

Practicing Politics: Female Political Scientists as Candidates for Elective Office

Barbara Burrell, *Northern Illinois University*

The question put to me more than any other was “what surprised me most about being a candidate for the U.S. Senate?” People who know me as a political scientist, pollster, pundit, and sometime activist assumed I knew what I was getting into. In all honesty, I knew a lot less than I was given credit for. The truth is that there is no way to know what it is like to be “the candidate” until you are one, and that’s when your life changes.

—Natalie Davis (1996), Birmingham Southern
Political Science Professor,
US Senate candidate

In 2007, University of Oklahoma political science professor Cindy Simon Rosenthal was elected mayor of Norman, Oklahoma, after having served as a member of its city council. Was her activity unique within the political science profession among female political scientists? Her election stimulated the curiosity of some of us in the women-and-politics-research community. To what extent had female political scientists attempted to move from the “Ivory Tower” to the “Public Square” as elective office holders? What had their experiences been like? We explore those questions with particular interest in a number of theoretical propositions from women and politics studies. For example, how did they decide to seek elective office? Were they self-starters or had they been recruited? What role did their families play in their campaigns? To what extent was gender perceived as a factor, and in what ways in their various campaigns? How successful were they, and what role did their academic credentials play in their campaigns? Did their quests for public office affect their academic careers? Did they use the findings from the women and politics literature to inform their quests? Perhaps, too, we thought, their campaigns might provide distinctive insights about running for and serving in public office and inform discussion about the role of gender in political life.

In other venues I focus on gendered aspects of the experiences of the female political scientists who had entered the electoral area interviewed for this research effort and tell their stories of life on the campaign trail (Burrell 2010). In this article I focus on these indi-

viduals’ thoughts on various aspects of the link between their academic lives and their political lives to contribute to the current lively discussion about a renewal of political science committed to practical politics and public service. This topic has recently captured the political science scholars’ attention who lament the lack of scholars’ participation in the “real world” of politics and who believe that meaningful public service can enhance academic careers. The April 2011 *PS* symposium “Mixing an Academic Career with Practical Politics,” focused on what its editors and others call “Pracademics,” or activities that create a professional connection “between full-time, university-based political scientists and the practical political world they study (McDonald and Mooney 2011, 251). The symposium editors’ goal was to “contribute to what we see as a nascent revitalization and rehabilitation of service—especially public service—as a respectable and integral part of a political science career” (251). They stress that “college professors have traditionally been discouraged from pursuing professional service in politics and government.” But, they argue, public service can stimulate one’s professional life. Participants in the symposium presented their experiences in practical politics and public service that enhanced their academic life. Also the e-journal *The Forum* devoted its 2010 issue 7 to “Political Science and Practical Politics” (Masket 2010). Blogging, party service, and campaign consulting and managing were examples of such activities; the articles’ authors stressed links between these types of practices and the study of politics.

Political scientists seeking public office and serving as elected officials is a prime example of engaging in pracademics. Yet, this activity, which also stimulated our study and interviews, received only passing attention in those articles. Seeking elected office has several distinctive qualities as a public activity. First, it requires the “objective” observer to articulate political goals and values and become a partisan, although not all elective positions are partisan offices. Second, rather than being seen as public service, holding an election position is sometimes viewed with suspicion among the public and in conflict with one’s professional scholarly role. Third, election to a statewide or national office requires suspension of one’s professorial duties, at a minimum taking a leave of absence and perhaps in some systems resigning one’s position. Finally, intimidation in the classroom by students of an opposite political persuasion, as two of my interviewees discovered, can also result.

This article contributes to the pracademics discussion through highlighting the experiences of female political scientists who had “thrown their hat” into the electoral ring and sharing the ways

Barbara Burrell is director of graduate studies and professor of political science at Northern Illinois University. She has published several books including *Women and Political Participation: A Reference Handbook* (1994) and *Public Opinion, The First Ladyship, and Hillary Clinton* (2001) and numerous chapter and journal articles. She can be reached at bburrell@niu.edu.

their scholarly life informed and stimulated their political life. How did their participation in the electoral process inform their academic life both in terms of teaching and research? These scholars' reflections indicate the value of such activities to the study of politics and the dissemination of political knowledge. Their assessments, in their own words, provide significant insights about the study of politics and the practicing of politics. Their perspectives are a first step in considering questions to ask and measurements to be constructed for more systematic quantitative analyses of the public life of political scientists.

