Do our daughters think politics?

Diane Mack
VIEWPOINT

Ryan Wiggins was 14 when she worked on her first political campaign. During dinners at home, there was often lively discussion of current affairs and politics, especially when her parents' friends, both Democrats and Republicans, were present. It was not enough that Ryan should listen to the varied and opposite arguments. The adults encouraged her to summarize the substance of the discussion and add to it. Today Ryan, a native Pensacolian, is one of the top political media strategists in the state.

Dana Perino was in third grade when her father gave her a standing assignment: to read the two local newspapers each day and select articles to discuss with him before dinner. He gave her a T-shirt with the message, "Anything boys can do girls can do better." The Coloradan was the first Republican woman to serve as White House press secretary.

Although these two women have not ventured so far as to seek elected office, they have pushed through to take on and succeed in positions in the political sphere that are still very much the province of men. Their success is due in no small measure to the encouragement and personal education they received from parents and other adults.

It is this kind of encouragement that will have the greatest impact on the number of women running for office in the future, according to research published in 2013 by American University School of Public Affairs in Washington, D.C. ("Girls Just Wanna Not Run: The Gender Gap in Young Americans' Political Ambitions").

After surveying 2,100 college students between the ages of 18 and 25, researchers Jennifer Lawless and Richard Fox concluded that "the gender gap in (political) ambition is already well in place by the time women and men enter their first careers." The research identified five primary factors that contribute to this gap among college students:

» Young men are more likely than young women to be socialized by their parents to think about politics as a career path.

» From their school experiences to their peer associations to their media habits, young women tend to be exposed to less political information and discussion than do young men.

» Young men are more likely than young women to have played organized sports and care about winning.

» Young women are less likely than young men to get encouragement to run for office — from anyone.

» Young women are less likely than young men to think they will be qualified to run for office, even once they are established in their careers.

When asked "Have you ever thought that, when you're older, you might want to run for political office," 63 percent of the young women (and only 43 percent of the young men) in the survey replied that they had "never thought about it."

How can we as a community and as a society begin to reduce this gender gap? The authors of the study propose action on three fronts:

» Urge parents to include a discussion of political careers when talking with their daughters about their future.

» Encourage young women to play sports from an early age to generate a sense of competition that may carry over to political ambition.

» Because female college students are less likely than men to take political science classes, discuss politics with their friends, and seek out political information through the media, women's organizations can intervene to make a difference. They can expose young women to female candidates and elected officials and provide examples of how pursuing electoral office can bring about societal change. Such activities help combat women's tendency to self-assess as unqualified to run for office.

A year or so ago the Pensacola Bay Area League of Women Voters put together just such a program as described above for female high school students. It is well within the mission of the Institute for Women in Politics to develop a substantial and ongoing program for college women. We look forward to exploring the means by which this may be accomplished.

Diane Mack is president of the Institute for Women in Politics of Northwest Florida and offers this viewpoint on behalf of the IWP board of directors. She served on the Pensacola City Council 2009-10.

Want more info?

For questions, contact the Institute at 438-0207 or contact@iwpflorida.org.

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