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Women are underrepresented in leadership across all sectors of our society – education, business, non-profits, and politics – leading to inequitable representation and inadequate outcomes. In order to recruit and retain more women in leadership, we need to better understand the experiences of women in new leadership roles. In this basic qualitative study, I used triangulated data from a journal analysis, interviews, and document analysis to examine the experiences of first-time female candidates for state legislative races during the 2018 election cycle. I examine why women chose the new leadership role including personal factors, outside factors that encouraged their decision, and the hurdles they had to overcome. I then explored what lessons women learned – lessons about themselves, politics, specific skills and people – and how they learned those lessons – from others, through experiences, and within formal learning structures. Finally, I share recommendations for other women preparing for this new leadership role, including talking to other women who served in the role, developing specific skills, and preparing for personal impact. The results demonstrate the importance of connecting women considering a new leadership role with other women currently serving in the role and with other women who are undertaking a similar role at the same time.

EDUCATION OF WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP:
LEARNING THE NEW ROLE OF
POLITICAL CANDIDATE

by

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APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Flashback to Fall 2017. Snap. The back of the nametag pulls to the magnetic front of my blazer and I am “ready to go.” This nametag points toward a new identity, “Ashton Clemmons, NC House” candidate and each time I snap it on I feel the same way. The nametag – and role – brings a new vulnerability, a new public definition that comes with immediate scrutiny. In my home, with our neighbors and friends, I feel fairly the same as before I adopted this new role of “candidate.” But out in the world, with the nametag on, I feel scrutinized and at times insecure. Many of the women who are also currently running for office who I have been lucky to connect with – though not all – feel the same way as they learn their new role of political candidate.

Given our shared experiences and vulnerabilities, I wonder, how much does being a woman impact our experiences and feelings as first time candidates for the state legislature? Does knowing the history of women’s underrepresentation in all leadership fields weigh on us? Does this unique time in history with record numbers of women running help our feelings? Why did we decide to take this new role, even knowing the challenges? How will we learn how to exist in this new role and what will support us? How can we support women as leaders in all aspects of life?

In this study, I examined the experiences of women were seeking a new leadership role, specifically considering why they chose the new role, how they learned their new role as political candidate and how they found support through the process. I explored the insights our experiences provided into how we could educate women in new leadership roles across contexts and what structural supports would strengthen that process. Ultimately, the world needs more women wearing leadership nametags.

Statement of the Problem

As is described in greater detail in the Background Context section below, women are woefully underrepresented in leadership across all fields. This is true in education, non-profit organizations, for-profit companies, and in elective political office. It is a problem of justice and equity when members of a particular identity group are underrepresented in leadership, leading to both social and individual consequences: women's voices are not taken as seriously in public spaces and individually, and they have less access to future success and financial benefit. It is also a productivity problem. According to research, companies with at least one woman on their board had higher returns on investments (Credit Suisse Research Institute, 2012), private firms with more gender diversity had more positive outcomes (Menguc & Auh, 2006), and board gender diversity significantly correlates with improved corporate responsibility (Boulouta, 2013). Women in leadership is associated with fewer workforce reductions (Matsa & Miller, 2014); smaller pay gaps between men and women (Tate & Yang, 2015); and more comprehensive policies to support lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, and transgender employees

(Cook & Glass, 2016). Women deserve equal representation in leadership out of fairness and because it makes organizations more effective.

Purpose of the Study

To increase women representation in leadership across fields, we need to understand the experiences of women who choose new leadership roles, how they learn their new roles, the supports that help them in the becoming leaders, and ultimately how we can more support women in their leadership pursuits. This study provides insight into critical experiences of women as they choose and learn a new leadership role, specifically, as they run for state level office. Understanding these experiences can help those working to increase gender diversity in leadership, including political organizations, for-profit companies, non-profit organizations, and education. It is especially helpful for organizations with a focus on recruiting, supporting, and mentoring women to tackle new leadership opportunities, particularly elected political office. We must understand the experiences of women in leadership, how they learn their new roles, and improvements needed to structural support if we hope to increase women's leadership.

Research Questions

Three research questions guide this study.

- How and why do women decide to run for office?
- How do women learn in their role as a candidate over the course of their campaign and where do they find support?

- What structures would encourage women to engage in new leadership roles?

Background Context

It is critical to consider the context the women in this study enter as they develop their new identities as political candidates. To begin, it is important to understand how deeply underrepresented women are in leadership across all fields in our country. This is certainly true in political leadership where women plateaued at about 20% of national, statewide, and local elected offices. Additionally, since I focused in this study on how women learn their new role, it is important to understand education and how, in a broad sense of the word, “knowledge” is created every day. This section provides context that furthers our understanding of the experiences of the women in this study including the lack of women in leadership across sectors and specifically in politics, a broad analysis of how learning occurs, and structural changes that improve women in leadership.

Lack of Women in Leadership. In this study, I examined the experiences of women who choose the new leadership role of political candidate. An understanding of the current context of women in leadership – and more closely political leadership – provides important background information to the experiences of the women in this study. Put concisely by the American Association of University Women (AAUW) in their comprehensive 2016 publication *Barriers and Bias*, “Women are much less likely than men to be considered leaders” (p. 1). The historic underrepresentation of women in all levels of leadership, and clearly in political leadership, impacts the experiences of the female candidates.

The lack of women in leadership is consistent across all contexts in our country. In 2015, women were less than five percent of Chief Executive Officers of S&P Fortune 500 companies (Catalyst, 2015). Wealth disparities also demonstrate strong advantages for men: only forty-six of the four hundred “super-rich” individuals in the U.S. are women (Kroll, 2015) and women only make up twenty-seven percent of workers who earn more than \$100,000 per year (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). The non-profit sector demonstrates leadership closer to parity though a disparity still exists within the workforce, where women represent seventy-five percent of workers but occupy only forty-three percent of leadership roles (Stiffman, 2015). In the field of education, where three quarters of public school teachers are women, only nineteen percent of school superintendents are women (Finnan, McCord, Stream, Petersen, & Ellerson, 2015). Across contexts – private, non-profit, and education – women are vastly underrepresented in leadership roles.

Lack of Women in Politics. The trend of disproportionate representation continues when examining political leadership. The most recent data collected by the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) in 2018 shows clear underrepresentation of women in political leadership roles. Last year, women held 107 of the 535 seats of the 114th U.S. Congress, only twenty percent. This represents twenty-three seats, twenty-three percent, of the U.S. Senate and 84 seats, 19.3 percent, of the U.S. House of Representatives. Of those 107 seats, 78 are held by Democrats and 29 by Republicans. The percentage is similar in Statewide Executive Offices including

governorships, lieutenant governors, and other state-wide roles where women hold 72 of 312 available positions, only 23.1 percent. Of these seventy-two, 43 are Republicans, 28 Democrats and 1 is unaffiliated. Only twenty mayors of the one hundred largest cities are women and only 297 of the 1,365 mayors in U.S. cities with populations over thirty thousand, or 20.7 percent, are women.

The picture for state legislatures follows the trends described above – both nationally and in North Carolina, where this study takes place. Currently, 1,878 of the 7,383 state legislators in the United States are women; this represents 25.4 percent. Women hold 22.8 percent of state senate seats and 26.4 percent of state house seats. The first women served in state legislative seats in 1975, when women held only eight percent of the seats. Women’s representation steadily increased one or two percentage points each two-year measure between 1975 and 1997, but then the pace slowed in 1999. Since 1999, state legislative seats have increased only from 22.4 to 25.8 percent in 2018. The past two decades demonstrate a similar pattern in the NC State Legislature, where women held 18.8 percent of the state legislative seats in 2000 and have increased to a high of 25.8 percent in 2008, and are currently 24.1 percent (CAWP, 2018b). Though some years showed a difference based on political party, with the greatest difference being Democratic women holding 19 more seats than Republican women, the current North Carolina State Legislature has 21 Democratic women and 20 Republican women. The historical and statistical data about gender representation in state legislatures across our

country and our state helps contextualize the experiences of women undertaking the new role of state legislative candidate.

The data shows that over time, women have grown to hold approximately twenty-percent of elective offices and never significantly over that number. What does the data show us about women choosing the new role of political candidate in 2018? Before the 2018 election, the record number of women filing to run for U.S. Senate was forty; in 2018 fifty-one women filed to run for the US Senate as of June 19, 2018 (CAWP, 2018a). The record for the U.S. House was 298 and this year 468 women filed. The pattern continues for governor where 61 women filed, in contrast to a previous record of 34, and Lieutenant Governor where 51 women filed with a previous record of 29. There are 3,221 women who ran for state legislative seats which beats the past record of 2,649 by almost 600 candidates. In the North Carolina state legislative races, the previous record of women candidates was 70 and this year there were 97 women candidates. There were clearly record numbers of women filling to run for office in 2018 in races throughout the country. As legislative sessions started in 2019, there were a record percentage of women as a total of state legislators at 28.9% nationally (CAWP, 2019). In the North Carolina General Assembly for the 2019 session, women are 25.3%.

While there were certainly record number of women candidates running for offices across our country and for our state legislature, Kelly Dittmar and Debbie Walsh of the Center for American Women and Politics (Dittmar & Walsh, 2018) caution the assumption that this will lead to dramatically greater numbers of women elected in

November 2018. First, approximately seventy-five percent of the women running in 2018 are Democrats and gender parity requires an increase in women candidates in both political parties. Second, “the majority of Democratic women candidates are running as challengers to incumbents – whose re-election rates have been consistently above 80% for over fifty years.” The authors worry that unrealistic expectations of women winning in great numbers will lead to a perception of failure of women candidates instead of “entrenched political systems and patriarchal structures that have long worked to their disadvantage.” Dittmar and Welsh press that making candidacy desirable for women is necessary and requires realistic portrayals of the progress that can be made in the 2018 election. After the 2018 elections, women are still only 23.7% of the 535 members of the United States Congress (CAWP, 2019).

In this research project, I explored why women chose the new role of candidate, how they learn their new role over the course of their campaign, and what supported their education of that role. The women chose this new role even with challenges of historical and statistical gender disparities. Historic numbers of women chose the candidate role in 2018, creating a unique environment for women to talk about their experiences as they learned the candidate role. To better understand the education of women as candidates, it is important that we first consider how people learn new roles more broadly.

Education Beyond Schooling. In this study, I explored the experiences of female candidates who chose to run for state legislative office, including how they learn about this new role. To begin, I must address the question, “what does it mean to learn?”

This study broadens the typical view of education beyond schools and institutions; instead, I expand our understanding to the many ways a person utilizes to learn a new role. It is an important question to ask, “what is education and how do people learn?” The answer has been debated for millennium and was summarized by Dr. Marilyn Price-Mitchell (2014) as she looked at quotes from the “world’s greatest minds” to answer this question. The following quotes from her summary provide insight into a broader definition of education that relates to the learning of the women in this study. Twenty-four hundred years ago Greek philosopher Plato wrote, “the object of education is to teach us to love beauty” and Aristotle stated, “It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it.” Robert Frost, American poet, defined education as “the ability to listen to almost anything without losing your temper or self-confidence.” Jean Piaget, a leader in development psychology, stated, “The principle goal of education...should be creating men and women who are capable of doing new things, not simply repeating what other generations have done.” Lawrence Cremin (1970), educational historian, defined education as “the deliberate, systematic, and sustained effort to transmit, evoke, or acquire knowledge skills, or sensibilities” (p. xiii). Education – as described above – involves new knowledge, an appreciation of the individual’s connection to humanity, and a discernment of self which frequently happens outside the context of schools. This broad definition of education includes the learning that takes place as people adjust to new roles.

A second related question is the process; how do we learn? Educational philosophers stress the difference between ‘schooling’ or ‘formal education’ and ‘learning’ and ‘informal education.’ Freire (1972) describes ‘schooling’ as trying to drill information and facts into people based on an external needs and others’ ideas, what he called “banking” with deposits of knowledge. In contrast, John Dewey (1916) describes education as a social process, “a process of living and not a preparation for future living” (p. 77). Fromm (1976) maintains that “The process of learning has an entirely different quality for students in the being mode...instead of being passive receptacles of words and ideas, they listen, they *hear*, and most important, they *receive* and they *respond* in an active, productive way” (pp. 37–38). In the broad explanations of education described above, learning occurs through experiences as people consider and react to those experiences.

The transition to a new identity and role provided a fertile environment to study the education of women using this broad definition. As a woman defines herself in a new role, going to new environments and completing new tasks, she is constantly learning. In this study, I observed women while in the process of learning the new role of political candidate. They learn this new role mostly informally and through experience, outside of traditional classroom settings. I explored how, with the given current context, women learn their new role of candidate.

Structural Changes to Increase Women Representation. Finally, as part of learning the experiences of current women candidates, I also generated ideas for how to

create structures to encourage women to pursue leadership opportunities in the future. As the American Association of University Women (2016) writes, “Women’s representation in leadership will not increase substantially without major changes in the culture, policies, and practices of the organizations where women learn and work” (p. x). If we truly want to work to increase the percentage of women running for office and leadership across disciplines, it is critical that we learn from women who accept the challenge about the structures they perceive further support their leadership.

Methods

I used three methods to collect data in this basic qualitative study. First, I wrote an autoethnography of my own experiences as a candidate based on my personal journal throughout the experience. The second method I used was a series of three interviews with five candidates who were running for office that I completed over the course of their campaigns. The five candidates were all first-time female candidates for the North Carolina House of Representatives. Interviews took place in three rounds: March 2018, October 2018, and between January and March 2019. Two of the five candidates won their election in November 2018. As a third data method, I analyzed comments in the online forum where eighteen first time female candidates for the North Carolina House participated, including the five women I selected for the interviews. Identifying similar themes across three data sources provided for a strong, triangulated analysis of the experiences of first-time female candidates for the state legislature.

Theoretical Framework

Theories provide an important tool to strengthen research by offering a lens to understand, interpret, conceptualize, and organize the observations made during the research process. Theories provide lenses through which the researcher views the world and help structure explanations about their observations. They also influence study design and construction. As LeCompte and Preissle (1993) describe them, “the purpose of theories is to help us sort out our world, make sense of it, guide how we behave in it, and predict what might happen next” (p. 42). Anyon (2008) stresses the critical nature of theory in research by stating that “researchers cannot gather empirical data *without* theory” (p. 8) and cautions that the influence of theories occurs whether the theory is acknowledged or not. As the researcher in this study, it is critical that I considered the theories that impacted my assumptions, observations, and explanations from the research. In this study, two theories – feminist and socio-cultural theories – informed my analysis.

Feminist Theory. The most dominant of the theories that impacted this study is Feminist Theory. In the *SAGE Handbook on Feminist Theory* (2017), Editor Mary Evans et al. define feminist theory as “a challenge to much of what has existed as knowledge which is supported by the implicit and unspoken authority of men, a form of authority that has existed across time and place” (p. 2). Feminist theory calls the researcher to question their assumptions and perspectives constantly, acknowledging that much of our intellectual, institutional and political history is defined by the “identification of the human with the biologically male (and usually white and privileged) human” (p. 3). The

editors describe how feminist theory offers three distinct possibilities to the researcher. First, it helps engage with various forms of politics and power in the worlds in which we live. Second, it brings the possibility of cross-disciplinary research as it can provide a lens to consider knowledge and research in any other field. Third, working within feminist theory “allows the sense of personal involvement and recognition” (p. 2). A feminist theoretical perspective guided this study.

Feminist theory provides a foundation for several assumptions and perspectives that impacted the research in this study. First, as described above, the field of leadership is dramatically skewed towards the male gender. Feminist theory led to my assumption and belief that there are structural and societal explanations for such a large discrepancy between opportunities available for men and women that should be explored. Second, because of these structural differences and expectations, women entering a new leadership role likely will experience that new role, the learning that occurs and the challenges they face, differently than men who enter that same role. Third, women will seek support for their new role in unique ways to combat the structural challenges and the male dominated leadership of the field they enter. I explored these issues through women who learn a new role as a political leader in light of the three assumptions described above and could apply to women entering leadership roles in any field.

As I analyzed the data in this study, I realized how feminist theory impacted how I viewed the experiences of the women running for the General Assembly. The women running for the General Assembly challenged the structure of male dominated power just

by serving in the role and providing a different vision of what “politician” looks like. As I suggest drawing on the data that I explore deeply in the analysis chapters, many of the women actively fought against the power structures of the political world. Feminist theory helped me frame these as male-created and male-dominated structures of power. My second assumption provide true, women did create alternative structures and supports to survive the leadership challenge. Feminist theory provided me with a lens to see those created structures differently, and to realize the importance the women placed on their support group as a challenge to historical structures that aligned to male dominated approaches. Ultimately, feminist theory impacted why I undertook this study and how I analyzed the data I collected.

Social Learning Theory. A second theoretical lens that impacted this study is social learning theory. Albert Bandura (1977) developed this theory to describe the process by which people learn. He writes that “most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others, one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action” (p. 6). In his social learning theory, Bandura focuses on how children and adults “operate cognitively on their social experiences and with how these cognitive operations then come to influence their behavior and development” (Grusec, 1992, p. 781). Social learning theory is characterized by three key aspects: observation learning, self-regulation and self-efficacy, and reciprocal determinism (Grusec, 1992).

Observational learning describes four components to learning through observation; the

learner pays attention to the modeled behavior, information is retained in memory, symbolic representation is converted to similar appropriate reactions, and the learner is motivated to repeat the performance observed. The characteristic of self-regulation and self-efficacy describes the factor of Bandura's theory that people bring "judgmental self-reactions into play whenever they perform an action" (Grusec, 1992, p. 782). Reciprocal determinism describes Bandura's triangle of influence between the individual, environment and behavior. Social learning theory provided a lens to consider how the women in this study learn their new roles.

In this study I drew on social learning theory to analyze the educational experiences of the participants in the study. As the women in this study learned their new roles, I drew upon social learning theory to understand how they learned from observation of other candidates and each other, as well as other experiences throughout their campaigns. The experience of learning a new role, especially a role that requires public interactions and navigating changing environments constantly, lends itself to constant learning through observation and interaction. Social learning theory applied to the women in this study who learned in relationship to other candidates, politicians, and community members. As the researcher, I assumed that the candidates learned in part through their observations of each other and their interactions with other people in the community.

Social learning theory proved especially helpful in understanding what and how the women learned in their role as political candidate. The women learned about a huge

range of topics – themselves, their communities, other people, politics, specific skills and more. We learned in from many different methods, including from interactions with others, online support groups, and personal reflections. Social learning theory helped me broaden the lens of how and what the women learned as I reflected on the data collected.

Researcher Role in the Study

The role I played in this study impacts the strength and limitations of the data and conclusions. I will explore a few key aspects of my role in this study in this section.

First, my experience as an educator before my role as political candidate influenced how I thought about the role and my interest in studying how women learned in their adjustment to this new role. Additionally, I am both the researcher and a participant in this study. This is most obvious in Chapter 4, where I analyze my journal from my own campaign for state legislature; but my role is more extensive as I created the online support network and was in constant interaction for almost a year with the women in this study. Finally, once this role of candidate ended and I had won the election, I moved onto the role of state legislator and into leadership roles within the caucus.

Before I decided to run for office, my entire life I identified primarily as an “educator.” After graduating from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill as a North Carolina Teaching Fellow, I began teaching first grade at the age of twenty-one. I taught first and second grade before attending Harvard University for my Master’s in School Leadership. I worked as a school turnaround principal in Guilford County, where I helped to transform the lowest performing school in our state to “NC School of the

Year” in the four years I was an administrator. I then worked as principal at another school and as an Assistant Superintendent in a neighboring district. Throughout the roles I filled as an educator, I operated from my deep belief in the powerful impact of traditional public schools to provide opportunity for future success for each and every child. This passion ultimately led to my decision to run for office, where I continue to advocate for resources for a strong and equitable public education for all children in our state.

There were two main connections between my life as an educator and the choice to run for office – anger at the direction of our state and a learned understanding of the structural supports needed for people to improve throughout their lives. First, I felt the leadership at the state legislature, particularly since a super-majority of one party took power in 2011, regularly made detrimental policy decisions to the institution of public education I so deeply believe in. Some examples include increased public dollars being used for private school vouchers; forced, out of touch, and unfunded class size decrease mandates; and increased school accountability with punitive measures. Also, I saw from my experiences as a school principal and district administrator the impact a successful and positive school can have in a historically disadvantaged community. I also learned the limitations of education as a cure-all for all social ills, particularly as the public health needs of many children and families go unmet and as they are subject to a justice system that leaves children behind.

