figure 3.2 reveals a direct relationship between sports participation and political ambition for Black women, offering support for the second hypothesis.

Given the direct nature of the relationship between sports and political ambition for Black women, I use a logistic regression model to further explore the impact of sports while considering other variables likely to influence political ambition.<sup>35</sup> Table 3.1 holds the results from the logit model and shows that consistent with the SEM, Would Win is a significant predictor of political ambition for Black women, while competitiveness is not. Table 3.1 also reveals that Income is an important predictor for the political ambitions of Black women, while education and political engagement are not. Lastly, we see in Table 3.1 that Sports Years remains a statistically significant positive predictor of political ambition among Black women even when accounting for other possible influences.

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<sup>35</sup>Given the imbalance of the dependent variable, I also run a skewed logit model as a robustness check. Given that the results of both models are practically identical, I use the logit model here in the discussion and include the scobit model in the appendix.

*Table 3.1 Predicting Political Ambition for Black Women*

	Coeff. (Std. Err.)	<i>p</i> -value
Sports Years	0.168 (0.071)	0.018
Competition Factor	-0.471 (0.398)	0.236
Would Win	0.404 (0.216)	0.061
Education	-0.094 (0.224)	0.673
Income	0.384 (0.182)	0.035
Political Engagement	0.189 (0.291)	0.515
Constant	-4.027 (1.142)	0.000
N	96	
$\chi^2$	17.690	0.007

The model presented here is a logistic regression model using the dichotomous variable Has Run.

I use predicted probabilities to further illustrate the influence of sports participation on political ambition for Black women. Figure 3 displays the predicted probability of having run for office while holding all other variables at their modal or average values for Black women. I find that the probability of a Black woman who played zero years of sports having run for office is 9.09%. The probability for the same woman who played the maximum observed years, 26, is 88.91%. The drastic difference in these probabilities offers evidence that the direct impact of sport participation on the political ambitions of Black women is substantively meaningful.

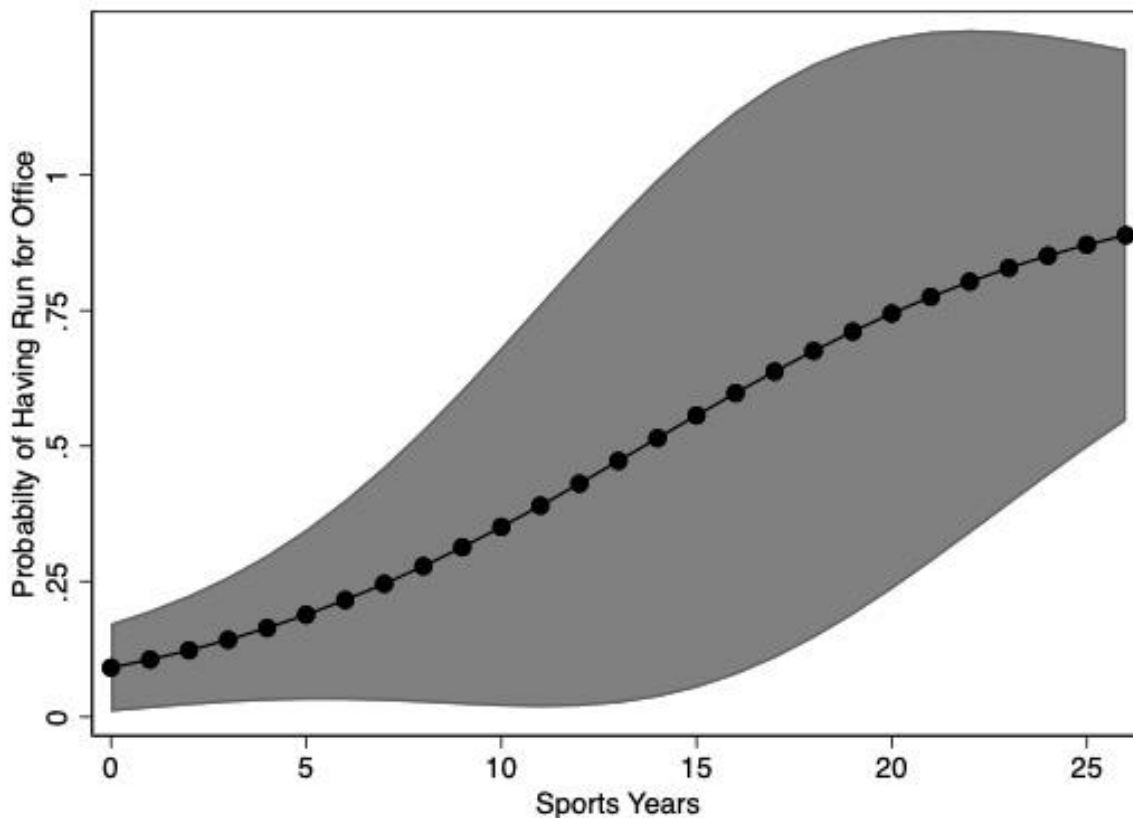


*Table 3.2 Predicting Political Ambition for White Women*

	Coeff. (Std. Err.)	<i>p</i> -value
Sports Years	-0.114 (0.326)	0.727
Competition Factor	3.942 (1.943)	0.042
Would Win	0.654 (0.500)	0.191
Education	1.385 (0.713)	0.052
Income	-0.634 (0.551)	0.250
Political Engagement	-2.244 (1.331)	0.092
Constant	-6.989 (2.696)	0.010
N	159	
$\chi^2$	22.200	0.001

The model presented here is a logistic regression model using the dichotomous variables Has Run.

Figure 3.3 Conditional Probability of Having Run for Office



The plot displays the predicted probability of having run for office for Black women based on the logit model shown in Table 1. The independent variables are held to their modal or average value for Black women.

Though the SEM in Figure 3.1 and the theory guiding this work do not suggest that sports participation will directly impact political ambition among White women, I run the same logistic regression model on the White women in the sample for comparison.<sup>36</sup> Table 3.2 further demonstrates that the factors impacting political ambition for women are not the same across racial lines. As expected, the years spent playing sports are insignificant in predicting the

<sup>36</sup> The dependent variable in this analysis is also heavily imbalanced. As such, I run a scobit model and a firthlogit model as robustness checks. The results across all three models are largely consistent and the additional models are available in the appendix.

likelihood that the respondent has run for office. Additionally, the significant and positive impact of competitiveness and education are in line with expectations.<sup>37</sup> What is unexpected and currently inexplicable, however, is the negative relationship between political engagement and having run for office.

A notable difference between the results in Tables 3.1 and 3.2 is the role of income and education. For Black women, education is insignificant, while income is a positive predictor. The reverse is true for White women in the sample. Exploring this difference is beyond the scope of this project; however, it does raise questions about the varied influence of education and income.

### **3.7 Conclusion**

As the underrepresentation of women in general, and women of color specifically, continues, it is necessary for scholars to pursue research that expands our knowledge not only on the causes of underrepresentation but possible solutions as well. Here, I offer the possibility that women's sports participation plays a role in the reduction of the gender gap in representation by fostering political ambition among women. However, I argue and demonstrate that while sports participation is positively associated with political ambition for women, it does not impact all women identically. Using original survey data, I offer evidence that playing sports indirectly influences the political ambitions of White women through confidence and competitiveness. For Black women, on the other hand, I demonstrate a direct link between sports participation and political ambition.

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<sup>37</sup>In both the logit and scobit models, the Competition Factor is statistically significant at  $p \leq 0.05$ . However, the p-value for the Competition Factor in the firthlogit model is 0.103. Notably, when the same models include an index made of the survey items measuring competitiveness, the variable is statistically significant at  $p \leq 0.05$  across all three models. I argue that the preponderance of the evidence, along with the theory, suggest that competitiveness is a significant predictor of political ambition for White women.