This study began with a search for female political scientists who fit our criteria to be interviewed. Our interviewees would be female political science academics who had sought public office during their academic career. They could have run for any public office, partisan or nonpartisan, from local office to president. Winning their elections did not matter: the activity and their experience were of interest to us. We sought out names of potential interviewees through announcements at Political Science Women's Caucus meetings and a published call in *PS*. To date, running for public office appears to be a rare occurrence for female political scientists. Women compose 26% of the nearly 13,000 political science professors in the United States. In the 2007 APSA Snapshot approximately 3,350 women were political science faculty members (Sedowski and Brintnall 2007). Yet, we identified only 17 who have run for public office during their academic career. All 17 individuals were interviewed.

These female political scientists ran for a variety of offices at different times during their academic careers. They ran in partisan races and for nonpartisan elective office. Seven lost their races whereas 10 were victorious, although not always on the first try or first office sought. Three of these women moved up the public office ladder: Cindy Simon Rosenthal from city council to mayor, Dina Titus from state senator to member of Congress, and Mamie Locke from city council, to mayor, and then a state senator.

These political scientists have run for school board, for town board and city councils, county board, the state legislature and for the US Congress. They have shown discrete, static, and progressive ambition in their quests. They have been candidates in communities around the country from Rhode Island to Alabama, to Montana and Nevada, from 1977 to 2010.

Some sought their first elective office early in their academic career, and some ran after they had achieved full professor status and had developed national and international reputations as scholars. On one hand, Doris Marie Provine ran for town judge of Virgil, New York, as she was finishing her dissertation and starting her career as a tenure track professor at Syracuse University (already having obtained a law degree). Mamie Locke, on the other hand, was dean of the School of Liberal Arts and Education and professor of political science at Hampton University in Hampton, Virginia, when she sought a seat on the Hampton City Council in 1994. Her students' dismay at what they perceived to be racial bias in the treatment of petitioners before the Hampton City Council, which had no minority members, stimulated her political career.

The youngest and most junior scholar to seek public office was Brigid Callahan Harrison whom the Democratic Party recruited to run for Atlantic County freeholder (county legislator) in 1992 when she was 27 years old and a graduate student. She had been active in the political realm having managed others' campaigns. She ran a second time after becoming a faculty member at Montclair University. Also, Jennifer Lawless took on an incumbent mem-

ber of the US House of Representatives, Jim Langevin, in the 2006 2nd district of Rhode Island Democratic primary as a 31-year-old assistant professor at Brown University.

CONNECTING THE ACADEMY TO THE CAMPAIGN AND THE CAMPAIGN TO THE CLASSROOM

The connection between the classroom and public office holding resonated with the interviewees in different ways. For some, their teaching stimulated their candidacies and then their campaigns and office holding informed their teaching and research. Their political science knowledge did, and surprisingly for some did not, inform their campaigns and office-holding. Some women were surprised at the differences they encountered. Several intriguing themes emerge from their responses about various connections. I touch on a few here.

Stories to Be Told

Enhancing their teaching by being able to relate real world politics to their students was a notable incentive for some political scientists to run for office. One interviewee immediately suggested that a stimulus for her running was "If nothing else I will have some great stories to tell my classes." And another suggested "It has enriched my teaching. I can tell stories and link them up to what we are doing in class."

When she ran for a seat in the US House of Representatives in 2008, Dina Titus's website stated that "In 1987, Dina decided to put theory into practice and ran for elected office." She was a professor of political science at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, at the time. She served five terms in the Nevada State Senate. The Senate is only in session every other year so she took an unpaid leave of absence from the university to go to Carson City to perform her legislative duties each session. Early in her Senate term Democratic colleagues elected her minority leader, an unusual feat at that time for a young, junior female member of the body. Her 2008 website stated "Her 20 years in the State Senate have brought the richness of first-hand experience to her classroom" (<http://www.dinatitus.com/about-dina-titus>).

Brigid Callahan Harrison provided an additional reflection on the classroom impact

On the positive side—in my teaching—I think there is certainly an appreciation on the part of my students for the real world applicability that came from that experience. When I talk about candidate recruitment, I can talk about it from a first-hand basis . . . I have examples for students; stories have been good. I forged a lot of relationships that remain to this day and I can call elected officials and have them come to the classroom from both parties. It has helped in securing internships or hearing first hand from elected officials.

Different Worlds

A second theme that emerged from these interviews was the difference between the scholarly treatment of the political process and the actual lived experience on the campaign trail. One might expect that political scientists running for public office would express substantial knowledge of the process and sophistication in their campaign plans based on their academic familiarity with electioneering. Yet what we found with this group of political scientist office seekers were primarily campaigns like any other campaigns run by would-be office holders, plus some fascinating commentary on academic versus real world experience. As one

interviewee commented, "Let's just say my expectations included much of what happened. But the actual lived experience was so much different than the academic exercise."

