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**Running for Justice? Understanding Women's Path to
Prosecutorial and Judicial Office**

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Dominant research on political ambition has largely centered white men and women, with minimal attention paid to the intersection of race and gender. Existing scholarship that does examine such disparities tends to focus on legislative office, leaving a significant gap in our understanding of judicial arenas. Women of color have become a growing presence in judicial roles, yet their unique pathways and motivations remain underexplored. This study seeks to expand the field's understanding of how intersecting identities shape access to and experiences within judicial office. It draws on interviews with sitting judges in Louisiana, aiming to capture their motivations for pursuing the bench, perceived and actual barriers to entry, and broader perceptions of the judiciary. These narratives are supplemented by descriptive patterns of Louisiana judicial candidates from 1982 to 2025. Integrating personal narratives with historical demographic trends, this research offers a richer picture of political ambition beyond the legislative domain.

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of political ambition and representation has long been a subject of scholarly inquiry (Frederick, 2013, p. 113). However, a significant gap persists in understanding how intersecting identities, particularly race and gender, influence pathways to public office (Jensen and Martinek, 2009, p. 379). While much of the existing literature centers on legislative bodies and often overlooks the nuances of judicial and prosecutorial roles, the increasing presence of women of color in the judiciary necessitates a deeper investigation into their unique experiences, motivations, and barriers. This paper addresses this gap through a mixed-methods approach, pairing historical data on race and gender distribution among Louisiana judicial and legislative candidates with in-depth interviews of sitting judges. The qualitative analysis captures personal

narratives about motivations for pursuing the bench, perceived and structural barriers to entry, and perceptions of the judiciary, situating these accounts within Louisiana's distinct historical and political context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

POLITICAL AMBITION AND GENDER SOCIALIZATION

The foundational barrier for women entering political office lies in the early stages of ambition. Elder (2004) and Fox & Lawless (2004; 2005) find that women are less likely to express nascent political ambition than men, even when possessing equivalent credentials. This is primarily attributed to political gender role socialization, lower political confidence, family responsibilities, and a lack of role models. Fox and Lawless emphasize that women are less likely to view themselves as qualified and are less likely to be encouraged to run. This ambition gap is even more pronounced among women of color, who face the compounded effects of both racial and gender-based socialization.

Schneider et al. (2016) further explore how women's political ambition is deterred by the perception of politics as inherently conflict-driven and masculine, a narrative inconsistent with the communal and collaborative roles women are often socialized to value. Reframing political work as community service narrows the ambition gap, suggesting that institutional frames can play a transformative role.

INTERSECTIONALITY

Existing literature strongly challenges the notion that women's political ambition is universal. Race and gender intersect to produce distinct motivations, barriers, and trajectories for women of color (Brown, 2014; Frederick, 2013). Women of color are not simply subject to the

combined burdens of racism and sexism, but to a unique matrix of oppression that fundamentally alters how they approach political participation and candidacy.

Frederick (2013), through narrative analysis, finds that Black and Latina women often express political ambition with greater confidence and community-centered than their white counterparts. While all women face the “gender metanarrative” of humility and selflessness, Black and Latina women more often frame political office as a continuation of activism for racial, ethnic, and economic justice. This contrasts with most political science literature, which treats ambition as an internal trait rather than a product of identity and communal responsibility.

Frederick also critiques survey-based approaches, arguing that ambition is shaped by “identity performances” within race-gender norms. Narratives like the “strong Black woman” both enable agency and impose burdens of resilience. Many Black women resist erasure through storytelling that reclaims their political legitimacy. Brown (2014), using the 2004 Ethnic Politics Study, supports this notion by showing that race and gender interact multiplicatively, creating unique routes into politics for women of color – often through community-based, nontraditional paths excluded from elite-focused models.

Silva and Skulley (2019) reinforce that theories of candidate emergence cannot apply uniformly. Analyzing House primary data from 1980 to 2012, they find factors like incumbency or party support that benefit white women may have little to no effect for women of color. In judicial contexts, women of color may be motivated by commitments to justice in communities disproportionately harmed by the legal system. Holman and Schneider (2016) further find that framing underrepresentation as demand-side barriers increases ambition for white and Asian women but decreases ambition for Black women, while Latinas show no significant change. Narratives of entrenched inequality may discourage rather than mobilize.

These findings suggest recruitment efforts must go beyond opening doors to reshaping how institutions are perceived. If legislative bodies are seen as exclusionary or unresponsive, outreach may fail. Judicial roles may align more closely with women of color's values, though bias and stereotype threat remain persistent obstacles.

