

Electoral Institutions, Gender Stereotypes, and Women's Local Representation

Melody Crowder-Meyer  
University of the South

Shana Kushner Gadarian  
Syracuse University

Jessica Trounstine  
University of California, Merced

Melody Crowder-Meyer is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Sewanee: The University of the South. Shana Kushner Gadarian is Assistant Professor of Political Science in the Maxwell School at Syracuse University. Jessica Trounstine is Associate Professor of Political Science at University of California, Merced. Contact author is Jessica Trounstine: University of California, Merced, School of Social Sciences, Humanities, and Arts; 5200 North Lake Road, Merced, California 95343; Phone 209-228-4870; email: [jessica@trounstine.com](mailto:jessica@trounstine.com)

Despite dramatic progress in winning election to political office, women remain underrepresented at all levels of government in the United States. A great deal of research has focused on institutional barriers to equal representation, particularly at the city level (see Smith, Reingold, and Owens 2012 for a review). Yet, the findings have been inconsistent across studies and little attention has been paid to the possible mechanisms that might account for the relationships between institutions and representation. In this paper we focus on one particularly well-studied institution – the method of election for city councilors. We use a decade of candidate level data from a single, large state (California) to show that women are significantly advantaged in district (versus at-large) elections and in city clerkships compared to mayoralties and council positions. We suggest that this may be the result of the competitiveness of elections, the status of the offices, and gender stereotypes.

We argue that district elections are generally viewed as easier and less expensive to win and the positions are considered less prestigious than citywide offices for council or mayor. Because women are viewed as less capable leaders but better at secretarial tasks and constituency service than men, they benefit from a districted setting for council seats. We offer support for these claims by analyzing the proportion of women running for and elected to city councils and the probability of victory for different types of offices. We demonstrate that female candidates are more likely to run for and be elected to districted seats than at-large seats, and that when women run for more prestigious political offices, they are more politically experienced than male candidates for the same office. Cities in California that use districts facilitate the election of women, but this facilitation may be due the decision of female candidates themselves about where to run

in addition to stereotypes about women's particular political strengths. In the remainder of the paper we review the relevant literature, discuss the data, present our results, and reflect on the broader lessons for representation.

### **Importance of Women in Local Office**

Women compose a minority of local elected officials. Women hold only a quarter of city council seats (ICMA 2001, Svava 2003b), 15 to 17 percent of county commission positions (ICMA 2007, Crowder-Meyer 2010), 18 percent of mayoral seats in cities with at least 30,000 residents (CAWP 2014), and 39 percent of school board positions (Hess 2002). This underrepresentation has significant consequences for the many policies that are created and implemented at the local level, and the substantive representation of the preferences of male and female residents of localities across the United States.

On average, men and women have different preferences regarding the actions of local government. Public opinion surveys reveal that women express more liberal views than men on a variety of both social and economic issues, ranging from gay rights, to racial and ethnic minority issues, to government funding of school vouchers (Shapiro and Mahajan 1986, Caughell 2012). Women are more likely than men to support government provision of social services, and to report a greater willingness to pay for government services for the poor and elderly, economic security programs (e.g. job training and placement programs), and public safety (e.g. fire, crime prevention, ambulance, and utility services) (Burns and Schumaker 1987, Alozie and McNamara 2010, Holman 2013). There are also gender differences in preferences for how these services are provided. For example, women are more supportive than men of alternative forms of crime prevention over traditional policing (Alozie and McNamara 2010).

Gender differences in the public parallel gender differences among local elected officials. Studies identify a wide variety of local issues on which male and female policymakers differ (Schumaker and Burns 1988), and demonstrate that women are more likely than men in local elected offices to support government provision of social welfare programs (Burns and Schumaker 1987). A recent study of welfare spending in cities nationwide demonstrates that the presence of women in office (specifically female mayors and a greater proportion of female councilmembers in cities with a female executive) increases social welfare spending in American cities (Holman 2013). Those seeking local offices also reflect the gender differences found in the mass public; surveys of school board candidates find that female candidates are more liberal than male candidates on issues like multiculturalism and the discussion of homosexuality (Deckman 2007; though see Donahue 1999). Thus, it seems clear that the interests of women in the electorate are most likely to be reflected among policymakers if more women are elected to local office.

Women's presence in local office is also beneficial to women in the electorate due to the focus female officials place on issues particularly relevant to women. Women in the population are more likely than men to be recipients of benefits from social service programs (Holman 2013), thus the greater provision of these benefits by female elected officials helps to ensure the needs of women are being met by their government. Women in local office are also frequently leaders in prioritizing and pushing for policy on issues that particularly affect women such as sexual assault, domestic violence, childcare, and childbirth in public hospitals (Boles 2001). Finally, research has even found that the presence of women mayors has a positive effect on gender parity in municipal

employment (Saltzstein 1986). In short, local descriptive representation produces local substantive representation. In this paper, we contribute to understanding the conditions that enhance or obstruct the descriptive (and thus substantive) representation of women by evaluating several factors that we expect will influence women's candidacy and success rates for city offices.