Syracuse University professor Kristi Andersen who ran successfully in 2005 for the Cazenovia Town Council in New York wrote in *PS* (2007) about this connection: "Thus this election campaign, like many other local elections, serves to remind us that the general patterns we deal with as political scientists are not nearly so clear when they collide with the particularities of local cleavages and issues." Jennifer Lawless illustrates the difference in her comment on how she "used statistics everywhere I went, I was citing experts everywhere. . . . My campaign manager said I had to start speaking like a normal person. Just tell one compelling story."

Helen Desfosses, political science professor at SUNY, Albany, who ran for several offices before being elected to the Albany Common Council colorfully describes her candidacy learning process:

The most important thing I could say to you was that I thought I knew what I was getting into because I was a professor of political science and had read all those books. But that did not turn out to be true. It was an incredible learning experience, sometimes very painful. . . . Being a political scientist may have turned me on to and alerted me to the elected politics arena. But I am not sure it prepared me any better than the person who didn't have a PhD in political science would have been prepared. . . . I think had I known more about the nitty-gritty of running for office, such as voter identification or something called targeting, it would have been better. I didn't know about that. I was a political science professor and maybe that is why I didn't know about it. I had a lot of macro knowledge. I knew about the American political system, the Constitution; I didn't know about targeting. I think had I known about the organizational imperatives, I would have known the right people to hire right from the beginning, but I had to learn that as well.

Natalie Davis who ran in the Democratic primary for the US Senate in 1996 describes the difference this way:

I guess I would say, and I said this in some speeches over the years, political scientists are supposed to know all of this stuff going in, and on paper I did know it but it is a lot different being the candidate, versus being the consultant, versus being the political scientist. Articulating those differences is very difficult. All the studies tell us how important money is. When you begin to see what it costs to run 30 seconds on *Wheel of Fortune*, looking at your media book, it is a different thing.

Dina Titus expressed a distinctive twist in her campaigns in how she played on the fact that she was a political scientist, but crafted her message in a particular way to avoid appearing too elitist. As she notes,

"I knew good government. I was an outsider to the political world and had to use whatever I could. I know the system. I know how it works. I know the problems. I have studied it. I have written about it. Now I want to do it. I played to being a teacher, in valuing education, never as a professor, but as a teacher. I never used the title "doctor." "Teacher" as opposed to "professor" may be a gendered way of connecting to voters.

Informing Scholarship

Another theme that emerged from these interviews was how the public offices they had held informed their research and teaching.

For example, Oberlin College professor Eve Sandberg, who served two terms on the Oberlin City Council and who also has a political consultancy business focusing on international work with women and nongovernmental organizations, expressed a distinctive, multidimensional perspective on the connection between practice and the professoriate. She saw her run for elective office and council service as, first, contributing to her credibility as a consultant on women's candidacies in African nations. "If I am talking to people and they say, 'Oh a professor, what do you know?,' and I say 'I have run for office twice and I have run successfully,' suddenly I had more credibility as a trainer." Second, she stressed how her practical experience affected her research and her teaching:

I teach economic development in third world countries. I have been part of it. I had been observing it. There is something different being in the shoes of the decision maker even though intellectually you have insights. You may understand the pressure but you don't understand the emotional pull. . . . It gave me an appreciation of what it means to be a target in public. It gave me a healthy respect, number one, for the people making the decisions and the pressures they are under and, number two, for the action of the system and the processes, we were talking before about inefficiencies in government. It gave me more insight as both a scholar and a teacher as to (a) what it takes, how much it takes to change a standard operating procedure and (b) to really think about the mechanics of what is involved in local governance and state governance as well, we interact a lot with our regional government. . . . And so when I am talking about someone in provincial government it helped me to figure out what questions to ask when I am doing research about the mechanisms for budget control. It helped me to figure out what questions to ask about revenue sources. It gave me much more finely detailed questions to use in my research and to talk about in my teaching. . . . It has given me more particulars to pay attention to in my own research . . . more particulars to pay attention to when I am having discussions with my students. I can draw on more concrete examples and hypotheticals and more examples to draw upon overseas because I have asked the questions. Rather than a surface answer, I know how to dig deeper. I know what are likely to be universals and what are likely to be idiosyncratic.

