

Out of the Running

Why Millennials Reject Political Careers and Why It Matters

SHAUNA L. SHAMES

INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE

Why Consider this Book for Your Class?

- Includes new evidence from a rare and hard-to-reach sample of elite Millennials about their political aspirations, offering information about why so many young people wouldn't want to be political candidates
- Offers a rare intersectional analysis of political ambition, looking not only at women or people of color, but race and gender together
- Writing is accessible, engaging, and understandable to anyone who follows American politics

"Shauna Shames is a young woman with a fire in her belly about young people leading in politics and the brains and tenacity to make it happen. This book is about what Shauna has been dedicated to for years, and I agree with her that **it is the most important thing we can do to maintain and strengthen our democracy: Get diverse young people to run for office in great numbers.** Buy it, read it, and buy at least ten more and send them to the young women and men you know."

—Marie C. Wilson, Honorary Founder and President Emerita, Ms. Foundation for Women; Founder, The White House Project



OUT
OF THE
RUNNING

WHY MILLENNIALS
REJECT POLITICAL
CAREERS AND
WHY IT MATTERS

SHAUNA L. SHAMES

272 PAGES • PAPER
978-1-4798-7748-5

General Summary

Millennials are often publically criticized for being apathetic about the American political process and their lack of interest in political careers. But what do millennials themselves have to say about the prospect of holding political office? Are they as uninterested in political issues and the future of the American political system as the media suggests?

Out of the Running goes directly to the source and draws from extensive research, including over 50 interviews, with graduate students in elite institutions that have historically been a direct link for their graduates into state or federal elected office: Harvard Law, Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, and Boston's Suffolk University Law School. Shauna Shames, herself a young graduate of Harvard University, suggests that millennials are not uninterested; rather, they don't believe that a career in politics is the best way to create change. Millennials view the system as corrupt or inefficient and are particularly skeptical about the fundraising, frenzied media attention, and loss of privacy that have become staples of the American electoral process. They are clear about their desire to make a difference in the world but feel that the "broken" political system is not the best way to do so—a belief held particularly by millennial women and women of color.

The implications of Shames' argument are crucial for the future of the American political system—how can a system adapt and grow if qualified, intelligent leaders are not involved? An engaging and accessible resource for anyone who follows American politics, *Out of the Running* highlights the urgent need to fix the American political system, as an absence of diverse millennial candidates leaves its future in a truly precarious position.

SUMMARY

In the opening chapter of *Out of the Running*, Shames presents groundwork for understanding elite Millennials' generally low levels of political ambition. Through extensive interviews and surveys, Shames's research suggests that Millennials understand the rewards and costs of running for election in a different way than previous generations. Millennials on the whole seem to see politics as a constraint on action, as opposed to a tool for accomplishing greater good. However, not all Millennials are alike. Some in this group were "political animals," individuals exceptionally driven towards attaining political office. Most were not; the majority viewed electoral politics as an inherently flawed system, especially due to the way money is involved in the campaign process. This chapter also describes Shames's study, where individuals were selected due to their location in prestigious institutions which are feeders into national and state-level politics. Almost all of these Millennials described themselves as "ambitious," but most were not politically ambitious (in the sense of wanting to run for office). Overall, Shames finds that a lack of interest in running for office is linked more to the way the Millennial generation views politics government, and in particular to a rational costs-versus-benefits calculus, than to a lack of ambition or interest in politics.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Who are the Millennials in this study and how were they chosen for participation?
- Why do Millennials think that acting outside of establishment-politics is a better way to effect change?
- What sort of factors may contribute to the view that politicians are "constrained"?
- Why is the level of trust that Millennials have towards government so low?
- Why might race and gender continue to factor into the likelihood of whether or not an individual will run for office, even at the elite level?
- What sort of trends in public opinion, or even specific events, might contribute to the disillusionment and lack of political interest that Millennials display?
- What are "political animals"? How is their political ambition different than the ambition of others considering running for political office?

I. GOOD REASONS NOT TO RUN: PAGES 1-17

- How did Shames conduct the study? What were the specific campuses chosen for inclusion and why? How were participants recruited? What do you think of this methodology?
- What does Shames mean by saying the book takes an “innovative intersectional approach” to examining race and gender differences in political ambition? What key findings does such an approach yield?