The feeling of anger at state decisions and realization of structural changes needed coalesced when I was asked, quite unexpectedly, to run for the North Carolina House. My first response was, “I cannot do this right now. I am an Assistant Superintendent, have three children 6 and under, and I am doing my doctorate.” As time went on, however, my passion for our children and a feeling of responsibility to use my life to improve opportunities for all of our citizens pushed me to consider running for this position. The support of my husband and my superintendent helped and I eventually came to a place where I could not imagine my life without trying this new role. Around the same time there was a district change in leadership and I decided to step down from my role as Assistant Superintendent. This change allowed me to spend more focused time as a candidate than some of the other women in this study.

As I undertook the role of political candidate, I became acutely aware of the underrepresentation of women in public office and the unique challenges the role posed to women. I began talking to other women running for the NC House for their first campaigns and realized we shared many experiences and questions. I talked to women who were considering whether or not to run and shared my experiences in an effort to support their decision. At some point early on in the election season, I realized the women experiencing this change in role should join together and support each other. I started the online forum for people to virtually connect and planned a dinner for people who wanted to meet in person. The support group grew from there. We reached out to new women who announced their campaigns and the women then defined how the group

could best support them. As the support group developed, I participated online and in interactions with the other women. Throughout the campaign cycle, I interacted with the women in this study as both a colleague and researcher.

Finally, my role after the campaign ended is worth mentioning in context of this study. The campaigns ended on November 8, 2018 and for many of the women in this study their role of “politician” came to an end as well. I won my election, as did one of the five women I interviewed, and six total from the twenty members of our support group (including me and the woman I interviewed). I moved onto the role of state legislator and retained the role of “politician,” while many women lost the role and had to consider the impact of the role through that lens, particularly in our final interview. The six of us who won continue to interact regularly and learn together for our new role. All twenty women continued to use the online forum to support each other in their new roles; this continues today. As a legislator, I serve as Freshmen Co-Chair of our class of nineteen first time Democratic representatives and am on the 2020 Campaign Leadership Team. The roles I served before becoming a political candidate, in organizing the women who became participants of this study, and that I continued onto after I studied the role of the first-time political candidate impact this study.

Limitations

While I was able to gain valuable insights into the experiences of a sample of women in North Carolina who ran for office, there are also some limitations to my study. First, while in this study I focused on political leaders, I only studied female candidates

from one political party. Nationally, the increase in female candidates is almost wholly through the Democratic party (CAWP, 2018a), which situates this limitation interestingly within the national context. A second limitation is that it was impossible to be a neutral observer of the study as a participant. However, as part of my journal analysis, I explained my own experiences and worked to control for biases and explore multiple interpretations of the data. The third limitation is that my personal experiences with other participants potentially inadvertently affected my observations. I worked to limit the impact of these challenges by triangulating data and using interview and observation protocols to ensure consistent data collection. I also enacted several strategies to enhance the trustworthiness of my findings, which I describe in my methods chapter.

Significance of the Study

This study provided important insight in several key areas. As described above, women are woefully underrepresented in leadership in all fields. This underrepresentation leads to less effective organizations and governments, and exacerbates inequities in other areas. If we are to address this challenge, we must understand the experiences of women who attempt to lead, how they learn new leadership roles, and how they find support. In this study, I provide rich details about the decisions and experiences of women who choose to run for office in a leadership field dominated by men. Ultimately, I will suggest structural changes that could support women to seek new leadership roles. The insights from this study will help all interested stakeholders to increase women's leadership in politics and in the world beyond.

Overview of Chapters

In the first chapter of this dissertation, I provided background information that informs this study, identified the problem this study addresses, listed the research questions, discussed the role of theory, provided a brief overview of methods, and pointed out some of the reasons this study is significant. In the second chapter, the Literature Review, I review research on women as political candidates, how people learn new roles, and the structural supports that increase women to seek and retain leadership positions. The third chapter is dedicated to the Methodology of the study. In this chapter, I describe the procedures I used in crafting my journal analysis and in the interviews I conducted and documents I analyzed. In Chapters IV and V, I present findings from my study. Chapter 4 is my journal analysis, constructed from the journal I kept throughout the campaign. In Chapter V, I analyze the interviews I conducted and the Facebook comments made by a larger group of female candidates who ran for a House seat in North Carolina in the most recent election. In the final chapter, I summarize the data collected and draw conclusions from the study. The conclusions provide insight to further strengthen women's leadership. I also discuss implications for research and practice.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

As described in the introduction, women are underrepresented in leadership across sectors. In this literature review, I provide context to more fully understand the experiences of the women in this study who chose the new leadership challenge of becoming a candidate. First, I summarize research on how people define and educate themselves in a new role, providing context for the experiences of women as they develop their new identity. In the next section, I consider research on women across fields where they learn to embrace a new leadership identity. In the third section, I consider the challenges for women who consider the identity of “political candidate” and present some strategies that mitigate those challenges. In the final section, I summarize what we know about how female candidates find support for their new identity as “political candidate” and how women seek support for that new identity.

Learning New Roles

What does it mean to learn a new role and how does it relate to Dewey’s broad sense of education that I mentioned in the introduction, which is education a process of living more than something we complete? Both personally and professionally, people continually change their roles through marriage, birth, death, job termination, hiring,

relocation, and in countless other ways. What does research tell us about how we learn those new roles? Does the learning differ if the role change is personal or professional?

First, I consider the personal new role of “parent,” a major transition for human beings. Personally, the new role of parent was one of my most challenging transitions. What would help parents as they adjust to this new role? A meta-analysis of parenting programs (Kane, Wood, & Barlow, 2007) describes “key characteristics” of parenting programs from the perspectives of parents: before the program parents felt “powerless and felt that they had inadequate knowledge in relation to their children’s behavior” (p. 791); the programs helped parents acquire knowledge, skills, understanding and a feeling of acceptance and support from others parents. This learning led to an increased feeling of control; the positive feelings increased empathy with their children and confidence in dealing with their behavior. How much does the context of the new role influence the transition and resources needed to adjust? A study of parenting experiences of homeless teenage mothers showed that “study participants universally rejected the idea that they could learn to be a parent by taking lessons or reading a book” and instead viewed parenting as a skill that required hands-on learning (Dworsky & Meehan, 2012, p. 2119). The two examples show that the role change required people to learn different skills and showed how differently people found that learning based on their contexts.

For another example, I look to people transitioning to the new role of “widow” after spending a significant portion of their life partnered with their spouse. One study provides insight into how structured intervention support groups helped widowers learn

their new role as “widow” (Stewart, Craig, MacPherson, & Alexander, 2001). The support group worked with widows and researchers found that the intervention increased total satisfaction of participants, sustained this increase three months after the conclusion of the support group, decreased future need for support, and decreased loneliness and isolation. As the widowers learned their new role, the support group helped by providing social comparison that normalized their experiences, reciprocal exchange of support between participants, and an increased perception of capability that influenced positively their self-efficacy to achieve goals. An ethnographic study of an online widow message board database showed that the community of widowers and “non-judgmental” conversations helped widows to develop meaning in their new identities and created an informal learning community for the members about their new roles (McDonald-Kenworthy, 2011). It seems that the personal transition to the new role of “widow” also led to the need for support and education.

People also change roles in their professional careers through moves, promotions, reductions, and new opportunities. Research from professional fields can provide additional context for how people learn a new role. First, research from the field of education contributes to the conversation. In one example, in a study of pre-service school librarians by Project LEAD, researchers worked to define the school librarian role as a transformational leadership role (Smith, 2015). The pre-service school librarians were provided mentors and direct professional development on transformational leadership. Pre- and post-survey data showed that participants developed new role

identities to “challenge the processes” in schools that are not working for students and to “inspire change” in their school communities. In a study of principals adjusting to a new school environment, Clayton and Johnson (2011) demonstrate the need for new principals to deeply understand the context for their new role by analyzing quantitative and qualitative data of student learning, parent and teacher perspectives and working conditions. These are two examples of how people educate themselves effectively for a new professional role in education.

The medical field also provides useful research related to learning new roles. In a study of new doctors’ perceptions of adjustment to their new role, Hesketh, Allan, Harden, and Macpherson (2003) demonstrate that during their first year in their new role, doctors learned the most about how to operate as a professional in a work environment. Just as the personal examples and education professional example described above, doctors also needed to contextualize their new role to the environment. Ryan, Hodson-Carlton, and Ali (2005) demonstrated the effectiveness of a clear matrix of expectations in helping nursing faculty change their role to *online instructor* from *classroom instructor*. The results demonstrated that faculty members were helped to understand their new role through administrative support, technology partnerships, and faculty teams and that benefits to the new role included the opportunity to learn new teaching pedagogies and be creative and energetic. The study also demonstrated some negative factors to the new role for faculty, including increased workload and a shift from authority figure to facilitator, changing the faculty’s perception of their expertise.

An interesting study in the field of business demonstrates the stress that can be caused when new roles are undefined and unclear. Joyce, McGee, and Slocum (1997) studied eight organizations with a lateral organizational structure defined as flatter, less bureaucratic and more cooperative and team based as compared to typical hierarchal structures. The costs to lateral organizational structures were quantitatively measured and clustered with the “Role Strain” clustered as one of the largest costs. The workers in all eight organizations studied demonstrated increases in role conflict, ambiguity, and overload, pointing to the fact that workers were unclear on the expectations for their role, felt conflicted with their own identity, and felt they were asked to do more than reasonable in their role. This study demonstrates human’s critical need to be clear on the expectations of a new role and the stress that can be caused without clear definitions and structure.

The research demonstrates some of the challenges and supports people seek as they define themselves in new personal and professional roles. People need support from peers and mentors, instruction in concrete skills, and real-life experiences as they adjust to their new roles. It is also clear from the research that context impacts how people adjust to their new roles. These ideas will be explored as I examine the women’s experiences adjusting to their new role or political candidate.

Women Leaders: Learning New Roles

Building on the background of how people learn new roles, an important context to consider is how women who become new leaders experience their new roles. When I

first started to research this topic, the bulk of the research that I could find was about why women do *not* achieve peak leadership positions in their organizations, as opposed to the experiences once they achieve them. A few studies sought to compare outcomes of women leaders versus male leaders, one even concluding that female Chief Executive Offices “underperform their male counterparts with .35% lower monthly risk adjust shareholders’ return” (Kolev, 2012, p. 437).

In this section, I describe the experiences of women in new leadership roles in their organizations, specifically school superintendents, female business Chief Executive Officers, and medical Chief Executive Officers. The experiences of the women who attempt new leadership roles provide important insight if we hope to better understand how to encourage and support women leaders. The experiences of the women discussed below inform the examination of the candidates’ experiences in this study.

I turn first to the experiences of female superintendents, the highest leadership position in the public-school sector. Teresa Wallace (2014) studied sixty-three female superintendents in six southeastern states, including North Carolina, which represented more than half of the female superintendents in those states at the time. The participants answered seventeen multiple choice questions and two open-ended questions related to how they decided to become a superintendent, advice they would give an aspiring female superintendent, and suggestions to increase the proportion of females in the superintendency. Wallace found that women chose the new leadership role of superintendent first for their commitment to education (75.8%), followed by the

opportunity to have an impact on student achievement and the opportunity to serve the community. The lowest two reasons were the desire to leave their current position and the prestige of the position (only 4.8% of respondents indicated that this was an important reason for their choice). The three highest incentives were making a difference, leading learning, and team building; the lowest were compensation and prestige of the position (0%). As I will describe in the next section, these findings align to a strategy that increases women representation in political leadership by framing the opportunity as a meaningful way to give back to their communities.

The superintendents' advice to incoming female superintendents provides insight into the challenges and experiences they faced in the role. Through the multiple-choice answers, the greatest pieces of advice were to learn the how (concrete skills) to the job, be aware of gender bias issues, and prepare for job related stress. The three pieces of advice that the participants rated as least important were to make sure the district is a good fit, understand board and superintendent roles, and take advantage of leadership opportunities. It appears in this study that the context was less important for the development of their new role than the skills needed, consideration of their gender, and strategies to balance their new stress. The superintendents most strongly recommended two strategies for increasing females in the role: provide incentives for females to gain superintendent certification and reward districts for hiring female superintendents. This mixed method study provides insight into how a large sample of female superintendents experienced their new leadership role and what may increase women to consider the role.

A qualitative study of seven female superintendents provides deeper insight into their learning as they adjusted to the new role. Allred, Maxwell, and Skrla (2017) completed semi-structured interviews and conducted pre-and post-interviews informally with these seven superintendents. The insights from their study may provide clues for how women choose and adapt to their new role of political candidate. What made the superintendents seek licensure at this level? Five of the seven pursued the role after being encouraged by a supervisor or professor; one woman noted “I didn’t really ever think I would be a superintendent. That was never the plan” (p. 5). As I will discuss later, the voices of the candidates in my study resonate with that superintendent as many of the candidates – me included – say the same about our role as a political candidate. The strongest supported reasons for choosing the leadership role were personal drive for excellence, desire to make a difference, acknowledgement of achievement or progress, and a desire to lead. Five of seven superintendents (all seven were married) described their partners as “significant sustaining factors” in their work (p. 7), four described their teams the same way. The most common challenge for the superintendents was balancing their lives, supporting the first finding of job-related stress as something to prepare for in the role. The experiences of women in the superintendent role provide some potential parallels to considering experiences of women who lead in the political field.

Additional insight can be found in the business field where women are woefully underrepresented in the role of Chief Executive Officer (CEO). Though there is a substantial amount of research documenting the problem of disproportionality between

genders in this top leadership role, it was difficult to find research specific to the experiences of women in the role. One recent study involves evidence from twelve in-depth qualitative interviews with female Chief Executive Officers, though this data was a subset of data that included 139 male participants. As the researchers state, “the rarity of female CEOs and the lack of studies on them mean we still have very limited insights into how women at the top of organizations perceive their career success – or its implications for others” (Athanasopoulou, Moss-Cowan, Smets, & Morris, 2018, p. 617). The researchers present several barriers to the progress of women to the CEO role, including the role of social context, a conscious or unconscious undermining of their own efforts, and gendered perceptions of effectiveness. Interestingly, in addition to asking questions on the themes of self-acceptance, self-development, and self-management, the researchers in this study also asked participants what advice they would give to a female aiming to become a CEO, the same question asked in the study of superintendents.

What did the researchers discover about women who chose the leadership role of Chief Executive Officer? The female CEOs advised women who hoped to become CEOs to take charge of work-family balance conflicts and expect little outside help. They also encouraged the women to feel confidence in their potential and to toughen their skin. How did the women develop in their leadership role? The participants described defining moments that shaped their leadership either by personally pushing their limits or strongly grasping operational aspects of their work – hurdles and small failures were seen as part of the process. When considering work-life balance, the CEOs approached them as other

business decisions, one described the balance in terms of the following advice: “recognize the need to make trade-offs, make a choice, accept the responsibilities that come with it, and move on” (Athanasopoulou et al., 2018, p. 628). The CEOs explained how they learned their new role through networking, mentoring, and conscious work on developing skills to prioritize time; think globally with strategy, vision and purpose; and to work towards transformational leadership. The CEOs described how their personal demeanor impacted their leadership, with a strong theme of the importance of being authentic and focused on the purpose, the need to toughen up to withstand the pressure, and the need to “pay conscious attention to a tendency for perfectionism and risk aversion” (Athanasopoulou et al., 2018, p. 629). There are clear similarities in the experiences of women as they learned the leadership roles of superintendent and CEO.

As in the other fields described, women are also underrepresented in hospital management. While women constitute seventy-eight percent of the healthcare workforce, less than ten percent of senior hospital management is female (Lantz, 2008). A recent study presents the experiences of twelve female hospital Chief Executive Officers following a semi-structured interview process (Soklaridis et al., 2017). The researchers sought to understand the experience of female hospital Chief Executives to better understand how to support and further females into the highest leadership role, similar to the researchers of superintendents and business CEOs. The findings of this study are consistent with the findings in the fields of education and business. The women sought the role of hospital CEO most strongly in an effort to improve care for patients and they

were least motivated by a “sense of power.” Women expressed the need to develop new skills to succeed in this role, to trust their own leadership, and the need for balance with the other parts of their lives. The female hospital Chief Executive Officers presented similar experience as the female superintendents and business CEOs.

In this section, I considered the development of women leaders in three fields – education, business, and medicine. I suspect that the experiences and choices of women in these fields parallel those of women candidates, though not much has been written about first time political candidate experiences. Several themes emerged across the fields and give insight into possible experiences of the women experiencing the new leadership role of candidate. First, the women needed to develop technical skills to meet the new demands of the role and personal skills to further their leadership. Second, confidence in leadership strength is an important for women in new leadership roles. Third, the context of leadership seems important to the development and success of the leader. Finally, women in new leadership roles need to pay close attention to the balance of their lives. The themes across these disciplines present possible context for the experiences of the women who choose the new “candidate” role. In the next section, I consider the challenges that impact a woman’s decision to run for political office and strategies that increase the likelihood they will choose that new role.

Political Candidate: Why Women Do Not Choose This Role

In this study, I examined the experiences of women candidates who decided to run for office during the 2018 election cycle. Research demonstrates unique challenges

to women (Fox & Lawless, 2010) running for office that provide important context for the candidates in this study. We must first understand the reasons women are less likely to run for political office than their male counterparts, and the challenges they face as political candidates, if we hope to understand their experiences and increase their participation in the political process. Based on the research, the reasons include familial obligations, differences in perceptions of qualifications, differences in party support, and different responses to the competitive nature of politics.

Family Obligations. A well-documented reason for women's lack of running for political office are the family obligations felt by female candidates. This mirrors research from the fields of education, business, and health that I described in section two. This factor was initially researched closely with the data from the 1972 Convention Delegate Study collected by the Center for Political Studies. Sapiro (1982) analyzed data from 2,449 surveys and 1,336 interviews on the decision making of men and women to run for office. There were several interesting observations in this research. First, the aspect of family life most cited for conflict by female political candidates was the presence of children, particularly under the age of six. Only two percent of the female office holders surveyed had children under the age of six compared with thirty-six percent of the male officeholders. Second, both sexes felt increased conflict when their spouses were not fully approving of their activities. Sapiro (1982) summarized her conclusion:

Family commitments and public commitments are experience by women as conflicting with each other. We may now add that these conflicts are experienced *at least as much* by men as well. With regard to political ambition, this

investigation lends added support to the idea that many women are inclined to forego ambitions rather than to risk added, and perhaps unmanageable conflict. We find, on the other hand, that men are more likely to develop and pursue political ambitions despite the fact that these commitments are felt by the men to be in conflict. (p. 276)

Interestingly, there was a note at the beginning of the article, “because of the focus on conflict between politics and family life, this analysis includes only married respondents” (p. 268) which alluded to an assumption that only married candidates would feel the tension between politics and family life. Ultimately, Sapiro created the foundational idea that early in the modern history of women running for office, women felt constrained by their family roles while men did not see the conflict as an inhibitor to their ambition.

The impact of family obligations continues to present itself in subsequent studies through today. In a study published in 1990, Bledsoe and Herring researched city council candidates over a five-year period, exploring whether they sought higher offices and their success. The researchers showed that women have high levels of “affiliative concern,” their motivation for political ambition must combine with their concern about the impact on their families, friendships and interpersonal relationships. In contrast, men tend to devote single-minded attention to achievement and performance in political ambition. Fox (2006) offered a similar finding in their study of more than two hundred men and women considered potential candidates for local and state elections in New York State. The authors concluded, “we find that traditional family structures and historically socialized gender roles may continue to discourage women from seeking public office” (p. 19). Fulton, Maestas, Maisel, and Stone (2006) studied state legislators in 1998 to

examine the conditions for male and female candidates who sought a position in the United States House of Representatives. They confirmed the research summarized above, “Female state legislators are less ambitious than males for a U.S. House seat, a difference that largely stems from gender disparities in child-care responsibilities” (p. 235). The research certainly indicates family obligations as a factor in women’s decision to run for political office.

