Identifying Pipeline Roadblocks for Minority Women into Political Leadership Positions in North Carolina

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Introduction

Gender parity in political office presents a significant problem at a global, national, and local level. When the additional dimension of race or ethnicity is included in the equation, the statistics inevitably become worse. North Carolina does not rank as one of the worst states when it comes to gender parity of women of color in elected office, yet the implications of a rapidly diversifying state population make this issue especially significant for the state's future. From 2002 to 2012, "the state's white population increased by 12.5 percent, while the state's African American population increased by 17.9 percent, and the state's Hispanic population increased by a substantial 111 percent" (Ajinkya 2012). The percentages of people of color in this state are rapidly increasing with time, and this demographic shift points to a future with a majority of young people of color. When this reality is juxtaposed with the current political make up of the state, there are clear and disheartening gaps, especially for women of color. In North Carolina, out of roughly 5000 elected positions in the state 27% are held by women, and only 2.2% are held by women of color (McLennan 2014). Compared to the 16.3% population of women of color in the state of North Carolina, the gap between share of political representation and population is significant (US Census Bureau). Are current policy makers, and those in positions of power even aware of the needs and issues of their evolving constituency? Diversity of representation helps to elevate the voices and perspectives of individuals and communities whose needs may not be understood or met by those who have the power to make changes. New policies are needed to change a system that perpetuates the exclusion of minority women's voices from the political process.

At the current rate of election, it would take North Carolina till 2070 to reach gender parity alone, excluding intersectional considerations such as ethnic minority or socioeconomic status (Estes 2015). Women are not encouraged at equal rates to pursue political office, and several roadblocks disproportionately affect women of color from developing and pursuing political aspirations (Women of Color in Elective Office 2015). Few formalized pipelines currently exist for women of color to enter elected office in North Carolina, and these existing pathways often lack consistency. The barriers keeping women of color from pursuing political office require sustained efforts over a period of time in order to be truly successful at addressing the systemic nature of this problem. Expanding and formalizing pipelines to better educate, recruit, reinforce and retain women of color at a young age within the political process is a key aspect to reaching long term goals of more equal representation in a state like North Carolina, with rapidly changing demographics.

> *"The troubling fact is that issues at the center of the lives of women of color rarely if ever take center stage in the political arena. Yet for them, having a consequential voice in our public policy discourse is not an abstraction; it is real, and the lack of it has direct and sometimes detrimental impacts on their world— their livelihoods, their bodies, their children, and their families."*
>
> **~Maya Harris, Center for American Progress**

The History and Context of the Issue

While unequal gender representation has long been an issue within the political process in the United States, the additional consideration of race or ethnicity has been a less examined factor. In order to learn more about the real challenges faced by women of color in the political process, I conducted several interviews with women of color who are either declared candidates, currently sitting elected officials, or retired elected officials in the state of North Carolina. Their insights combined with outside research helped me to synthesize a more complete narrative of the barriers that disproportionately impact women of color in the political process. This synthesis revealed six major roadblocks for women and women of color that prevent them from ascending into positions of political power. These roadblocks are as follows:

Roadblocks	Reasons
Family	• Primary caregiver to parents/children • Distance/time of travel
Financials	• Cost of campaign • Financial viability of elected office • Cost of travel
Perception of Qualifications Issues	• Despite high qualifications, women don't often think they're qualified *enough*
Needing to be Asked	• Women aren't being asked • Women often need to be asked multiple times (7)
Fear of Losing/Lack of Support	• Historically, when women run, women win • Women in NC are able to raise significantly more funding dollars than men
Visibility	• Lack of role models • Feeling of exclusion from a space that seems devoid of people who look like you

Source(s): Estes 2015, Fricke 2015, Foushee 2015, Johnson 2015, Saccoccio 2015

From my conversations with women of color elected officials, two of these roadblocks emerged as greater challenges than the rest: Financials and Visibility. Running a campaign involves a significant amount of money, and this step is just the starting point. Even if an elected position is secured, often times elected office is not a financially viable job on it's own. For example, the yearly salary for a North Carolina legislative position is $13,000, and with per diem can become at most $24,000 (McLennan 2014). Similarly, a city council position has a yearly salary of about $21,000 per year. The National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) classifies North Carolina as a hybrid legislature in, "which legislators spend two-thirds of their time in activities related to their political office, but whose total compensation is not enough to allow them to live without another source of income" (McLennan N&O). When both State and Municipal level