## 4 EXPOSURE TO PROFESSIONAL WOMEN ATHLETES AND ATTITUDES TOWARD WOMEN IN POLITICS

“The greatest impact the USWNT will have will not be on young girls, it will be on the boys who can grow up embracing the model of strong, badass women.”<sup>38</sup>  
Anthony DiCicco

### 4.1 Introduction

A recent report released by Global Web Index details a “surge in popularity of women’s sports” across the world (2019, 4). In the United States, the launch of the 2020 season for the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) and the National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL) resulted in “strong television ratings.”<sup>39</sup> Television is not the only place the average American might come across professional women athletes. Following the victory of the United States women’s national soccer team (USWNT) in the 2019 FIFA Women’s World Cup, two of the team’s forwards, Megan Rapinoe and Alex Morgan, covered the July edition of *Sports Illustrated*.<sup>40</sup> Later that year, *TIME* named the USWNT “Athlete of the Year.”<sup>41</sup>

The *TIME*’s athlete of the year article labels the USWNT as a team that “transcended sports” and uses their “athletic platform to push for social progress” (Gregory 2019). The article naming Megan Rapinoe the 2019 *Sports Illustrated* “Sportsperson of the Year” describes the forward as someone who “challenged perceptions of her, of female athletes, of all women.”<sup>42</sup> The quote from Anthony DiCicco, son of the late USWNT coach Tony DiCicco, and the magazines honoring the team argue that the USWNT is having a profound impact on how

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<sup>38</sup> <https://twitter.com/DiCiccoMethod/status/1190050122379345920>

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sport-usa-women-feature/strong-ratings-boost-momentum-for-womens-sport-idUSKCN24V2SY>

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.si.com/soccer/2019/07/09/uswnt-world-cup-sports-illustrated-covers-issues-buy>

<sup>41</sup> <https://time.com/athlete-of-the-year-2019-us-womens-soccer-team/>

<sup>42</sup> <https://www.si.com/sportsperson/2019/12/09/megan-rapinoe-2019-sportsperson-of-the-year>

American society views women. These athletes, as a team and as individuals, have repeatedly demonstrated their strength and ability to excel in a domain stereotypically reserved for men. The popularity and repeated victories of the USWNT in the traditionally masculine arena of athletics leads to the following research question: Does exposure to women's success in the masculine field of sport impact attitudes toward women in other masculine fields, such as politics? Specifically, could exposure improve attitudes toward or reduce prejudice against women politicians?

Extant literature demonstrates that exposure to counter-stereotypical individuals can improve attitudes and reduce prejudice towards groups. I use the mere exposure hypothesis, exemplar-based models of social judgment, and the parasocial contact hypothesis to argue that observing women competing and succeeding in a traditionally masculine role should reduce prejudice against women in the political arena, which is currently dominated by men. Using an experimental design, I find that exposure to USWNT players impacts bias towards women in politics conditionally by gender and partisanship. For Independent and Democratic men, exposure to the USWNT reduces bias against women in politics. Conversely, exposure increases bias against women in politics among Republican men. I offer potential explanations for these diverging results.

## **4.2 Counter-Stereotypical Exemplars in the Literature**

Scholars use several approaches to analyze how exposure to an individual or group impacts attitudes. Zajonc's (1968) mere exposure hypothesis contends that "mere exposure" improves attitudes toward a "stimulus object," which could be an individual or a group. He defines mere exposure as "a condition which just makes the given stimulus accessible to the individual's perception" (Zajonc 1968, 1). Smith and Zárate discuss how exposure to "cognitive

representations of persons,” labeled exemplars, impacts the judgment and stereotypes perceivers apply toward the group the individual exemplifies (1992, 3). In this work, I use the mere exposure hypothesis, which maintains that exposure alone can improve attitudes, in combination with the exemplar model, which suggests representatives of a group can counter group stereotypes, to argue that exposure to the women of the USWNT could change attitudes toward women in other domains. This exposure could take many forms. Smith and Zárate argue that exemplars can impact attitudes even when encountered through media.

Similarly, in what they propose as the parasocial contact hypothesis, Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes (2005) argue that media-based exposure can reduce prejudice comparably to interpersonal contact. Using experimental evidence, Schiappa et al. (2005) demonstrate that exposure to gay characters on a television show reduces prejudice toward homosexuals generally. Whether the reduction in prejudice is due to mere exposure, parasocial contact, or the characters serving as exemplars for the gay community, the evidence supports the notion that mediated exposure can impact attitudes towards a broader group. The effect of exposure is not limited to reducing homophobia.

Zebrowitz, White, and Wieneke (2008) find that mere exposure to Asian and Black faces increases the likeability of other Asian and Black faces participants did not previously see. Dasgupta and Greenwald (2001) also offer experimental evidence that exposure to pictures of admired Black exemplars reduces implicit anti-Black bias. Additionally, Ramasubramanian (2011) demonstrates that seeing pictures of counter-stereotypical Black television characters impacts the stereotypes participants ascribe to the group and reduces anti-Black prejudice. In another study, Ramasubramanian (2015) finds that exposure to written news stories about

counter-stereotypical African Americans reduces racist and stereotypical beliefs about African Americans.

A recent example of how exposure to counter-stereotypical exemplars impacts attitudes is sometimes called the “Obama effect.” Scholars argue that Barack Obama possesses qualities that are counter to the stereotypes commonly associated with African Americans in the United States and that exposure to him as a counter-stereotypical exemplar impacts attitudes toward African Americans more generally (Columb and Plant 2011; Goldman 2012; Goldman and Mutz 2014; Plant et al. 2009). Plant et al. (2009) measure anti-Black prejudice during Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign to compare to previous data from the same institutions and uncover a reduction in anti-Black bias. Goldman (2012) and Goldman and Mutz (2014) use panel data to demonstrate a decrease in prejudice towards African Americans during the Obama campaign. Additionally, Columb and Plant (2011) offer experimental evidence that subliminally priming participants with Obama’s name lowered implicit anti-Black prejudice. Taken together, the evidence suggests that exposure to counter-stereotypical exemplars, such as Obama, can influence attitudes toward a group. I contend that the players of the USWNT are exemplars for women in an arena dominated by men and that exposure to these women will impact attitudes toward women in the also masculine domain of politics.

#### **4.3 The USWNT as Counter-Stereotypical Exemplars**

According to Smith and Zarate (1992), exemplar status can be based on characteristics like gender and occupation. Further, they acknowledge that gender can interact with occupation to influence perception. I argue that the women of the USWNT are exemplars of women in professions traditionally overwhelmed by men. While Smith and Zarate’s exemplar-based model of social judgment does not necessitate the exemplar be famous, the expectations of their model

do require exposure. The USWNT is arguably one of the most famous women's sports teams in world history.

Having won the FIFA Women's World Cup an unprecedented four times has offered the USWNT extensive media coverage over the last two decades. In addition to covering and being featured in *TIME Magazine* and *Sports Illustrated* multiple times in recent years,<sup>43</sup> players have also covered *ESPN The Magazine* and *Marie Claire*<sup>44</sup> and been featured in ESPN's *The Body Issue*.<sup>45</sup> Further, the USWNT became the first women's sports team to receive a ticker-tape parade through New York City's Canyon of Heroes in 2015<sup>46</sup> and was honored with a second ticker-tape parade after their 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup victory.<sup>47</sup> Players have also appeared on television channels like ESPN<sup>48</sup> and shows such as Good Morning America.<sup>49</sup> The USWNT is a group of women who many have likely seen via one media platform or another. Those who have witnessed the USWNT has seen professional athletes who diverge from what is stereotypically expected of women in the United States.

