

Deondra Rose:

Hello everyone. And welcome to Policy360. I'm Deondra Rose. I'm a faculty member at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. And I have the pleasure of sitting in for Kelly Brownell today. My guest is Jennifer Lawless, a professor at American University and director of the Women and Politics center there. Her books include *Running from Office: Why Young Americans are Turned Off to Politics* and *Women on the Run: Gender, Media, and Political Campaigns in a Polarized Era*. Welcome to the program, Jennifer.

Jennifer Lawless:

Thank you.

Deondra Rose:

So, is it true? Are young people actually running from office?

Jennifer Lawless:

They are. Richard Fox and I did a national survey of more than 4,000 high school and college students in the last election cycle, so the fall of 2012, and we found that 89% had already decided, unequivocally, that under no circumstances would they ever consider running for office. But it wasn't just this abstract notion that turned them off. When we asked them to compare running for Congress with being a businessman or woman, or being a lawyer or being even a high school principal, they preferred all of the other options. When we ask them whether they'd rather be a mayor than a sales person, many of them still chose sales person. So people of the youngest generations today are very disappointed with what they see in Washington and have decided that it's not a way to solve problems. They've already decided it's something they won't do.

Deondra Rose:

And so what methods are being used to try to lure them into politics and to the polls?

Jennifer Lawless:

Unfortunately, not that much. We know that college students are often recruited to vote. And so the parties or candidates will target college campuses, especially when there are polling centers, right on those campuses or the campus comprises a large part of a precinct, but beyond voting, we don't really do that much as a country to get our young people involved in politics. We kind of wait until they're older and figure out that when they have families, they'll care more about issues in their communities. But the reality is that if you've decided to do something or not to do something by your late teens, it's very unlikely that you'll do a 180 and completely change. So if you've already decided that you will never run for office, it's very unlikely that even when you have a family, even when you own a house, even when you have a job, that you'll all of a sudden decide, you're going to throw your hat into the ring.

Deondra Rose:

If you were giving us advice on what we might be able to do to attract young people at an early age, what would you say?

Jennifer Lawless:

I think one of the most important things is to highlight some policy successes and to highlight some politicians who are actually doing good. Too often the 24-hour news cycle brings us 24 hours of men behaving badly in Washington, but they're really a minority. Most elected officials are doing their jobs. They are getting the work of the people done. We have more than 500,000 elective offices in this country. It's not just a couple of dozen people in Washington who are behaving in a way that's unappealing. And so if we can highlight some of the policy successes and some of the men and women at other levels of government who are really doing nice work, I think that's one way to bring people back again.

Deondra Rose:

There was a really interesting article in The Atlantic recently, where you said, "Hillary Clinton has generally grown more popular when she stops seeking an office and begins occupying it." So can you tell us a little bit about that? What did you mean?

Jennifer Lawless:

Well, people hate Hillary Clinton when she's campaigning. When she was campaigning to be First Lady back in 1992, people were very turned off by her. They generally felt that they didn't need two for the price of one, which was what Bill Clinton was promising. When she ran for the Senate in 2000, she was very polarizing in New York. When she ultimately decided to run for president in 2008 in the Democratic Primary, it was very, very divisive and people supported Barack Obama over Clinton. Yet every time she actually occupies an office, whether it be the United States, Senate, or secretary of state, her approval ratings go way up because she seems to do the job very well. She's demonstrated that she really is a workhorse and she's a team player. On the campaign trail, people are more interested in her background and in a lot of her baggage, but when she's actually working, people tend to be far more satisfied with the outcomes.

Deondra Rose:

Do you think that this says something about where the country is now when it comes to women and ambition and politics?

Jennifer Lawless:

You know, I think, and I've been saying this now for about a year and a half, that we can't learn very much about women in politics by looking at Hillary Clinton, in that she's incredibly unique. Most of our presidential candidates and most of our women in politics are not people that have been on the front page of the newspaper pretty much every day for 25 years. Most of them are not married to former presidents. And most of them have not been as polarizing as the Clintons have been. We do know that when women run for office at lower levels, they want elections at equal rates as men, they raise just as much money and they generally receive the same kind of media coverage. So, I think the country has moved in a direction that supports women in politics. I just don't know that Hillary Clinton's election is a referendum on that movement.

Deondra Rose:

One thing that I found really striking, or I have found striking, is that it doesn't seem that gender is front and center of this election. Is that your sense also? That this... I mean, I find it shocking. Maybe I'm...