Difference in Perceptions of Qualifications. A second critical factor and challenge for female candidates to decide to run for political office is the difference in perceptions of how “qualified” the woman is for the role as compared to how qualified a man is for the role. The women business CEOs expressed this challenge to their leadership growth as well. Fox and Lawless (2004) conducted the Citizen Political Ambition Study, the first large-scale national survey of potential candidates, and also have written extensively about gender differences in the decision to run for office. The researchers administered questionnaires to 6,800 men and women considered part of the national candidate eligibility pool and targeted men and women in the three professions that yield the highest proportion of political candidates: law, business, and education. They received 3,765 surveys almost evenly balanced between male and female respondents. To measure whether participants made progress on running for office, the survey asked whether they took any of the following initial campaign steps: investigated how to be on the ballot or discussed running with friends, community leaders, party leaders or donors. Based on their results, they claimed that in the group of successful,

“elite” performers, “across professions, men are always at least fifty percent more likely than women to have engaged in each of these fundamental campaign steps” (p. 268).

Additionally, the candidates were asked to place themselves on a continuum from “not at all qualified” to “very qualified” to run for office. The male potential candidates in the sample were nearly twice as likely as female potential candidates to deem themselves “very qualified” though their work histories showed no difference in qualifications. The differences between men and women on self-perceived qualification were statistically significant, and the data indicates that “the gender gap narrows considerably and becomes statistically insignificant as women perceive themselves as increasingly qualified to run for political office” (Fox & Lawless, 2004, p. 272). Most notably, the impact of self-perceived qualifications on women’s predicted likelihood of considering a run was nearly double that for men. “For women, self-perceived qualifications are the strongest predictor of considering a run for office” (Fox & Lawless, 2004, p. 273). This study shows the critical need for women to feel confident and strong in their qualifications to run for office.

Differences in Encouragement to Run from Party Leadership. A key factor that influences which candidates run for office is the leadership in the parties and what they are looking for in their candidates. It is a challenge for women when party leadership does not view them as viable candidates. Sanbonmatsu (2006) demonstrated this phenomenon in state legislative races when she investigated party leader beliefs in both the Democratic and Republican leadership. She found that while women and men

have similar percentages of perceived electability, party leadership sees women with an advantage only in particular districts. Sanbonmatsu's research confirmed the frequently documented effect that when women run they are as successful as men, but adds the layer that women may only be recruited to run for specific types of elections where they are more predisposed to win.

Fox and Lawless (2004) provide additional insight into the mindsets and recruitment impact of party leadership. In their study, they used responses from 3,765 men and women from across the country who completed the Citizen Political Ambition Study. Fox and Lawless determined the predicted probabilities of considering running for office from the sample and found men's (.32) likelihood significantly higher than women's (.20). Respondents' likelihood of considering a candidacy increased dramatically with external support to run, women to .75 and men to .85. It is important to note, though, that

Despite the fact that external support for a candidacy boosts both men and women's likelihood of considering a run for office, 43% of the men, compared to 32% of women received encouragement to run for a party leader, elected official, or political activist...patterns of traditional gender socialization in candidate recruitment hinder the selection of women candidates. (p. 273)

A second wave of surveys completed in 2008 provided additional insight into the gender impact of recruitment (Fox & Lawless, 2010). In this study, they looked more closely at recruitment and pinpointed significant differences in a few areas. First, women attorneys and educators are far less likely than men to be tapped to run for office by party

leaders compared to the business field when men and women are recruited at comparable numbers. The researchers also illustrated whether the party affiliation impacted the likelihood of women to be recruited by party leadership. Only twenty-five percent of Republican women and twenty-three percent of Democratic women reported being recruited by party leadership. Interestingly the study showed support for women's organizations who seem to recruit women the most aggressively, thirty-six percent of Democratic women were asked to run for office by a "political activist" in their community. This study furthered the understanding of the lack of party leadership to recruit women when compared to their recruitment of men as a challenge to women running for office.

Competitive Nature of Politics. A fourth documented reason for the lack of women running for political office is the evidence that women shy away from the competitive nature of politics. Preece and Stoddard (2015) demonstrated this effect with research involving giving a group of politically active men and women two different explanations of running for office. In the first control group, there was a neutral statement and the second statement included a description of the highly competitive nature of politics. Preece and Stoddard compared the rates of requests for information on running for office in both groups and found a "significant negative effect of the competitive treatment on women's leadership ambition" (p. 307). A second study completed as part of this published study conducted with a sample of workers on Amazon's Mechanical Turk confirmed the results of this study.

Kanthak and Woon (2015) also demonstrated the impact of competitiveness on women's likeliness to become a candidate. Kanthak and Woon conducted an experiment, controlling for the incentives potential candidates receive, beliefs, and preferences and different features of the electoral environments to test whether women and men were likely to volunteer for a leadership role. They found that women and men were equally likely to volunteer when the representative was chosen randomly but women were less likely to become candidates when the representative is chosen by an election. Kanthak and Woon showed that the competitive and strategic context of campaigns and elections caused the difference, and not disparities in abilities, risk aversion, or beliefs. Interestingly, the only time the women's "election aversion" disappeared was when the campaigns were seen as costless and tend to be truthful (p. 601).

The reasons described above provide an important context to understand why women do not choose to become political candidates as frequently as men. As I studied female candidates who did make that decision, I explored whether these challenges described still impacted the way they see themselves as a politician. It is also important to understand ways women can be convinced to run for office to consider the strategies that led to these candidate's decision to run.

When Women Choose to Become a Candidate

The women in this study faced the challenges described above and still decided to run for a statewide legislative race. As we learn about the candidates in this study, their decisions to run and their growth over the campaigns, an understanding of specific

reasons women choose to run for office and how the numbers of female candidates can increase is important. The reasons women decide to run for office include recruitment by political parties, redefining of the role of political candidate, and a politicized upbringing. These reasons provide context as I considered the decisions of the women in this study to run for office.

Party Recruitment. As discussed earlier in this chapter, party leaders do not ask women to run for political office at the same rates as men. Thus, one way to increase female participation is to increase the recruitment of women by leadership in the Democratic and Republican parties.

Research suggests that fairly simple interventions can increase participation of women candidates. Karpowitz, Monson, and Robinson Preece (2017) conducted an insightful study about the power of party leadership to elect a greater number of women candidates by increasing the supply and demand of female candidates for office. In this study, the state Republican Party, with historically low levels of women representation, used party caucus meetings as an experimental setting. The caucus meetings usually involve equal numbers of men and women present, though only twenty to twenty-five percent of delegates elected are women. The researchers sent precinct chairs one of four form letters: the *placebo* letter with no mention of gender, the *supply* letter which asked precinct chairs to encourage two to three women to run for delegate positions after explaining the gender disparity; the *demand* letter which also explained the gender disparity and provided a paragraph to be read to participants describing the disparity and

asking for consideration in candidate selection; and the *supply + demand* letter which encouraged precinct chairs to reach out to two or three women and read the paragraph aloud. Precinct chairs completed a post-caucus survey, which provided the sample data set for the analysis.

The first research question was whether a greater number of precincts elected at least one woman to the delegation increased with the interventions. The percentage of precincts that elected at least one woman increased from 37.5% to 45.4% from the Control Group to the Supply + Demand group. Additionally, “including the control variables reveals that women were more likely to be elected when a greater proportion of those at the meeting were women” (Karpowitz et al., 2017, p. 932), though the interventions demonstrated a positive effect on women’s representation independent of that relationship. The second research question sought the impact of the interventions to increasing the overall proportion of the precinct’s state delegates who are women. Women comprised less than 24.6% percent of delegates in the control group which increased to 30.6% in the Supply + Demand condition. The researchers wrote, “our experiment suggests that a simple intervention in a single state can bring hundreds of women into the formal political party structure and its associated informal networks” (Karpowitz et al., 2017, p. 935). In a replication experiment of a Republican sample of almost 3,000 voters in thirty states, voters were about eleven percentage points more likely to choose a female candidate when included in the Supply + Demand condition versus the Control condition. The researchers conclude, “although our interventions were

mild – a single letter sent to precinct chairs with a request for the state party chair or exposing voters to statements from party leaders – we saw significant increases in women’s representation” (Karpowitz et al., 2017, p. 940). This study shows how party leadership can easily increase the number of female candidates.

Redefining the Role of Politicians. A second interesting method for increasing the number of female candidates is to orient politics around a communal goal as opposed to power and independent goals. Schneider, Holman, Diekman, and McAndrew (2016) studied participants of both genders to determine how men and women view the goal of politics and whether it impacts participation. They hypothesized that women’s goals were more dominated by communal responsibility and men’s by power and independence; they believed this would lead to a disconnect between how people see the role of the politician and the goals of women. Both men and women participated in the laboratory experiment where factors were manipulated and beliefs and preferences were then measured. The data also demonstrated that men express greater interest in roles that afford power as opposed to women, as well as greater interest in conflict, and greater interest in potentially unpleasant political discussions.

The most poignant conclusion from the study was that emphasizing opportunities to meet communal goals increased women’s positivity towards a career in politics. The researchers concluded that

When political careers were described in a communal manner, women’s reporting of enjoyment increased significantly such that there were no longer significant differences between men and women. In a fairly simple and straightforward

method, we were thus able to close the gender gap in projected enjoyment of a political career. (Schneider et al., 2016, p. 526)

This finding suggests that it may be in the nature of female candidates to focus on the goals of improving our community and the common good if we are to support women to run for political office.

Politicized Upbringing. A third important factor that impacts a woman's decision to run for office is the lasting imprint of a politicized childhood. Fox and Lawless (2005) identified six expectations or considerations for a potential candidate for political office and studied the impact of those expectations on whether a candidate decides to run. The authors concluded that "early political exposure generates lasting effects that are independent and cannot be entirely compensated for by being politically active as an adult" (p. 653). If a candidate grew up in a home where running for office was encouraged, their likelihood of considering a candidacy increased by seventeen percentage points and experience running in a high school or college student body election increased the likelihood an additional seven percentage points.

An early entry into politics also impacts a candidate's view of whether they are qualified to be a politician, one of the most impactful factors in the decision to run for office. Participants in their study whose parents encouraged them to run for office were twice as likely to consider themselves "very qualified" compared to candidates whose parents offered no support. Ultimately, the researchers describe the impact of early experiences in politics by stating the magnitude of the effect is "striking."

In this section, I summarized the challenges for women to choose the new leadership role of political candidate and some methods for encouraging female candidates. The challenges include family obligations, lack of confidence in their qualification, gendered encouragement from political parties, and women's resistance to the competitive nature of politics. Several of these challenges reflect challenges described for new female superintendents, business, and hospital Chief Executive Officers. I also demonstrated some successful efforts that improve a woman's likelihood of accepting this new role including intentional recruitment, early exposure to politics, and a redefinition of the role to focus on the impact to others.

Conclusion

This literature review provides important context to inform the research design and analysis of my findings in this study. In this chapter, I examined how people adjust to new personal roles, showing the need for technical and experiential knowledge and the impact of context to the knowledge needed. I considered the experiences of women in new professional leadership roles across fields. Women describe the need for concrete technical skill acquisition and support for other needs as they adjusted to their new roles including family redefinition. I also discussed how the motivation for women to seek new leadership roles is frequently aligned to their values and goals for their communities. Moreover, women find mentorships and promotion by other women to encourage women leaders to be important.

In the third section of the literature review, I provided insight into the role of political candidate and specifically the impact of the choice of women to tackle this new role. The research demonstrated several challenges to women who may seek this role and offered possible strategies that successfully recruit women to the role. The literature reviewed provides context to the experiences of women in this study as they choose and learn their new role of political candidate.

In this study, I will contribute to the literature reviewed above by providing insights into the experiences of women as they learn the new leadership role of political candidate. The research provides context to the challenges of women in leadership and how we learn new roles though does not answer how women navigate those challenges during their learning. By having close access as both a researcher and participant, I hope that this study will further our understanding of women in leadership, how women learn new leadership roles, and how to support women in the process.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Statistical data shows the unique nature of the 2018 elections, especially for Democrats who saw the 2018 elections as critical turning point at the state and national levels. When filing closed at noon on February 28, 2018, there was a candidate for every seat in the North Carolina General Assembly in both parties, the first time in more than one hundred years this has been the case (CAWP, 2018a). There were also more female candidates than ever before, with women running for seventy-seven of the one hundred and seventy Democratic seats in the North Carolina General Assembly, the previous record was fifty-four. The numbers showed the significant number of candidates running for the North Carolina General Assembly.

Once the dust settled and the recruiting calls ceased, candidates began the work of learning to be a candidate. What do we do now? How do we get organized? What does this mean for our lives, our families, our careers? Where do we go to find answers? Who can help us? Candidates educated themselves on their role and what it means to become a candidate. In this study, I examined five women running for the North Carolina House of Representatives and their experiences learning to be a candidate over the election cycle. I also studied my own experiences in this same role, as well as looked more broadly at the comments of a Facebook group of a number of additional female

candidates in this role. Before describing the methods, I used in this study, I briefly discuss a pilot project I conducted to refine these methods.

Pilot Project

As I knew I wanted to study the experiences of women seeking new political leadership roles for my dissertation, the goals I had for the pilot project were to collect data from candidates early in their campaigns, practice my interview protocol, observe initial commonalities across the candidates' experiences, and reflect on research protocols moving forward. The only method I used as part of this pilot was interviews, though I then expanded the scope of data collection. While I initially planned on this first set of interviews to be a pilot project, the timeliness and importance of the data collected as part of the pilot project led me to include the first interviews as part of the overall data collection. Following the pilot project model, I still adjusted interview protocol and strategies for the second and third interviews based on what I learned doing the first set of interviews.

Participant Selection. The pool that I used for participants in this study was the twenty first time female candidates participating in the online forum. All first time female Democratic candidates for the NC House were invited to become part of our support group, including the online forum. I deliberately and thoughtfully selected five women of these women to participate in the interview data collection in this study.

I strategically chose the five candidates to reflect diverse experiences and backgrounds, including differences in ages, race, family situations and the

competitiveness of districts. I listed all twenty candidates in a chart with each of the categories color coded; I asked five women that created a cross range of experiences across categories. I selected three back-up women as well, though the initial five selected agreed to participate. The women ranged in ages from thirty-six to sixty-four. Two of the women self-identified as Black and three as White. The candidates represented a range of campaign competitiveness with two participants in highly competitive seats, defined as a forty-six to fifty percent Democratic Performance Index score (DPI, the predicted performance of a Democratic candidate), two participants in stretch competitive districts, defined as forty to forty-five DPI scores, and one in an unlikely district (defined as a DPI of thirty or less). A brief summary of each participant is provided below (pseudonyms used).

- **Anna:** Stay-at-home mother for the past twenty years; two children aged 18 and 20; mid-60s; White; stretch competitive district; unsuccessful campaign.
- **Yasmine:** Self-employed attorney; two children aged 5 and 7; late 30s; Black; highly competitive district; successful campaign.
- **Iris:** Paralegal; two children aged 4 and 20; mid-30s; White; highly competitive district; unsuccessful campaign.
- **Courtney:** Financial officer for a university; two children aged 19 and 22, single mother; late 50s; White; stretch competitive district; unsuccessful campaign.

- **Dana:** Probation Office; two children aged 11 and 14; mid-40s; Black; unlikely district; unsuccessful campaign.

Initial (Pilot) Interview Data Collection Description. Drawing on qualitative sources on how to conduct effective interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), I created an initial interview protocol to use with each of five candidates I selected for the study. I selected five candidates who represent different types of political races, racial diversity and age diversity.

Since the decision to run the first critical challenge for female candidates, this first interview focused on how the candidate made that decision. I also wanted to hear how candidates found support at this point in their campaigns. Additionally, I wondered how being a woman at this unique political time may intersect with the experiences and learning of the candidates of the course of their elections. Thus, I had several goals in the first round of interviews:

1. To understand how and why the candidate decided to run for office.
2. To understand the challenges, the candidate faced in that decision.
3. To understand the candidate's view of the campaign experience to this point.
4. To understand the goals of the candidate.
5. To understand their current perspective of the impact of gender on the House race.

Based on the goals described above, I created an interview protocol of eight questions to ask each candidate. The first weekend in March of 2018 provided a natural

opportunity to interview candidates as we were all at a training in Raleigh. The training focused on concrete skills that candidates need to run their campaigns. I interviewed four of the five candidates during that weekend and the fifth candidate the Wednesday after due to time constraints. The interviews lasted between thirty-five and fifty minutes each. I recorded each interview and took notes as I interviewed each candidate as well. The interview protocol included the following questions:

- Tell me about yourself and how you got to be here.
- How did you ultimately decide to run for office?
- What hurdles did you have to overcome to make that decision?
- How would you describe your experience so far?
- What has helped you in this process so far?
- How – if in anyway – do you think being a woman has affected your experience?
- What do you most want to work on at the state legislature?
- What difference does it make to have more women in office?
- What do you look forward to in the campaign?
- What seems like the greatest challenge?

After conducting these interviews, I had them transcribed and analyzed them for themes and insights to help me develop the research protocol for my dissertation.

Reflection on First Round Interviews and Protocol. The experience interviewing candidates provided a great learning opportunity for me to reflect on my

role as an interviewer, refine my questions for future interviews, and to reflect on the process of interviewing. The interview practice showed how important it was to have a carefully crafted interview protocol and script and to stick with the protocol as I proceeded through the follow-up interviews. Due to our shared experiences and relationships as candidates, it was difficult to not begin more personal conversations with the candidates as I heard their answers to specific questions, and thus get off track from the questions I wanted them all to answer. I found it particularly challenging to stay focused as the candidates described challenges as I wanted to provide support and encouragement. I learned how important it was for me to know the clear goal of each interview I planned to conduct and to ask follow-up questions aligned to that goal, working to filter out other issues I found interesting or wanted to ask about based on other reasons. I also learned how important it was to remind the candidates at each interview that I was in the interviewer role. I knew I could overcome this challenge because of the access and openness with which the candidates described their experiences due to our relationships.

This first round of interviews also provided an opportunity to reflect on the way I worded questions and how I needed to shape them differently for the next interviews. There were two questions that caused problems. I worded the first question as “tell me about yourself and how you got to be here,” yet I realized after the first few responses that this question was not specific enough for the candidates. I *meant*, “How did you get to be a candidate for office?” but realized after a few confused responses that I needed to

create a more direct and clear question. In the second question, I asked, “What hurdles did you have to overcome to make that (to run) decision?” While all of the candidates described hurdles, I realized during the interview that this was a leading question as I assumed they each felt hurdles. One candidate’s initial reaction was nonchalant, as though she did not really feel hurdles and it opened my eyes to potential bias in the way I asked the questions. Both of the lessons learned from the questions – to be as clear as possible and to avoid leading statements – were helpful in designing the later interviews.

A final thing I learned from the first round of interviews was that I needed to clearly consider what I would take notes of and how I would take them during the additional interviews. I realized in the review of the data for these interviews that my notes were not as comprehensive and helpful as I thought they would be, even knowing I had written transcriptions of each interview. In reflection, it seems I relied on the recording instead of working to diligently take notes on comments and what struck me about them at the time. This helped me to become a better note-taker while conducting the interviews that became part of this study.

Research Questions

Three research questions guided my study.

- How and why do women decide to run for office?
- How do women learn in their role as a candidate over the course of their campaign and where do they find support?
- What structures would encourage women to engage in new leadership roles?

Methodology

In this study, I used a basic qualitative study approach. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) describe three interests for researchers using a basic qualitative study approach: “how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 24). In this study, I sought to understand how a select group of female candidates for the North Carolina House of Representatives interpreted their experiences, constructed their new identities as candidates, and the meaning they created over the course of the campaign through their experiences. A qualitative approach provided the depth data I needed to fully examine the learning of the candidates in the new roles. The qualitative approach allowed me to hear nuanced explanations from the candidates and to follow up as needed. It also provided several avenues for data collection, which, in turn, helped me provide a more trustworthy description of the experiences of candidates.