STEREOTYPES AND STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

Despite strong credentials, women of color face persistent stereotype-driven challenges when pursuing judicial office. Bauer (2013) explains that while structural barriers remain, the enduring gap in representation is increasingly shaped by gender stereotypes that affect how candidates are perceived. She argues that political science must integrate insights from social psychology to better understand “how stereotypes shape perceptions” of female candidates, particularly in roles like judgeships that demand perceived impartiality and authority.

Gonzalez and Bauer (2022) expand on this by identifying a distinct “women of color” stereotype, in which candidates are ascribed both masculine traits like “strength and leadership” and feminine traits such as “intelligence and selflessness.” While such dual traits can seem beneficial, they often place women of color in a double bind—expected to be strong yet penalized if seen as too assertive or insufficiently neutral in judicial roles. This duality, they write, “affects how women of color are perceived as political leaders and impacts their electoral prospects.”

These challenges persist even when women of color exceed traditional qualifications. Moyer, Harris, and Solberg (2022) find that women of color judicial nominees often have “longer and more robust resumes” than white male peers, yet still receive lower ABA ratings, which reflects systemic bias. The expectation, as they note, is to be “better too much than not

enough,” reinforcing the unequal burden of proof women of color must meet to access the bench. Despite their deep commitment to justice, these candidates remain the most underrepresented race-gender group in the judiciary, underscoring how intersectional bias shapes both opportunity and perception.

INTERVIEW METHODS

This qualitative study draws on semi-structured interviews with sitting judges in Louisiana to examine the motivations, pathways, and challenges faced by women of color pursuing judicial office.

Interviews, lasting 45 minutes, focused on three areas: (1) motivations to run for judicial office, (2) challenges along the path, including race- and gender-specific barriers, and (3) perceptions of judicial culture and community engagement. Probing questions allowed participants to elaborate on personal experiences, contrasts with legislative office, and relationships with the communities they serve.

Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically. This design prioritizes depth, highlighting how women of color view judicial ambition as an extension of moral clarity, community responsibility, and commitment to justice. The interview with “Nikki,” a Black woman judge in Louisiana, exemplifies these themes.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

The interview with “Nikki,” a Black woman judge in Louisiana, reveals motivations rooted in identity, justice, and community responsibility. Her desire to pursue law emerged early, shaped by familial models of assertiveness and clarity. “My model for having a voice... for being very clear... those models were my paternal grandmother... and my mother,” she explained.

Though she lacked professional legal mentors growing up, she was deeply influenced by the women around her who modeled strength and conviction.

Unlike many legislative candidates, Nikki's judicial aspirations were part of a long-standing plan. "I knew I was going to be a judge. I had it as a goal," she said, recalling how she even included it in her college sorority interviews. For her, pursuing a judgeship was not only career-driven but also about serving justice. "Sometimes I will not follow a precedent. I will simply say... this precedent is wrong," she said. "I am not an activist. I am a judge who serves the interest of justice." Her approach is guided by moral principles rather than strict adherence to precedent

Nikki had never been prompted to run for legislative office, largely due to the political processes involved. Though judicial campaigns require similar efforts, her primary motivation was serving justice, and she later had to learn how to appeal politically.

A defining feature of her journey was strong community engagement. Having clerked, worked as a public defender, and lived locally, she emphasized the importance of knowing and engaging the people she serves. Her campaign success, ultimately by five votes, demonstrated the value of grassroots involvement.

She also discussed community tensions regarding the justice system, balancing expectations of firm policing with concerns about over-policing and systemic inequalities. "My presence makes it easier for many people to at least open that line of communication," she said, highlighting her role in fostering dialogue.

Nikki contrasted her approach with peers, noting that judicial culture often prioritizes institutional preservation over public service. "Our conversations... are always about legislation...our economic interest," she observed. Many judges seem more concerned with

pension protections, workload avoidance, or shielding their records from scrutiny than with public service. When institutional culture rewards self-preservation over service, it can erode public confidence, particularly in marginalized communities already skeptical of the legal system. Nikki's emphasis on transparency, accessibility, and civic education represents a different model of judicial leadership.

Initially self-financing her campaigns to avoid conflicts of interest, Nikki later reconsidered, acknowledging the financial strain and the possibility of fundraising with integrity. Her reflections demonstrate the additional burdens faced by underrepresented candidates lacking traditional support networks.