The literature documents an extensive list of gender-based stereotypical traits. Stereotypically feminine traits include being yielding, shy, gentle, and tender, while masculine stereotypes are about being aggressive, ambitious, assertive, athletic, competitive, and dominant (Bem 1974). Extant scholarship demonstrates the pervasive nature of these gendered

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<sup>43</sup> <https://time.com/athlete-of-the-year-2019-us-womens-soccer-team/>, <https://time.com/magazine/us/5594338/june-3rd-2019-vol-193-no-21-u-s/>, <https://www.si.com/soccer/2019/07/08/usa-womens-world-cup-title-uswnt-rapinoe-lavelle-ellis>, <https://www.si.com/soccer/2019/05/29/uswnt-world-cup-sports-illustrated-covers-on-sale>, <https://www.si.com/sportsperson/2019/12/09/megan-rapinoe-2019-sportsperson-of-the-year>,

<sup>44</sup> <https://espnpressroom.com/us/press-releases/2019/05/julie-ertz-featured-on-cover-of-espn-the-magazines-world-football-issue/>, <https://www.marieclaire.com/celebrity/a28967312/women-changing-future/>

<sup>45</sup> [https://www.espn.com/video/clip/\\_id/16406531](https://www.espn.com/video/clip/_id/16406531), [https://www.espn.com/sports/soccer/story/\\_id/27491036/uswnt-star-kelley-ohara-championships-celebrations-carbs-body-issue-2019](https://www.espn.com/sports/soccer/story/_id/27491036/uswnt-star-kelley-ohara-championships-celebrations-carbs-body-issue-2019)

<sup>46</sup> <https://www.ussoccer.com/stories/2015/07/historic-tickertape-parade-honor-awarded-to-world-champion-uswnt>

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/07/nyregion/uswnt-parade-nyc.html>

<sup>48</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OfMOLT\\_TUNQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OfMOLT_TUNQ)

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=faUQnyulb94>



expectations and that they are mostly stable over time (Bergen and Williams 1991). Recent work in psychology indicates that gender stereotypes persist and that individuals continue to expect certain traits and behavior from others based on gender (Ellemers 2018; Radeke and Stahelski 2020).

Political science literature suggests that gendered trait expectations are harmful to women candidates because stereotypes impact the perceived competence of women running for office (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993a, 1993b). Experimental evidence demonstrates that feminine stereotypes also reduce women's perceived qualifications to be a Senator or presidential candidate (Bauer 2015). Further, Bauer (2020) finds that gendered stereotypes hurt perceptions of women candidates at lower levels of office as well. The psychology and political science literature establish that gender-based stereotypes persist and that these stereotypes are harmful to women candidates.

The women of the USWNT do not fit the stereotypical mold in ways that should impact attitudes about the traits women possess. Due to their status as professional athletes, one might reasonably describe the players of the USWNT as athletic and competitive, two traits that are traditionally viewed as masculine (Bem 1974). Further, while sports, in general, are understood to be masculine, survey evidence indicates that soccer specifically is rated as more masculine than many sports such as swimming, golf, cycling, and others (Koivula 2001). The argument presented here is that their counter-stereotypical nature makes the players of the USWNT exemplars capable of influencing prejudicial attitudes toward women in other masculine fields. The first step in assessing this argument is examining the traits associated with USWNT players.

#### 4.4 Image Testing

I study reactions to seven images of players from the USWNT using a sample of 205 undergraduate students from a large university in the southeast. The presentation sequence of the images is randomized to avoid order effects. Students were shown an image and asked, “What traits would you say this image reflects?” Most replies are one word, or a list of words, with very few responses being sentences. Responses are grouped according to the traits they include. For example, in response to the image shown in Figure 1, respondents use terms such as “aggressive,” “aggressiveness,” and “aggression” to describe the image. These responses are all versions of the word “aggressive” and, as such, are collapsed into one thematic category. The same categorization applies for concepts like “dominant,” which appears in responses as “dominant,” “dominate,” and “dominance,” or “tough,” which is used as “tough” and “toughness.” The traits referenced are tabulated according to the frequency of appearance within the responses and then ranked in order of most to least referenced. Table 4.1 displays the ten most common themes and terms used to describe the image in Figure 4.1.<sup>50</sup>

*Table 4.1 Top Ten Tabulated Responses to Image from Figure 4.1*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Count</b>
Competition   Competitive   Competitiveness   Compete	32
Strength	29
Team   Teamwork   Team player   Team effort	25
Athletic  Athleticism	20
Aggressive   Aggressiveness   Aggression	19
Determination   Determined	17
Dominate   Dominant   Dominance	15
Tough   Toughness	14
Assertive   Assertiveness	10
Hard-working   Hard work	8

<sup>50</sup> I include the respective tables of the top ten responses to each of the seven images in the appendix, along with the images used in testing that were not selected for the experiment.

Next, I compare the top ten traits associated with each of the seven images to Eagly and Karau's (2002) agentic traits and Huddy and Terkildsen's (1993) masculine traits to ascertain which images most reflect traits stereotypically ascribed to men. Four images, shown below, have the most agentic or masculine traits among the top ten most commonly cited traits; therefore, these four images serve as the experimental treatment. The top ten most commonly reported traits associated with Figure 4.1, in order of most frequent appearance, are competitive, strength, team, athletic, aggressive, determination, dominant, tough, assertive, and hard-working. Figure 4.2's most frequently cited traits are competitive, dominant, strength, aggressive, assertive, determined, athletic, tough, active, and skill. The most mentioned traits for Figure 4.3 are strength, athletic, focus, confident, determined, dominant, active, tough, competitive, and hard-working, and for Figure 4.4, the traits are confident, strength, team, pride, dominant, stern, hard-working, determined, successful, and assertive. The results from image testing establish that the four selected images serve as an appropriate experimental treatment by demonstrating that the pictures portray the USWNT players as counter-stereotypical.



*Figure 4.1 Samantha Mewis Test Image*



*Figure 4.2 Julie Johnston Test Image*



*Figure 4.3 Megan Rapinoe Test Image*



Figure 4.4 TIME Cover Test Image

## 4.5 Hypotheses

Given the research on how exposure to concepts can increase favorability toward them and having established that the USWNT serve as exemplars of women in a field usually dominated by men, I expect that exposure to the USWNT will increase support for women politicians.

H<sub>1</sub>: Exposure to the USWNT should increase support for women politicians in general.

Further, because extant literature suggests that exposure can reduce prejudice toward groups, I hypothesize that exposure to the USWNT will reduce prejudice against women in politics.

H<sub>2</sub>: Exposure to the USWNT should reduce bias against women in politics.

## 4.6 Experiment and Analysis

### 4.6.1 *The Experiment*

I conducted an experiment on a sample of 634 U.S. adults to examine the impact of exposure to the USWNT on attitudes toward women in politics and test the two hypotheses.<sup>51</sup> Subjects were randomly assigned to the control or treatment group, resulting in 321 participants in the control condition and 313 receiving the experimental treatment.<sup>52</sup> T-tests were conducted to ensure randomization across demographic characteristics. There are no statistically significant differences between the treatment and control groups. The four selected images were used to

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<sup>51</sup> Details on the exact demographic makeup of the sample are available in the appendix. The sample was collected and compensated via Qualtrics and paid for using a grant from the political science department at Georgia State University.

<sup>52</sup> A table containing the t-tests is available in the appendix.

create the experimental treatment. Subjects in both the treatment and control conditions were shown the following sentence: “Next we would like to know your opinions regarding modern culture and society.” Those in the control condition were immediately directed to questions about society. The treatment group was first shown the tested images and asked, “What do you think of the United States women’s soccer team winning the 2019 FIFA World Cup?” and then directed to the same questions as the control group.