I used three methods to collect data. In addition to completing a series of three interviews (inclusive of the interviews collected for my pilot project) with five candidates about their adjustment to their new role, I wrote a journal analysis of my own lived experiences as a candidate for the state legislature. My journal analysis draws on the autoethnographic tradition to analyze my journal entries. According to Bolen (2017), “Autoethnographies are reflexive narratives of researcher’s lived experiences” (p. 74). Autoethnographies provide insight into a phenomenon by the researcher using themselves as both the subject and the analyzer of the experiences. Throughout my own campaign

for the North Carolina state legislature, I kept a journal and used an autoethnographic methodology to reflect on the writing. Finally, I used document analysis to analyze the online forum of a larger group of candidates as they learned their new roles to provide additional insight to the experience. The three data collection sources provided strong data for this basic qualitative study. I describe each in more detail below.

Autoethnography. Drawing from the autoethnographic approach to research, I completed a journal analysis of my personal journal as a primary source of data on the experience of learning to become a candidate. I began the journal in February 2018, and by the time the election cycle concluded in November 2018, I had ten months of personal experiences as I learned the new role of candidate. In the journal, I wrote about experiences that affect me during the campaign process. I was particularly interested in experiences that challenged my role identity as a candidate and how that role impacted the other aspects of my life. I also included descriptions of my own first-hand experiences as a female candidate for legislative office in my journal. It provided a unique data source for an autoethnographic approach to answering the research questions of this study.

Bolen (2017) defines autoethnographies as both a process and product that creates “reflexive narratives of researchers’ lived experiences” (p. 2). To analyze the journal, I used a layered approach to combine my personal narrative experiences with academic research. The literature review provided me a lens to reflect on the experiences I described in my journal and by using a layered approach, I was able to construct present

rich descriptions and analyses of my lived experiences. In so doing, I was able to achieve a goal of autoethnographic research to “focus on a single case, drawing attention to what is particular as well as what may be universal” (Ellis, 2012, p. 5).

Interviews. Interviews were the primary data collection method I used to learn about the experiences of the other women candidates in this study. As Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) describe the process, “The research interview is an interpersonal situation, a conversation between two partners about a theme of mutual interest” (p. 123). Through interviews, I asked questions directly to women who navigated the education of the new role of political candidate; their answers provided critical insight into their experiences. The interviews were conducted with a semistructured approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016); I created an interview guide with questions that I asked in open ended and flexible ways as the foundation for the interviews. At times I expanded on a specific question and asked additional follow up questions to the participants.

I completed a series of three interviews with each of the five women in this study. The first interview occurred in the in March 2018 as part of the pilot project and as women began their campaigns in earnest. The second interview occurred in October of 2018, as women were in the most intense part of campaigning and only a few weeks from Election Day. The final interview took place between January and March of 2019, as women reflected back on the experience after some distance from Election Day. The series of interviews provided chronological insight into the experiences of women and their reflections once they were no longer in the role of “candidate.”

I used several strategies as part of this method. First, I created an interview guide of questions to be used as the foundation of each interview. Immediately after the interview, I took notes about the important aspects that stood out from the conversation and my personal reflections. I recorded each of the interviews and transcribed each interview afterwards, which provided a written document for data analysis. I read over the transcription while the interview was still recent to add notes and comments based on observation and also asked the interviewee to review the transcription for accuracy.

Document Analysis. A final data collection source was a document analysis of an online forum the group of candidates used to communicate with each other. The five women in the study and I participated in the online forum with a total of twenty first time female candidates for the North Carolina House of Representatives. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) write “documents are, in fact, a ready-made source of data easily accessible to the imaginative and resourceful investigator” (p. 162). The online forum was a closed online group where twenty first-time female candidates for the North Carolina House of Representatives posted about anything they chose throughout the campaign. The online forum comments were primary source documents since “the originator of the document is recounting firsthand experience with the phenomenon of interest” (p. 178). The forum, which started in December of 2017, provided an additional data source that helped me to further understand the experiences of women running for the state legislative races.

Researcher Role

I was also a participant in this study as a candidate and part of the online support network of the other candidates studied. As a lifelong educator and new candidate for the North Carolina General Assembly, I was naturally interested in the process by which candidates, especially women, transitioned to this new role. How and why would women decide in this unique moment in time to run for office? How did they find support as they transitioned to a new role and what did they learn over the course of their campaigns?

Early in the candidate recruitment process, I found myself in the role of talking to women considering whether or not to run for NC House. As I spoke to women, I realized we needed a support structure as we navigated the election; I created a support group of sorts where we connected through an online forum and in person as well. Through this experience, my interest in how these women were learning and supporting each other grew. I also realized that my own experiences were relevant to this study. Therefore, I decided it made sense for me to be a participant in the study, which called for me to deeply and systematically reflect on my own experiences and perspectives. This close relationship with the other candidates also helped me to elicit their honest thoughts about the campaign.

Data Analysis Strategies

Combined, using the three research methods I described above provided me with strong data to answer the research questions. Once I finished collecting the data, I

followed the analysis process described by Merriam and Tisdell (2016). I began by readings carefully transcripts, journal entries, and Facebook post, then coding the data, using codes related to both the topics I identified in the literature and ideas that emerged from the data itself. Using these codes, I constructed categories and created themes. I compared and contrasted codes and categories in my journal, interview transcriptions, and online forum comments. For example, I used different codes for comments about relationships with children, relationships with significant others, professional roles and other roles mentioned by participants. As I analyzed the data I grouped these codes into a category about the impact of the role on other roles filled by the women and related that back to the research on the tension women feel about their familial and professional relationships when considering a political run for office. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) describe the importance of creating categories that are “responsive to the purpose of the research...exhaustive...mutually exclusive...sensitizing...and conceptually congruent” (p. 213). Once I determined broad categories, I reviewed the data sources again to group data by these categories, collapse similar categories together, and then created themes, which Marshall and Rossman (2015) describe as “buckets or baskets into which segments of text are placed” (p. 224). I placed these themes in conversation with the literature as I sought to answer my research questions.

Trustworthiness

There are several strategies I employed in this study to build trustworthiness. In this section I will how I used triangulation, respondent validation, and reflexivity to ensure readers can trust the data and conclusions presented.

First, I triangulated the three sources of data, looking across them for patterns, similarities, and anomalies. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explain, “multiple methods of collecting data (methods triangulation)...can be seen as a strategy for obtaining consistent and dependable data, as well as data that are most congruent with reality as understood by the participants” (p. 252). Triangulation specifically refers to using at least three data sources to strengthen conclusions. In this study I used a journal analysis, interviews, and document analysis as three unique data sources. The triangulation of data sources provided strong themes and conclusions.

Second, I used respondent validation by “taking tentative interpretations/findings back to the people from whom they were derived and asking if they are plausible” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 259). Once I identified the themes from the interview and online forum analyses, I presented the themes to each of the five women participants and asked for their reactions to the themes. This occurred in individual conversations with each participant during the summer of 2019. I compared their reactions to their initial comments in the interviews and online forum to strengthen the trustworthiness of this study and adjusted as needed based on their feedback.

The third strategy I used to build trustworthiness in this study is reflexivity, which means I worked to explain my biases, dispositions, and assumptions as a researcher how these affected the research process. Maxwell (2013) explains the goal is not to eliminate or negate the researcher's perspective but "instead, qualitative research is concerned with understanding how a particular researcher's values and expectations influenced the conduct and conclusions of the study" (p. 124). In this study I shared openly the theories that I drew from to create a lens for my study, detail my relationship to the participants, discussed my own positionality, and explored the limitations of my role.

Data Reporting

I report the findings in two data chapters, Chapter IV and Chapter V. In Chapter IV, I write a journal analysis of my experiences as a candidate primarily constructed from analyzing the journal I kept throughout the campaign cycle. In Chapter V, I discuss themes developed from the interactions of with other candidates through interviews and the document analysis of the online forum.

Limitations

While this study provided important insights how women learn their roles, there are also limitations. First, the study is bound only to candidates for the North Carolina House of Representatives; these experiences may or may not be relevant to other types of elections in other locations. Second, I only included women to provide a specific lens on data collection and analysis. Third, the study is limited to the location of the state of North Carolina and the time period of the 2018 elections. Finally, the sample size is a

limitation since all candidates' voices are not heard in the study. Despite these limitations, my research nonetheless contributes to broad conversations about women leaders, the process of learning new roles, and women as political candidates.

CHAPTER IV

AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC JOURNAL ANALYSIS

In this chapter I analyze my personal journal written throughout my experience as a first-time political candidate. Over the course of the campaign I wrote a total of 109 journal entries between February 6 and December 14 for a total of 267 single-spaced pages of documentation and reflection about my experiences. The journal became a consistent part of my life as a candidate as a few times each week I wrote about my experiences and reactions to the newness of the role. Looking back over my journal helped me develop an awareness of how I adjusted to this new role. To analyze the themes of my journal, I completed multiple readings and a thorough coding of the entries and determined three prominent themes: the impact of the new role on my life, the guilt I felt as a mother and candidate, and the support of the other women candidates through the process. I develop each of these themes more fully below.

A New Role or a New Life?

It is clear to me now, that there is no way to understand how becoming a political candidate forever altered my life and my identity. I wrote on December 2, 2018, a little less than a month after the election, “I understand now that no matter whether you win or lose, you can never go back to the life you had before running for office. There is no way to go back to that identity, that person.” Re-reading and analyzing the journal entries

from my experience as a political candidate deepened my own perspective on how the role fundamentally changed who I am in my community and helped me to clarify my core values. While I wrote about the new role of political candidate, as I describe in this section, it actually felt more like a new life.

One difference to the role of political candidate compared to other professional roles is that you are always seen primarily through that role while interacting with the community. It only took a couple of twenty-minute discussions about a community concern at the grocery store or child's baseball field for that reality to sink in. As time went on in the campaign, more and more people would look at me with recognition or introduce themselves and begin to talk about an issue of importance. In my journal entry on July 28, 2018, I reflected on the day I spent with my daughter as we were walking through Target and after being stopped seven times she looked up and asked, "Mom, are you famous?" I responded with a chuckle and squeeze of her hand, "No, Lettie," to which she responded, "It seems like it and it is annoying." In early September I wrote about how it feels to drive around our city and see yard signs with my name on it; "I hate it. It makes me feel self-centered and self-important. Every time I see one I cringe a little bit." In October my husband and I tried to get away for a dinner and I ended up talking to five tables of people before we sat down. Day by day I realized there is no "pause" button to the role of political candidate where you can say, "today, I just want to be mom, wife, daughter, walker."

This feeling of always being a “candidate” led to personal challenges throughout the campaign. It felt that no matter where I went and when, people judged me. One incident exemplifies how risky that could feel at times. On July 30, 2018 I wrote about taking my daughter to summer camp that morning. I woke up early to go for a walk because I learned early in the campaign that walking helped ease the new-found anxiousness I frequently felt. I came home, loaded Lettie up and walked her into her summer camp. A woman who was dropping her grand-daughter off at the same camp said, “Aren’t you running for office?” I responded, “Yes, I’m Ashton Clemmons. It’s nice to meet you,” and shook her hand. She looked at me skeptically and said, “Aren’t you supposed to never leave your house not made up.” I do not remember my response in that moment and I did not write it as I reflected on the experience in my journal. I did write,

I am not sure why this comment bothered me so much but I think it has to do with the new reality I live in now. That there is always pressure and expectation about how I am supposed to look, seem, feel and be. There is no break in that pressure, even at camp drop off.

Twice in my journal I reflected on the experience of taking a break from the identity of candidate as I took vacations with my family away from our community. These experiences provided some insight into just how dramatically this role changed how I live and experience our community. In early July 2018 our family took a ten-day trip to New England. While I did not journal much while on the trip, I wrote the following words when I returned:

Having some time where no one defines you in that role makes you realize how much that role weighs on you – how on edge and always feeling the pressure of the role it can be. I guess I felt some stress on vacation but not nearly the same way. I wasn't worried I was going to run into someone unprepared.

Maybe more simply reflecting the shift felt during vacation, I wrote on August 7, 2018 after a week-long trip to the beach, "Today, I re-enter the candidate role and I kind of dread it! The break was so nice!"

A second aspect to the new role of political candidate that fundamentally changed who I am as a person is the requirement it brought to spend much of my time outside of my comfort zone. There are some clear ways this happens when you begin to run for office. My district represents the top third of our city and 72,000 people. Working hard to earn the votes of a wide and varied constituency meant I spent a lot of time in new neighborhoods and locations speaking to new people. While I frequently spoke to groups as a school principal and district office administrator, it was very different to speak to the public, especially as I was unsure of what questions would be asked or opinions expressed. There are so many new skills to develop as a political candidate: fundraising, canvassing, debating, writing, speaking to groups with varied interests, making media appearances, navigating social media, hiring campaign managers and more. On March 22, 2018 I wrote, "I feel like I cannot learn fast enough. I love learning but there is just so much and I cannot keep up." The structural aspects to running a campaign and being present in the community brought constant new opportunities and expanded boundaries, but they were also daunting and overwhelming at times.

One specific aspect to the loss of comfort zone experienced in the role of political candidate is that I entered a field where people were skeptical and critical of who I was; they questioned why I was running and whether I would represent their interests if elected. Personally, this was one of the most challenging aspects to running for office. In August 2018 I described this challenge in a journal entry:

I feel vulnerable all the time. I feel like I stand in front of people – many of whom have already decided how they feel about me – and if I am lucky I have 5 seconds for them to decide whether they trust me. Before running for office, I could stand in front of people and feel strong and competent in my role as teacher, principal, or assistant superintendent. Now I stand in front of people and do the best I can but it just feels so hard. I feel judged and critiqued all the time. And in reality, I am and should be. It's just a lot.

On September 18, 2018, I wrote about a conversation with my campaign manager about a telephone call I needed to make with a local elected official who supported my opponent that was going to be uncomfortable. I asked him, “Do you think I will ever stop feeling uncomfortable with stuff like this?” and he responded, “No, but you will get used to it just being the norm.” This challenge was one of the most difficult personal challenges to adjusting to a new role as a political candidate.

Finally, for all of the change the new role of candidate created in my life, it also helped me to clarify the fundamental aspects of who I am. On February 14, 2018, I had a particularly challenging conversation with someone whose support I felt a deep need to secure and who shared several reasons why that would be a challenge. I felt defeated and frustrated and called one of my friends who supported me through several professional

and personal roles. She said, “Ashton, you know who you are. Who you are has earned you respect in challenging things before when people started out not believing in you. You care about people and will do the right thing with integrity. Do not let anyone change that story for you.” This is an example of several times throughout the campaign when the challenges of the role helped me reflect on who I am, what I stand for, and why wanted to run for office. I felt the same clarity when I answered, “so what makes you think you can represent us?” in front of a community meeting. “I will work harder than anyone else to stay connected to the people who vote me into office. I will continue to use every aspect of my life to try and understand what others experience and to make decisions that improve your lives. I need your help to do that.” Afterwards the woman who asked the question came and gave me a hug and her cell phone number to help in the work ahead. I felt my core commitment to opportunity for all children as I met three-year-old “Ashton” (a little toddler I met in a community housing neighborhood) while canvassing in a project housing community in our district. The campaign provided the incredible opportunity to reflect on my core beliefs of opportunity for all, dedication to understanding the experiences of others, and a responsibility to use my life to help improve the lives of others.

We all change roles throughout life and each change brings unique challenges and adjustments. The role of political candidate provided significant changes to how I live in the community and a stronger understanding of my core values.

Drowning in Mom Guilt

The challenging impact of running for office on my children was one of the most difficult to survive as a political candidate. I felt this guilt almost daily, as evidenced from this quote in October,

Tonight, I am drowning in ‘mom guilt.’ I came home exhausted after yet another day of not seeing my kids awake and went in to give them a kiss goodnight. Beck was asleep clutching my palm card in his little hand. I sat on the edge of his bed and burst into tears.

As I re-read the journal entry for October 18, the feeling of guilt washed over me each and every time, as it does now as I write about the moment. A review of my calendar for October 18th shows that I left our house at 6:45 in the morning to stand outside one of our targeted Early Voting locations from 7:00 – 9:00. I left to speak to a group of organizers from 9:30 – 10:30, then gave a lunch speech to a community group at 11:30, held a campaign meeting from 2:00 – 4:00, attended the Guilford County Association of Educators forum from 5:00 – 7:00, which I left early for a community forum at New Light Baptist Church from 6:30 – 8:00. I missed the PTA night at my daughter’s school that evening where she joined other second graders for their grade level performance. I rushed home at 8:30, hoping one of my three children would still be awake in bed for a quick hug and instead walked into my four year-old twins’ bedroom to find them both asleep. Beck’s blonde hair was still wet from his bath, his left arm was bent across his chest with my campaign flier pushed to his chest, his little fingers clutched around the top. I sat at the edge of his bed and cried.

What the calendar does not show is how the night before I made my daughter's lunch, checked her homework and made sure her soccer clothes were ready for the day. It does not show how carefully I worked each week to coordinate my husband, babysitter and a wide-array of friends to ensure our kids were able to continue with their activities and "normal" schedules. It does not show my phone calls on the way from one place to another to check in with our children or how many times a day I thought of them. My journal does not reflect those moments either because they are seemingly insignificant parts of how I worked to continue to meet the needs of our children through my candidacy. My journal does not reflect the many moments I remember from the campaign where our children experienced incredible life changing opportunities, expanded their perspectives, built independence and grew in their relationship with their father. Instead, I disproportionately captured the moments I felt I was failing in my motherhood role. There are 36 references to my feelings of maternal shortcomings in the journal compared to seven references of positive outcomes from the campaign for our children.

One of these "maternal shortcomings" came a week later and was extremely difficult as this "mom failure" occurred publicly, with permanent documentation. On October 24, 2018, Katherine Goldstein spent several hours recording for an episode of her podcast about working mothers, *The Double Shift*. As we sat on my couch in our den and I am literally in the moment discussing how to balance being a mom and political

candidate, our babysitter walks in without our daughter. The following interchange becomes part of the podcast (Goldstein, 2019):

Ashton: Did you get Lettie?

Babysitter: Was I supposed to get Lettie?

Ashton: Yes, from ballet. Uh-oh.

Katherine (pod-caster): Oh no.

Babysitter: On the email it said pick the boys up.

Ashton: Oh gosh. Sorry (to Katherine). Okay. What time is it?

Babysitter: 4:35.

Ashton: Okay, let me call them. Will you go grab her?

Katherine: Yep, a total scheduling mis-hap. The babysitter forgot to pick up Lettie from ballet so she is sitting there waiting for someone to go get her as we are sitting there doing our interview.

Briggs: Can I have a snack?

Ashton: Sure. See, here you go. Mom failing.

Katherine: It's not a failure, it's all part of the process.

Ashton: *Laughs*. It's part of it but its...not good.

The journal entry that night reflects my despair at how I failed as a mom that day, the public nature of the moment being caught as part of a podcast and how guilty I felt that our daughter sat alone and waiting at her ballet studio.

Not only did our seven-year-old have to sit alone at her ballet studio while I sat talking about how women must step into running for office and can do it with young children, it was captured for people everywhere to hear how difficult it really is (Journal Entry, October 24, 2018).

In that moment, I felt consumed with embarrassment and guilt. As I reflect on that day though, I remember that when Lettie came home she did not seem bothered at all. She walked in and said, “Mom, can I please have Doritos?” I also understand from the many emails and messages I received from mothers across the country how powerful that moment was in helping ease the “mom guilt” they feel in their life by normalizing that all of us who are working hard to be great mothers and to use our lives in roles that improve our communities will make mistakes.

The string of motherhood guilt weaves throughout the pages of my journal in major moments and in small mentions. In my journal I write about small moments such the constant questions I answered: “what will your children do?” “how is this going to work?,” and “will they be okay?” I described how guilty I felt when my husband shared how many people asked him similar questions about what would happen to our children and who would take care of them if I won. I write about big moments when I missed one of the children’s activities or had to answer to their sad questions about why I had so much to do at night. I readily admit the challenges being a political candidate pose to being a mother of young children as evidenced by the writings of the journal. As I re-read the journal though, I realized how I allowed the moments of motherhood failure, mistakes and short-comings disproportionate space in my writings and perspective. I

realized that I did not write about the moment Lettie’s teacher called to tell me how this experience helped her develop resiliency and how proud Lettie is when she talks about what I am doing. I did not write about how excited Briggs was on election night when he looked up and said, “Mom, you won your new job?” I did not write about how Beck wore his “Kids 4 Clemmons” shirt three days in a row. My journal entries show how powerful guilt can be, especially when connected to a role as emotional and critical as parenting, and challenge me to work to keep that guilt in perspective, especially now as I adjust to my new role as House Representative and other new roles in the future.