### **Current Understanding of Institutional Influences on Women's Representation on City Councils**

Existing research finds contradictory effects of institutions for women's representation.<sup>1</sup> For example, while King (2002) presents evidence that districts benefit women, many others find no effect (Smith, Reingold, and Owens 2012, Alozie and Manganaro 1993, Bullock and MacManus 1991), and a number of studies have shown that women make up a slightly larger share of city councils elected at-large (Trounstone and Valdini 2008, McManus and Bullock 1995, Darcy, Welch, and Clark 1994, Karnig and Walter 1976). Scholars have hypothesized that a norm of diversity might drive this latter result. Both those selecting candidates to run and those choosing among candidates at the ballot box may feel more pressure to support female candidates in at-large contexts. Public opinion polls reveal growing social norms of diversity, exemplified by increasing numbers of people who support an equal role for women in society and a willingness to support a female presidential candidate (American National Election Studies; Smith,

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<sup>1</sup> The link between electoral institutions and the election of racial and ethnic minorities is more straightforward and the findings more consistent. When voting is polarized along racial lines and when racial and ethnic minorities live in segregated communities, they are more likely to achieve descriptive representation in districted cities (Trounstone and Valdini 2008). However, this explanation is not helpful for understanding a link between gender and electoral institutions. First, there is little evidence of consistent and widespread polarized voting along gender lines (King & Matland 2003; McDermott 1997; though see Dolan 2008 for an examination of the complexities of gender affinity effects). Secondly, the share of women in the electorate and their degree of residential segregation is relatively constant across cities.

Marsden, and Hout). In at-large contests, parties often run a slate of multiple candidates, and voters are often able to allocate votes to multiple candidates at once. In these contexts, candidate recruiters and voters may feel pressure to diversify their choices – and allocate at least some of their support to women. Additionally, recruiters and voters may be more willing to give some of their support to a less traditional (i.e. female) candidate in a context where that candidate is not the only one to whom they can offer support. In short, in many at-large contests, even if a voter supports a woman, she is not the only candidate who will win one of the offered seats, and if she does, it is not necessarily at the expense of a man who also ran (Bullock and MacManus 1991; Darcy et al. 1994). This could lead to more support for female candidates in at-large than district contexts, and offers an alternative hypothesis to those we propose. In the next sections we explain our theory regarding why women may instead be *less* likely to win election to office in at-large systems. In addition to electoral rules, we expect that voters’ long-standing perceptions of female candidates matter to voter decision-making.

### **Gender Stereotypes in Local Elections**

Although most research on local institutions and women’s representation has focused on other mechanisms, local elections are a prime location for gender stereotypes to influence outcomes. Specifically, gender stereotypes should be particularly powerful for voters casting local ballots because local elections tend to be low-salience with few easy cues for voters to rely on when choosing a candidate to support. In these types of low-information elections, research shows that voters are more likely to rely on stereotypes (Riggle et al. 1992, McDermott 1998). Additionally, individuals are more likely to rely on stereotypes when they have lower motivation to allocate much time to

their decision (Pratto and Bargh 1991), which is also likely to be true in the local context where contests typically do not receive much media or public attention. Finally, while the presence of political party cues can outweigh the influence of gender cues in voter decision-making (Huddy and Capelos 2002; Koch 2002; King and Matland 2003, though see Sanbonmatsu and Dolan 2009), the non-partisan elections in this study, like many local elections, do not offer a partisan cue for voters to use – likely increasing voters’ need to rely on gender (and other) cues in their voting decisions. Thus, gender stereotypes should influence who wins local elections.

Stereotypes may also affect women’s representation earlier in the process, through candidate selection (i.e. who gets picked to run) and through office selection (i.e. for what types of offices women run). First, those encouraging and supporting candidates for local office, as well as individuals in the candidate pool, may draw on gender stereotypes when determining whether they should recruit someone to run or choose to run themselves. Second, political elites and potential candidates may anticipate voters’ use of gender stereotypes, and decide who to recruit or whether to run based on concerns about voter use of stereotypes (Crowder-Meyer 2010). This may particularly affect women’s decisions about whether to pursue candidacy because surveys of potential candidates reveal that women in the candidate pool are more likely than men to perceive the electoral environment as biased against women (Lawless and Fox 2005; 2010). For these reasons, then, we expect stereotypes affect women’s emergence as candidates for local offices in addition to affecting success rates of women who have chosen to run.

### **Understanding Stereotypes and Institutions**

We expect gender stereotypes to influence women's candidacy and success in achieving city offices in several ways. The first set of gender stereotypes that ought to affect the election of women to local offices are those related to the competency levels and strengths associated with men and women. Some research suggests that women are seen as less capable leaders or executives (Best and Williams 1990; Fox and Oxley 2003; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; Mueller 1986), but better at constituency service (Richardson and Freeman 1995; Thomas 1992) and secretarial tasks. Furthermore, research demonstrates that women are perceived as less competent, particularly at tasks related to management (Schein 2001; Brenner, Tomkiewicz, and Schein 1989, Heilman, Block, Martell, and Simon 1989; Eagly and Mladinic 1994). Additionally, men are stereotyped as having instrumental strengths such as independence, knowledge, toughness, and assertiveness (Ashmore and Del Boca 1979, Deaux and Lewis 1984; Best and Williams 1990; Lawless 2004), strengths that are prized by voters as necessary for a "good politician" to have (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993). Consequently, we expect that women should be more likely to run for and win offices that are seen as lower-prestige and more secretarial in nature than offices that are perceived as having a higher level of responsibility and prestige.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This expectation is consistent with research at the state legislative level, which finds that women are more likely to win primary and general elections for less desirable state legislative seats (Diamond 1977; Carroll 1994) and that women more often report recruitment for less desirable contests, where their party is weak, than for more desirable state legislative contests (Niven 2006). At the local level studies have examined whether different measures of desirability, from salary to term length, to number of council seats and the size of the population represented, influence women's presence in local office. This body of literature has found no consistent negative relationship (Bullock and MacManus 1991, Engstrom, McDonald, and Chou 1988, Smith et al. 2012, Trounstein and Valdini 2008, Welch and Karnig 1979). Our conception (and measure) of prestige is different because it captures voter decision-making based on gender stereotypes and office desirability. As such, we hypothesize a negative relationship between prestige and women's representation.