II. POLITICAL AMBITION: PAGES 18-34

II. POLITICAL AMBITION

SUMMARY

Chapter two of *Out of the Running* addresses several key theoretical questions that underpin this study, including what political ambition is, who has it, why women and people of color seem less likely to run for political office, and why we should care. Shames explores the concept of political ambition, or the desire driving individuals to want to run for office. Such political ambition is not evenly distributed. The candidates we currently see run -- those most ambitious to hold office -- are a narrow and unrepresentative group. The first factor, narrow, is concerning because in a significant number of elections voters do not get a meaningful choice between parties. A lack of representation is equally as concerning due to growing diversity amongst the American population. Further, there are political ambition gaps by race and gender; women and minority groups do not seek office as much as white men. Shames suggests the anticipation of discrimination may play a role here, with many women and people of color choosing not to run because they think they will face double standards and will have to work harder to be elected. In a representative democracy such as the United States, it is in the interest of all citizens to have an electorate that is as diverse as the nation itself. That inequalities exist in representation is not itself a problem, but race, class, and gender inequalities in particular persist rather than rotate, and stem from a history of state action, both of which make them a problem for democracy. In total, this chapter takes an introspective look at why and how political ambition impacts women and minority representation in government, and why it matters that as a nation we work to improve participation across the spectrum.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Leadership is by nature unequal. Should we care about women and people of color not being fully represented? If so, why?
- What is political ambition? What factors might affect it?
- What sort of social expectations cause women and people of color to decide not to run? Are these social expectations legitimate?
- What are some ways that the structure surrounding elections could be changed to create more equality amongst candidates from differing backgrounds?
- How does visibility of diverse elected officials impact people considering a run?
- What are the positives/negatives of the current candidate self-recruitment system?
- Should political parties be more responsible for recruiting candidates that run on their ticket?

III. THE COSTS OF RUNNING: PAGES 35-69

SUMMARY

Chapter three of *Out of the Running* discusses the costs of running for political office. According to data collected by Shames through surveys and interviews, running as a candidate in the United States (particularly for higher office but even for local office) can be difficult, risky, and costly in terms of time, money, energy, and other resources. Several features of our unusual campaign processes make it more difficult to be a candidate here than in other advanced post-industrial democracies. Another common deterrent from running is the way that the media intrudes on candidates' privacy. While people recognize that this is in order to improve transparency amongst politicians, the omnipresence of media coverage can push individuals away. Another notable cost is personality-linked; extroverts and people who enjoy arguing have an easier time in many aspects of campaigning. Overall, Shames finds that political ambition among these Millennials is strongly related to how difficult or costly they perceive running for office perceived to be.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How does the U.S. compare to other post-industrial democracies on campaign financing?
- What are some of the costs of running for office that Shames finds in the minds of Millennials?
- What are the two different types of costs these Millennials see relating to campaign funding?
- Is media intrusion on politicians more beneficial, in that it promotes transparency amongst those who do run, or harmful, in that it discourages people from running?
- Why and how does the current American political system discourage introverts and other people with certain character traits from running for office?
- How does the two-party system affect or constrain political ambition for some of these Millennials?
- How, if at all, can some of these cost factors be changed so that more people might consider running?

IV. THE REWARDS OF RUNNING: PAGES 70-86

SUMMARY

While the costs of running for and being in office may be high, for some people the rewards could be a powerful motivation to run anyway. Although some survey and interview respondents simply wanted to be famous or to have power for its own sake, the far larger proportion related the rewards of politics to the idea of helping people or making the world a better place. Perhaps the many failings of the political system could be overlooked, or minimized in the mind of a potential candidate, if s/he truly felt that politics was useful to solve the kinds of problems s/he cared about. The interviewees or survey respondents who saw politics as useful were in fact the least likely to say they would be deterred by having to raise money or an intrusive media or other features of the campaign environment. High perceptions of rewards, in other words, could balance out even high perceptions of costs. But not many in this study saw enough rewards to make the idea of running seem worth their while.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What sorts of rewards are associated with running for office? Which seem to be the most powerful motivators for young people's political ambition?
- Why is politics considered a useful tool to help people by some individuals, but not by others?
- How realistic are the perceived rewards of running for office?
- Are rewards perceived to be different at different levels/types of offices?
- Do the rewards understood by Millennials in this chapter overshadow the numerous costs mentioned in chapter three?