#### ***4.6.2 Measurement***

The questionnaire following the treatment and control contains seven items asking respondents their opinions about gender and political leadership.<sup>53</sup> The questions center on two topics: women in politics and comparing men and women in politics. An exploratory factor analysis of the seven items reveals that the items primarily load on these two factors. The questions measuring support for women in politics, in general, ask for respondents’ opinions toward more women serving in Congress, more women running for political office, their political party nominating a woman for president, and women’s capacity to be political leaders. I use these four items to create the variable **Support for Women Politicians**. I rescale this variable to a zero to one continuum in which higher ratings indicate greater support for women in politics generally.

The other three questions gauge how respondents feel about women in politics when compared to men. I ask respondents how much they agree that “most men are better suited emotionally for politics than are most women,” “society is better off with mostly male political leaders,” and “women should take care of running their homes and leave running the country up

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<sup>53</sup> Question wording and coding is available in the appendix.



to men.”<sup>54</sup> The variable **Bias Against Women in Politics** is a factor of these three questions and ranges from zero to one, with higher scores indicating a greater preference for men compared to women in politics.

### 4.6.3 Analysis

I hypothesize that exposure to the treatment should increase support for women politicians. I use t-tests to compare the control and treatment group averages to test this hypothesis. The average **Support for Women Politicians** is 0.816 for the control group and 0.779 for the treatment group with a p-value of 0.064. This result runs counter to Hypothesis 1.

As a test of Hypothesis 2, which proposes exposure will reduce bias, I conduct a t-test comparing the average **Bias Against Women in Politics** score for the treatment and control groups. The control group average is 0.350 compared to the treatment average of 0.331. This difference is not statistically significant and offers no support for Hypothesis 2.

Given that the literature focuses on the impact of exemplars on attitudes toward out-groups, I focus my analyses on how men react to the treatment. Prior to exploring treatment effects for men in the sample, I checked for random assignment across several characteristics exclusively among men. Men in the treatment condition were largely the same as men in the control condition across most of the demographic characteristics; however, men in the treatment were noticeably more Republican.<sup>55</sup> The uneven partisan distribution is concerning given Sanbonmatsu and Dolan's (2009) finding that Democrats are more likely than Republicans to perceive women as even with or advantaged over men in terms of certain issue competencies, suggesting that women politicians may fare better with Democrats. In light of this difference and

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<sup>54</sup> Question wording is taken or adapted from the General Social Survey, Pew Research Center's American Trends Panel, and Sanbonmatsu (2002).

<sup>55</sup>A table comparing the men in the control to the men in the treatment group is available in the appendix.

the possible partisan influence, I use ordinary least squares regression to examine how exposure to the treatment impacts the attitudes of men toward women in politics while accounting for partisanship and how it might interact with the treatment.

I include a dummy variable for partisanship, **Republican**, in which respondents who identify as “Strong Republican,” “Republican,” or “Independent, Leaning Republican,” are coded as 1 while all other responses are 0. I also include an interaction between the treatment and the partisan dummy variable, **Treatment\*Republican**, to explore the treatment’s effects as well as the role of partisanship. The results of the OLS model are shown in Table 4.2. Once I account for the impact of Republican partisanship, the treatment effects found in the initial t-test disappears.<sup>56</sup> I find no evidence that exposure to the USWNT increases support for women politicians, and therefore no evidence for Hypothesis 1.

*Table 4.2 Support for Women Politicians (Men Only)*

	Coefficient (Std. Err.)	p-value
Treatment	-0.062 (0.038)	0.103
Republican	-0.046 (0.043)	0.283
Treatment*Republican	0.007 (0.059)	0.903
Constant	0.854 (0.026)	0.000
R <sup>2</sup>		0.024
n		283

<sup>56</sup> There are also null effects when the same model is run exclusively on women in the sample and on the sample as a whole. Tables showing the models are available in the appendix.

I also re-test the second hypothesis using OLS and the partisan variables on only the men in the sample. Table 4.3 reveals that the treatment does reduce bias against women in politics; however, the relationship varies with partisanship. For Democrats and Independents in the sample, exposure to the treatment reduces bias against women in politics. Conversely, for Republicans, exposure to the treatment actually increases bias against women in politics.<sup>57</sup> Exposure to the treatment for Democratic and Independent men reduces the bias score from 0.494 to 0.365, on average. The average increase in Republican men's bias score due to the treatment rises from 0.473 to 0.714. These results offer conditional support for Hypothesis 2 by demonstrating that exposure to the treatment reduces bias among some men. The increase in bias among Republican men is contrary to the theoretical expectation that exposure should improve attitudes toward the outgroup. I explore potential explanations for the findings below.

*Table 4.3 Bias Against Women in Politics (Men Only)*

	Coefficient (Std. Err.)	p-value
Treatment	-0.129 (0.050)	0.010
Republican	-0.021 (0.056)	0.707
Treatment*Republican	0.220 (0.077)	0.005
Constant	0.494 (0.034)	0.000
R <sup>2</sup>		0.050
n		283

<sup>57</sup> These results hold when I run the same model on the sample as a whole. When I run the model on women in the sample only, none of the variables are statistically significant. The tables are available in the appendix.

## 4.7 Discussion

According to previous literature, exposure to counter-stereotypical exemplars should positively impact attitudes towards the relevant out-group(s). The experimental results offer evidence that exposure to the USWNT can reduce bias against women in politics; however, the effect is conditioned on partisanship and gender. The treatment reduces bias against women in politics for Democratic and Independent men while exacerbating bias among Republican men.

One possibility is that Republican men might not like the USWNT. Dasgupta and Greenwald (2001) make a point to describe their chosen positive exemplars as “admired,” though the authors seem to treat admired as synonymous with famous. Several players of the USWNT publicly condemned Republican President Donald Trump in recent years. Megan Rapinoe, Alex Morgan, and Ali Krieger all spoke out against the president, his administration, and his policies (Olmstead 2019). The public condemnation of the president may have impacted Republican attitudes toward the team.

Another potential explanation is that, among Republican men, women who violate gender stereotypes are not received as positively as counter-stereotypical African Americans are. The racist stereotypes about Black people in the United States are socially undesirable, meaning that counter-stereotypical exemplars, such as Barack Obama, are viewed as what an individual should strive to be. Perhaps Republican men not only *expect* women to possess communal rather than agentic traits but are also *prefer* women to hold traditionally feminine characteristics. The literature documents a “backlash effect,” in which women who demonstrate agentic traits and violate traditional gender stereotypes are viewed negatively (Heilman and Okimoto 2007; Rudman 1998; Rudman and Glick 2001). Scholars investigating exposure to counter-

stereotypical women exemplars should consider measuring subjects' preferences for feminine traits and attitudes on the role of women in society.

This research would be improved by measuring the concepts just mentioned, as well as by including a measure of social dominance orientation (SDO). Sidanius, Pratto, and Bobo define SDO as “the extent to which one desires that one’s in-group dominate and be superior to outgroups” (1994, 742). Sidanius et al. (1994) find that in six out of six samples, Republican affiliation is positively associated with SDO. Those high in SDO prefer a hierarchy that benefits their ingroup and are prone to dislike trends reshaping the social order. Scholars show that men score higher on SDO scales than women (Pratto et al. 1994; Sidanius, Pratto, and Bobo 1994). Whitley and Ægisdóttir (2000) demonstrate that men tend to have higher levels of SDO and that men are more likely to be homophobic and hold traditional beliefs about gender roles. Without the data, it is impossible to point to SDO as an explanation for the conditional findings in this work. However, the literature suggests SDO is something to consider in the future, given the adverse reaction to exposure for Republican men.

