

## From ballot to binder: How women in political appointments tell a different story of political ambition than women in elected office.

*Despite some progress, women are still woefully underrepresented in running and holding elected office in the US. But what about political appointments? In new research which uses state-level survey data, [Kaitlin Sidorsky](#) looks at whether or not women's political ambitions change when they are appointed rather than elected. She finds that while more women could be found in appointed rather than elected offices, the more qualified many felt for higher office, the less ambitious they were to achieve it.*



Academics and scholars alike are fascinated by the low numbers of women that are running and holding elected office. Nearly 100 years after gaining the right to vote, women only hold 20 percent of congressional seats, and less than a quarter of [state legislative positions](#). Yet every time the media and scholars focus on why women are not in elected positions, they reinforce the mentality that elected office is the only kind of public office- completely ignoring the other viable pathway to public office: appointment. Even when appointing women is the subject of a presidential debate, as it was in 2012, it still fails to capture the interest of the public or even academia. The Republican Party candidate, Mitt Romney shined a bright light on the need for more women in state cabinet positions when he highlighted the low number of female candidates for appointed positions. He recalled how he reached out to women's organizations who brought him "whole binders full of women."

Although Romney's comment would become the butt of many jokes, his description of searching for applicants for cabinet posts in state government opens the door to a rarely studied political office: the political appointment.

Many of the theories surrounding why women do not run for elected office are based on the characteristics of elections themselves. Women are less likely to be competitive- so they do not run. Women are less likely to think they are competent to run for [elected office](#). This prevents them from even thinking of themselves as candidates- so they do not run. Women are not as likely [to be recruited](#) for elected office- so they do not run. What happens to women's political ambition when the office does not require any of these things?

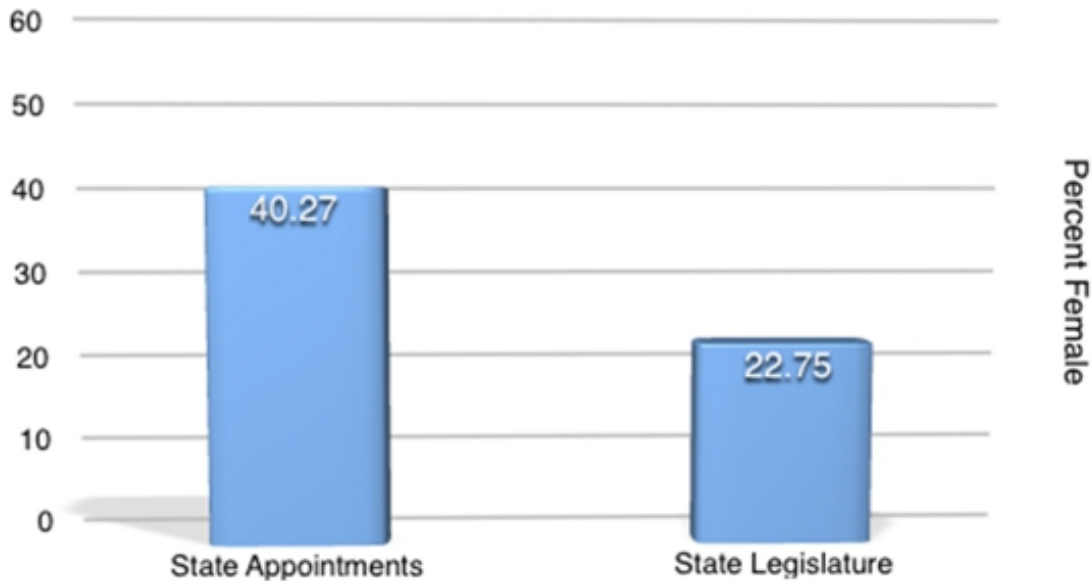
What if we looked at a political position that can be less time consuming, less public, and more tailored to an individual's expertise and interests? You will not find this kind of office in the electoral world- you will, however, find it within political appointments. Using original survey, I tested how the story of women's political ambition changes when we look to political appointments instead of elected positions.

My survey targeted individuals in political appointments across twenty states, varied by region, culture, percentage of women in appointments, and percentage of women in the state legislature in 2013. Appointees held positions from the lowest level state board and commission all the way to cabinet secretaries in the departments of Health, Environment, Natural Resources, and Commerce. The goal of this survey was to figure out 1) who women in these appointments were, 2) if women in appointments were less ambitious for higher office than the men- mirroring what we already know of elected officials, and 3) if women in appointments continue to believe they are unqualified for higher office. The lack of women's confidence in their political abilities is one of the strongest predictors of the initial interest in elected office and I want to know if it also affects the interest in seeking a higher office amongst appointees.

Figure 1 below contains the average percentage of women in appointments from the 20 states I surveyed in 2013 and the average percentage of women in state legislatures from those same states. More women can be found in the

appointment world at the state level than in elected office. Furthermore, the women in appointments are younger, more educated, and more liberal than appointed males.