Doris Provine's story strikingly highlights the research connection in another way. In 1986, University of Chicago Press published her book *Judging Credentials: Nonlawyers and the Politics of Professionalization*. According to Doris, her elected judicial office experience contributed directly to her analysis. As she said, "It assisted my research to really understand the job . . . I got an in-depth approach to the bench, the study of lawyer, non-lawyer judges and that aspect of the job from sitting on the bench which was a great place to hear what was going on rather than being in the back somewhere. Being a fellow judge was really advantageous." Her research also contributed, among other reasons, to her not seeking reelection. "When I wrote the book one of my recommendations was that we were overpopulated with town and village judges and we needed to cut back so each judge should have a larger case load and become more professionalized through experience. More cases would lead to more training." Her town had two judges and the research she had done suggested that "we should only have one judge anyway. So it was my ethical duty to pull out. So I didn't run again."

This initial presentation of material from interviews with 17 female political scientist candidates for elective office gives insights from their experiences that provide ideas about the links between the academic enterprise and the public exercise of power. Space precludes drawing illustrations about other aspects of these linkages, such as the ways administrations and political science departments view such activities as public service or put up impediments to such engagement that were touched on in these conversations.

CONCLUSION

These quotes are only a hint at how being a political scientist engaged in the study of politics and the dissemination of knowledge about that process and becoming elective office candidates are linked. This study originated out of curiosity about a small group of people from a specific profession running for public office. We centered this research only on female political scientists and their quests for elective office in a qualitative study as an aspect of women and politics research. From an emphasis on campaign trail experiences and gendered aspects of these women's quests for public office to present, we have abstracted some of these candidates' ideas about connections between the practice of political science and the performance of a particular public activity and ways in which it resonated with academic life.

This initial study should stimulate the exploration of several political science questions regarding the workings of our democratic system. Clearly political scientists have interest in questions of political power and public policy making. They produce studies to affect and inform the political and policy process. Certainly many are policy advisers to public entities across the governmental spectrum. Political scientists serve on policy setting boards and commissions. They are perceived as having an expertise that contributes to informing lawmaking and implementation. Then, to what extent do they envision themselves as having ambition to serve in public office, to be political leaders, and to be decision makers? Certainly, the general public must often ask them about their interest in running for public office. Note here that Charles Merriam, former president of the American Political Science Association, was elected alderman in Chicago and served from 1907 to 1911 when he unsuccessfully ran for mayor. My own dissertation adviser, Samuel Eldersveld, had been mayor of Ann Arbor, Michigan. (See also, Pomper 1984.) Two professional colleagues, David Price (D-NC) and Daniel Lipinski (D-IL), serve in the 112th Congress.

The aspects of the campaigns highlighted in this article also provide several ideas for developing a more systematic empirical

study of political scientists who campaign for public office. First, how do candidates describe their academic profession and use it in their campaigns? For example, what is the difference between academic knowledge and electioneering knowledge?

Second, focusing on women and politics, this initial study of female political scientists running for public office is a research domain ripe for further study. Perhaps, female political scientists need to give greater attention to and engagement in running for political office as an activity. Many have not thought of pursuing this activity or maybe (as Brigid Harrison suggested in her interview), women have thought about it, but as an enterprise separate from professional life. As students of women and politics, as many of us are, perhaps we have not thought about ways in which we might use our research and our particular skills to make a broader impact on public life and reflect on how we might become substantive representatives of women's interests—among other things—and play a role for others in the political realm. Within political science, caucuses and research sections promote women's interests and research on women and gender in politics. Finally, this project should stimulate a new dynamic to our thinking of political scientists as politicians and our own contribution to democratic leadership and policy making. As Natalie Davis described her campaign experience, "I had the time of my life." ■

NOTE

Jackie DeLaat, political science professor at Marietta College, originally was my partner in this endeavor and very much helped me conceptualize it. She has since passed away.

REFERENCES

- Andersen, Kristi. 2007. "What I Learned (and Relearned) When I Ran for Local Office." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 40 (3): 507–10.
- Burrell, Barbara. 2010. "From the Ivory Tower to the Public Square: Female Political Scientists as Elective Office Seekers and Holders." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, DC.
- Davis, Natalie. 1996. "Confessions of a Candidate in Politics, Money—Lots of It—Makes World Go 'Round." *Birmingham News*, August 18, 1C.
- Masket, Seth. 2010. "Academics outside the Academy." *The Forum* 8 (3) Article 7. Available at <http://www.bepress.com/forum/vol8/iss3/art7>.
- McDonald, Michael P., and Christopher Z. Mooney. 2011. "Editors' Introduction." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 44 (2): 251–54.
- Pomper, Gerald. 1984. "Practicing Political Science on a Local School Board." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 17 (2): 220–25.
- Sedowski, Leanne, and Michael Brintnall. 2007. "Data Snapshot: The Proportion of Women in the Political Science Profession." Washington, DC: The American Political Science Association.