Whitley and Ægisdóttir’s work also suggests another avenue for consideration: homophobia. The USWNT might not be synonymous with queer representation, but their 2019 FIFA victory was quickly followed by an article titled “Lesbians Won the Women’s World Cup.”<sup>58</sup> The USWNT has several queer players who are out publicly,<sup>59</sup> including Megan Rapinoe, who is described as a “lesbian football icon.”<sup>60</sup> The *TIME* cover photo includes several queer athletes, along with Megan Rapinoe, who is also featured as the primary focus of another image used in the experimental treatment. Perhaps a homophobic reaction to the treatment

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<sup>58</sup> <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/shannonkeating/megan-rapinoe-womens-world-cup-finals-champions>

<sup>59</sup> <https://www.insider.com/professional-athletes-who-identify-as-lgbtq-and-proud-2020-5>

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2019/12/09/sports-illustrated-sportsperson-year-megan-rapinoe/>

spilled over into resentment for all women who violate historical gender norms. Though survey evidence from Pew Research Center demonstrates that Republicans are historically less likely to be accepting of homosexuality,<sup>61</sup> this potential explanation is entirely speculative. Unfortunately, the data does not exist to explore how homophobic attitudes might interact with exposure to women athletes to impact attitudes toward agentic women in other domains. Each possibility raised here warrants further investigation.

#### **4.8 Conclusion**

This research explores how exposure to the USWNT impacts attitudes toward women in politics. The mere exposure hypothesis, parasocial contact hypothesis, and exemplar-based theories of social judgment suggest that exposure to an out-group, such as women in the traditionally masculine field of sports, should improve attitudes toward women in the also historically masculine domain of politics. Using a control versus treatment experimental design, I find that exposure to the USWNT reduces prejudice against women in politics for Independent and Democratic men while having the opposite impact on Republican men. I offer possible explanations for the diverging results, though I have no evidence to support these possibilities.

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<sup>61</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2017/10/05/5-homosexuality-gender-and-religion/>

## 5 CONCLUSION

“We ultimately decided to file this motion for all the little girls around the world who deserve the same respect as well as the boys. They deserve a voice, and if we as professional athletes don't leverage the voices we have, we are letting them down. We will not let them down.”<sup>62</sup>  
 Alex Morgan

Women's sports had a profound impact in the 2020 Senate elections. Specifically, Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) players were pivotal in the election of Rev. Raphael Warnock to the Senate. After then Senator Kelly Loeffler, owner of the Atlanta Dream, criticized the Black Lives Matter movement, WNBA players came out in support of her opponent, Rev. Warnock (Boren 2020). Preliminary data analysis indicates that the players' support helped Rev. Warnock raise funds at a crucial point in his campaign (Delevoye 2020).

The WNBA players' involvement in the Senate election is not the only time women athletes have stepped into American politics. Megan Rapinoe and Sue Bird, both star athletes in their respective sports of soccer and basketball, regularly encouraged fans to vote and actively campaigned for the Biden Harris ticket during the 2020 presidential election.<sup>63</sup> WNBA player Angel McCoughtry spoke at a rally for Jon Ossof and Rev. Warnock leading up to the Senate run-off election.<sup>64</sup> Other women athletes, such as Nneka Ogwumike,<sup>65</sup> Alex Morgan,<sup>66</sup> and Ali Krieger,<sup>67</sup> used their platforms to stress the importance of voting. The WNBA Player's Association released “The Voting Playbook” on their social media detailing how fans could register to vote.<sup>68</sup> Women athletes have repeatedly demonstrated that due to their involvement in sports, they are well suited to step into the political arena. Countless women athletes throughout

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<sup>62</sup> <https://www.cosmopolitan.com/politics/a56699/alex-morgan-equal-pay-soccer/>

<sup>63</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/p/CDj4eyvnbAD/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link](https://www.instagram.com/p/CDj4eyvnbAD/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link)

<sup>64</sup> [https://twitter.com/angel\\_35/status/1335698554820702210?s=20](https://twitter.com/angel_35/status/1335698554820702210?s=20)

<sup>65</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/p/CI3ZTBkfyF/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link](https://www.instagram.com/p/CI3ZTBkfyF/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link)

<sup>66</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/p/CHHzqZUFxf2/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link](https://www.instagram.com/p/CHHzqZUFxf2/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link)

<sup>67</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/p/CFxUffgjVz9/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link](https://www.instagram.com/p/CFxUffgjVz9/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link)

<sup>68</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/p/CFfOqFvBmhO/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link](https://www.instagram.com/p/CFfOqFvBmhO/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link)

modern U.S. history have used sports as an opportunity to push for social change through protest, candidate support, and voter mobilization efforts. These women are leaders both within their sport and in the world of politics.

Women increasingly occupying space in the world of sports, and using that platform for overtly political purposes, raises questions about the political implications of this societal shift. Could fostering political ambition among women be another benefit of sport participation? If yes, might this relationship vary for women of different races? How does witnessing women's role in athletics impact attitudes toward women in other traditionally masculine arenas? These questions go largely unanswered in the literature. We know very little about how sports influence political ambition. We know even less about how exposure to women's sports influences attitudes toward women in other masculine domains. I have attempted to answer each of these questions throughout this dissertation using data from an original survey experiment, thereby expanding our knowledge of an increasingly politically relevant subject.

In chapter 2, I theorize that sports participation aids in the development of confidence and competitiveness, which in turn should lead to political ambition. However, because the literature shows that women tend to score lower on these qualities than men, I expect sport participation to most meaningfully impact women. I find evidence of an indirect, as well as a direct, positive relationship between sport participation and political ambition for women in the sample, but not for other survey participants.

Next, I explore how the relationship between sport participation and political ambition differs between Black and White women. Centuries of racially based oppression create different experiences for Black women in both politics and athletics. The data reveal that while sport participation is positively associated with political ambition for both Black and White women,



the relationships differ. For Black women, sport participation directly impacts political ambition, whereas, for White women, the relationship is mediated through confidence and competitiveness.

Finally, using an experimental treatment, I find that exposure to professional women athletes impacts men's attitudes toward women in politics. However, the treatment's effects are nuanced. Democratic and Independent men who receive the treatment report less prejudice toward women in politics. On the other hand, Republican men in the treatment condition report increased prejudice toward women in politics.

The evidence I present here suggests that women's sports influence women's political ambitions and men's attitudes toward women in politics. For decades, scholars have argued and demonstrated that the gender disparity in political ambition is at least partially to blame for women's ongoing underrepresentation. Further scholarship shows bias against the women who do run for elective office. By influencing a woman's willingness to run and men's acceptance of women's involvement in politics, women's sports may play a role in the election of more women in the United States.

More research is necessary to demonstrate a causal link between sport participation and political ambition. As it stands, the data I present here only reveals that sport participation and political ambition are linked. It is possible that women who are confident, competitive, ambitious, and unconstrained by social expectations, meaning women who we might expect to be politically ambitious, are more likely to play sports. A similar study conducted on a larger more diverse sample of women would offer more compelling evidence. A better sample for this research would have more politically ambitious women. This would allow for more certainty in a relationship between sports and political ambition, though causality would remain an issue. A

longitudinal study of sport participants could offer more persuasive evidence that sport participation fosters confidence, competitiveness, and political ambition.

An ideal project might measure confidence, competitiveness, and ambition in a sample of different gendered students of various ages at multiple points throughout their first season in competitive sports. If the sample included students who did not participate in sports from similar backgrounds, they could serve as a useful comparison as well. This would give us a better understanding of how participating in sports influences the qualities relevant to political ambition. The non-sporting students would illustrate how these qualities might develop sans sport participation. This research design would not prove causality either, but it might offer more convincing evidence of how confidence, competitiveness, and ambition develop through sports.

Another potential research avenue which could clarify the relationship between sport participation and political ambition for women would involve hearing directly from women in sports and politics. Interviews with women athletes and women politicians, especially Black women athletes and politicians, would allow for participants to articulate how sports impacted them in ways that might be difficult to measure with survey instruments. It is certainly possible that sports influences political ambition in ways I, and the literature, have failed to consider. Without hearing directly from the relevant women, the literature is likely missing crucial concepts relevant to the development of political ambition and the influence of participating in sports.