Mayors are seen as more prestigious than city council members in the eyes of the American public. When asked to rate the prestige of different occupations, respondents on the 2012 General Social Survey (GSS) rated mayors as a 7.2 on a 9 point scale, compared to a prestige score of 5.6 for city council members (Smith and Son 2014).<sup>3</sup> Similarly, respondents on the 1989 GSS ranked mayors at 7.0 and city council members at 6.0 (Nakao and Treas 1990), suggesting that this perception is fairly steady over time. Additionally, the inherent duties of the offices we examine generate differences in responsibilities that voters are likely to understand. First, research indicates that mayors play a larger leadership role than city councilors, even in council manager cities (Svara 1990, Svara 2003a). Second, by definition, district officials represent only a fraction of the population, while at-large officials represent the entire city. Finally, city clerks, primarily charged with secretarial duties, have less formal responsibility for city policy-making than either mayors or councilors. Thus, we view mayoral seats as most prestigious, followed by at-large council seats, then district council seats, and finally city clerk positions. We expect women's representation to vary inversely with prestige.

Stereotypes related to the specific issue competencies and traits of women and men should also influence where women run and win. While men are seen as having instrumental strengths, women are stereotyped as being more likely to have expressive strengths like compassion and warmth (Ashmore and Del Boca 1979, Deaux and Lewis

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<sup>3</sup> Over four waves of the General Social Survey (GSS) (1965, 1967, 1989, 2012), respondents were presented with a large number of occupations derived from Census categories and asked to rank them one at a time on a "occupational prestige ladder" that had 9 stacked boxes, where 1 was the lowest prestige and 9 the highest prestige. On the 2012 GSS, respondents rated 90 occupational titles in either English or Spanish. On the 2012 GSS, respondents ranked mayors as similarly prestigious to university presidents and college professors and less prestigious than only physicians and surgeons. City council members were ranked as similarly prestigious to law clerks, locomotive engineers, museum curators, and magazine editors.

1984; Best and Williams 1990). Women are also perceived as more honest and as better at dealing with policies related to care and compassion, helping the elderly or poor, and addressing needs related to education or health (Kahn 1996; Alexander and Andersen 1993; Huddy and Terkildson 1993; Lawless 2004; Herrnson, Lay, and Stokes 2003). Finally, women are seen as better at – and in fact report spending more time on – constituency service than men in similar elected offices (Richardson and Freeman 1995; Thomas 1992). These traits and competencies should be most important in elected offices that are closest to constituents. In other words, constituents may particularly prioritize electing a compassionate, warm, honest, and service-provision-focused candidate to offices where constituents are most likely to directly interact with their elected official relative to offices where the elected official is more distant from constituents. Citywide offices are elected by a larger constituency, and as a result, are more distant from individual constituents. Welch and Bledsoe (1988) report that districted councilors spend about “4% more time doing personal services than their at-large counterparts” (page 73). The tasks of city clerks vary across cities, but in California, all share the basic functions of record keeping and election administration. Clerks often interact directly with the public, providing access to a variety of government documents.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, gender stereotypes may lead women to encounter greater electoral success in districted council seats and for the position of city clerk.

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<sup>4</sup> According to the City Clerks Association of California, “The City Clerk is the local official who administers democratic processes such as elections, access to city records, and all legislative actions ensuring transparency to the public. The City Clerk acts as a compliance officer for federal, state, and local statutes including the Political Reform Act, the Brown Act, and the Public Records Act. The City Clerk manages public inquiries and relationships and arranges for ceremonial and official functions” [http://www.californiacityclerks.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/pdf/Working\\_With\\_Your\\_City\\_Clerk.pdf](http://www.californiacityclerks.org/fileadmin/user_upload/pdf/Working_With_Your_City_Clerk.pdf)

Finally, just as voters and political elites perceive men and women potential candidates differently, evidence suggests men and women in the candidate pool also perceive themselves differently. Most importantly for this study, research demonstrates that women in the pool of likely candidates – for example, those in professions most likely to precede a political career – are more likely than similar men to judge their qualifications stringently. According to Lawless and Fox’s (2005; 2010) surveys of potential candidates, women are more likely than men to compare themselves to an ideal set of qualifications when determining if they are competent to run for office, and indicate they believe they need more experience before pursuing a run for office. Additionally, majorities of both men and women in occupations that often precede political candidacies report believing that it is more difficult for women than men to be elected to high-level political offices (Lawless and Fox 2010). Recent research suggests that this perception may be based in fact, as female congressional candidates are more likely than male candidates to face primary and general election challengers, and appear to have to be of higher quality than their male counterparts in order to achieve equal electoral success (Lawless and Pearson 2008; Fulton 2012). For these reasons, we expect that women should be less likely than men to pursue a more prestigious city office without having prior political experience.