Support of Other Women Candidates

Early in my campaign I connected with several female first time Democratic candidates for the North Carolina House. I seemed to intrinsically understand that this group of women running would prove to be an invaluable resource as we all learned our new identity as “politician” and navigated what that meant. I began connecting the candidates in an online forum which led to several gatherings, deepened relationships, ongoing discussion and support. The group grew over the course of the campaign and by summer of 2018 there were nineteen women. While I was not journaling when our group first connected, my journal entries since it began *clearly* reflect how critical this group of female candidates became during my first campaign season – 81 of the 109 journal entries reference women in this group, almost 75 percent of the entries. An analysis of my journal references showed I discussed my relationship with these women in three primary categories: encouragement (35), specific help (19), celebration (16) and other

(11). As I wrote on September 13, 2018, “I do not know what people running for office do without a support group like these women.”

My journal entry on August 25, 2018 demonstrates a strong example of how the women in our group encouraged each other through challenging new moments in the campaign. This was the point in the campaign when many of the women began to receive frequent attack ads through mailings and some on television. This particular week, four of the women in the group had the exact same attack ad mailed to their constituents, the only thing different among them were the pictures and name for each candidate. One of the women in particular struggled with the attack ads. I write about my conversation with her (name changed for anonymity):

I spent an hour talking with Elle today. Elle had three different attack ads come out three days in a row this week...I asked her how she was dealing with it and she said, ‘well, I knew it was coming. But as a pleaser who wants to do the right thing it is still hard. And I hate my kids have to see it and go to school with other people whose kids see it.’ I asked how I could help her, acknowledging there really is nothing anyone can do because only she can live through this moment. She said, ‘it helps to know there is our group of women across North Carolina all living through the same thing.’

This moment provides an example of what we learned through the course of the campaign about the importance of a support group of women who experienced similar challenges. While many of the women in the group were blessed with strong support networks already, through supportive partners, family members, friends and volunteers, there is unique support provided by women who have lived through the challenges of running for office. My journal entries detail many similar experiences where the women

encouraged each other through difficulties including loss of parents, campaign staff changes, fundraising shortfalls, communication with state organizations and more.

There were also many examples of how the women in the group provided concrete support for each other throughout the campaign cycle such as specific advice, problem solving, and volunteer help. In my journal entry for September 16, 2018, I described an example of how the group worked together to provide support for one of the women. One candidate was diagnosed with breast cancer in August and several of the other women worked to raise money for her campaign while she received treatment, a couple of us even went to canvass with volunteers for her. I wrote,

I am so amazed by the unselfishness of this group of women who are able to put the overall goal of moving our state forward above their own needs. This week more than \$7,000 was donated from the women to Mary and six of us went to canvass in her neighborhoods. It shows what is possible when women stick together.

There were examples of women helping each other move houses, working the polls for the women during the Primary election, and making calls on behalf of each other. Through my journal, I described how I provided, received, and observed the candidates in this group support each other in concrete ways.

The final category of comments includes the nine examples described in my journal when the women of this group celebrated with each other. My favorite example to relive through this autoethnography was “filing day” on February 11, 2018. “Filing Day” refers to the first day of the two-week filing period when a person officially files to

become a candidate for office. While many of the candidates were already well-established in their campaigns, the day brings excitement because the candidacy becomes “official” and the media is paying attention. That morning began with several text messages to the women across the state I knew were filing, providing encouragement and strength. One of our local news stations asked me to be there at 11:00 to do an interview for their story about first time women candidates. I learned that one of the women in the group was also going to be part of the story and we talked excitedly on the phone about the day. I completed my interview, filed for office, and called the other candidate on the way home. She told me that she did not have the news station so when the news came on we sat together on FaceTime watching the news story about our candidacies as first-time female Representatives. I wrote in my journal, “Today was an incredible day. I felt the overall tide rising for women leaders as I talked to the candidates across the state. I tucked my daughter in tonight with hope.”

One of the most pervasive themes throughout my journal is the impact of the other women running for office. Their voices and experiences shaped my own experience as a candidate by providing support, encouragement, celebration, and understanding. The vast majority of the pages in my journal reflect how deeply the women candidates walked this new path together.

Conclusion

The experience of writing this autoethnography provided an invaluable opportunity to reflect on my experiences that I tracked in a journal as I learned the new

role of political candidate. As I read and analyzed the journal, I realized how the role shaped my identity in our community, the impact of motherhood on the experience, and the strength of a support network of women experiencing the same role change. My personal journal provides concrete data to examine my experience as a political candidate.

CHAPTER V

PARTICIPANT ANALYSIS: INTERVIEWS AND DOCUMENT REVIEW

In this chapter, I analyze data from a series of interviews with five first-time female candidates for the North Carolina House of Representatives, as well as incorporate data from a document analysis of their online support group.

I interviewed each of the candidates three times throughout the course of her new role as political candidate. The first round of interviews took place in March 2018, the second in October 2018, and the third interviews were between January and March 2019. I intended to spread out the interviews to hear from candidates at the beginning of the new role of political candidate, right before the election when candidates were most defined by the role, and a couple of months after the election as participants reflected on the role. The total interview time per participant ranged from one hour and forty-minutes to two hours and thirty-two minutes. I transcribed each interview and coded them to identify themes to answer the research questions of this study. The online forum began in December 2017 and continues to present. While I focus primarily on the interview data in this chapter, I include select examples from the online forum throughout the interview analysis in this chapter.

In this chapter I organize the data into four sections. First, I summarize themes about how the participants in this study decided to run for office and assume the new role

of political candidate. Second, I describe the lessons participants learned in the role, and third, how they learned those lessons. Finally, I summarize participant recommendations for other women considering the role of political candidate. I use pseudonyms for the five participants. In this chapter, I provide insight to participants' experiences learning the new role of political candidate.

Choosing a New Role: Decision to Run for Office

One of the most important issues to explore with the women in this study was their decision to choose the new role of political candidate. I asked the candidates three questions about this critical decision:

1. Why did you choose to run for office?
2. What helped you make the decision?
3. What concerns or hurdles did you have to overcome to decide to run?

The participants described the reasons they chose to run for state legislative office in the 2018 election, factors that encouraged their decision and challenges they faced in making the decision. I explore themes in the participant responses to each of the three questions in the sections below.

Why? The first question I asked each participant in the both the first and second interviews was why she decided to run for office. The participants expressed several reasons for their decisions and all five remained consistent in their answers from the first to the second interview.

Timing. The strongest reason each of the five candidates decided to run was because they felt like it was the “right time” in their individual lives to attempt this new role. Four of the five candidates equated this “right time” with the current environments of their families. For example, Yasmine shared that she considered running when her sons were 3 and 1 years old but now that they were 7 and 5, it felt like a better time for her family. Iris similarly described that her oldest daughter was well adjusted and able to help with their younger daughter. Anna explained that her youngest daughter was graduating and leaving for college, which opened her life to the possibilities of new roles. Courtney shared,

You know how life goes. It gives you detours and so a 20-year marriage later and two kids later and I had been approached to run for school board a couple times, but it just hadn’t been the right time. I went through a difficult divorce, lost a year of my life to a severe back injury, I had two surgeries within a year, so I had just kinda gotten back on my feet...I was healthy then, the divorce was final, kids were good, older daughter in school, younger daughter driving. So it just felt like now’s the time.

Dana equated the “right timing” with her “plan about the progression of my political career” after serving for several years on her local school board and city council.

In contrast to the women who felt this was the “right time” to run for office, professional and family timing was my greatest challenge in choosing to run for office. The first thought that I remember when the recruiter first posed the idea of running for office was, “does she know I have twin 3 year-olds and a 6 year-old?” I was also early in a new educational district central office position, which was a significant promotion for

me in contrast to my previous principal position. It felt like definitely *not* the right time to run for office. The more I considered it though, the more I asked myself how I could not tackle this challenge that means so much to the future of our schools and children. One night as I talked to my husband he said, “I know this is probably not ideal timing but I don’t think things like that come up that often.” When I broached the idea with my boss, she immediately responded, “you were meant to do this.” Timing eventually became less important than a calling to the role for me.

Response to presidential election. A second strong theme I uncovered in participants’ interviews was the motivation candidates felt as a response to the presidential election of 2016. Three candidates referenced this election explicitly. Anna described that after the election in 2016, she knew she needed to find a new role for her life that improved her community, “so I got involved after the election in every group that formed, because I was really casting a wide net. What is my place?” Anna continued explaining many ways she became involved and how it ultimately led her to run for office. Iris explained that after the 2016 election, she looked around her community and thought to herself, “no one is representing the people I live with every day” and felt like she had to do something. Courtney related the rise in women running in response to the 2016 presidential election as part of her decision-making, “in a year in which women were making huge strides, I didn’t want this seat to go without a strong democratic challenger.” Building on the first theme of personal timing, it seems that the national timing also impacted three candidates’ decision to run for office.

Leave no seat unchallenged. A third reason given for why the women were running during this most recent election was the need to ensure there was a Democratic challenger for the state house race where they lived. Both Anna and Courtney explained their worry that no one planned to run for their state house districts as factors in their decision. Anna explained,

I decided to become a candidate for state legislature when it was apparent that no other Democrat was going to step up to run in (my) House District. I had been so angered by the fact that in 2016 there were no Democrats at the legislative level on the ballot, on my ballot...I just thought it was good for democracy. Somebody needed to do it and I, maybe foolishly, said 'I can do this.'

Courtney expressed similar feelings, "In this house seat, we struggle to get good candidates...it would've been unconscionable for me to sit back and say, 'yeah, I'm not going to do that. It's too much trouble. And have nobody run.'" The commitment to ensure a Democrat candidate motivated two participants to run for office.

A third candidate expressed the same factor in her decision to run but broadened her perspective to a longer historic concern about no Democratic candidates in her county in the past several years. After explaining that there were no state level Democratic candidates in more than ten years, Dana explained her decision to run:

I'm not necessarily afraid of or concerned, well I am concerned, but not too much, about whether I win or lose because I just really think this run is much bigger than winning. If I win I'll be super happy, but I also want to let Democrats know in this county that you can run. That it's not unheard of just because you're a Democrat you can't run in a Republican county.

Dana's unique perspective reflected a desire in her decision to serve as a role model in her community and give hope to other members of her political party.

A voice for the community. A fourth theme I identified in the participant responses for why they chose the new role of state legislative candidate was the desire of participants to be a voice for the people of their district, particularly in response to a perceived deficit in current representation. Iris described her experience learning about the current state representative for her district this way:

Nobody had any idea who represented them. And even when I would mention his name, nobody had ever seen him. And I started looking into it and realized, oh yeah, okay, so he shows up for ribbon cuttings and things like that. I pulled up his voting record and it's directly in opposition to the people that I was talking to. I find that heartbreaking, that there are people that need a voice in the legislature and don't have one.

Yasmine shared a similar feeling in her explanation of how working as a social worker and lawyer helped her to understand what people struggle through in their lives. She explained,

I figured that my voice would be better served in the capacity at State House where I could give voice to a lot of voiceless North Carolinians...Ultimately I'm doing it because I feel...there's no voice in the General Assembly that is speaking, at least in my district, is speaking for the actual constituents.

The desire to represent the people of their districts impacted the decision of two participants in the study.

Always felt called to office. While not directly impacting their immediate decision to run for office, two candidates referenced a lifetime feeling that they would run for office in their answers. Iris explained it this way, “I was that four or five-year-old kid who was like, ‘I’m gonna be the first female president.’ And I said that many times throughout my childhood.” She continued later in the interview, “it’s always been in the back of my mind to run for office, knowing that I would bring it to the forefront of my mind when the time was right.” Similarly, Courtney shared, “I had thought about running ever since high school. I used to say I was going to be the first female president.” Courtney later shared a story about her senior superlative of most ambitious and how her father’s role on the school board helped her see politics as part of their lives. The similarity in Iris and Courtney’s comments demonstrate a factor in decision making beyond the current timing and political reality, notably childhood dreams and experiences that predisposed them to be drawn to the political arena.

Encouragement to Run. The second area I explored related to candidates’ decision to run for political office was what encouraged the candidate to make the ultimate decision to seek the new role. Two themes emerged in the responses to this question. First, each participant described the importance of direct recruitment in her decision to run for office. Second, they discussed the impact of attending trainings in the decision to become political candidates.

Direct recruitment. The strongest theme reason participants gave for running was direct recruitment. Each of the five women shared recruitment as a key factor in their

decision. The participants described three key categories in the people who recruited them: members and staff from the House caucus, progressive organizations focused on candidate recruitment, and individual members in the community. Dana described the experience of direct recruitment from the House caucus and other state representatives

I think what really pushed me over was calls from our representatives, from the recruiting team. Once I got those phone calls and they kind of said, ‘well, I think you’re a really good candidate, I think you’re a strong candidate. You already have that name recognition, you’ve done good work in the community, we think you might be able to do this.’ I was like, ‘okay well if you think I can do it then let’s go.’ I was ready.

Dana’s comments reflect the sentiment shared by all five participants about the critical impact of direct recruitment by the current members of the North Carolina House.

In addition to the recruitment by current representatives, three participants described the impact of recruitment by progressive organizations dedicated to candidate recruitment – LEAD NC and Lillian’s List. According to their website, “LEAD NC exists to seek out, encourage and cultivate a new generation of community and civic leaders for North Carolina” (Retrieved from www.leadnc.org/about; August 6, 2019). Similarly, “Lillian’s List recruits, trains and supports progressive women, who are champions of reproductive freedom and equity for women, to run for public office in North Carolina” (Retrieved from <https://lillianslist.org/aboutus/>; August 6, 2019).

Yasmine described the experience of being recruited by these organizations:

I was approached by LEAD NC and Lillian’s List...I was approached by both of the directors of their programs jointly to go ahead and actually run. So it was nice

‘cause I was approached by two women who were actively trying to get more women to run for office, which I think is really helpful because they talked about some of the challenges that we would face as women, but also they talked about the importance of why we need more women to run. And so they gave really good perspective on what you can expect, but then also subsequently why it’s important for us to have more women and how their agencies would support women. LEAD NC is not only...It doesn’t focus on women. It focuses on progressive candidates, but I think they also understand that the mission is important for us to have a representative North Carolina and our representatives should look like the demographics of North Carolina and currently they do not.

The majority of the participants in this study discussed the impact of the two organizations in encouraging them to run for office, as reflected by Yasmine’s comments above. Additionally, three participants in the study shared how people in the community asking them to run for office encouraged them to make the ultimate decision.

Participants described the following community members who encouraged their runs for office: employers, church members, family members, local Democratic Party chairs, friends, and neighbors.

Online forum comments also demonstrated the impact of direct recruitment by current representatives, organizations, and community members. Several women specifically referred to the Recruitment Chair for the NC House Caucus as reasons for running and they also used this person to talk through concerns. Candidates also referred specifically to the recruitment person from LEAD NC as making an impact on their decision to run. One participant wrote, “just call Tricia (pseudonym). She will make you want to run again!” The participants in this study clearly indicated direct recruitment by

state representatives, organizations and community members as key factors in their decisions to run for office.

Trainings. In addition to the importance of recruitment in the decision to run for office, three participants also described how important trainings were helping them make the decision to run for office. As Iris described it, “the trainings I attended help make it real what it would feel like to run for office. It made me feel like I could do this and know how to start.” Anna described her experience with a training, offering “I felt called to do it but I felt like I could do it after the training.” The online forum also demonstrated how trainings impacted candidates in their decisions to run for office. For example, one woman posted, “I loved being with y’all at the LEAD NC training. Now I feel like I know what to do to start.” The trainings helped the participants in this study feel more confident in what it would mean to run for office, which ultimately encouraged them to decide to choose the new role. The trainings and direct recruitment by current representatives, organizations and community members encouraged the participants to run for office.

Hurdles to Overcome. The final question I asked participants in relation to their decision to run was about the challenges they overcame to ultimately make their decision. Unlike the previous two questions, there was no common hurdle expressed by all five participants. Four of the five participants expressed a range of concerns, some of which I will describe in this section. Interestingly, Dana shared that she did not feel any major challenges in making her decision to run for state level office. She explained, “(I) didn’t

really have a lot of hurdles. I'm sure there are some that I maybe haven't recognized yet, but I don't think I had many...once I made that decision...I was like okay, we're ready." Anna, Iris, Yasmine and Courtney described concerns about work, family, and possible primary opponents.

The ability to continue working provided challenged both Yasmine and Courtney in their decision to run for office. Courtney explained that as a single mother with daughters who depended on her for health care, quitting her job to campaign was not an option. She explained, "I wanna do this in spite of the fact that I work full time and have to have my job because I'm a single mom and I have a pre-existing condition that would make healthcare difficult and expensive if I weren't working and I don't have any other income." Yasmine and her husband are partners in a law firm and work was a large challenge for her in this decision. She explained,

Am I gonna be able to do this and still run my law firm? Because my husband and I being in private practice, the only income we have is our firm...I kept thinking, 'how am I gonna do that and be able to still make money? Because, I obviously worry about my own family, and then we have employees that I have to of course worry about. Pulling my own weight at the firm, being able to try and figure that out was really important and a hurdle.

For both Yasmine and Courtney, the need to continue with their current employment provided a major challenge to their decision to run for office.

A second challenge explained by two participants was the impact running for office would have on their family members. Anna shared that while her youngest daughter's entry to college helped her feel freedom to run for office from her motherhood

role, her desire to support her ailing parents presented a major challenge. Yasmine explained at length the worry she felt about the impact running for office would have on her children. She even passionately stated, “really the biggest hurdle was, were my kids gonna hate me? I mean, were they going to say... ‘My mom wasn’t here for things.’” Yasmine shared how she talked about the potential of parenting as a legislator with another representative and a friend whose father served in the state legislature. She ultimately made the decision to run which she explained,

I want my kids to love North Carolina as much as I do, and I want them to stay here, and I want them to be in a situation where they’re proud of their state...it would be selfish of me not to run and to see if we could obviously make change for them.

Yasmine continued by explaining strategies she created to minimize the impact of campaigning on her children and ultimately ended by saying, “It’s hard. I don’t know what they’ll understand and whether or not they’ll regret it.” Their desire to support their families provided a major challenge for Yasmine and Anna.

The final concern shared by two participants was the potential for a primary opponent. Yasmine offered, “There were three men that were gonna primary me and I met with them all.” In particular, one potential primary opponent criticized Yasmine’s decision to run as a mother and partner in her family law firm in his effort to dissuade her from running. She ended this part of the interview by saying, “So ultimately I said, ‘no, I’m not dropping out and I wish you luck in the primary.’ And he chose not to run. So I did not have a primary.” Iris also had a potential primary as a challenge to running in her

district. Iris described that the caucus leader met with her and said that she was the “third or fourth name on this list” for potential candidates in that district. Iris worried that she did not want to cause division or divide the party. Like Yasmine, she scheduled meetings with each of the potential primary challengers. She describes the experience:

Early on I thought whoever’s a stronger candidate. We need to make the grown-up decision of whoever’s the stronger candidate, that’s who going to run. When we met, I realized that for various reasons I was positioned in such a way that I was the best candidate at this time. And they agreed, and eventually they all got behind me.

For both Yasmine and Iris, the possibility of a potential primary challenger provided a hurdle to running for office, though it was a hurdle that they overcame after having conversations with potential opponents.

The online forum demonstrated the potential and real impacts of primary challengers on the experiences of the women who ran for office. Three women in the online support group ran in an actual primary race, though eleven of the twenty mentioned discussions with primary opponents. Many women felt discouraged by the possibility of a primary challenge, specifically having to raise more money and to debate with someone supposed to be on the “same side.” Comments the participants made in the online forum are consistent with the observations made by Yasmine and Iris about the potential impact of a primary challenger on the decision to run for office.