Focus groups would also allow for women in politics and sports to share more about their experiences in both institutions. A focus group discussion with a diverse women's sports team might allow for a richer understanding of how race, gender, orientation, class, and other characteristics intersect to create different experiences within the same athletic environment. A

focus group consisting of women politicians with backgrounds in athletics would be incredibly useful as well, though it would likely be difficult to locate and recruit the necessary participants.

This project also suggests that additional research is necessary on how exposure impacts attitudes toward woman in politics. While the data show that exposure to women in sports influences men's attitudes toward women in politics, we cannot be certain that being more or less favorable toward women politicians would impact an individual's vote choice. Future research could manipulate exposure to professional women athletes, followed by a simulated election. However, future work must balance control over the experimental manipulation and an approximation of reality. The experiment conducted for this project does not offer compelling evidence of how individuals behave in the real world or how various stimuli actually impact their vote intention.

While there is certainly more to learn about the political implications of women's sports, that does not erase what we have learned from this project. I argue throughout that the growing number of girls and women participating in sports influences American politics in ways that have been largely ignored in extant literature. The evidence presented here suggests women's participation in sports could impact representation in American politics. I echo scholars such as Mansbridge and Phillips, who argue for descriptive representation and why we should care about equal participation and political involvement for all citizens. Given the importance of more equitable representation, any avenues that might lead to increased descriptive representation are worth exploring.

I stress that political science as a discipline needs to consider the political implications of women's athletics. Further, this research agenda must take an intersectional approach that considers race and incorporates transgender women and gender-expansive athletes. How do the

exclusionary policies being pursued in state legislatures impact concepts such as political efficacy and ambition in those excluded? How might these exclusionary policies impact descriptive representation in the future? Do sports offer gender-expansive participants the same benefits as their cisgender counterparts? Sport participation is a vehicle for political empowerment, making it necessary to consider how sports impact those who are most often disempowered.

My aim in this project is to start a path of research to better explore the potential political impact of women's sports. Though I do not have the same platform as two-time FIFA World Cup champion and Olympic gold medalist Alex Morgan, I do have the opportunity as a scholar to research the causes of disparities in representation, as well as potential solutions. Further, as a Black woman, I have a responsibility to carry on the legacy of progress for those who come after me. I have no doubt that sports are a path toward progress. For the girls who participate and for the spectators who witness, sports can shift individual thinking toward a society in which success in any arena is possible regardless of gender.

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A: Chapter 2 Variable Distribution and Additional Models

*Appendix A.1 Variable Distribution***Table A.1.1: Race**


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Asian	6.32%
Black or African American	20.98%
Native American or Alaska Native	1.29%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.43%
White	68.39%
Two or more races	1.72%
Other	0.86%
<hr/>	
N	696

**Table A.1.2: Hispanic Origin**


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Hispanic	19.97%
Non-Hispanic	80.03%
<hr/>	
N	696

**Table A.1.3: Gender**


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Female	53.42%
Male	45.87%
Non-binary/Third gender	0.43%
Prefer not to say	0.14%
Prefer to self-describe	0.14%
<hr/>	
N	702

**Table A.1.4: Education**


---

Less than a high school diploma	3.01%
High school diploma or equivalent	25.39%
Some college, no degree	28.69%
Associate degree	7.89%
Bachelor's degree	16.64%
Graduate degree	18.36%
<hr/>	
N	697

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**Table A.1.5: Income**

Under \$20,000	15.16%
\$20,000-\$39,999	16.02%
\$40,000-\$59,999	13.73%
\$60,000-\$79,999	14.45%
\$80,000-\$99,999	12.88%
\$100,000 or more	27.75%
N	699

**Table A.1.6: Partisanship**

Strong Democrat	15.26%
Democrat	14.41%
Independent, Leaning Democrat	5.14%
Independent	17.55%
Independent, Leaning Republican	8.56%
Republican	21.97%
Strong Republican	17.12%
N	701

**Table A.1.7: Age**

Minimum	18
Maximum	99
Average	43.30
Std. Dev.	17.70
N	650

**Table A.1.8: Has Run**

	Full Sample	Female	Non-Female
Yes	20.66%	14.13%	28.31%
No	79.34%	85.87%	71.69%
N	702	375	325

**Table A.1.9: Sport Participation**

	Full Sample	Female	Non-Female
Yes	51.70%	38.50%	66.99%
No	48.30%	61.50%	33.01%
N	675	361	312

**Table A.1.10: Years in Sports**

	Full Sample	Female	Non-Female
Minimum	0	0	0
Maximum	25	25	25
Average	3.29	2.00	4.81
Std. Dev.	5.34	4.00	6.26
N	668	359	307

**Table A.1.11: Political Engagement**

	Full Sample	Female	Non-Female
Minimum	1	1	1
Maximum	7	7	7
Average	1.97	1.81	2.13
Std. Dev.	1.10	0.94	1.22
N	647	330	315

**Table A.1.12: Competition Index**

	Full Sample	Female	Non-Female
Minimum	4	4	4
Maximum	28	28	28
Average	16.04	14.86	17.45
Std. Dev.	6.01	5.44	6.31
N	695	370	323

**Table A.1.13: Would Win**

	Full Sample	Female	Non-Female
Minimum	1	1	1
Maximum	6	6	6
Average	2.94	2.55	3.39
Std. Dev.	1.66	1.51	1.72
N	683	366	315

*Appendix A.2 Additional Models*

**Table A.2.1: The Mediated Relationship between Sports and Political Ambition for Women Participants**

	Coef. (Std. Err.)	p-value
Sports Years-> Competition Index	0.279 (0.070)	0.000
Constant	12.355 (0.314)	0.000
Sports Years-> Would Win	0.0778 (0.020)	0.000
Constant	2.386 (0.087)	0.000
Competition Index-> Has Run	-0.001 (0.003)	0.695
Would Win-> Has Run	0.077 (0.012)	0.000
Constant	-0.039 (0.054)	0.462
N		353

**Table A.2.2: The Mediated Relationship between Sports and Political Ambition for Participants who are not Women**

	Coef. (Std. Err.)	p-value
Sports Years-> Competition Index	0.163 (0.056)	0.004
Constant	16.472 (0.446)	0.000
Sports Years-> Would Win	0.041 (0.015)	0.007
Constant	3.195 (0.122)	0.000
Competition Index-> Has run	0.001 (0.004)	0.779
Would Win-> Has run	0.102 (0.015)	0.000
Constant	-0.084 (0.073)	0.247
N		304

**Table A.2.3: The Direct Relationship between Sports and Political Ambition for Women Participants**

	Coef. (Std. Err.)	p-value
Sports Years-> Competition Index	0.278 (0.070)	0.000
Constant	14.355 (0.314)	0.000
Sports Years-> Would Win	0.0778 (0.020)	0.000
Constant	2.386 (0.0879)	0.000
Competition Index-> Has Run	-0.004 (0.003)	0.248
Would Win-> Has Run	0.0678 (0.012)	0.000
Sports Years-> Has Run	0.020 (0.004)	0.000
Constant	-0.02 (0.052)	0.695
N		353

**Table A.2.4: The Direct Relationship between Sports and Political Ambition for Participants who are not Women**

	Coef. (Std. Err.)	p-value
Sports Years-> Competition Index	0.163 (0.056)	0.004
Constant	16.472 (0.446)	0.000
Sports Years-> Would Win	0.041 (0.015)	0.007
Constant	3.195 (0.122)	0.000
Competition Index-> Has Run	0.001 (0.004)	0.879
Would Win-> Has Run	0.101 (0.015)	0.000
Sports Years-> Has Run	0.004 (0.004)	0.249
Constant	-0.091 (0.073)	0.212
N		304

**Table A.2.5: Predicting Political Ambition**

	Coef. (Std. Err.)	p-value
Woman	-0.837 (0.292)	0.004
Sports Years	0.008 (0.020)	0.680
Woman*Sports Years	0.093 (0.038)	0.015
Competition Index	-0.011 (0.019)	0.571
Would Win	0.382 (0.256)	0.813
Political Engagement	-0.020 (0.084)	0.000
White	-0.327 (0.256)	0.201
Age	-0.038 (0.010)	0.000
Democrat	0.089 (0.050)	0.078
Education	0.316 (0.000)	0.000
Income	0.107 (0.078)	0.168
Constant	-17.250 (913.910)	0.985
$\chi$	2.91	0.088
N		555

Note: Coefficients come from a skewed logistic regression (scobit) model run on the dichotomous dependent variable "Has Run."