### **Hypotheses**

The stereotype literature discussed in the previous section generates a number of implications for local elections. We argue that because citywide offices are more prestigious and difficult to win, and because gender stereotypes regarding competencies affect voter choices and potential candidate behavior in local elections, women can be

expected to perform differentially and hold different qualifications under different institutions. We test these hypotheses both by comparing male and female candidates running for the same positions and by comparing the success just of women candidates across different institutions. We argue that women should run for and be elected more frequently in districted seats relative to at-large seats (H1). More specifically, we predict that compared to men, women will be more likely to run for districted seats, and that when we analyze only female candidates, women are likely to do better in districted seats compared to at-large seats.

We also expect that women are more likely to be elected to city council seats relative to mayoralties and clerk positions relative to both council or mayoral positions, (i.e. that the proportion of female as opposed to male winners will be higher in city clerk positions than the other offices) (H2). Finally, we expect that women are sensitive to gender stereotypes and office prestige, and that this affects their decisions to run for more prestigious offices more-so than their male counterparts. We expect that women who run for prestigious citywide offices (at-large council seats and mayoralties) should be of higher quality, indicated by more political experience, than men running for these same positions (H3).

These predictions are inherently overlapping. That is, our data do not allow us to determine whether gender stereotypes regarding overall competency (combined with the prestige of the office) or specific areas of competency generate the results that we present. However, our analyses do allow us to rule out other mechanisms linking women's representation and institutions, and thus reveal relationships between electoral structure and women's representation that depart from previous research

## Data and Methodology

To study the relationship between institutions and representation we gathered data on all California city elections between 1995 and 2011 from the California Elections Database Archive (CEDA). The dataset includes results from nearly 6,000 elections and more than 23,000 candidates. Table 1 shows the number of cases, and the proportion of female candidates and winners for each type of office.

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

We chose to focus on cities in California for a number of reasons. The first reason is the availability of the data. Collecting local election data is an incredibly time consuming process. In many states the only way to do so is to visit, in person, the county registrar's office to photocopy physical election returns. The California Elections Database Archive is a unique public good, offering researchers electronic data on **all** California city elections over a large number of years. An additional benefit is that the data are entered in a standard format. They include information regarding each candidate for office, including his/her name, the ballot designation associated with the candidate, the candidate's incumbency status, vote share, and election outcome. California also offers us significant variation on a number of different institutions; both those we seek to study (type of city council elections and elections for other offices) and those we include as controls (the timing and competitiveness of elections).<sup>5</sup> And because we argue that stereotypes about women might negatively affect their chances of election in certain settings, the general liberal leaning of California's voters may offer a stringent test of our

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<sup>5</sup> One type of institution that does not vary is partisanship. All local races in California are nonpartisan by state law. Most (about 75%) cities in the US are nonpartisan, but our analyses are unable to provide insight into the 25% of cities that do use partisan labels in elections.

hypotheses.<sup>6</sup> Finally, although cities from California are not perfectly representative of cities throughout the United States, they offer significant variation on many different demographic variables. Nonetheless, we recognize that our conclusions are necessarily limited by the single state analysis.

To the election data we merged city level demographic data from the 1990 and 2000 Census of Population and Housing and the 2011 American Community Survey. We interpolated interim years. Finally, we merged institutional data from the International City County Manager's Association Municipal Form (ICMA) of Government Surveys conducted in 1986, 1992, 1996, 2001, and 2006. We matched the ICMA data using the most recent year available for each year in the CEDA data.

To code the gender of each candidate we relied on two automated utilities. First, we separated each candidate's first, middle, and last names and isolated any nicknames, honorifics, and suffixes. Then we ran the names through two on-line programs. The first utility, developed by the Brown University Center for Digital Scholarship<sup>7</sup> disambiguates male and female first names by matching the name to lists of male and female names provided by the United States Census. If the name appears on both male and female lists, the program determines the frequency with which each name appears on the list and chooses the gender with the higher frequency. We ran all of the candidates through a second utility developed by Pre Post Office<sup>8</sup> that matches the name with a proprietary gender table of more than 108,000 given names. When the two utilities had matching

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<sup>6</sup> Women are generally better represented in California than in many other states. According to data collected by the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University, California ranked 17<sup>th</sup> out of the 50 states in the representation of women in state legislatures in 2014 ([http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/fast\\_facts/levels\\_of\\_office/documents/stleg.pdf](http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/fast_facts/levels_of_office/documents/stleg.pdf)).

<sup>7</sup> <http://dev.stg.brown.edu/projects/names/index.html>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.prepostoffice.com/data-enhancement/gender-coding.html>

determinations, we coded the candidate's gender accordingly (this represented the vast majority of the cases). When one utility determined a gender and the other utility was unable to make a determination, we chose the determined gender. When the utilities disagreed or neither was able to make a determination, we had student research assistants attempt to determine the gender through newspaper and internet research. In total we were able to determine the gender of 23,259 candidates for the city elections included in our analysis (99.4% of candidates in the dataset). Our analyses exclude candidates for whom we could not determine gender.