positions offer such low compensation, it unintentionally impedes the participation of a diversity of individuals in the legislative process by imposing financial barriers to entry.
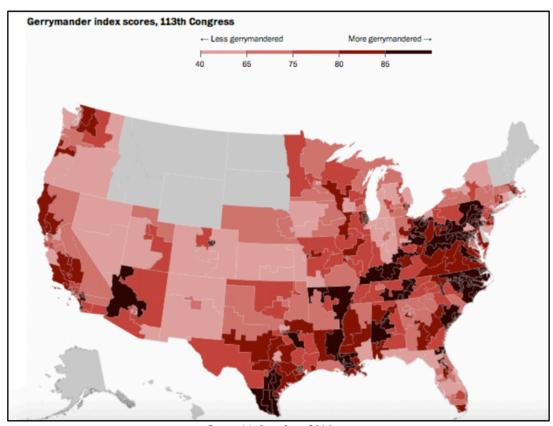
Before reaching elected office, declared candidates must first secure sufficient campaign contributions in order to run and convey their message. Campaign donations are essential to funding and running a strong campaign, and often candidates must invest some of their own money in the election process. State level races have become increasingly expensive, with House races costing an average of $100,000 and Senate races costing $200,00, with many candidates needing to raise significantly more money depending on the district and the race (Casey 2012). Many women, and especially women of color, may not be in positions where accepting such a low paying, high-cost job is viable. Furthermore, expenses incurred from travelling from further parts of the state to Raleigh are just one other example of additional costs in the process.

Beyond costs, a reoccurring theme in the narratives of women of color elected officials is the issue of Visibility. It is hard to decide to run when no one in office looks like you, and it is hard to not be disillusioned with a system that does not visibly appear to represent you or your needs. With so few women of color in elected positions, there are very few role models and little encouragement for aspiring, young, women of color to see themselves within the political process. This issue becomes a vicious cycle as more women of color decide not to run based on the poor representation and visibility of currently elected women of color officials, thus further exacerbating and perpetuating the problem.

Policy and Government Roadblocks

While the aforementioned roadblocks act as significant deterrents to women of color in elected office, the issue can either be compounded or alleviated by government and policy regulations.

One example of a policy that compounds the problem is gerrymandering. Gerrymandering is the process of manipulating district boundaries to favor a certain group. North Carolina is currently one of the states with the worst gerrymandered districts in the entire country, holding a record of 3 out of the 10 most gerrymandered districts including NC-1, NC-4 and NC-12 (Ingraham 2014). Some districts were created specifically with the intention of being "minority/majority" districts that are designed to elect a certain type of person into office. In fact, in February 2016 Federal courts demanded the redrawing of districts NC-1 and NC-12 by independent parties prior to the North Carolina March 25th Primary on account of being drawn on racial biases (WNCN 2016). This issue significantly hinders the ability of women of color in specific to get elected within certain districts in North Carolina.

Gerrymander index scores, 113th Congress

← Less gerrymandered   More gerrymandered →

40   65   75   80   85

Source(s): Ingraham 2014

While gerrymandering compounds the problem, other states provide examples of government taking substantive policy action to directly address the lack of gender parity in elected office by adopting policies that address this issue. For example, Massachusetts recently passed S1007 "a resolution to encourage equitable and diverse gender representation on boards of companies in the Commonwealth" (Kane 2015). Similarly, Iowa passed a law in 1987 mandating state level 50% gender equity on all boards/commissions, which was later extended to county/city boards in 2009. At a different political level, South Carolina created the Gubernatorial Appointment Project to, "add resources to the process of identifying qualified women for appointment to power boards" (Jennings 2013). This initiative, established under the first minority woman to serve as South Carolina's Governor, is overseen by the non-profit organization Southeastern Institute for Women in Politics, and demonstrates a collaborative government partnership effort to increase gender equality in political office (Charleston Regional Business Journal 2010).

While there are significant barriers to entry for women of color to overcome in politics, there are opportunities to create policy changes that can help address the issues. The current environment in North Carolina prevents women of color from successfully reaching elected office by failing to reinforce the inconsistent and informal pipelines in existence. From personal accounts of current minority women in elected office, certain issues such as wanting to be an effective intermediary between the activist community and policy makers, or wanting to make sure their children had equal opportunities in education despite their skin color, drove them to politics and convinced them that while they may not have envisioned themselves in this role, there was a

need for them. Indeed, within the context of the minority experience, this is entirely true: there need to be voices at all levels of decision making that speak on behalf of minority groups, and who best to represent those needs than someone who is a part of that group?