V. WEIGHING THE COSTS AND REWARDS OF POLITICAL CAREERS: PAGES 87-106

SUMMARY

The first few chapters of this book explored the concept of political ambition and what we know about it from research and then delved deeply into what might be the costs and the rewards in the minds of potential Millennial candidates. Both chapters 3 and 4 on costs and rewards, respectively, developed tools for understanding and measuring these perceptions in people's minds. Now Chapter 5 simulates how these costs and rewards might "stack up" against each other. Going back to that image of a balanced set of scales, the answer is: pretty evenly. Generally across this sample, the rewards do not outweigh the costs, resulting in candidate deterrence rather than a whole lot of political ambition. I argue that it is not because these young people are dumb or selfish; while a few wanted to be famous or make a lot of money, these were a small minority of the group as a whole. Mostly, it appeared that these graduate students wanted to do good things for the world (help their communities, solve problems, improve lives) but were highly ambivalent about their ability to do good through electoral politics. The indication from the data so far is also that rewards may matter more than costs; seeing low costs and low rewards does not seem to stimulate political ambition, but high rewards— even if coupled against high costs— can. What is most damning for the political ambition of these young people was that most just did not see high rewards from running. According to this analysis so far, some "political animals" in the sample did indeed want to become candidates, but they were a small, non-representative group, especially in terms of gender.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- For most people, how do rewards stack up against costs in the minds of these elite Millennials? (How does Shames do this "stacking up"? Does the methodology make sense to you? How realistic or not is it?)
- How, if at all, do the "costs" and "rewards" indices relate to each other? Are they just measuring the same thing?
- What do the distribution curves in Figures 5.1 and 5.2 show?
- This is a specialized sample. Do you think that these findings would hold true for young people more generally, or are there certain findings that might be different for these elite folks?
- How "moveable" are people when it comes to political ambition? What does this tell us?

VI. INEFFICIENT AND UNAPPEALING POLITICS: PAGE 107-136

SUMMARY

The men and women in this elite sample should be, and in many ways are, more alike than they are different. However, certain items show very strong differences between men and women, and many of these relate to running for public office. From the evidence presented here, it appears that women in general are less likely than men to think that politics is of use in solving the problems they care about— and this correlates strongly with political ambition. Also, women have been far more likely than men to have experienced discrimination and are much more likely to expect to face it in the electoral arena, should they run. Women, more than men, see running as a game that is stacked against them.

Differing perceptions of the usefulness of politics by sex and differing experiences with discrimination both seem extremely related to the disparate levels of political ambition between men and women. Even before we add the expectation of discrimination as a cost, women saw higher costs and lower rewards to candidacy than did men. However, the vehemence with which interview respondents spoke about bias in the electoral arena and the high numbers of the survey sample expressing concerns about such biases together suggest that such expectations should indeed be considered as part of a rational cost- benefit analysis. When they are added to the rewards- minus- costs index, women as a whole fall far below the zero-line. As studies have found, certain personality characteristics, such as confidence, differ across men and women as groups. Such characteristics may partially account for women's relative reluctance to run for office. But the larger story is that almost everyone in the sample saw costs to running for and holding office, and only a narrow slice saw compensating rewards. For women as a group compared with men as a group, the costs just seem higher and the rewards seem lower.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Why might we expect not to see large gender differences between the men and the women in this particular sample?
- How different, if at all, are the levels of political ambition by gender?
- What is "role incongruity?"
- What did Millennial women expect in terms of fair (or not) treatment for women in politics? Does this relate to role incongruity? (If so, how?)
- How if at all are previous life experiences related to expectations of gender bias for women?
- Did men expect the political arena to be biased against women?
- What are some of the key gender differences on costs and rewards variables discussed in this chapter?

SUMMARY

On the whole, the data suggest three main conclusions about women of color specifically, when compared with either men or white women. The first is that they show greater sensitivity to many of the already-discussed costs to running for or holding office. The second is that women of color perceive additional barriers to candidacy. Third, and perhaps most important, women of color are the group least likely to think that politics can solve important problems. When we combine these factors, it is no wonder that the political ambition of women of color falls below that of both white women and of men generally. This group of bright, ambitious, and thoughtful young women saw with the “clear eyes” that Liz said women in general had about politics, and many also possessed the “second sight” discussed by Du Bois in reference to American racial minorities. Yet this was also an extraordinarily strong and inspiring group, deeply committed to helping their communities. I got the feeling that had they truly believed politics was the sphere in which they could make a difference to the world, they would have lined up to run. What was most damning for their political ambition was that the high costs were not counterbalanced by perceptions of high rewards.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Does the author think that gender and race gaps in political ambition will simply disappear as women get equal levels of education?
- What are the subgroups of men and women, by race/ethnicity, most interested in running for office? What subgroups are least interested?
- What is the author trying to visually depict in Figure 7.7, on page 160?
- How do men of color compare to white men in terms of political ambition? What about women of color specifically?
- Why are women of color the most deterred subgroup of potential candidates?
- How does Figure 7.5, for women of color only, compare to Figure 6.9 in the previous chapter (on women as a whole)? What does this difference suggest to you?