## Appendix B: Chapter 3 Survey Items, Variable Measurement, Sample Characteristics, and Full Models

### *Appendix B.1 Survey Items and Variable Measurement*

**Gender:** What is your gender?

- Female
- Male
- Non-binary/third gender
- Prefer to self-describe:
- Prefer not to say

**Race:** What is your race?

- White
- Black or African American
- Native American or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- Other:

**Sports Years:** How many years did you participate in competitive organized sports?

**Competition Factor Items:**

- How well do the following statements describe you?
  - It annoys me when other people perform better than I do
  - In my field, I like to outperform my peers
  - I am a competitive person
  - Performing better than my peers is important to me
- Response options:
  1. Strongly disagree
  2. Disagree
  3. Somewhat disagree
  4. Neither agree nor disagree
  5. Somewhat agree
  6. Agree
  7. Strongly agree

**Would Win:** If you were to run for public office, what do you believe is the likelihood that you would win the election?

1. Extremely unlikely
2. Unlikely
3. Slightly unlikely
4. Slightly likely
5. Likely
6. Extremely likely



**Education:**

1. Less than a high school diploma
2. High school diploma or equivalent
3. Some college, no degree
4. Associate degree
5. Bachelor's degree
6. Graduate degree

**Income:**

1. Under \$20,000
2. \$20,000-\$39,999
3. \$40,000-\$59,999
4. \$60,000-\$79,999
5. \$80,000-\$99,999
6. \$100,000 or more

**Political Engagement:** Measured as a count of each of the following items

- Vote in the 2016 presidential election
- Vote in the 2018 midterm elections
- Contact a newspaper about a political issue
- Join or renew membership with a political organization
- Contact an elected official (by phone, email, letter, social media, etc.)
- Contribute money to a candidate or political cause
- Volunteer for a political campaign

*Appendix B.2 Sample Characteristics*

Table B.2.1: Race and Gender

	N
Black Women	102
White Women	170

Table B.2.2: Distribution of "Has Run"

	N	% Who Have Run
Black Women	25	24.51%
White Women	7	4.12%

Table B.2.3: Distribution of Sports Years

	Min	Max	Average	Std. Dev.
Black Women	0	26	2.010	4.130
White Women	0	21	1.790	3.490

Table B.2.4: Distribution of Competition Factor

	Min	Max	Average	Std. Dev.
Black Women	-1.743	1.558	-0.271	0.800
White Women	-1.744	1.559	-0.205	0.775

Table B.2.5: Distribution of "Would Win"

	% for Black Women	% for White Women
Extremely unlikely (1)	22.00%	49.09%
Unlikely (2)	13.00%	22.42%
Slightly unlikely (3)	28.00%	12.12%
Slightly likely (4)	20.00%	11.52%
Likely (5)	11.00%	2.42%
Extremely likely (6)	6.00%	2.42%

Table B.2.6: Distribution of Education

	% for Black Women	% for White Women
Less than a high school diploma (1)	2.97%	2.37%
High school diploma or equivalent (2)	29.70%	42.01%
Some college, no degree (3)	24.75%	38.46%
Associate degree (4)	20.79%	1.18%
Bachelor's degree (5)	16.83%	10.06%
Graduate degree (6)	4.95%	5.92%

Table B.2.7: Distribution of Income

	% for Black Women	% for White Women
Under \$20,000 (1)	27.00%	18.24%
\$20,000-\$39,999 (2)	26.00%	17.06%
\$40,000-\$59,999 (3)	24.00%	12.35%
\$60,000-\$79,999 (4)	8.00%	10.00%
\$80,000-\$99,999 (5)	5.00%	10.59%
\$100,000 or more (6)	10.00%	31.76%

Table B.2.8: Distribution of Political Engagement

	% for Black Women	% for White Women
0	7.92%	12.50%
1	46.53%	32.14%
2	32.67%	41.07%
3	7.92%	9.52%
4	4.95%	2.98%
5	0.00%	1.79%
6	0.00%	0.00%
7	0.00%	0.00%

### *Appendix B.3 Full Models*

This Appendix contains the full models used for the figures in Chapter 3.

**Table B.3.1: The Relationship between Sports and Political Ambition for White Women**

	Coef. (Std. Err.)	<i>p</i> -value
Sports Years-> Competition Factor	0.047 (0.017)	0.006
Constant	-0.272 (0.066)	0.000
Sports Years-> Would Win	0.092 (0.028)	0.001
Constant	1.866 (0.111)	0.000
Competition Factor-> Has Run	0.037 (0.020)	0.057
Would Win-> Has Run	0.026 0.012	0.025
Sports Years-> Has Run	-0.006 (0.004)	0.195
Constant	0.000 (0.288)	0.987
N		162

**Table B.3.2: The Relationship between Sports and Political Ambition for Black Women**

	Coef. (Std. Err.)	<i>p</i> -value
Sports Years-> Competition Factor	0.057 (0.019)	0.002
Constant	-0.388 (0.860)	0.000
Sports Years-> Would Win	-0.023 (0.036)	0.525
Constant	3.108 (0.166)	0.000
Competition Factor-> Has Run	-0.063 (0.057)	0.269
Would Win-> Has Run	0.056 (0.029)	0.055
Sports Years-> Has Run	0.035 (0.010)	0.001
Constant	-0.014 (0.110)	0.899
N		97

**Table B.3.3: Predicting Political Ambition for Black Women (Scobit)**

	Coeff. (Std. Err.)	<i>p</i> -value
Sports Years	0.138 (0.050)	0.006
Competition Factor	-0.424 (0.353)	0.230
Would Win	0.323 (0.176)	0.066
Education	-0.057 (0.192)	0.768
Income	0.310 (0.148)	0.036
Political Engagement	0.138 (0.230)	0.549
Constant	-16.098 (1076.894)	0.988
N	96	
$\chi^2$	0.290	0.592

**Table B.3.4: Predicting Political Ambition for White Women (Scobit)**

	Coeff. (Std. Err.)	<i>p</i> -value
Sports Years	-0.095 (0.283)	0.737
Competition Factor	3.806 (1.858)	0.041
Would Win	0.602 (0.484)	0.213
Education	1.360 (0.688)	0.048
Income	-0.602 (0.507)	0.235
Political Engagement	-2.212 (1.210)	0.068
Constant	-23.119 (4282.854)	0.996
N	159	
$\chi^2$	0.870	0.352

**Table B.3.5: Predicting Political Ambition for White Women (Firthlogit)**

	Coeff. (Std. Err.)	<i>p</i> -value
Sports Years	0.092 (0.260)	0.725
Competition Factor	1.862 (1.142)	0.103
Would Win	0.366 (0.385)	0.341
Education	0.994 (0.527)	0.059
Income	-0.378 (0.406)	0.352
Political Engagement	-1.085 (0.921)	0.239
Constant	-5.260 (1.833)	0.004
N	159	
Wald $\chi^2$	8.390	0.211

**Appendix C: Chapter 4 Sample Demographic Information, Variable Measurement, and Tested Images and Most Common Responses**