A Policy Recommendation

It is important for North Carolina leadership to take action to help solve this problem, especially since the state's current demographic transition will result in further unequal representation as time goes on and political leadership positions remain empty of women of color. While aforementioned issues such as gerrymandering result in significant difficulties for women of color getting elected, re-examinations and redrawing requires either federal action or a wait till the 2020 census. In the meantime, there are several policy reformations and cooperative measures that can address this issue and establish the level of reinforcement needed to encourage young women of color into elected office over the various stages of their lifetime.

My proposed policy recommendation involves the North Carolina General Assembly Internship program. Currently, North Carolina state government offers three main internships within different branches: Executive Branch (driven by Governor's staff), Legislative Branch (Staff Interns), and Legislative Branch (Representative Interns). These programs exist for college undergraduate and graduate students, allowing individuals the opportunity to work intimately alongside government officials while observing the political process in action. These are paid positions that are crucial stepping-stones and introductions into the political ecosystem. At a high school level, the North Carolina General Assembly sponsors the "Page Program" that gives high school students an opportunity to participate in the political process over the course of the summer (State of North Carolina Internship Program 2016).
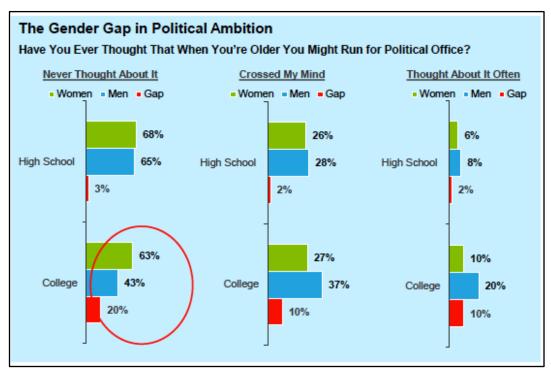
The Legislative Intern Program council was created in 1989 as a body to oversee and select interns. The last legislative change to the internship program occurred in 2007, to expand the program to allow community college program students to also participate (North Carolina General Assembly 2007). Since 2007, no additional changes have been made to the structure of the program. Explicit structural changes are necessary to reinforce a program that has the potential to reach and provide invaluable opportunities to women of color and other minority groups to gain exposure to the political process. The North Carolina General Assembly allocates roughly $130,000 every long session to fund the internship programs, and this monetary support demonstrates an understanding of their impact and ability to educate, recruit, and ultimately retain youth participants in the political process (McLennan 2015).

These types of programs are critical for improving the pipelines for young women of color, but largely due to the methodology of the recruitment process, women of color do not fill as many of these positions. Representation does not occur uniformly and equally from throughout the state, with consideration to gender, or ethnic and racial minority status. This creates a system by which not only are different counties unequally represented, but women and women of color are not recruited as often.

From a conversation with a sitting NC Senator, I learned that over her 3-year tenure in the House and Senate, she had worked with five different interns. Of the five, only one was female, and was

not a woman of color. The Senator was not communicated with about how the interns were selected, and only in some instances was involved in the interview process for the final candidates (Foushee 2015).

What this demonstrates is that internship program has several major flaws: recruitment, transparency and placement. Internship programs such as this are fantastic ways to encourage and expose interested youth to the political process, and in turn, help them envision a future where they could also participate in it within elected office. In fact, studies have shown that college is the critical point within the trajectory of young women's lives where the interest in political leadership amongst women and men divides, leaving more women uninterested or uncertain about politics (Estes 2014).

The Gender Gap in Political Ambition
Have You Ever Thought That When You're Older You Might Run for Political Office?

Never Thought About It		Crossed My Mind		Thought About It Often	
Women Men Gap		Women Men Gap		Women Men Gap	
High School	68% / 65% / 3%	High School	26% / 28% / 2%	High School	6% / 8% / 2%
College	63% / 43% / 20%	College	27% / 37% / 10%	College	10% / 20% / 10%

Source(s): Estes 2015, Lawless & Fox 2013

This drop off point demonstrates the necessity of reinforcing and improving programs that target this age demographic in specific, and making intentional changes to the recruitment, transparency, and placement structure of the current internship program could take significant steps towards solving the problem:

Recruitment

Recruit more evenly across geographic, gender, and race/ethnicity. Allow opportunities for minorities to enter the political process, and ensure that recruiting occurs in more than just the major universities. Establish a formal recruitment process with annual milestones and responsible contacts within Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), women's colleges, and Multicultural Student Affairs Offices.