Lessons Learned in New Role

As in the role adjustments I described in the literature review, the participants in the study learned a huge amount in their new roles as political candidates. In the second interview, I asked each participant to share five things they learned in the role, encouraging it not as a set requirement, and told them that more or less was fine. I used “five” as the prompt because I wanted candidates to elaborate on more than a couple of thoughts about the things learned on the campaign. In each interview, I asked follow-up questions based on the specific answers provided by the interviewee to delve deeper into specifics about their initial answers. In the third interview I asked candidates two questions about their learning as they reflected on the role of candidate a few months after the election and the role ended. I asked candidates “How did being in the role of political candidate change you?” and, “As you look back on being a candidate, are there things you learned in reflection that you did not see at the time?” I analyzed the responses from the second interviews separate from the third interviews as the lessons learned while in the role differed from the lessons learned reflecting on the role.

Lessons During the Role. Candidates expressed many things learned across a broad range of categories in the answers they gave while they were in the role of candidate role. In this section, I categorize responses into four areas: what participants learned about themselves, people, politics, and skills learned.

Lessons about self. A strong theme that emerged in the second interviews was that candidates learned important lessons about themselves through their new roles. Four

of the five expressed the lessons with positive language and one candidate expressed lessons she observed as weaknesses about herself. The four participants with positive self-lessons each shared that through her new role she learned her strength. Yasmine described, “I’ve learned that I can handle all the shit ton of things in my life.” Iris listed this lesson as her first answer, “I’ve learned that I’m stronger than I thought I was.” Dana offered, “I always knew I was strong, but I think this really has pushed my limits of strength.” Courtney explained, “you become a different person...with an expanded confidence.” For the four candidates who reflected positively about the lessons they learned about themselves, the realization of their own inner strength proved important.

Participants shared two additional positive self-lessons. First, Iris described how this role helped her learn to release things that no longer seemed important. She stated,

(I learned) The things that I thought would bother me haven’t. I think that works that way because it’s built up over time. You start running and you’re busy and you get hit with things, but you get increasingly hit with more, and you get increasingly busy. I’ve been surprised about that, I just had to let some stuff go.

Courtney described how the role of political candidate helped her grow as a person:

So the biggest lesson from being a candidate is that you should always...to grow a human, you should get outside of your comfort zone and stay outside of your zone. Ultimately your comfort zone grows, and you become a better person. Not better necessarily. That implies judgment. But you become a different person, with an expanded network, and an expanded confidence. So yeah, it’s just been a personal growth journey for me.

In addition to their inner strength, Courtney and Iris reflected additional positive lessons learned through the role of political candidate.

In the online forum, participants shared many examples of their own strength and encouragement of the strength in each other that they learned through the role of political candidate. One woman wrote the night before the election, “Ladies, when we started this who would have known how strong we would have to become. But we’ve done it. We are fierce and ready.” Another woman wrote in September 2018,

I have to be honest. I don’t know if I would have said ‘yes’ to running for office if I knew how strong I would have to be or how hard it would be. But I would have missed learning how much I can do.

As our campaigns were coming to an end, women posted inspirational quotes to encourage each other, such as “Keep Shining, the World Needs Your Light;” “Do sharks complain about it being Monday? No, they’re up early. Biting sh\$%, showing everyone they are a F*^ing shark;” and “Own the Fear. Find the Cave. And write your own ending.” The women also posted stories about other women who demonstrated great strength and growth, such as a tribe of women in Senegal saving their village and a group of women lawyers in Bolivia fighting sexual violence. The candidate forum demonstrates the strength women expressed in their interviews.

In contrast to her peers, Anna identified a weakness upon reflection. Anna’s initial responses about what she learned included skills-based factors. I asked a probing question, “What would you say you’ve learned about yourself?” Anna responded, “That

I'm not as thoughtful and deliberate about making decisions, big decisions, as I should be." After she gave no further elaboration, I asked her to explain and after a brief pause she elaborated,

I'm maybe too passionate... There are times where I think I said I would do things, attempted to accomplish certain things, and I wish I had set boundaries and just said, 'I'm not doing that. This is me, this is what I can do.' Because I have limits, my family has needs, I feel like I've maybe over accommodated in devoting a lot of my life's energy to this campaign. Looking back, I feel like I've paid a big personal cost.

Anna's responses provided a sharp contrast to the positive growth reflected in the comments of the other four participants and demonstrate how the role differently affected candidates.

Skills learned. Participants also learned a wide array of skills through their role as political candidate. All five candidates shared that they developed skills in public speaking and three discussed fundraising skill development. There were several other skill areas participants shared that I briefly discuss below.

Public speaking skill development was the only skill referenced by all of the five candidates. The comments about public speaking ranged from generic comments to specific skills learned through the experience. Anna stated a general, "I feel that I have been forced to be more comfortable talking to groups" and Dana shared, "I think my public speaking has gotten a lot better. I always did that really well, but I did it well with maybe my notes in front of me. But now I think I can do it off the cuff." The remaining three participants gave more specific ways they improved in their public speaking. Iris

reflected that her “ability to adapt her my body language to reflect that of those around me so that feel comfortable” improved through being a candidate. Courtney answered my probing question about a concrete skill she learned with a clear response, “Public speaking is the biggest one. That was huge.” She later explained that she learned the more prepared for her speeches, the more comfortable she was giving them. Courtney shared, “I memorized my first dump speech, which is like a ten-minute speech and by memorizing it, it allowed me to extemporize.” Yasmine shared the shift she made in public speaking as a candidate from her public speaking in her professional role of attorney.

As an attorney...I would have to be very fact specific and facts matter. They very much matter in the law and it is very frustrating that facts do not matter in politics...At the beginning I had a very hard time of being too specific and not being able to extrapolate a greater point to just be more basic...instead of getting into the weeds, I just had a more global or birds eye view...I can just simply, instead of using twelve words and specific facts, I could use five and get the same point driven home...What I didn't have and what I've developed is being able to synthesize the most important parts down in a much shorter amount and in much shorter and condensed form. And also use empathy or imagery to actually bring a point home and to drive a story home, because people vote based on feelings and also they engage based on where you meet them...And so I feel that that skill has definitely been improved since I ran.

It is clear from the breadth of comments from the participants that increased skill and confidence in public speaking is an important aspect of the candidate role.

A second skill described by three participants was increased effectiveness in fundraising. Courtney explained this skill as, “people aren't going to give you anything unless you directly ask them...People have a harder time saying no if they are given a

direct ask.” Iris said, “Well, asking for money is a requirement in this world so I had no choice but to get better at it.” Anna shared, “I have gotten more comfortable at calling people and asking them for money. The more you do it, it just gets...Easier.” Anna also shared particular pride that she developed new political donors, which she shared this way.

I learned what seems like most people do is go find people who've given politically and ask them for money. That's probably the smart, easy way to raise money, but...I did some of that, but I also really wanted to dig out some new donors...I'm kind of proud that I feel like I created some new political donors, but it was also very time consuming.

The responses of the participants reflected growth in the skill of fundraising through the role of political candidate.

The five participants expressed other concrete skills in their responses that I briefly mention here. Iris referenced several social media skills she learned including Twitter, Instagram, and how to make graphics for the campaign. Iris also learned to make her own campaign buttons because, “It's cheaper to buy a machine.” Anna shared she felt her writing improved. In the online forum, women also reflected on the new skills they had learned, such as how to talk to people at the polls when their opponent was present, use Excel and online voter databases, employ basic phrases in Spanish for canvassing, and order campaign signs.

Lessons about people. Running for political office also help the participants learn about people in their families and communities. Both Iris and Yasmine described their

learning about their children's resiliency through this role. Yasmine explained the lesson this way:

My children will survive even if I'm not there and think that I have to do absolutely everything and that they'll live off of fast food and that the world will not end...my kids are resilient and that they are really proud of me...I have overcome fear that my children would hate me and I would give them legitimate mom issues later on in life.

Iris simply described the lesson, "I learned that my kids and my family will figure things out and I do not have to fix everything for them."

In addition to learning about their families' self-sufficiency, two candidates shared lessons is about the people in their community. Courtney explained her lesson:

People are just people. I knew this going in, but I really know it now. For most people, we all want the same things. We want our family; we want to be able to provide for our families. We want our kids to succeed and do better than we did, and have opportunity. And I am, we want to be able to take care of our kids if they get sick. So I think people are just people.

Iris shared her lessons about people and their resilience. She says,

People are tough...I'm meeting people who come from rough backgrounds, have been through a lot, and continue to go through a lot, and they're in their fifties or sixties and they still come out swinging every single day. And wake up and go, 'Thank you God for waking me up this morning.'

The role of political candidate provided valuable lessons to participants as explained by Iris and Courtney.

A final interesting lesson learned was shared by Iris about the difference in communication between the millennial generation and people “in their sixties,” as she described them. She described the lesson this way.

A lot of folks on my campaign are in their sixties. I very much respect them and love them, but I see them struggle with how they’re treated, like sort of an ageism situation with younger people, the way they’ll talk to my campaign staff sometimes. We actually had early on a younger guy on the campaign that I had to remove from the campaign because I was like, ‘I just can’t have you talking to everybody like that.’ It was very condescending. Now I’m very aware of it and see it happen to them all the time and it makes me angry for them.

Iris’s experiences based on the make-up of her campaign team taught her about a disconnect between younger and older generations, especially how people communicate with each other.

Lessons about politics. The final topic that participants learned about through their experiences as a first-time candidate was politics. Four participants expressed a lesson related to politics, though the responses ranged significantly. In response to the question on what she learned, Anna responded, “How, dis-unified your own party is. It’s not the perfectly organized party I would like it to be.” Dana shared her lesson that “running for office is extremely hard. Not necessarily physically hard but mentally.” Courtney shared, “that people don’t really know enough about their government and how it works, and who represents them, and how it’s structured. So, we have a dire need for civic education in our state, and our communities.”

Yasmine elaborated a few lessons learned that related to politics. First, she simply said, “party politics and politics is exactly what people expect.” She then explained a second lesson

There are very good kind and generous people in this world who are willing to go ahead and step forward and to really help out and are very thankful for the sacrifices that candidates like myself make to prioritize running for office...I'm amazed by the generosity of people and their families for us stepping forward and advocating for them and advocating for their families.

Yasmine shared another lesson about politics as well.

When women get out of their own way, we are exceptionally, not only productive, but very effective in campaigning...we oftentimes hold ourselves back because we want to be perfect at everything. And what I've learned is when I've been at different events with men, male candidates, we oftentimes are more engaging with how we speak with people and that people I think relate to us a lot better. The online forum also provided many examples of women learning about politics.

Several candidates posted information about their interactions with the Caucus and what they learned based on those interactions on the Facebook page. One post simply said, “Talked to the Caucus today and we are seeing more eye to eye. I've learned a lot about how things operate in the political world through this.” In addition to learning about family, people, and politics during their campaign, the women who ran for office also discussed lessons that they learned in retrospect, after the campaign was over. I turn to these in the next section.

Lessons from Reflection on the Role. During the third interview round conducted a few months after the election, I asked participants about what they learned in

the role as they reflected after its conclusion. I asked each participant questions about how the role changed them and what they learned in retrospect.

1. How has being in the role of political candidate changed you?
2. As you look back on being a candidate, are there things you learned in reflection that you did not see at the time?

Looking at their experiences from a distance, the women I interviewed learned broad lessons about politics and about themselves.

Lessons about politics. All five of my participants described lessons they learned about politics during the final interview. Dana shared how hard running for office was, harder than she expected. She stated, “The whole experience is so unorganized and no one person will get you the right answer. I am the type of person who likes structure. Running for office is not a very organized space.” Anna shared two concise lesson about politics, “I am more aware of how important it is to financially support campaigns” and “I’m more aware of how flawed our political process is,” before elaborating on a major lesson based on her experience. She summarized this lesson towards the end of her interview:

I feel that candidates who were recruited to run in districts that were very challenging politically – with a small chance of winning – were used by the state party to accomplish some of their goals and that the candidates were not dealt with honestly by the state party. I think these candidates didn’t receive the support they needed in many cases, and that they weren’t dealt fairly and honestly by the party.

Anna's elaboration shows her concerning lesson based on her reflection about her role as political candidate that political parties could use people for their overall goals

Yasmine also described a significant lesson about politics based on her reflection after ending the role of political candidate. Yasmine described a mistake she made during the campaign cycle that time and reflection helped her learn a different lesson than when the event happened. She explained the lesson this way:

What may appear to you to be a major mistake, gaffe or misstep, will be quickly forgotten in a news cycle or two, if it even gets that much attention. When you are living and breathing your campaign, one can have the tendency to over-analyze everything. The reality is that very few missteps will result in a critical error during the campaign and it is best to keep everything in perspective.

Yasmine's reflection helped her identify a lesson about politics she was only able to identify after stepping out of the role of political candidate.

Lessons about self. Similar to the lessons candidates identified while in their role, three candidates discussed lessons they learned about themselves through this role. Yasmine and Anna discussed the lessons being a political candidate taught about how they spend their time. Anna stated, "I am more protective of my time." Yasmine elaborated on her similar lesson about time, "I spend more quality time, over quantity, with my children than I previously did because my free time is significantly more limited. When I have free time, I prioritize spending time with my family and close friends." Additionally, Yasmine described her learning to redefine her professional role. She shared, "I didn't realize how much my identity was tied to my 'worth' at my law firm

until it was challenged. I have since learned that my worth isn't solely defined by the amount of money I bill for the firm.”

In addition to the lessons Yasmine and Anna described about themselves, Courtney explained strong lessons she learned about herself through her role as political candidate, particularly to think differently about her life and about her own ability to take risks. Courtney shared,

Before running for office, I think about my life as being medium-sized...my day-to-day life was pretty average. Running for office feels like a super-sized life. There is a feeling of more importance, people know you, your words matter, your actions matter more. People look to you for leadership. I liked that super-sized life, and going back to my medium-sized life has been hard...it is shrinking every day. No one remembers the candidate who lost.

Courtney also provided introspective lessons about her relationship with taking risks. She shared, “I’ve always felt that I am risk averse. Now, I realize I can tolerate much more risk than I thought. I’m measured and calculated but also willing to take great risk if the reward would be worth it.” She continued to explain how this realization of a willingness to take bigger risks prompts her believe she is “not done” running for office even though she lost this election.

Interestingly, Dana provided a response that runs counter to the responses shared by Anna, Yasmine, and Courtney. While those three women shared their lessons and changes based on running for office, Dana shared that in reflection she did not feel like she changed. She began her answer celebrating aspects of the role, “It was such an amazing experience. I got to meet so many great people along the campaign trail. I also

met some individuals who were not so nice.” Dana ended her answer with, “I don’t think the experience actually changed me as a person. I am the same just with a lot more knowledge.”

While I did not answer the third round of interview questions directly, I considered my own responses for this data analysis chapter. My greatest changes in response to being a political candidate are personal as well. The most significant change is that my life feels like it opened up significantly by entering politics. My perspectives and understandings about our community grew at an incredible rate as every day presented opportunities to challenge my assumptions. I also learned to let go of having to control all aspects of our family life; my husband stepped into a more balanced role in our family dynamics which meant things would be done differently.

In the online forum, women also shared many lessons they learned, implicitly and explicitly, in reflecting on their roles. For example, one candidate wrote, “I am grateful for the personal growth I have experienced. I am grateful for the greater knowledge of my community and understanding of its needs.” Another candidate wrote, “For those of us who were the victims of a system designed to keep us silent, we must make our voices even louder in the future as we continue to resist the mindless “leadership” so rampant in the NCGA.” A third candidate wrote, “I’m tired. And glad this over. But so grateful to learn how strong I – and we – are.

Two main themes emerged from the participants’ responses about lessons learned in reflection on their role as a political candidate. Both themes parallel lessons described

in the first and second interviews while candidates were in the role – the role of political candidate taught participants about themselves and politics.

How Did Participants Learn?

In addition to what candidates learned through their new role, I wanted to understand how candidates learned. I asked candidates how they learned in both the first and second interviews. In the first interview I asked a more general question, “what has supported you as your transition to this new role?” In the second interviews I asked more explicitly, “How have you learned new things in this role?” Based on participant responses, I asked follow up questions for deeper understanding and for examples. Participants’ responses explained below are grouped in three key areas of how they learned in their roles: through other people, experiences, and formalized support structures.

Learning through Others. The strongest theme supported in participants’ answers is how other people helped them learn throughout their role. Each of the five participants discussed other people who were critical to their education on how to be a political candidate. The responses fall into three categories of learning with others – the women’s group of other first-time political candidates, small groups of campaign support, and interactions with people in the community. All five participants shared the impact of the first group and three each shared the impact of the people in the second and third categories.

First-time women candidate support group. All five participants shared the important role of a first-time women candidate support group in how they learned about their new role. As I have previously discussed, the five participants in this study were part of a larger group of twenty first-time women candidates for the North Carolina House who used an online forum and in-person meetings to support each other in their first political races. Iris talked about the support this group provided as she learned the new role in both her first and second interview. Initially she shared, “all of us being able to support each other on good days and bad days, sharing resources saves me. I am so grateful for the group that I can bounce ideas off of and make decisions with.” She echoed this in her second interview where she added, “you can just ask the group about your question and everybody chimes in. Then you can either feel better or feel worse or at least have more information to help you make a better decision.” Iris also added, “Other male candidates that I know who are running are like, ‘I wish I was a woman this year. You guys have that cool support group.’” Similarly, Yasmine shared, “Talking to other women that are running for the first time has been really helpful, and talking to them about ideas and just their experiences.”

Like Yasmine and Iris, Dana and Courtney elaborated on how the women helped them learn through the role of political candidate. Dana explained it this way, “It’s just very empowering just to see how they work through what they’re going through and just getting information from them...that’s been a great help.” Courtney reflected this in her recommendation to other women planning to run for office. She said,

How lucky did we get? I mean it's not lucky because you (Ashton) did it. You know, get a group of other women running to support you, who you can vent with and be honest with, and who's got your back, and give you advice. There's no way that I would be in the mental space that I'm in right now without that, without our group.

All five women expressed the importance of the women's support group in their learning about their new role. In analyzing the online support group Facebook webpage, I uncovered many concrete examples of how the women learned from each other. Women frequently posted question and shared insight into concrete skills. One example is a candidate asking two of the other participants – one a Moms Demand Action state leader and one a parole officer – a question about gun permits for a candidate survey. In another example, a participant posted an education article and asked for thoughts from the three participants with an education background. There were other examples of candidates posting a specific question about finance reporting, using the online voter database, and reporting to organizations. In reviewing the Facebook archive, I saw lots of moments of both implicit and explicit support and learning.

Individual campaign leadership teams. A second group referred to by three candidates as helpful in learning throughout their campaigns were individual campaign leadership teams the candidates worked closely with in their role. Candidates are encouraged to create a small group who leads the campaign work forward, provides advice and support; these small groups are frequently called “kitchen cabinets” in the political sector. Iris, Anna and Courtney shared the importance of their campaign leadership teams in their learning throughout the course of this role as political candidate.

Anna described how the conversations with her “kitchen cabinet” helped her learn over the course of her campaign. She answered the question “What has helped you learn?” this way: “having close friends and family members make observations in their role of being supportive. Just telling me what they see... You always need that person on your kitchen cabinet who can tell you honestly.” Iris described more specifically how she learned directly from her campaign manager, a key member of her campaign leadership team, explaining that she learned specifically about public speaking and organization from her. Finally, Courtney elaborated on her leadership team’s impact on her learning in this role

I have this team of women that is just amazing. Every single day I’m amazed by how much they are giving of their selves, of their time, of their energy, of time away from their kids to get me elected. They teach me every day based on their passion, their own experiences, their skill sets and their energy...So the women that are doing this work with me are amazing.

Campaign leadership teams supported three participants in the study as they learned their new role of political candidate, and likely the other women as well, even if they did not talk about them directly.

Members of the community. The final group of people who helped candidates learn was members of the community participants talked with in their role as political candidate. In political campaigns, candidates spend time walking the neighborhoods in their district talking to constituents and asking them for votes; this practice is referred to as “canvassing.” Iris, Courtney, and Yasmine shared conversations with community

members while canvassing and during in-district events that taught them important lessons during their campaigns.

