Making Politics Personal: Leadership Programs as a Tool for Building Political Interest and Efficacy in Young Women

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Introduction

In April 2000, the White House Project Education Fund commissioned a study to identify ways to help young women “envision a greater participatory and leadership role for themselves in the public realm” (5). The objective of the research program was to mine young people’s perceptions of political leadership, assess their perception of barriers to women and youth, and identify tactics and messages to engage young women in the political process. Researchers concluded that “the most effective role that organizations seeking to involve more women in running for elected office can play is in providing mentoring, training, advice, and models for young women to follow” (27).

It is widely believed that access to these resources will stimulate in young women the political interest and efficacy that are precursors to political ambition and participation. Political interest represents a connection or engagement with politics. It can be demonstrated by a stated commitment and active pursuit on behalf of a particular concern, or take a more passive form such as following current events or a range of political, constitutional and international issues.

Political efficacy reflects a sense of competence, and the belief that one can participate successfully in civic life. Both are necessary for political mobilization because without interest, one may possess the skills to participate but choose not to, and without efficacy, one may wish to participate but be unsure of where to begin.

NEW Leadership

Since 1991, the Center for American Women and Politics has offered the NEW Leadership™ program as a strategy for getting young women into the political pipeline for public leadership. NEW Leadership™ is an annual six-day residential training institute that teaches college women the value of civic engagement, and gives them an opportunity to establish networks of current and future leaders committed to the expansion of women’s leadership in the public sector. The program faculty is comprised of women holding public sector leadership positions, including elected officials from all levels of office (city/county to Governor or US Senate), judges, representatives from advocacy organizations, executive and legislative staffers, and women leaders from the for- and non-profit sectors, as well as experts in leadership development. As of October, 2012, there were 21 NEW Leadership™ programs in 25 states, with additional programs planned for 2013.

Key Findings*

After participating in a week-long residential leadership institute focused on women’s civic engagement, college women:

➢ Were more likely to indicate that they would consider running for office
➢ Reported that they were more likely to contact an elected official to voice their opinion on an issue
➢ Reported higher levels of confidence speaking to an elected official
➢ Expressed greater confidence in their ability to affect change related to issues that matter to them
➢ Rated themselves higher on knowledge of women’s involvement in politics and methods for participating in politics.

Furthermore, follow-up interviews with program alumni (some of whom had participated in the program 10 years prior) revealed the following themes:

➢ Respondents stressed positive personal outcomes, including greater confidence and feelings of efficacy and empowerment
➢ In hindsight, graduates expressed increased interest in politics, or greater understanding of the many ways they could be involved in politics, as a result of their participation in NEW Leadership™. Many also articulated a new awareness of the ways that they could participate in politics, while also pursuing other personal goals and professional careers

*All reported findings are statistically significant at the .05 level, minimally.

The respondents indicated that the most valuable aspect was interacting other women, especially women leaders who could show them “what it’s really like” to be involved in politics.

Discussion

Increased emphasis on women’s representation in recent decades has led to the emergence of organizations such as The Sue Shear Institute for Women in Public Life, the White House Project, the National Women’s Political Caucus, the Center for American Women in Politics, the Women’s Campaign Fund, The National Federation of Republican Women, the Women’s Campaign School at Yale, and Emerge that provide campaign skills training and encouragement to women seeking public leadership.

These organizations, however, can only teach women who want to be taught. They can recruit and encourage women to run for office, but so far, these efforts have not uncovered enough women candidates to close the gender gap in elected bodies. The lack of women positioning themselves for power is sometimes referred to as a “pipeline issue” as it relates to women’s political progress. Without sufficient numbers of women in the pipeline to pursue positions of power and authority in the political arena, there is concern that they may never achieve representation in numbers that reflect adequately their share of the population.

Encouraging young women to pursue careers in electoral politics is seen as one strategy for ameliorating the gender disparity that has characterized political institutions for decades. Men, it is assumed, are groomed for positions of political leadership in much the same way they are taught to succeed in other fields; through informal networks and mentoring. Even at a young age, however, women express less interest in politics than their male peers, raising concerns that future generations will fail to close the gap without some sort of intervention. The results of this study suggest that the NEW Leadership™ program is a mechanism for closing the gap.

Connecting, cultivating, enabling, and engaging are some of the key objectives of the six-point NEW Leadership™ curriculum. Participants are exposed to a multitude of stimuli on each day of the program, all with the end goal of inspiring and empowering them to act. They meet informally with women leaders who share their career paths and offer insight and advice to those seeking to following in their footsteps, and teach them the ways of the political world. They are given opportunities to practice and improve personal leadership skills such as public speaking, when they are assigned to introduce a faculty member to the group. They receive praise and encouragement from program staff and faculty who affirm their goals and aspirations. And they are repeatedly asked to use their talents in a public leadership role.

Conclusion

Since 1991, NEW Leadership™ programs across the country have worked to “educate and empower” college women to consider careers in politics by exposing them to women leaders who demystify the political process, affirm their aspirations, and represent a full spectrum of opportunities for engagement in public life. This project examined the efficacy of the NEW Leadership™ model, and the findings suggest cause for optimism: Students who complete NEW Leadership™ programs report higher levels of internal and external political efficacy, and indicate that they are more likely to run for public office than their non-participating peers.

The importance of this last point cannot be overemphasized: The relationship between participation in NEW Leadership™ and self-reported likelihood of running for public office is positive and significant (at the .05 level). Women leave the program with greater confidence in their ability to effect change, and an enhanced willingness to consider seeking elected office. This is strong evidence that programs like NEW Leadership™ are effective at building political ambition in young women, and it holds promise for the political pipeline.

Methodology

Four 2011 NEW Leadership™ Development Network programs were included in the research sample: NEW Leadership™ New Jersey, NEW Leadership™ Nevada, NEW Leadership™ Ohio, and the 21st Century Leadership Academy at the University of Missouri–St. Louis. A pre-test was administered to 160 program applicants on-line during May and early June 2011, prior to each respective NEW Leadership™ program. One hundred and four students completed the pre-test for a response rate of 65 percent.

An on-line post-test was administered during the month of August, 2011. The post-test was administered to pre-test respondents only, as completion of both measures was required for inclusion in the sample. A total of 83 individuals (59 participants and 24 non-participants) responded to both the pre- and post-tests. The overall response rate for participants and non-participants was 82 and 77 percent, respectively.

On both the pre- and post-test, survey respondents were asked to indicate if they had participated in any of 12 political activities. The list of activities ranged from membership in a campus organization to running for political office, and respondents were instructed to “check all that apply.” Respondents were asked to rate their level of interest in politics and assess their political knowledge and confidence using a Likert Scale of 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest).

A two-tailed t-test was used to analyze the difference in means of responses for the applicant and participant groups.

Interviews were conducted with 16 graduates of the four programs included in the study. Respondents were selected randomly from participation lists provided by program directors, and interviews were conducted by phone between Oct. 2011, and Jan. 2012.

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