*Appendix C.1 Sample Demographic Information*

**Table C.1.1: Race**

Asian	6.53%
Black or African American	20.06%
Native American or Alaska Native	1.43%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.48%
White	68.63%
Two or more races	1.91%
Other	0.96%
N	628

**Table C.1.2: Hispanic Origin**

Hispanic	20.51%
Non-Hispanic	79.49%
N	629

**Table C.1.3: Gender**

Women	54.57%
Men	44.79%
Non-binary/Third gender	0.32%
Prefer not to say	0.16%
Prefer to self-describe	0.16%
N	634

**Table C.1.4: Education**

Less than a high school diploma	3.18%
High school diploma or equivalent	25.76%
Some college, no degree	30.37%
Associate degree	8.27%
Bachelor's degree	15.42%
Graduate degree	17.01%
N	629

**Table C.1.5: Income**

Under \$20,000	15.56%
\$20,000-\$39,999	16.98%
\$40,000-\$59,999	13.02%
\$60,000-\$79,999	14.92%
\$80,000-\$99,999	13.17%
\$100,000 or more	26.35%
N	630

**Table C.1.6: Partisanship**

Strong Democrat	16.88%
Democrat	22.40%
Independent, Leaning Democrat	8.99%
Independent	16.88%
Independent, Leaning Republican	5.68%
Republican	13.88%
Strong Republican	15.30%
N	634

**Table C.1.7: Age**

Minimum	18
Maximum	99
Average	43.36
Std. Dev.	17.91
N	587

**Table C.1.8: Comparing Control and Treatment for Whole Sample**

	Control	Treatment	p-value
White	0.536	0.591	0.161
Hispanic	0.220	0.190	0.345
Women	0.567	0.527	0.310
Education	3.591	3.570	0.862
Income	3.778	3.665	0.435
Democrat	4.396	4.102	0.080
Liberal	4.091	3.932	0.271
Age	43.393	43.325	0.964
N	321	313	



**Table C.1.9: Comparing Control and Treatment for Men Only**

	Control	Treatment	p-value
White	0.679	0.714	0.516
Hispanic	0.132	0.143	0.798
Education	3.964	3.966	0.990
Income	4.263	3.300	0.853
Democrat	4.321	3.687	0.016
Liberal	4.162	3.842	0.159
Age	45.095	45.921	0.672
N	137	147	

**Table C.1.10: Support for Women Politicians (Women Only)**

	Coefficient (Std. Err.)	p-value
Treatment	-0.014 (0.039)	0.723
Republican	0.032 (0.050)	0.528
Treatment*Republican	-0.014 (0.073)	0.849
Constant	0.340 (0.027)	0.000
R <sup>2</sup>		0.002
n		336

**Table C.1.11: Support for Women Politicians (Entire Sample)**

	Coefficient (Std. Err.)	p-value
Treatment	-0.026 (0.024)	0.290
Republican	-0.046 (0.029)	0.116
Treatment*Republican	-0.024 (0.558)	0.558
Constant	0.831 (0.000)	0.000
R <sup>2</sup>		0.019
n		621

**Table C.1.12: Bias Against Women in Politics (Women Only)**

	Coefficient (Std. Err.)	p-value
Treatment	-0.001 (0.032)	0.975
Republican	-0.054 (0.041)	0.188
Treatment*Republican	-0.051 (0.059)	0.389
Constant	0.814 (0.022)	0.000
R <sup>2</sup>		0.023
n		334

**Table C.1.13: Bias Against Women in Politics (Entire Sample)**

	Coefficient (Std. Err.)	p-value
Treatment	-0.059 (0.032)	0.063
Republican	0.022 (0.038)	0.555
Treatment*Republican	0.112 (0.053)	0.036
Constant	0.401 (0.022)	0.401
R <sup>2</sup>		0.022
n		623

### *Appendix C.2 Variable Measurement*

#### **Bias Against Women in Politics Survey Item Wording and Coding:**

- In general, do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
  - Most men are better suited emotionally for politics than are most women
    - Agree (1), Neither agree nor disagree (0), Disagree (-1)
  - Society is better off with mostly male political leaders
    - Agree (1), Neither agree nor disagree (0), Disagree (-1)
  - Women should take care of running their homes and leave running the country up to men
    - Agree (1), Neither agree nor disagree (0), Disagree (-1)

#### **Support for Women Politicians:**

- Do you think each of the following is generally a good thing or a bad thing for our society?
  - More women serving in Congress
    - Good thing for society (1), Neither a good nor a bad thing (0), Bad thing for society (-1)
  - More women are running for political office
    - Good thing for society (1), Neither a good nor a bad thing (0), Bad thing for society (-1)
- In general, do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
  - It would be a good thing if a woman from my preferred political party were elected president
    - Agree (1), Neither agree nor disagree (0), Disagree (-1)
  - Women are capable of being political leaders
    - Agree (1), Neither agree nor disagree (0), Disagree (-1)

### Appendix C.3 Tested Images and Most Common Responses

Figure 1: Samantha Mewis Test Image



Table C.3.1: Top Ten Responses to Samantha Mewis

Theme	Count
Competition   Competitive   Competitiveness   Compete	32
Strength	29
Team   Teamwork   Team player   Team effort	25
Athletic  Athleticism	20
Aggressive   Aggressiveness   Aggression	19
Determination   Determined	17
Dominate   Dominant   Dominance	15
Tough   Toughness	14
Assertive   Assertiveness	10
Hard-working   Hard work	8

Figure 2: Team Celebration Test Image



Table C.3.2: Top Ten Responses to Team Celebration

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Count</b>
Happiness	88
Pride   Prideful   Proud	33
Excited	25
Teamwork   Team	23
Winner   Winners   Win   Winning   Won	20
Confidence   Self-Confidence	14
Accomplished   Accomplishment   Accomplish	13
Successful   Success	11
Dominant   Dominance	7
Hardworking   Hard-work	5

Figure 3: Megan Rapinoe Test Image



Table C.3.3: Top Ten Responses to Megan Rapinoe

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Count</b>
Strength	60
Athletic   Athleticism	24
Focus   Focused	21
Confident   Self-Confident	19
Determined   Determination	18
Dominant   Dominance	16
Active	15
Tough	11
Competition   Competitive   Competitiveness	8
Hard work   Hard working	8

Figure 4: Alyssa Naeher Test Image



Table C.3.4: Top Ten Responses to Alyssa Naeher

Theme	Count
Strong   Strength	34
Athleticism   Athletic	28
Determination   Determined	25
Active	20
Confidence   Self-Confident	14
Skill   Skilled   Skillful	12
Agile   Agility	9
Assertive	8
Focus   Focused	8
Goal   Goals	8

Figure 5: Alex Morgan Test Image



Table C.3.5: Top Ten Responses to Alex Morgan

Theme	Count
Happiness	88
Success	51
Proud   Pride   Prideful	34
Excited	25
Dominant	7
Hardworking   Hard worker   Hard work	6
Determination   Determined	6
Athletes   Athletic	4
Assertive	3
Celebratory   Celebration	2



Figure 6: Julie Johnston Test Image



Table C.3.6: Top Ten Responses to Julie Johnston

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Count</b>
Competitive   Competition   Compete	49
Dominance   Dominant   Dominate	27
Strength	25
Aggressive   Aggressiveness	23
Assertive	19
Determined   Determination	18
Athleticism	17
Tough   Toughness	16
Active   Activeness	7
Skill   Skillful   Skills	7

Figure 7: *TIME* Cover Test Image



Table C.3.7: Top Ten Responses to *TIME* Cover

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Count</b>
Confident   Confidence   Self-Confidence	41
Strength	37
Team   Teamwork	26
Pride   Proud	20
Dominant   Dominance	19
Stern	19
Hardworking	12
Determined   Determination	12
Successful   Success	10
Assertive   Assertiveness	8