While Iris and Yasmine elaborated on how canvassing taught them during their campaigns, Courtney briefly mentioned the impact. Courtney stated, “Just getting out there and driving the roads and walking the neighborhoods to talk with people, you learn a lot about what’s going on in the community.” Yasmine explicitly shared how canvassing taught her a lesson.

The voters themselves have actually taught me is that I can take their stories and use those as concrete examples of what people specifically in my district are struggling with. And so I think that I’ve learned from them, that it’s not always about whether or not you’re Republican or Democrat. It is that if you have the connection and a human connection with people, they’re willing to see past what your party is and that if you speak your values and you live your values, then people will go across the aisle and vote for you, even if they have never voted for a Democrat or Republican before.

Iris shared a specific example of how a conversation from canvassing taught her a lesson about public speaking. After sharing her naïve energy on the first day of canvassing, the person at the first door she knocked on responded to her, “Yeah, I’m not going to vote.” From this experience Iris learned to use more welcoming body language and adjust communication skills.

Learning by Doing. A second strong theme presented in four participant responses is that they learned through their experiences, following the adage, “you learn best by doing.” For example, Dana said about her learning, “I guess by just kind of going through the process” and then explained several examples where she did not know

something and “just did it” – canvassing, organizing precincts, building the local party. Courtney elaborated with a similar experience, “Doing. Learning by doing. Right? The more you speak in public, the better you get at it. It’s like everything else...the more you practice, the better you are.” Iris shared a similar response to how she learned in her new role.

I just go do it and figure it out. That’s how I’ve always been and that has been a super helpful thing on the campaign trail, because a lot of people, other candidates, I hear them say, ‘Well, how do you do this? I don’t know how to do that.’ Well, I didn’t either. I just went and figured it out. You just jump in and do it.

Iris, Yasmine and Dana all shared how delving into the role through experiences taught them lessons through their campaigns.

Anna provided a different angle to the theme that experiences during the campaign taught the candidates. I asked Anna, “What has helped you learn those things?” after she shared several lessons learned. Anna responded, “Experiencing pain.” I asked, “so, the experience?” She continued, “Yeah, I think just really experiencing and learning what my limits are has forced me to reflect and learn from them.” While the other participants indicated the experiences as supportive of the role, Anna’s responses showed pain associated with the learning experiences.

Learning in Formal Structures. The third theme is that formalized structures helped candidates learned through their campaigns. The participants discussed specific

organizations dedicated to candidate education, paid political consultants, and political parties as specific formal structures that influenced their political education.

Candidate support organizations. This category includes three main organizations that worked directly with the participants in this study: LEAD NC, EMILYs List, and Lillian's List. I described the missions of these organizations earlier in this chapter. These three organizations supported candidates through direct trainings and individual coaching and support. Three participants in the study referenced the trainings as important in their learning as candidates, with specific mentions about their helpfulness in social media, fundraising, and campaign team structure. Two candidates discussed specific coaches from the organizations as part of how they learned as a candidate. Yasmine shared specifics about the impact of the local EMILY's List coach

He has been a really great confidant but also advisor in that sense because he's been around, he's run campaigns. He is the person who you can call and get resources from, you can vent to, but you can also trust that he's going to ahead and give you the best advice because he is committed to make sure that more women are in the legislature. So he has been a really great source of information and support for me.

Comments in the online forum also support trainings as impactful in learning. For instance, in there were nine posts where participants shared a training with the other women and encouraged other women to participate. There were also seven examples on the online forum where women shared something specific that they learned from a training. The trainings and individual support offered by state and national organizations helped three candidates learn through the course of their campaigns.

Political consultants. An additional formal structure that candidates used to learn was paid political consultants. Political consultants are paid by candidates to provide expertise on a variety of areas including direct mail, polling, and media market decisions. However, Anna was the only candidate who referred to political consultants in her responses about how she learned as a political candidate. She described the support quickly, “I have a political consultant, and it’s been a resource.” She did not elaborate on how this person helped her specifically.

Political party structures. The third category of organized structures that supported candidates as they learned were the structures created through the Democratic Party to support candidates. Two candidates shared that their local Democratic parties helped them learn as candidates though neither gave specifics on how. Additionally, two participants briefly mentioned the North Carolina House Caucus as support, similarly without elaborating on any specifics. Finally, two candidates discussed how people serving in the role of Representative helped them learn through their experiences. Yasmine shared how talking to a Representative who served with young children helped her learn how to manage her role as a mother. Iris shared that women Representatives she talked to helped her learn how to balance all the demands on her life as a candidate and potential future office holder.

Considering a New Role: Recommendations for Potential Women Candidates

Finally, I asked participants what they would recommend to other women considering a run for political office. This question provided insight into how the

experiences of the women in the study informed how they would approach the role of political candidate. I asked this question in the second interview cycle and asked again during the third interviews for any additional recommendations they would make based on their reflection of the roles. I organize the recommendations from participants into three categories in this section: talk to other people who ran for similar political office, learn specific skills and strategies for the role, and consider and prepare for impact on yourself.

Talk to Others Who Served in the Role. Three candidates listed this recommendation first, talk to other women who have also run for political office. Iris offered, “do it, and talk to another woman who has done it.” While she did not elaborate on what benefits that conversation would provide, Iris later shared her hope that she can be in the position to help new first-time women candidates. She elaborated, “I would like to share that with somebody who’s thinking about running so they would not have to fight some of the same fights and have some of the same frustrations I’ve had.” Dana similarly shared, “tell them to call me! Or another woman who has already done that, their experiences would be the most important.”

Anna provided detailed explanations for her recommendation to talk to other women who ran for office. First, she stressed the importance of talking to women who were elected and who lost their campaigns to get a wide perspective on the costs of campaigning. Anna believes that people considering the role should have a more realistic picture of what it looks like, “I don’t think it’s helpful to have people doing this who only

have been encouraged and drawn and pushed into it, without hearing the other side, like what are the costs.” I asked Anna to share what costs she would describe if a candidate called and asked her for advice and she responded,

I would say, ‘Here’s a list of things that you need...’ I wouldn’t say these things first, because it would scare somebody off, but you need to have this whole picture of – If you’re in a competitive seat, you’re gonna be attacked. So, just think how you feel about that. You’re gonna have negative TV, mailers, things that are false, misleading put out there about you. You may or may not have support of your party. You’re gonna be asked to give up your entire life for a year. I would say, you know what? You don’t have to start this campaign a year ahead of time...Get advice from a lot of different people who know what they’re doing, but don’t feel like you’re gonna be dictated to...you don’t have to do it one way.

Anna then continued to discuss about how introverted people, like herself, can also be successful as political candidates, even if they do not fit the established model.

Learn Specific Skills and Structures. All five candidates shared specific skills and structures women considering the role of political candidate should consider. The types of skills and structures varied widely; I share several of the recommendations in this section. Dana, Courtney, and Yasmine stressed the importance of creating time management structures. Courtney said, “you need to decide what percentage of your time will go where and hold yourself accountable to what you want your life to feel like...use every minute. Like if you’re in the car, be rehearsing a speech, or be listening to a podcast, or making calls. Use all the time that you have.” Dana and Anna discussed the importance of trainings to prepare potential candidates, both specifically referenced training for fundraising as important. Anna listed connecting with Lillian’s List for those

trainings. Courtney suggested that potential candidates should “Practice in front of the mirror. Practice, practice, practice. Practice asking for money.” Iris specifically recommended learning clearly the roles of different people you will work with as a candidate, including campaign staff, the party, and the Caucus. Iris also suggested having a timeline of a campaign ready for potential candidates.

The women also mentioned specific skills needed to be successful in running for office in the online forum, both in the form of questions and statements about skills they had learned. Some of these skills include: how to use and end online campaign database systems, create campaign mail and ads, understand policy, organize campaign teams, define relationships with campaign managers, raise funds, and speak publicly.

Consider and Prepare for the Impact to Yourself. The final category of recommendations from four participants relate to balancing responsibilities and self-care. These recommendations fall into three themes: consider the impact running for office will have on your other roles, prepare your support network, and take care of yourself.

Consider the impact on other roles. Anna and Yasmine talked about the importance of considering the impact of the political candidate role on other roles they hold. Anna focused on the impact to family and stressed the importance of having a realistic conversation with your family, “talk, talk, talk to your family, it’s a big decision.” Yasmine provided several specifics about things to consider in three different roles – mother, spouse and professional roles.

If you have children, really take a look at what you're willing to give up with regards to the engagement that you have with your children...If you go through with this process, would it'll have been worth the time that you're going to be away from your kids...Also, if you're married, you really need to have a candid conversation with your significant other about what that will do to your relationship and subsequently what roles are going to change in your house...it's going to change the dynamic of your relationship...And if you're employed, you're going to have to have, obviously, a conversation about what you can do with regards to your job...You may work a forty or 60 hour week, but it will not be in your office in the traditional way that you work. We'll have to figure out ways to go ahead and be flexible with regards to your schedule.

Anna and Yasmine shared that potential candidates should consider how that new role would impact their other roles, specifically family and professional roles.

While not specifically explained as a recommendation for future candidates, the women in the online forum frequently reflected on the strong impact of the role of political candidate on families and jobs. Many women wrote about concerns on this role on their family. One post a woman shared, "Do you all feel like it is hard to explain this to your spouse? It feels exhausting that he does not understand." Another woman wrote, "I feel guilty every time I look at my children and think about what they have sacrificed." There were some positive comments about the impact on families as well. One post showed a candidate with her children canvassing with the quote, "they are learning so much through this experience." Some women also wrote about the impact on their jobs. One woman wrote, "I don't know what I would do if my boss was not understanding." Another wrote, "If I didn't have a job, this would all be manageable."

Prepare your support network. Three participants stated the importance of potential candidates preparing a support network. Dana's first recommendation was,

“Make sure that you have a really good support system, that is number one.” Yasmine also discussed this importance in two ways. First, she shared the importance of having a group of “confidants that you can trust and call and vent to.” She also shared the importance of having a support network to help you, “who can help you out in a pinch? If you have kids, for childcare purposes. Picking up groceries. Who can help when something happens?” Courtney related this recommendation to emotional support, “get a group of other women running to support you, who you can vent with and be honest with, and who’s got your back, and give you advice.”

The online forum is an example of how women built a support network for each other. Women reflected the importance of this support network in many comments, especially towards the end of the campaign season. Here are some of comments expressing the importance of this support network: “Mostly, I am grateful for you. Thank you for your wisdom and thank you for your courage;” “It’s going to be an ugly 9 to 10 days. We need to stay strong together, knowing we have each other to lean on and talk to. I’m so lucky to be on this journey with each of you;” and “I am so proud to have been a part of this special moment in the history of our state, and I am especially proud to have been part of this special group of uniquely talented and determined women.”

Take care of yourself. The final theme for how potential candidates should prepare for the impact on the role on themselves is to take care of yourself through the process. Courtney explicitly stated this recommendation, “Definitely sleep. Take care of your physical and mental self because you can’t...if it takes you a year, there’s no way

you can get to the finish line without taking care of yourself.” Yasmine explained the recommendation this way, “Set aside time for yourself as well. We don’t have a lot of work/life balance, but you have to find things that continue to replenish your energy and your spirit and your soul, ‘cause without that you’re going to be exhausted all around.” Yasmine also stressed the importance of saying “no” when needed through the role of candidate to protect yourself.

Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter, I shared the experiences of female first-time candidates for the North Carolina House of Representatives, based on both interviews with five candidates and comments that a larger group (which included 15 additional candidates) shared on a group Facebook site. The willingness of the women in this study to share their experiences helps broaden our understanding of what women in new leadership roles experience and how to support them through the role. As is reflected in this study, it is an intense and personally challenging experience to learn a new leadership role. This is especially true in the field of politics, where the learning (and the mistakes) occurs publicly. I hope the honesty and leadership of the women in this study informs support of women leaders in the future.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I provide concluding comments based on the information and data presented in this study. I summarize the key findings of the study, answer the research questions, discuss implications based on the findings, share limitations to the research, recommend strategies for practice and future research, and end with final thoughts. It is my hope that this chapter brings together all the important insights and findings from this study and that I am able to share positive contributions to future leadership and research.

Summary of Key Findings

Organizations exist in our communities to achieve goals that move purposes forward – businesses, educational organizations, non-profit companies, neighborhood associations, parent teacher associations – all bring people together to achieve established goals. Research shows us that organizations work most effectively when the leadership reflects the gender ratio of the community. Across all professional sectors, women are underrepresented in leadership roles. This challenges the values of equitable representation and fairness, and it also leads to less effective progress towards goals. This is certainly true in politics, where women have proven to be effective legislators and yet make-up only twenty-five percent of state legislatures and twenty-one percent of the United States Congress. Our organizations and political structures would move forward

more productively with greater representation of women in leadership roles. In order to increase women leadership across sectors, we need to understand how to more effectively recruit and support women in new leadership roles. By studying women who choose a new leadership role, how they adjust to that new role, and what they recommend to other women considering the role, we are better prepared to support new women leaders in a range of contexts. In this study, I followed women in the new leadership role of political candidate, how they chose the role, what they learned and how they learned it, and what they recommend to future women considering the role. I hope the data and findings I shared help to inform efforts to better support women in leadership roles and ultimately increase women in leadership across sectors.

Research Questions Answered

How and Why Do Women Decide to Run for Office? In the first research question, I sought to understand how and why women choose to accept the new role of political candidate. In this section, I answer this question in three sections: personal factors for the decision, challenges overcome to make that decision, and strategies that impacted the decision. I also put the findings from my study in conversation with some of the literature I reviewed in chapter two. Three personal factors influenced women's decision to become political candidates. The first was timing, both personal timing and national timing. Women needed to feel the "time was right" for themselves and their families when they made the decision to run for office. The national landscape and response to the presidential election also factored into participants' decisions to run for

office. Participants also shared their desire to be a voice for their community and a calling to run for office as factors in their decision to seek the new role of political candidate. Similarly, the experiences of female school superintendents, Chief Executive Officers, and hospital lead managers aligned with the participants in this study, as they too expressed being called to their new leadership roles by their desire to improve their communities (Athanasopoulou et al., 2018; Soklaridis et al., 2017; Wallace, 2014).

There are also challenges women faced in their decision to run for office. The biggest challenges were the impact this new role would have on the other roles women fill, including with their families and professionally. Women shared the particular challenge of how the new role impacted their children and spouses and their worry about it negatively affecting relationships with their families. This is consistent with research that shows that family obligations are a large barrier to women running for political office (Bledsoe & Herring, 1990; Fox, 2006; Fulton et al., 2006; Sapiro, 1982). The challenge to meet professional and financial obligations impacted women considering this new role as well; four of the five women explored in the interviews continued full-time employment through their campaigns. A final challenge that I identified was concern about the possibility of primary challengers, which affected how women felt about their decision to run for office. Preece and Stoddard (2015) also shared this concern, describing how the competitive nature of politics discourages women from running.

The literature suggested two additional barriers to women running for office that I did not see in my data. First, several researches mentioned that that women are less

encouraged to run for office by party leadership (Fox & Lawless, 2004, 2010; Sanbonmatsu, 2006). The structure of this study prevents a comparison between the recruitment of men and women; however, the women in my study almost all discussed the strong impact of party recruitment on the women's decision to run for office. In fact, my experience and the experience reflected by several women in the study, was that we were recruited because we were women and because the party leadership and outside organizations wanted to increase gender parity in political leadership. Additionally, the research reflected a difference in perceived qualifications for leadership between women and men as a barrier (Fox & Lawless, 2004) which was not supported by the participants in this study. One sarcastic picture posted in the online forum shows quite the opposite – a fake cross-stitched plaque that read, “Lord, Give Me the Confidence of a Mediocre White Male.”

Finally, participants reflected upon structures that encouraged them to choose the new role of political candidate including direct recruitment and trainings. Matching the research, I reviewed about factors that increase women running for office (Karpowitz et al., 2017), direct recruitment positively encouraged women in this study to run for office, including direct recruitment from current representatives, the North Carolina House Caucus staff, and representatives from specific organizations focused on candidate recruitment. Schneider et al. (2016) also described the positive impact of redefining the role of politics to align to women's desire to benefit their communities in recruiting women to run for office. My own experience reflects this finding too, as recruitment

conversations that I participated in focused on my desire to improve our community through education and the possibility of achieving that goal as a politician. The impactful organizations mentioned in this study were LEAD NC, Lillian's List, and EMILYs List. Trainings provided by the same organizations also encouraged women to run for office.

How Do Women Learn in Their Role as a Candidate Over the Course of Their Campaign and Where Do They Find Support? In this study, I identified what candidates learned over the course of their campaigns for state legislative races and how they learned those lessons. I showed that candidates learned lessons in four different areas through their role as political candidate. First, women learned about themselves through their roles including their own strength and areas of growth. Second, women learned specific skills, especially in the areas of fundraising and public speaking. Third, women learned about people in their community and finally, they learned about politics. The lessons learned by the candidates in this study reflect similar lessons learned by new parents, widows, new educators, principals, doctors, and new women superintendents, Chief Executive officers, and lead hospital managers that I detailed in the literature review. People in new roles learn about themselves, skills related to the new roles, and about the structures they work in. I imagine this to be true across genders, races, ages and roles.

The participants in this study learned through a variety of methods, which I grouped into three categories – learning through others, learning by doing, and learning in formal structures. The strongest method for learning supported by the data in this

study was candidates learning through their interactions with others. Most clearly supported by the data is the education that occurred for candidates through the first-time female candidate support group. I explore this strategy and position it in the research literature in the next section of this chapter. Additionally, candidates learned through independent campaign leadership teams and community members. Second to learning through others, women also expressed that they learned from their experiences. They described learning about the new role by “jumping in” and doing what needed to be done for the role. As I read the participants answers about the importance of learning by doing, I thought about how this has been true in most of the roles of my life. It is also reflected in some of the roles I reviewed in Chapter II, for example, where new young parents “universally rejected the idea that they could learn to be a parent by taking lessons or reading a book” (Dworsky & Meehan, 2012, p. 2119) and school principals discussed the importance of learning the context by being on the ground in their new positions (Clayton & Johnson, 2011). The women also talked about the influence of formal structures on their learning. These formal structures included organizations created to support candidates, political consultants, and party structures. Similar to the women in this study, formal structures were referred to in the literature as helpful for learning new roles but less important than through relationships and experiences.

What Structures Would Encourage Women to Engage in New Leadership Roles? The women in this study discussed several structures that could encourage women to choose the new role of political candidate and to support them in the role. The

most strongly supported recommendation is the importance of connecting women considering a new leadership role with women currently serving in that role and women who begin the role at the same time. First, as women make the decision on whether to accept the new role, discussion with women currently in the role can help with that decision. Women superintendents interviewed about their decision made the same observation (Allred et al., 2017); talking to other women superintendents encouraged them to take the new role of superintendent.

Once a woman makes the decision to take a new leadership role, a strong support for their learning is to connect with other women who are new to the leadership role as well. The examples from the online forum in Chapter V provide context for how impactful the support network became for women learning this new leadership role. All five women discussed the importance of the support group in their interviews and I shared the impact it had on me in my journal analysis. I shared the feelings of the women in the group that I do not know how I would have survived the campaign without the support group. The research also reflects the importance of a like-role support groups. For example, new parents found acceptance and learned new skills through a support group with other young, new parents (Dworsky & Meehan, 2012; Kane et al., 2007). New widows found that an online support group provided non-judgement support and informal learning, normalized their experiences and demonstrated reciprocal exchange of increased efficacy in their new role (McDonald-Kenworthy, 2011). Support groups of

people experiencing the same role transitions are supported by the research and strongly supported by the experiences of the women in this study.

In addition to the support of other women in the role, I found two additional structures would help women new to the role of political candidate. Both structures I determined from this study align to recommendations made in the research by women leaders in other fields. First, women should develop necessary skills aligned to the new role and specifically fundraising and public speaking for future political candidates. Women superintendents (Wallace, 2014) and women Chief Executive Officers (Athanasopoulou et al., 2018) recommended the same strategy for future female leaders in their roles, specifically that they should learn the concrete skills needed for the job (Wallace, 2014). Secondly, the women in this study suggested that future first-time female political candidates should consider and prepare for the impact of the new role on themselves. This includes thinking ahead about how the new role will impact work and family roles and plan for those changes, creating a support network for their adjustment to their new role of political candidate, and planning to take care of their mental and physical health and well-being. Women superintendents, Chief Executive Officers, and hospital lead managers (Soklaridis et al., 2017) recommended this strategy to future female leaders as well. One CEO explained this advice this way, “recognize the need to make trade-offs, make a choice, accept the responsibilities that come with it, and move on” (Athanasopoulou et al., 2018, p. 628). Women across fields understand the need to consider the impact of a new leadership role on the other aspects of their lives.