Jennifer Lawless:

I think that it's front and center in some of the messaging. So, the breaking the highest, hardest glass ceiling messaging, the convention graphic where she literally broke through the glass ceiling, was somewhat inspiring. And I think reminds people that we are well positioned to make history if she's elected. By the same token, gender has been front and center in the way that Donald Trump has been accused of being a sexist and in many ways how he's doubled down on a lot of the sexist remarks that he's made. But I think you're right, in that more broadly speaking, we've really got a Democrat working against a Republican and a Republican fighting a Democrat. And that says where we are as a country, we are in really polarized times and the party idea of a candidate, whether there's a D or an R in front of that candidate's name, is far more important and far more salient than the presence or absence of a Y chromosome in his or her DNA.

Deondra Rose:

What do you think is the biggest challenge right now when it comes to women and elected office?

Jennifer Lawless:

I think getting women to run in the first place is the biggest impediment. There is a substantial gender gap in political ambition. When Richard Fox and I surveyed lawyers, business leaders, educators, and political activists in 2001, we found that there was about a 16 percentage point gap in terms of, "Have you ever considered a candidacy?", where women were far less likely than men ever to consider it. When we conducted the same survey with a brand new group of people, 10 years later in 2011, the gender gap in political ambition was exactly the same size. And in 2012, the gender gap in political ambition among 18 to 25 year olds was exactly the same size. So, this is not something that's going to go away or be taken care of with generational change. We need to encourage young women to run for office. We need to let them know that they're qualified to run and we need to let them know that when they do, they'll be just as successful as them.

Deondra Rose:

So now, speaking of running for office, in 2006 you ran for office yourself. So you ran for the U.S. House of Representatives as a Democrat in Rhode Island. So could you tell us a little bit about that? I mean, how did it come about that you decided to run?

Jennifer Lawless:

Yes, it was 10 years ago yesterday, actually, which seems crazy to me because I'm not that old. I challenged Jim Langevin in a Democratic Primary in Rhode Island's second congressional district. And I did it because I felt that he was not representing his constituents on issues that mattered to me and on issues that mattered in Rhode Island. Rhode Island, in general, is a very, very blue state. The second congressional district is very, very liberal and he was ardently anti-choice. He had voted 27 times against a woman's right to choose. He had also not really held the Republicans accountable for the war in Iraq. And those were two issues at the time that were very important. So I threw my hat into the ring and I had students from Brown... I was a professor at Brown at the time who deferred law school and worked their hearts out for about 17 months.

And we ultimately pulled in about 40% of the vote, which was unbelievable and raised several hundred thousand dollars. And I can honestly say that it's the most difficult thing I've ever done, but also the most rewarding. Because I don't think that people realize that when you run for office, you get to speak to thousands and thousands of people who are depending on their elected officials to help them achieve meaningful policies, because those policies play a direct role in their lives. And too often, we

think about these people, these candidates, as just wanting to win or lose, and we forget the stakes that are involved. And on the campaign trail, you remember every single day what those stakes are.

Deondra Rose:

Was there anything particularly surprising for you about your time running for office?

Jennifer Lawless:

I would say the two things that surprised me most were first, that most people had never before actually met a candidate or an elected official. And that struck me because as somebody who had been a political science major and had interned in college for a Congresswoman, it wasn't that novel to me to come across elected officials. But the typical citizen - out there really feels pretty divorced from government.

The other thing that was surprising to me was that you hear about how much time you have to spend raising money, and it's true. By the end, when we were quite successful, I was spending about 35 hours a week on the phone, calling people and asking them for money. People I'd never met and asking them for more than they could possibly give. But what was particularly surprising to me was that once you actually get through to a person and you make a compelling argument, they say yes. So when people are asked to engage and when they have the resources and they're asked to put those resources behind something that they believe in, they are willing to do it. And that made me feel really good about the American people.

Deondra Rose:

So Jen, if you had to make a pitch to young people, college students right now, and in hopes of encouraging them to run, what would you say?

Jennifer Lawless:

I would say that they should at least consider it, the same way that they consider a wide range of other options. And they shouldn't think about presidential politics and make their decisions based on that because they're not going to run for president. Maybe they will, but very few people run for president. But as I said, there are half a million other offices out there, and most of them are not full-time jobs. Most of them don't involve raising crazy sums of money. Most of them don't garner any kind of media coverage, so there are no violations of privacy and journalists rifling through your trash. Most of these positions are just positions that can improve communities and towns and cities and states. And I think it's vital that we encourage the next generation to at least consider occupying them.

Deondra Rose:

Well, thank you so, so much for joining us today, Jen. My guest has been Jennifer Lawless. Jennifer is a professor at American University and director of the women and politics center there. I hope you will check out Sanford's other podcast, Ways & Means. There's a terrific episode on this very subject titled Women in Politics, A Shout or a Whisper. I'm Deondra Rose. Thanks for listening.