Any analysis of institutions and election results faces a potential selection problem. We would like to be able to estimate the effect of an institution on women's probability of winning, but we are unable to estimate the probability of victory or vote share for women who choose not to run because we have no data on women who do not run. The sample only consists of women who choose to run for each type of office. In an ideal world we would randomly assign candidates to run under different electoral arrangements and then analyze the effect of the institution on the probability of victory and vote share. Instead, candidates make a choice about whether or not to run in any given election; and they know in advance what the institutional features of that election will be. We would not worry about this if the decision to run in one race or another (or to run at all) were unrelated to the outcome of interest (e.g. winning). If this were the case then we could just assume that no systematic differences exist between the pool of candidates running in at-large versus districted elections or for mayor versus city council. But this is not likely to be the case. It is in fact very likely that female candidates will choose to run for offices that they have the best chance at winning. As the institutions

become more favorable to their victory, we should expect more women to run. This results in a sample of women who, on average, face favorable institutions. This nonrandom aspect to the sample does not bias the estimation of the effect of the institution because the variables that predict running (e.g. favorable institutions) are included in the outcome equation (Sartori 2003).

However, another type of selection can be problematic. Some women will run in unfavorable institutions. These women may differ in important ways. Perhaps they have a high value on some unmeasured quality – say local networking, fundraising skill, or political competence. The problem is that the unmeasured quality is correlated with the institution of interest in our sample. Assuming that the unmeasured quality results in a higher probability of winning, the analysis will underestimate the effect of the institution because women who run in the unfavorable races are unusually strong candidates.

Unfortunately, we do not know which institution is likely to be most favorable to women as the arguments and aggregate results in the existing literature are in disagreement. So we do not know whether our estimates are plagued by a selection problem or not. The best we can do is assume that districted city council elections and city clerk positions are favorable to women, and so view the results presented below as a lower bound on the possible institutional effects.

### **Women Fare Best in Districts and City Clerkships**

An examination of simple summary statistics offers initial support for our hypotheses. The third and fourth rows of Table 1 show the mean proportion of all candidates and winners that are women in different types of elections. It reveals that districted seats are more likely to see female candidates and winners compared to both at-

large seats and mayoralities. Women are least well represented in mayoral elections and best represented in city clerkships. But there are many individual and city level factors that could affect these relationships, so we next turn to multivariate analyses at the individual and city level.

For our first set of multivariate analyses we look to see how women fare at the candidate level. We model the effect of electoral institution on three different dependent variables: 1. the probability that the candidate running is female (coded one if the candidate is *Female*), 2. the probability that the female candidate will win (coded one if the candidate *Won*), and 3. female candidates' vote margins. When we analyze the latter two variables we restrict the analysis to women, allowing us to determine the effect of electoral structure on the success of female candidates. The vote margin variable is calculated as the difference between the candidate's vote share and the vote share of the highest losing candidate in the race if the candidate won, and the vote share of the lowest winning candidate in the race if the candidate lost. This allows us to make direct comparisons between races with many different numbers of candidates and seats.

Our main independent variable in all models is a dummy variable noting whether or not the election was for a *District* city-council seat.<sup>9</sup> To ensure that any relationship we find between structure and representation is not an effect of the number of candidates in the race, we include a measure of the *Candidates per Seat* in the election. To account for candidate quality we add a variable noting whether or not the candidate is an *Incumbent* and a separate variable noting whether or not the candidate had *Prior*

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<sup>9</sup> We coded this variable using information provided by CEDA regarding the "area" for which the election was held. The CEDA codebook describes this variable as "Area within Office – e.g. supervisorial district, school board seat." We coded elections as districted if this variable was non-missing.

*Experience* as an elected or appointed official.<sup>10</sup> We control for the total size of the city *Population* because in California district elections are more common in big cities, and larger, cosmopolitan cities may also be more likely to support gender diversity in elective office. We account for the proportion of the population that is *White* to account for the possibility that racial and ethnic minorities may be more supportive of women candidates (see for example Trounstine and Valdini 2008) and perhaps be more prevalent in districted cities. We control for the socioeconomic status of the community using three variables, *Median Household Income*, *Median Home Value*, and the percent of the population that is *College Graduates*, to remove the possibility that more education and wealth are associated with more liberal (or conservative) attitudes towards women's electability and electoral institutions (see for example Smith, Reingold, and Owens 2012). Finally, we control for four institutional variables that have been shown by other scholars to be related to women's representation and are often highly coincident with council electoral structure. These variables are the number of *City Councilors*, the presence of city council *Term Limits*, and a *Council-Manager* form of government.<sup>11</sup> We

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<sup>10</sup> We coded this variable using the ballot designations provided by CEDA. First, we took an inventory of all of the ballot designations included in the data set. We then determined a list of terms that captured local elective and appointive offices. We searched all ballot designations for the following terms: councilmember councilman councilwoman council city board auditor assessor recorder controller commissioner postal superintendent county planning mayo trustee appointed incumbent assembly assemblyman treasurer auditor sheriff judge school zoning municipal prosecutor elections district court coroner chief. If the designation included one of these terms the candidate was coded as having prior experience. We then removed all incumbents from this list and were left with a code for candidates with prior experience who were not currently serving in the elected position under analysis. The variable is a dummy variable, coded one for candidates with prior experience. This is clearly a rough measure. It would be preferable to have a more nuanced measure capturing variation in the level of experience and probability of name exposure. Given no existing research on which to base such a measure (and a lack of information regarding which positions are elected versus appointed in each city), we use a simple coding here. Omitting this variable changes our results very little.