Discussion and Implications

The answers to the research questions from the data sources in this study lead to several implications. The method candidates used to learn throughout the course of their campaigns challenges us to consider what education for a new role really involves. After discussing this issue, I turn to implications for increasing women leadership across sectors and in the field of politics that I see coming from the data I collected in this study.

What is Education? In this study, I examined what and how women learned about their new leadership role over the course of assuming that role. In chapter two, I discussed how researchers talk about the difference between learning and schooling, and between formal and informal education. I found it difficult to bring together a definition of education broad enough to encompass the many ways humans learn new skills. Instead I came to understand “education” involves new knowledge, positions the learner in relationship to the world around them, and some interaction or event with the world leads to a new understanding for the learner. Frequently, those interactions – and thus learning – occur outside of the context of traditional schooling. The conclusions I draw from this study challenge us to accept how much learning occurs outside of traditional structures created to educate.

As part of this study, I documented my own experiences as a first-time political candidate with a specific focus on how I learned about the new role. As I reviewed my own journal entries, I realized that I only referenced formal, structured, or institutional support for my learning in this role six times in the course of more than 250 pages of

reflections. Instead, I discussed forty-eight times when other female candidates helped me learn how to navigate the role. It is challenging to quantify the number of times I referenced a lesson that I learned through the experience itself – from talking to people in the community, hard interactions with my family, internet searching campaign finance laws at 1:00 in the morning, and so many other lessons I learned by jumping into the experience. In fact, it felt like learning was such a continual and natural part of the new role that I could not separate the education about the role from the role itself.

My experiences reflect the broader participants' experiences based on their interviews and Facebook comments as well. The women in the study shared how they learned through interactions with other people, “just doing” what needed to be done to fulfill the role of first-time candidate, and their experiences throughout the course of the campaign. Only two participants mentioned the formal structures created for learning about the role as supportive and both mentioned them after at least three other strategies that supported their learning. The women in this study overwhelmingly learned how to meet the expectations of their new leadership role outside of formal structures created to teach them how to succeed in the role.

The lens of social learning theory helped position the education of the women in this study beyond traditional learning structures and to illuminate how social experiences are a key driver of changed behavior. Observational learning, a key aspect to social learning theory, is pervasive in how the women learned during their campaigns. In the online forum the participants “observed” how the other members approached different

tasks – “What does your flier look like?” “Who can send me their NGP report so I can figure out what to do?” – and modeled their own work off of their interactions with the other candidates. Interactions with members of the community also provided a rich educational experience for candidates who learned about their communities, themselves and politics from the relationships. Social learning theory helped me find learning *everywhere* as the women interacted with each other and their worlds throughout their time as political candidates.

Additionally, my review of the Facebook comments of the group of twenty first-time candidates also showed that they learned mostly outside of formal structures and through interacting with each other. I created the online forum when I was thinking about running for office and worried that I was getting in over my head. I assumed that other women felt the same way and thought we could use a safe support network to share ideas, resources, frustrations, and successes. While not every post in the online forum was directly linked to education about the role, the hundreds of posts where participants learned from each other showed that the formal structures provided to educate the women may be helpful, but are insufficient.

What are the implications for this understanding? As a lifelong educator who spent a significant time focused on classroom and school-wide learning structures, it is humbling to realize how much broader the idea of learning truly can be than what one learns in formal settings. This study shows us that as we seek to teach people about a new role, or potentially anything, it is imperative that we value how significantly the

learner's relationships, interactions, and experiences also educate the learner. The data demands an acceptance that learning about a new role continues well after initial trainings; true educational support for the people in a new role will sustain throughout the role and respond to changes.

Increasing Women in Leadership. This study also provides implications for how we work to recruit and retain women into new leadership roles. As I discussed in my first two chapters, there is a gap in women leadership across sectors in American society – business, non-profit, education and elected office. At the same time, researchers have shown the positive impacts women in leadership bring to the effectiveness of organizations across these sectors. Following women as they chose and adjusted to a new leadership role in this study provided insight into strategies for how to recruit and retain more women to leadership roles.

Interconnectedness of roles. Women fill many roles; I have illustrated throughout this study the interconnectedness of these roles (e.g., candidate, mother, partner, employee) and alluded to why we need to help women learn how to navigate multiple demands and support them in occupying many roles at once. Two of the three themes I focused on in my journal analysis were the impact of the new role of political candidate on my life. First, it was difficult to adjust to a new leadership role for which there were very few breaks, both for me and for my family. Before becoming a political candidate, I served in my past leadership roles (school principal, assistant superintendent) in a specific time and space. I could then easily focus on my role as mother and wife

with my family at home and in our community. It became challenging to do so in my new role as political candidate, which proved to have no boundaries, I had to adjust to filling multiple roles at the same time. Additionally, in my journal I reflected the intense impact of candidacy on motherhood in a section aptly named, “Drowning in Mom Guilt.” For me personally, and for the other candidates, navigating the demands of the many different roles we hold was a significant challenge during our candidacy.

My interviews with five women running for office also showed the role interconnectedness women feel and its impact on new leadership opportunities. The participants discussed the need for women considering a new role to consider how it will impact their roles professionally and in their families. The women in the study shared deeply personal questions they asked about the impact of the new role on their current roles, such as “will my children hate me?” and “how will this change my dynamic with my husband?” In many instances on the Facebook support group, women expressed feeling conflicted about the impact of being a political candidate on another role they filled.

If we hope to encourage and sustain women into new leadership roles, we must help them consider the impact of the role on their other roles and plan to minimize negative impacts as much as possible. Participants in the study suggested strategies for women, for example, to organize support networks to help with the other roles such as picking up children or filling in at work and to create space for yourself to rest and

regroup. I know I needed encouragement from other women when the candidate role limited my ability to fill my motherhood role.

Connection to other women. A second key support for women entering a new leadership role is the importance of connecting with other women in recruitment and support. The participants in this study were all members of a candidate support group with other first-time women candidates for the North Carolina House. As I showed in my analysis of my own journal, interviews, and the Facebook posts, this group provided an important network for new female candidates. I mentioned the importance of this journal and this group a number of times in my journal – both generally and in specific instances where the group provided invaluable support and encouragement related to particular issue or struggle. All five women discussed this support group as a key method for learning throughout their time in the role of political candidate. The sheer volume and frequency of women participating in the online form demonstrates the usefulness of this group of women

In addition to women supporting each other through new leadership roles, women also served as a key factor in recruiting other women to the new leadership roles. Several participants shared how women currently serving in the North Carolina House as Representatives were key to their decision to choosing to run for office. One participant shared specifically the positive impact of two women coming to first recruit her to run for office.

Increasing Women in Political Leadership. In this study, I explored women who chose the role of political candidate and learned much from them about how we can specifically increase women in political leadership. The two strategies I described in the section above should be used in the political sphere by connecting women with other female politicians and first-time candidates. In my review of the relevant literature, I described four challenges to women's political leadership: family responsibilities, difference in perceptions of qualifications, lack of encouragement from the party and the competitive nature of politics. All three data sources in this study clearly supported the first challenge of family responsibilities to running for political office. However, the women in this study did not express a lack of encouragement from the party as a barrier. While not specifically listing the difference in perceptions of qualifications to run, the two women who described meeting with a potential primary opponent did not express intimidation or lack of confidence in their own ability. I also did not share these concerns after my conversations with potential primary opponents either. My participants also did not explicitly mention the final challenge of the competitive nature of politics, though there are indications of a version of this concern in all three data sources. In my journal I described my discomfort at how it felt to directly debate my opponent. Women in their interviews shared comments such as "politics is what people think" and described the selfishness of other politicians; Facebook posts also were about several instances of women bemoaning a competitive aspect to the role. While the data I collected in this study strongly support the research-based barriers of family responsibilities and

somewhat support the competitive nature of politics; my participants did not discuss challenges related to a lack of party recruitment or a difference in perception of their qualifications.

According to research, there are three positive factors for increasing women in political leadership (Fox & Lawless, 2005; Karpowitz et al., 2017; Schneider et al., 2017); all three were supported by the findings of this study. First, party recruitment is a significant factor in encouraging women to run for political office. Second, redefining the role of politics in an effort to increase women's participation is useful. In the study, women described their desire to solve problems observed in their professional and community lives and to be a voice for members of their community as major factors in their decision to run for office. As Schneider et al. (2016) suggest, defining politics in relation to shared goals instead of individual seeking power can also help increase the number of women running for office. The third characteristic that increased women running for office is a personal history of a politicized upbringing. Three women in the study described their own learning about politics from experiences as young children. Two women even shared that they saw themselves as "the first female president" by the age of 5. While I did not share it in my journal, I also experienced politics in my youth with a father who ran the Democrat Party for our county.

This third factor that increases women in political leadership provides opportunity for us think about how we might influence young women to see themselves as potential

political leaders in the future. When I asked Dana how she thought we could increase women in political office she responded

Do exactly what we're doing, we're running. We're showing other women and especially girls that we're doing it – we're working moms with young children, or we have other responsibilities, we do things in our community but people can see us doing it...It's not easy but it's possible and it shows other women that we're strong and we can get this done. And our daughters and granddaughters will see it and some will think, 'I can do this too.'

Dana reflects what I believe to be true from our shared experiences and what is borne out in the research, by exposing young girls to women in political leadership early, we can increase the number of women interested in running.

Limitations

As I conclude this research, there are two additional limitations I feel compelled to share that shape how readers might make sense of my findings. Both limitations were made clear when I realized the impact of the role as time progressed after the election and as I moved into the role of House Representative. First, in many research studies, the researcher ends their relationship with participants at the conclusion of the study. In this study, my relationships with the participants continued in varying levels until present day and it is a potential limitation that the continued relationships impacted the data analysis presented in this study. I remain closer to certain participants in the study, which could also inadvertently impact my reflections on the data. At one point when I was reviewing interview notes, I wondered whether I would have asked the participant more follow-up

questions if we shared a closer relationship. A possible limitation is that after data collection concluded for this study, my relationships continued with the participants.

A second limitation is my realization that the role of political candidate continued to affect the participants in the study after data collection concluded and continues to impact their paths today. The women in this study continued to grow and reflect from their experiences well after the final interview and this study does not capture the continued impact of the role. Yasmine and I moved onto serving as state legislators. Courtney is considering what office she should run for and being more realistic about the impact on her professional and family roles in that decision. Iris is running for the state legislature again in 2020 and Dana is running again for her local office. Anna took a break from all things political and is slowly re-engaging in local activist organizations. The lack of data collection about long term impacts to the role of political candidate limits the conclusions of the study to immediate reflections.

Recommendations for Practice

The conclusions from this study lead to recommendations in two key areas. First, I share recommendations for organizations that coach and train people in new roles. Then I share two recommendations for how to encourage and support women into new leadership roles, which can be used by any organization who hopes to recruit and retain women in leadership.

The data in this study about how people learn in a new role lead to recommendations for organizations supporting members accepting new roles. When I

think about how organizations support people with a new role – a new job, becoming a parent, a new community position – I immediately think of the trainings or classes provided to prepare the person for the new role. The data in this study show that most of the learning about a new role occurs as the person experiences and interacts with others once in the role; the impact of organized structures such as trainings is relatively small in comparison to the learning that comes through interaction with others, including people who have been elected to office. Based on this finding, organizations that want to support people in new roles should consider how they provide feedback, discussion, and encouragement throughout the transition to the new role – as well as figuring out ways to connect new people to mentors.

For future women running for political office, this study demonstrates the effectiveness of a support group of women adjusting to the same new role. This group gives the women others to learn and support each other. Mentors were also important. Pairing women with currently serving representatives as mentors could help women transition to the new role. There would be challenges to finding mentors who shared life experiences, however. For example, before our class of new representatives in 2018, there were no women serving in the North Carolina House with school age children. This has now changed, as the six women from this study who were elected could serve in a mentorship role for the new class of women in 2020. As an additional example, we can consider a nurse who is promoted to Lead Nurse over her division in the hospital. The hospital would want to provide initial training on the transition to the new role but should

spend even more attention and energy on how they will continue to support the nurse's learning throughout the first six months to one year, or longer, of her transition to the role. Any organization or individual that works to support people as they transition to new roles should plan for sustained education as the individual adjusts to the new role.

In addition to the described recommendation based on how people learn a new role, there are two recommendations to improve recruitment and retention of women to new leadership roles; leverage other women leaders and explicitly discuss and plan for the impact of a new leadership role on the leader and her other roles. The recommendations could be used by any organization with the goal to increase women in leadership in their organization and by recruitment organizations who work to increase women in leadership across fields.

An important recommendation to increase women in leadership identified in this study is the strong positive impact of other women in the recruitment and retention of women into new leadership roles. When an organization hopes to encourage a woman into a new leadership role, one of the most important strategies it can use is to connect the recruited woman with a woman currently serving in a similar leadership role. Once the woman agrees to the new leadership role, a strong support for sustaining her in the adjustment is to connect her with other women also adjusting to a similar leadership role. By connecting a woman considering a new leadership role with current women in the role and supporting her in her adjustment with a similar network, organizations can increase women accepting and continuing in leadership.

A second recommendation to increase women in leadership is to help future women leaders reflect on, and plan for, the impact of a new leadership role on their lives, specifically themselves and their family and professional roles. In this study, I discovered the interconnectedness of roles for women and the impact of a change in role on the other roles that women fill. An organization that seeks to prepare a woman for future success in a new leadership role could support her success with strategies to consider the impact of the new role and how to minimize negative effects. In this study, participants referenced two organizations that worked to recruit women for political office. The data suggests that those organizations would increase the likelihood of women running for political office by helping them prepare for the impact of their new roles on the other roles of their lives. For an example in a different field, a similar recommendation would support the work of Women on Boards, an organization dedicated to increasing female representation on corporate boards.

Recommendations for Future Research

This research leads to several possible areas for future research. First, there was a lot of information and data in the Facebook support group that I didn't have time to analyze deeply, however it potentially a really valuable source of information, especially if constructed for both support and research purposes. For the purposes of this study, I used the document analysis to cross-reference and corroborate observations from the participants' interviews and occasionally to add further perspective on statements made. This document analysis could be explored on its own for additional insight into the

research questions of this study or to answer some of the following research questions: How does an online forum support people learning a new role? What do candidates struggle with most in the course of a campaign? What do women offer to each other as encouragement in a role transition?

A second area of future research is to study the long-term effects of a new role, specifically after candidates complete their first campaign for political office. As I shared in the limitations of this study, I learned that the role of political candidate continues to influence people long after the end of the campaign. I completed the research in this study a few months after the end of the campaign and through continued relationship with participants, realized the impacts of the role continued to affect their lives. One woman decided to run for a local office in 2020. Five women in the larger support group who did not win in 2018 are running for the North Carolina House again in 2020. Several women in the online forum commented about their renewed dedication to local organizations after their loss in 2018. As I previously mentioned, six of us now serve in the NC House as Representatives. Being a first-time political candidate impacted all of the women's next steps in life. The long-term impacts on women of running for political office would deepen understanding of the impact of the role. Similarly, additional research that followed people several years after a new role would provide insight into long-term impacts of new roles. This would be an interesting research question in the field of politics where the role of first-time candidate could serve as a pivotal shift in participants' lives. Research into the long-term impacts of new roles would deepen our

understanding of the research questions in this study and additional research questions as well.

A third area of research interest created by this data would be a study of women as they adjust to the new role of state legislator – what lessons from being a candidate prepared them for the role, what new lessons do they learn, how do junior legislators learn their new roles, and how do women find support for serving in the legislature? As I transitioned to being a state representative, the support network we created as candidates proved even more critical. The six women who bonded as candidates and won became an immediate support group for each other as legislators. There were so many things to learn to function in the legislature, and even greater impacts on family and professional roles. Additional research into the transition from candidate to legislator would strengthen support for women in the legislator role.

Finally, a fourth area of research interest created by this data would be a study of characteristics for effective support networks in like role groups. The participants in this study clearly identified their support group of other first-time candidates as fundamental to their education and adjustment to the role of political candidate. I did not examine the key characteristics of that support group that positively impacted participants, which would provide additional data and recommendations for how people can best be supported in new roles. It would strengthen recommendations for practice to understand the aspects of the support network that were most valued by the participants in this study

Finally, research about how people successfully consider and plan for the impact of new leadership roles on the other aspects of their lives is needed. The research here indicates the need, especially for women, to consider a new leadership opportunity and the impact of the opportunity on other aspects of their lives and to prepare to minimize negative impacts as much as possible. I did not explore specific strategies to achieve this goal

Final Thoughts

I began this study as primarily an educator, serving as an Assistant Superintendent focused on Curriculum and Instruction. As I entered the new world of politics, I knew I needed to learn a tremendous amount. I also felt a disconnect between my usual modes of learning – read articles, study, seek experts – and what I needed to learn to succeed in this role. As I have shown throughout this study, I felt a broadened sense of education for this new role, much beyond traditional schooling. Completing this study pushes me to consider the field of education through a new lens, one that values learning through experiences and in relationship to others.

Additionally, when I began this study, I did not know where the paths for the candidates would lead after the November 2018 elections. I hoped several women from our support group would win and join the North Carolina House of Representatives. Six of us won out of twenty in the overall group; only two of the six women studied in depth became State Representatives, me and one of the five women interviewed. While nine out of the nineteen new Democratic Representatives are female, only one of the nine

Republican new members is a woman, and overall, we continue to be only a quarter of the North Carolina House. Women are seriously underrepresented in the North Carolina General Assembly.

As I end this dissertation in Fall 2019, I can reflect on the impact of this underrepresentation based on my experiences in my first session as a Representative. Too often I am the only woman in a room of White men over the age of sixty, debating what is right for the children of our state. We are in the middle of a long budget standoff between the male Speaker of the House, male Senate Pro Tem, and male Governor where all parties try to not be the first to seem they are backing down. I cannot help but wonder whether the research about women legislating more effectively and remaining more focused on getting work done than winning (Lazarus & Steigerwalt, 2018) would bear true if a woman were part of the leadership in this current stalemate. Last week we spread 4 sessions across 4 days, each only eighteen to thirty minutes instead of efficiently putting them altogether. Part of the schedule is political strategy, but I am also convinced it is a function of men who do not feel the interconnectedness and responsibility of multiple roles explored here. My experiences as a first-time legislator strengthen my conviction that we need more women in political leadership.

This conviction grows even stronger as I constantly think about my eight-year-old daughter and the leadership doors I believe should be open to her. I was ten years old during the last “Year of the Woman” and statistically, little has improved from then to now with women in leadership roles. I constantly ask myself, “what will I do to continue

progress for women in leadership?” on behalf of my daughter Lettie and the other eight-year-old girls across our country.

Personally, this study confirms my personal identification as “feminist,” a title I shied away from in the past. My own experiences as a first-time political candidate taught me how strongly the structures, systems, and networks support men to be more likely to run for office. This is also true in how much the organization, structures, and processes of how the General Assembly operates – more supportive of male legislators. This is exemplified by the very building itself, which has a large number of male bathrooms and fewer, awkwardly-organized female bathrooms, seemingly because they were an afterthought. Completing this study strengthened my feminist perspective because not only was I personally frustrated, I watched other women I grew to respect suffer through the same structural limitations placed on women. While we continued to support each other through the challenges, my belief in the need for change and organized questioning of the male dominated world of politics grew.

One of the concrete ways I work to improve women representation at the General Assembly is to actively recruit and support women candidates for the 2020 elections. This research helps me more effectively have conversations with women I might help to persuade to run, understand their challenges and how to support them, and ultimately increase the number of women running and hopefully, winning. While daunting, each conversation with a new interested woman brings me a renewed sense of hope that we can make progress. We must. Lettie is watching.

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