Nikki's story illustrates that for many women of color, pursuing judicial office is driven not just by ambition but by moral clarity, community accountability, and a desire to challenge structural inequities. Her narrative suggests that the bench can serve as a platform for relational justice and transformative leadership, challenging dominant frameworks of candidate motivation that often overlook racialized and gendered pathways to power.

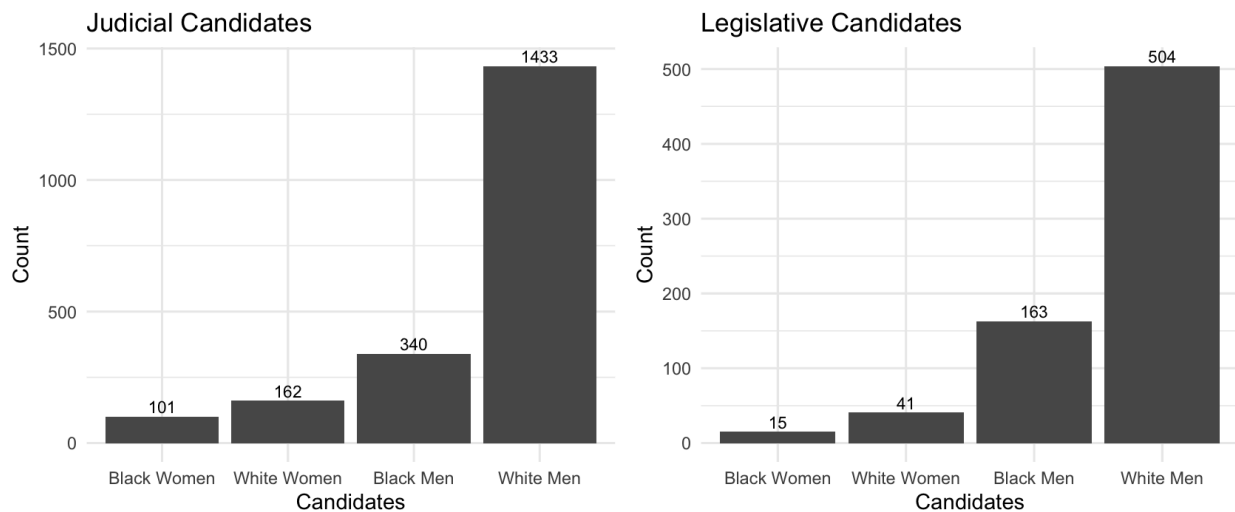
DESCRIPTIVE DATA AND METHODS

This study draws on quantitative data from the Louisiana Secretary of State's official candidate database, covering state and local elections from 1982 to 2025. Each entry includes parish, political party, race, and gender. The legislative dataset includes office such as governor, secretary of state, state representative, mayor, councilmember, alderperson, and commissioner. The judicial dataset features candidates for roles such as state judge, city prosecutor, district attorney, and attorney general; all candidates in this dataset have law degrees. In total, the judicial records document 2,121 candidates, while the legislative dataset contains 831.

Figure 1 compares the total number of candidates by race and gender (Black Women, White Women, Black Men, White Men) across 30 years for both judicial and legislative elections. This provides a baseline understanding of the proportional representation. Figure 2 presents a time-series analysis (1985-2020/2025) of women candidates, showing both the proportion of women (Total, White, Black) and raw counts by year. Proportions are displayed as three lines: dark gray representing Black women, light gray representing white women, and dotted representing total women. Counts are shown with two bars per year: dark gray for Black women and a light gray bar for white women, allowing examination of trends and fluctuations in women's representation by race over time.