Transparency

Improve transparency regarding the distribution of funding, the internship programs, and the methods used to recruit interns. Lack of both transparency and ease of access to this information produces confusion regarding the success of the program, and it's reach. As a source of government funding, ensure that the public receives better information regarding the design of the programs. Have explicitly stated and searchable information about the application process, and maintain year-round efforts at website maintenance. Students searching for internship opportunities should not have difficulty tracing the chain of command or the opportunities available to them.

Placement

Finally, once interns are selected, it is crucial to make placements that allow for the development of strong mentorship relationships. Prioritizing placing women of color with female government officials, or if possible, women of color adds another level to the mentorship relationship. This placement of interns helps address the issue of Visibility. Furthermore, the development of this relationship benefits the intern because, "encouragement from political actors is the single most important predictor of considering a candidacy" (Lawless & Fox 2010).

These structural changes to the North Carolina General Assembly Internship Program, if implemented, could directly address the roadblocks of Financials and Visibility by offering a paid position that intentionally recruits and pairs minority women with political mentors who can show them by example that they, too, have a place in the political process. While these structural changes can provide relatively simple opportunities to improve the scope of an existing program, fully addressing the lack of women of color in elected office requires reinforcing different stages of a young minority woman's life. This can only truly be done through cooperative efforts between government, educational institutions, and external organizations. There are several dedicated organizations at both the state and national level that have the ability to bridge the gaps remaining in the pipeline to get young women of color into political office.

Best Practice Model: Lillian's List

Outside of the direct North Carolina government organizations, I searched for external organizations addressing gender inequality at the political level. I identified and partnered with an organization called Lillian's List and used their approach as a best practice model to examine this issue. Lillian's List originated as a Political Action Committee (PAC) in 2002, but has recently transitioned into a 501(c)(4) organization that helps support progressive women at various stages in the process of pursuing elected office (Saccoccio 2015). Currently, Lillian's List offers four main training services that directly target the six roadblocks.

Program Name	Function	Roadblocks					
		1	2	3	4	5	6
Get Elected	Workshop designed to support declared candidates in preparation for election cycles	√	√	√		√	
Get Ready to Run	Workshop designed to encourage potential candidates considering running for office	√	√	√	√	√	
Issues Training	Help candidates understand voter issues and polling			√		√	
Run to Win (Public Speaking Training)	Give prospective and declared candidates opportunities to practice and develop aspects of presentation, delivery, and public speaking			√		√	

Source(s): Saccoccio 2015

Besides these training sessions, Lillian's List actively recruits all over the state of North Carolina, engaging with local leaders and asking for recommendations of potential women who would excel in political office. Their recruitment model provides a strong example for the North Carolina General Assembly in how internship recruitment should similarly be conducted in order to reach out to underrepresented talent.

Furthermore, Lillian's List also provides support at different levels of the political process by focusing on and providing workshops for campaign managers and other crucial individuals involved in the election process. Not only are the elected positions typically bereft of women of color, but also the behind-the-scenes of the political world are typically similarly lacking (Saccoccio 2015).

Lillian's List currently does emphasize the inclusion of women of color in both their main and subsidiary programming in order to actively pull these underrepresented groups into the political process. Potential additions to increased recruitment efforts could include recruitment sessions at HBCU's and special scholarship opportunities that encourage participation in sessions.

As an organization, Lillian's List is currently doing amazing and extensive work, especially considering the fact that the organization only has four employees. Three of the four women of color candidates I spoke to utilized the resources of Lillian's List during their political process, and all three of these women cited the organization as a critical aspect of their political success.

For future recommendations to increase scope, one of the most important recommendations would be to focus on long-term strategy and payoff. Currently, Lillian's List programs focus primarily on women who are getting ready to run or are already running. Expanding their long-term strategy to sponsor workshops with young women and women of color earlier along in the pipeline would help ensure larger numbers of candidates further down the line. In order to ensure

the Visibility gap is bridged, Lillian's List could partner with other organizations that focus explicitly on targeting young women of color earlier on in the pipeline and exposing them to potential role models in the political process.