<sup>11</sup> In the United States most cities use one of two forms for the organization of the city government: mayor-council or council-manager. In a council-manager form of government, the legislative duties are handled by the elected city council, while many of the executive duties in the city are allocated to an appointed professional city manager who is an at-will employee selected by the council. In a mayor-council city the city council handles legislative functions while the mayor is the head of the executive branch. Including

conduct logit analysis on the probability of females running for office and their probability of victory, and OLS on the vote margin for women. We cluster the errors by city and add fixed effects for year.<sup>12</sup> Table 2 presents the results of these candidate level analyses.

[INSERT TABLE 2 HERE]

The results indicate that women may be slightly more likely to run in districted elections than men (the results are significant at the  $\alpha=.13$  level).<sup>13</sup> When women run for districted seats, they receive larger vote margins and are more likely to emerge victorious in the election compared to at-large seats. With all other variables held at their mean values, on average, women running in at-large elections lose. Women running for at-large seats have a 47% probability of winning compared to a 54% probability when running for districted seats.<sup>14</sup> The vote margin for women in at large elections is -0.01 compared to 0.06 in district races. However, these data do not tell the whole story. Male candidates are **also** likely to do better in district seats compared to at-large contests. Among men, vote margins are about 5 percentage points higher in district elections and the probability of victory increases from 37% to 49%.<sup>15</sup> What this suggests is that on the whole, districted seats are easier to win than at-large seats which makes sense given that

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the form of government is important because district elections are more common in cities with mayor-council structures and women are less well-represented on councils in cities with mayor-council governments.

<sup>12</sup> Fixed effects for city are not feasible because only 5 cities in the dataset have both district and at-large elections for council and we do not have enough observations in both types of institutions to run the analysis.

<sup>13</sup> The result becomes strongly significant when we remove other institutional variables which are highly correlated with the presence of districts (council size, term limits, government type) suggesting that limited variation across institutional forms is likely driving this null result.

<sup>14</sup> All estimates were generated using the “margin” command in Stata 12.1 with all other variables held constant at their mean values.

<sup>15</sup> These results are not shown in Table 2 but available upon request. Women candidates are typically of high quality when running for office compared to a wider range of quality for male candidates, which explains why they are more likely to win office overall compared to men.

they demand fewer campaign resources. In order to understand representation in the aggregate a different specification is required. In the next section we look at the *proportion* of candidates running that are women and the *proportion* of winners that are women for different types of city elections. This set-up allows us to compare the success rates of women to men directly.

We further test the hypothesis that districted seats benefit female candidates by comparing the proportion of female candidates to male candidates who run and win districted versus at-large city council seats. In the first aggregate model, our dependent variable is the percent of candidates for each city council race that are women (*Percent Female Candidates*), then we analyze the proportion of city council winners that are women (*Percent Female Winners*). Our independent variables are similar to those in Table 2. We specify whether the election is for a *District* seat versus an at-large seat and we control for the number of *Candidates per Seat*, the total number of female *Incumbents* in the race, the total number of females with *Prior Political Experience*, the city *Population*, percent *White*, *Median Household Income*, *Median Home Value*, the percent of the population that is *College Graduates*, the number of *City Councilors*, the presence of city council *Term Limits*, and a *Council-Manager* form of government.

[INSERT TABLE 3 HERE]

Table 3 tells a similar story to Tables 1 and 2. Women are more likely to run for and win districted seats compared to at-large seats, confirming our first hypothesis. Overall, approximately 26.5% of winners are women in at-large elections compared to 37% in district races. However, on average at-large councils are slightly smaller (5 seats) than districted councils (7 seats). Accounting for size makes the disparity even greater.

We estimate that 25% of winners in at-large elections are women, compared to 40% in districts. This means that on average, at-large councils will have about 1 female councilmember (~1.25 female representatives) while districted councils will have nearly 3 (~2.8). Furthermore, while fully 34% of cities with at-large elections have no women on their councils, only 19% of cities with districts have no female representatives. In short, unlike many previous scholars (e.g., Smith, Reingold, and Owens 2012, Bullock and MacManus 1991), we find that electoral structure has significant consequences for the descriptive and potentially substantive representation of women in the electorate. Furthermore, we find that in California, it is district, not at-large elections (Trounstine and Valdini 2008, McManus and Bullock 1995, Karnig and Walter 1976) that provide this enhanced representation for women.

In Table 4, we test H2, the expectation that female candidates are more likely to win less prestigious offices like city clerk relative to more prestigious positions like mayoralities. The dependent variable is the proportion of winners of mayoral, clerk, and council elections that are female.<sup>16</sup> The models compare the proportion of winners who are female in mayoral elections and city clerk elections to the excluded category of city council elections (combining at-large and district elections). Essentially this regression is a more formal analysis of the differences across columns in the bottom row of Table 1.