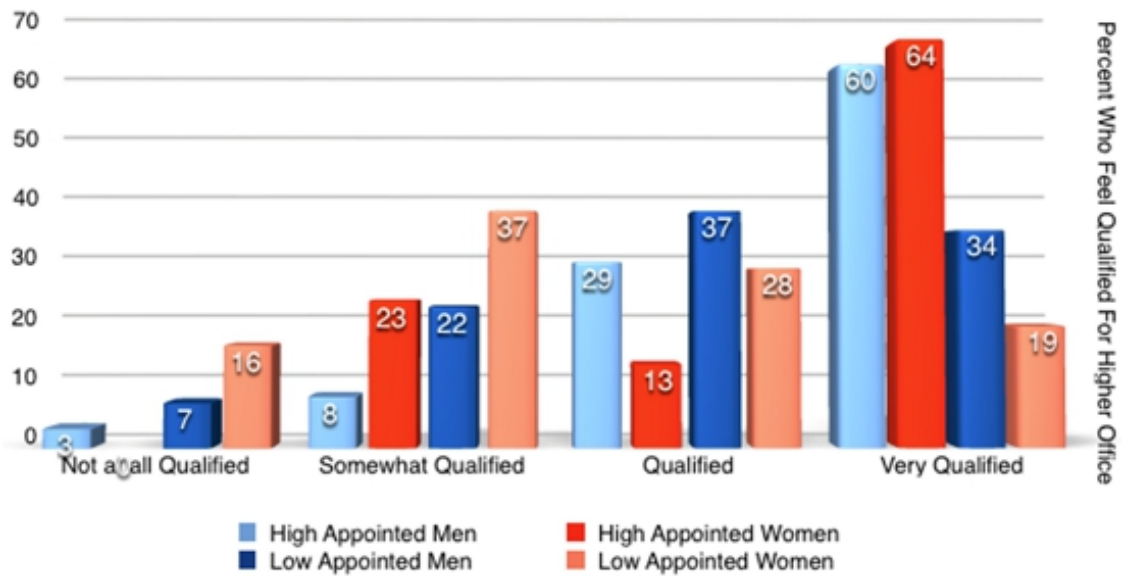
**Figure 1 – Percentage of women in state appointments and the state legislature, 2013**



The main contributions of this analysis was to understand whether ambition differed by sex amongst appointees, and whether appointees ambition was affected by the same variables that affect elected official ambition. One of the [major variables](#) affecting women’s initial interest in elected office is whether or not she feels she is qualified to run for elected office. In general, women feel less qualified to run for office than similarly situated men. As women become as confident in their abilities as men they become more ambitious for elected office. No study has investigated whether or not this variable, referred to as gendered perceptions, continues to affect women once they already hold a public office and are considering moving up the political career ladder. Figure 2 below shows the results from my survey, indicating that women, particularly women in low appointments, continue to feel they are less qualified to hold higher public office.

Additionally, analysis revealed that appointed women were nine percent less likely to be politically ambitious for higher office than appointed males. When I included the variable measuring gendered perceptions, I found a surprising reversal from previous political ambition results mentioned above. Instead of appointed women becoming more ambitious the more qualified they feel to hold higher office, they actually become less ambitious.

**Figure 2 – Qualification self-assessment for higher office by sex and level of appointment**



This study raises important questions about the source of political ambition for women in the United States- or lack thereof. Prior studies had only taken into consideration how women feel about elected office, and how elected women decide to seek higher elected office. This focus has not only ignored a considerable number of women in non-elected positions, but it has also meant the study of political ambition is tied to characteristics only found in elected office. Furthermore, my study challenges the notion that if women simply had more self-confidence they would be just as politically ambitious as men. The appointed women who did score themselves as being more qualified for higher office were less ambitious for higher office- instead of more.

I argue that these women are less ambitious for higher public office due to the nature of their position. Many of the women from the survey said they were only appointed due to their profession, expertise, or passion for the issue. Many were emphatic that their positions were not political, and they had no political agenda whatsoever. These feelings are closely related to an area of political science that studies the disavowal of politics, where individuals taking part in the political process distance themselves from the political arena because they feel politics is not the way to get things accomplished. For those who disavow politics, they convince themselves that their position is not political, and therefore will not be dragged down into the political muck.

As there are countless more women in political appointments than elected office, it is imperative that we widen our scope when studying women's political ambition. Partly this is so we can include all the non-elected women who could have higher ambitions. But it is also so we do not confuse the characteristics unique to one office with the reasons why women may not want to enter into the political arena.

*This article is based on the paper, 'Moving on Up? The Gendered Ambitions of State-Level Appointed Officials', in Political Research Quarterly, which will be free to read until December 15, 2015.*

Featured [image credit: Thomas Hawk \(Flickr, CC-BY-NC-2.0\)](#)

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor the London School of Economics.*

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Kaitlin Sidorsky is an Assistant Professor at Coastal Carolina University. Her research interests include political ambition, political appointments, and the intersection of gender and federalism.

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