Additional Programs and Models for Increasing Gender Parity

There are several programs and organizations that exist on a national level that work dedicatedly towards providing opportunities for young women, and especially young women of color, to get experience in the political environment and encourage future participation. One such nonprofit headquartered in Washington, DC is called "Running Start" and offers several yearly programs designed to expose young women to politics. Among these offerings are their "Young Women's Political Leadership" program that invites around 60 high school students a year to participate in seminars, meet their representatives, and engage with presenters from a diversity of backgrounds. Over half the participants received full scholarships, mitigating the costs of attendance and allowing for more women of color and first generation college students to participate in programs. In fact, the organization cites 60% of its participants in this program as young women of color. Additionally, their "Elect Her" programs in collaboration with the American Association of University Women (AAUW) operate on campuses across the United States to help encourage women to run for student government. This program trained 2,500 students in 2015, and aims to double that number in 2016. These numbers demonstrate a significant impact at the most crucial stage of political development requiring reinforcement. In combination with these programs, Running Start has been able to incorporate the theme of "#ILookLikeaPolitician", a social media campaign designed to engage program participants in the idea that they belong in the political process. This combination of programs and initiatives address the Financials, as well as Visibility barriers that are most present for women of color (Richmond 2016).

Unfortunately, North Carolina has been less involved in the programs supported by organizations such as this. "Elect Her" programs have occurred sporadically at Davidson University and High Point University, while programs at Duke and NC Central have fallen out of practice in the past two years. Establishing stronger connections between state level AAUW organizations and local universities by including AAUW responsibilities in an existing administrative position could be one method of establishing more consistent programming efforts across both external organizations and higher education institutions.

These inconsistencies demonstrates one aspect of North Carolina's failure to maintain programs and cooperate with national actors to improve the opportunities for women, and women of color in this state to enter potential political pipelines. Addressing the barriers for women of color into political office requires both public and private partnerships involving several stakeholders, including the local government, national and state level organizations, and local universities. Without specific channels between these stakeholders, the programs to help address these issues are unable to reach their intended targets, thus perpetuating systems in the state that make it extremely difficult for young women of color to develop and maintain interest in the political process.

However, with the cooperative efforts in place, these programs in conjunction have the potential to impact women of color at all stages in their lifetime, as well as collectively reinforce all six critical barriers:

Program Name	Timeline	Roadblocks					
		1	2	3	4	5	6
NCGA Page Program	High School		√				√
LL Get Elected	Running	√	√	√		√	
LL Issues Training	Considering/ Running			√		√	
LL Run to Win (Public Speaking Training)	Considering/ Running			√		√	
RS Young Women's Political Summit	High School		√	√	√	√	√
SC Gubernatorial Appointment Project	Considering	√		√	√	√	
RS Women's Leadership Program	**High School**		√	√	√	√	√
RS/AAUW Elect Her	**College**				√		√
NCGA Internship Program	**College**		√	√	√		√
LL Get Ready to Run	**Considering/ Running**	√	√	√	√	√	

Source(s): McLennan 2015, Richmond 2016, Saccoccio 2015, Charleston Regional Business Journal 2012

Policy Shortcomings

While I believe that addressing this issue with the aforementioned policy adaptations would certainly improve one of the main pipelines for women of color into the political process, this solution cannot overcome the systemic barriers associated with women of color historically being able to access these positions (higher education access, financial ability, etc). This policy adaptation can provide valuable experiences and opportunities for women of color, and help correct inaccurate perceptions of belonging with regard to political office, but ultimately, this solution simply alleviates the larger problems relating to race and gender. While women face significant barriers to entry within the political process, women of color experience those difficulties at even greater levels. The intersections of various demographic identities exacerbate access issues, and women of color may run at lower rates because of how their social identities intersect.

Conclusions

North Carolina must take definitive steps to increase the voices of women of color in political office. As the demographic shift takes place, the disparity between women of color in elected

office and women of color in North Carolina will only grow. Failing to address this problem now translates to a failure to invest in North Carolina's future by ignoring the long-term value of bolstering the pipelines for women of color. Tomorrow's leaders emerge from the results of strong training, support, and encouragement today, and North Carolina's current pipelines for political leadership are both incomplete and inconsistent. We need to maximize existing government programs such as the North Carolina General Assembly Internship program, in order to engage communities that are historically under-represented in the political process. Furthermore, state parties and government need to support and cooperate with external local and national programs such as Lillian's List, Running Start, and the American Association of University Women (AAUW) to best leverage these groups resources towards addressing the barriers of Financials and Visibility that most impact women of color. No one program or policy change can successfully eradicate such overwhelming and systemic problems, but by cooperating with external programs and maximizing existing pipelines, North Carolina has a strong chance of increasing the number of women of color in elected office.

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