Because mayoral elections and city clerk elections are always for a single seat the dependent variable takes the value of zero or one in each observation for these types of races, while for council elections, the dependent variable ranges between zero and one.

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<sup>16</sup> We recognize that mayors, clerks, and councilors serve very different functions in city government. We seek to leverage these differences in order to reveal how gender stereotypes might operate among voters and candidates to produce differential rates of success for women.

The mean of the dependent variable for each type of seat (shown in the bottom row of Table 1) represents the proportion of winners who are women elected to each type of office.

[INSERT TABLE 4 HERE]

The first column of Table 4 reveals no difference between the successes of women in mayoral elections as compared to city council elections, but large and statistically significant differences between city clerk elections and both city council and mayoral elections. As our second hypothesis and summary statistics predicted, women do best when running for the position of city clerk.<sup>17</sup> The second column of Table 4 runs the same model without the control for the number of women incumbents in the race, allowing us to test our third hypothesis, that women who run for higher prestige office are more politically experienced than their male counterparts. Removing this variable makes the coefficient on mayoral elections significantly negative. Not accounting for incumbency, women are nearly 9 percentage points less likely to win the mayoralty compared to city council seats. The fact that the control for incumbency eliminates this effect suggests that experience plays a major role in the decision for women to run for the mayor's seat and for voters to elect them. This result is confirmed in additional t-tests analyzing the difference in prior political experience for male and female candidates and winners of mayoral elections. On average about 22% of male candidates for mayor have prior political experience compared to about 35% of female candidates. This finding is consistent with recent research on candidates for the U.S. House, which finds that women

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<sup>17</sup> It is interesting to note that women appear to do best in strong mayor systems compared to systems that have both an elected mayor and a city manager (as revealed by an interaction analysis). These results are available from the authors upon request.

candidates typically are more qualified than their male counterparts but win at only equal rates (Fulton 2012; Pearson and McGhee 2013). Thus, this offers additional support for the idea that voter biases against women candidates are present and that female candidates must be of higher quality than male candidates in order to achieve equal levels of electoral success.

## **Conclusions**

We have argued that institutions at the local level affect the election of women to city offices. We suggest that stereotypes of women as less competent at managerial tasks and more likely to emphasize constituency service means that women should be most likely to run for and win election to office for positions that are less prestigious and more closely linked to voters. We hypothesized that women will be advantaged in districted council seats compared to at-large seats and disadvantaged in mayoral elections compared to both council seats and city clerkships. The evidence that we present strongly supports these predictions.

These findings suggest that electoral institutions matter a great deal in determining the success of female candidates at the local level. The findings also reveal another important aspect to increasing female representation, the role experience plays in mitigating potential biases against women running for higher office. When accounting for incumbency, there is no difference in the probability of a women winning city council races and mayoral races. Women still fare better in city clerk positions than in the other offices, but if women begin to amass political experience in lower prestige offices, these could be gateways to building reputations and eventually winning higher level offices.

However, we recognize that our analysis is limited by a number of data restrictions. First, our analyses are lacking political variables. We are unable to control for the party of the candidate or the electorate due to the non-partisan nature of local elections in California. It may be that gender stereotypes matter less in elections for higher level offices, where partisan cues likely trump gender cues in voter decision-making (Koch 2002; King and Matland 2003). Consequently, we expect that our conclusions are most likely to apply to the substantial majority of city elections which are non-partisan contexts. Second, although the data we present are consistent with the mechanisms we describe, the evidence is circumstantial and the data do not allow us to disentangle the various proposed mechanisms. A final limitation of the paper is the focus on California alone. It may be that stereotypes, gendered preferences, and institutions work differently in different places. An analysis of data from the International City County Managers Association (ICMA) supports this idea. A simple regression of the relationship between districts and female councilors state by state reveals significant variation. For instance, in California, Colorado, Delaware, Florida, and Nevada districts are positively associated with female council representation, but in Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Utah the reverse is true.<sup>18</sup> Clearly additional research is needed to understand how different state contexts matter and which variables omitted from these analyses.

All that said, we believe that the results presented here contribute substantially to our understanding of women's underrepresentation in local politics. According to the ICMA nearly 70% of cities have predominantly at-large council seats. In our analysis,

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<sup>18</sup> Results are from state by state regression of percent women on city council on percent of council seats elected by district, controlling for total population, percent white, percent college grads, median household income, median home value, total council size, city manager government, and presence of term limits.

cities with district elections come much closer to representational parity than those with at-large seats and we have provided evidence that this may be the result of the combined effects of stereotypes and office characteristics. Public opinion shows growing support for more gender parity among elected representatives (Dolan and Sanbonmatsu 2009), however such parity is unlikely to be reached in city government without changes in electoral institutions or significant increases in women candidates' experience over and above the level required for their male counterparts.

Furthermore, our findings highlight that the political offices women are most likely to fill are not those with the greatest policymaking power or public profile. While women in city clerkships may accumulate experience and name recognition enabling them to run for higher offices, while in those positions, they have less ability to shape substantive policy outcomes than their (typically male) colleagues holding city council and mayor positions. Due to their somewhat lower visibility and power, they also are less likely to serve as political role models for female potential candidates considering whether the political environment is favorable for their own electoral pursuits. Thus, our findings highlight the way in which the cycle of low descriptive representation for women in city government and beyond is likely to be perpetuated.

The extent of descriptive representation of women in local offices is enormously consequential for how well female constituents' needs and preferences are attended to and translated into government policy. Having women in local offices is necessary for the substantive representation of women's preferences, to ensure that policies that assist women are prioritized and enacted, and to provide a set of qualified women who can move up into higher offices and address women's policy needs from those positions as

well. For this reason, it is essential that we understand why women continue to hold so few offices at the local level and what institutions, such as electoral rules, can promote more gender equality in local representation. This article demonstrates that district elections facilitate descriptive representation, serving to both further equity and meet public demand.

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**Table 1: Total Observations and Female Representation by Office**

	Mayor	City Council District	City Council At-large	City Clerk
Total Races	805	1,269	3,183	507
Total Candidates	2,124	3,326	17,123	686
Percent of Candidates that are Women	21% (.010)	30% (.009)	26% (.004)	82% (.015)
Percent of Winners that are Women*	21% (0.014)	33% (0.013)	28% (0.005)	84% (0.016)

\* Note: Cells show mean percent of winners coded as female, standard errors in parentheses; all differences significant at  $\alpha=.001$  level.

**Table 2: Effect of Districts for Candidates**

	Likelihood that Candidate is Female †		Female Candidates' Vote Margin‡		Female Candidates' Probability of Victory†	
	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE
District	0.115	0.076	0.064 **	0.019	0.269 **	0.125
Candidates per seat	-0.038 **	0.012	-0.036 **	0.003	-0.288 **	0.039
Incumbent	0.228 **	0.045	0.153 **	0.013	2.086 **	0.093
Prior Experience	0.208 **	0.065	0.066 **	0.008	0.816 **	0.099
Population (millions)	-0.085	0.088	-0.028	0.019	-0.097	0.184
% White	-0.471 **	0.15	0.021	0.019	0.128	0.191
% College Grad	1.015 **	0.47	-0.143 *	0.074	-0.232	0.596
Median HH Income (10k)	-0.035 **	0.015	0.007	0.005	-0.001	0.024
Median Home Value (10k)	0.004	0.003	0	0	0.004	0.004
Council Size	0.022	0.026	0.014 **	0.007	0.053	0.053
Term Limits	-0.06	0.063	0.006	0.012	0.138	0.095
Council-Manager	0.179	0.154	0.053 **	0.027	0.451	0.295
Constant	-1.15 **	0.22	-0.123 *	0.064	-0.675	0.436
R <sup>2</sup>	0.007		0.236		0.171	
N	18797		4899		4900	

\* $p < .10$ , \*\* $p < .05$ ; † Logistic regression; ‡ OLS Regression; fixed effects for year included, but not presented, robust standard errors clustered by city presented

**Table 3: Effect of Districts for City-Council Candidates in the Aggregate**

	% Candidates that are Women		% Winners that are Women	
	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE
District	0.083 **	0.013	0.106 **	0.019
Candidates per seat	-0.012 **	0.003	0.006	0.005
# Female Incumbents	0.211 **	0.010	0.320 **	0.015
# Females with Experience	0.166 **	0.010	0.188 **	0.017
Population (millions)	-0.036 **	0.018	-0.067 **	0.021
% White	-0.056 **	0.024	-0.055 *	0.031
% College Grad	0.092	0.076	0.020	0.093
Median HH Income (10k)	-0.005 *	0.003	-0.004	0.003
Median Home Value (10k)	0.001	0.000	0.001 *	0.001
Council Size	0.010 *	0.006	0.022 **	0.007
Term Limits	-0.005	0.012	-0.004	0.016
Council-Manager	0.037 *	0.022	0.095 **	0.019
Constant	0.131 **	0.042	-0.042	0.054
R <sup>2</sup>	0.287		0.294	
N	4088		4088	

\* $p < .10$ , \*\* $p < .05$ ; OLS Regressions with robust standard errors clustered by city presented, fixed effects for year included, but not presented

<b>Table 4: Effect of Type of Election for Women Representatives</b>						
	% Winners that are Women Including Incumbency			% Winners that are Women Excluding Incumbency		
	Coefficient		SE	Coefficient		SE
Mayor	-0.019		0.016	-0.091	**	0.021
City Clerk	0.460	**	0.022	0.562	**	0.028
Candidates per seat	0.002		0.004	-0.007	*	0.004
# Female Incumbents	0.351	**	0.014			
# Females with Experience	0.214	**	0.015	0.186	**	0.014
Population (millions)	-0.118	**	0.023	-0.127	**	0.025
% White	-0.066	**	0.029	-0.086	**	0.039
% College Grad	0.102		0.085	0.254	**	0.127
Median HH Income (10k)	-0.001		0.003	-0.003		0.004
Median Home Value (10k)	-0.000		0.001	-0.000		0.001
Council Size	0.046	**	0.007	0.043	**	0.007
Term Limits	0.048		0.033	0.041		0.042
Council-Manager	0.022		0.017	-0.016		0.02
Constant	-0.084		0.062	0.076		0.064
R <sup>2</sup>	0.424			0.213		
N	5337			5337		

\* $p < .10$ , \*\* $p < .05$ ; OLS Regressions with robust standard errors clustered by city presented, fixed effects for year included, but not presented