DESCRIPTIVE RESULTS

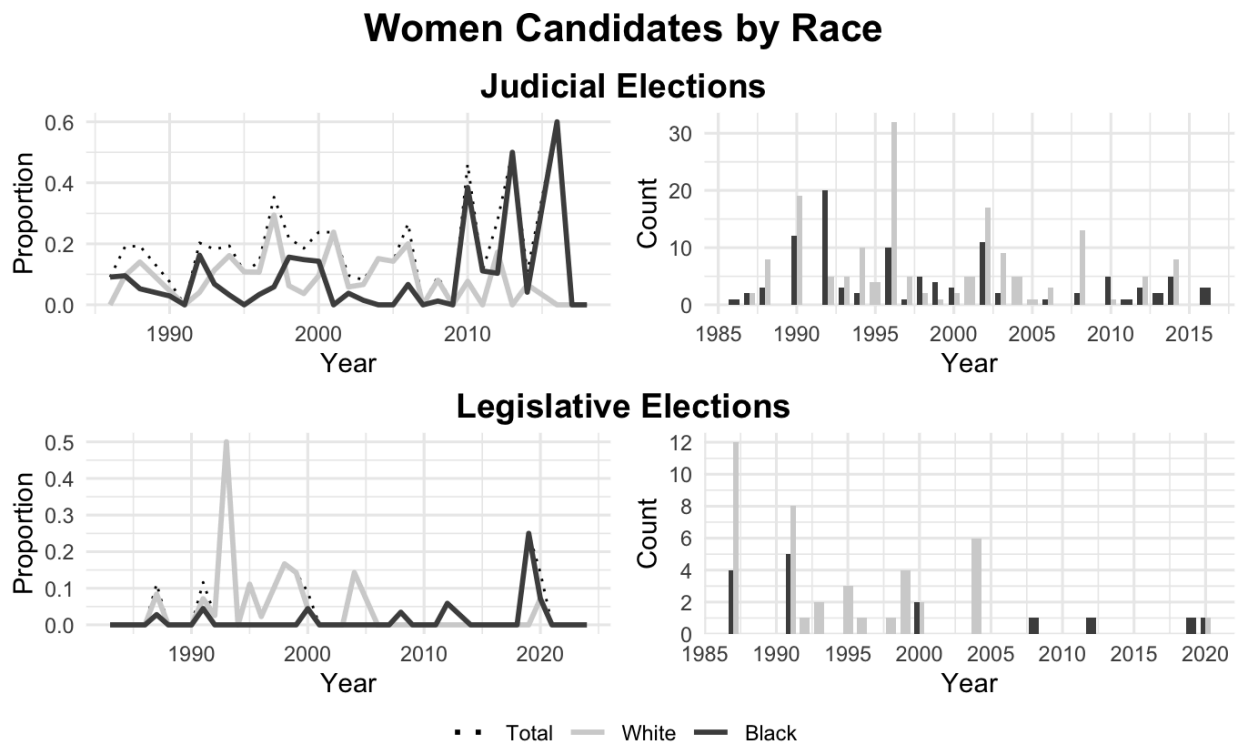
Overall Race and Gender Distribution



Among judicial candidates, white men dominate with 1433 candidates, followed by Black men at 340. White women account for 162, while Black women are the least represented at 101 candidates. This hierarchy reflects entrenched power structures favoring historically dominant groups (Fox & Lawless, 2004, 2005), with low numbers for women of color reflecting

the lower nascent political ambition identified among historically excluded groups (Fox & Lawless, 2005).

Legislative candidacies show a similar pattern but with lower overall numbers: white men lead with 504 candidates, Black men with 163, white women with 41, and Black women with only 15. These figures suggest even greater barriers for women and racial minorities in legislative elections, consistent with the man's world perception of politics (Elder, 2004).



The proportion of women candidates in judicial elections fluctuates, peaking around 1990, 2000, 2010, and notably in 2015. Black women follow the same trend at lower levels, showing increases around 2010-2015, while white women contribute to the overall pattern. These fluctuations might be influenced by factors such as the changing visibility of female role models, including appointments like Joan Armstrong (1974) and Bernette Joshua Johnson (2013), or shifts in perceptions of judicial power (Elder, 2004; Schneider et al., 2016).

Raw counts reinforce these trends. Black women candidates occasionally reach levels comparable to white women (e.g., 1990, 2015), though absolute numbers remain modest, with peaks around 10-12 in some years. This growth aligns with findings that women of color often require “longer and more robust resumes” and accumulate diverse professional experiences to attain judicial office (Moyer, Harris, & Solberg, 2022), suggesting higher barriers to entry and reflecting intersectional motivations of political participation (Brown, 2014).

In contrast, women’s representation in legislative elections remains low. Slight increases occur in certain years (e.g., 1990, 2020), sometimes showing Black women surpassing white women, which is consistent with Silva and Skulley’s (2019) finding that women’s decisions to run are context-dependent. The introduction of legislative term limits in 1996, creating more open seats, might contribute to these fluctuations by reducing incumbency advantages.

Raw counts highlight both racial and gender disparities: Black women rarely exceed 4-6 candidates annually, and white women remain similarly low. This stark difference between judicial and legislative elections suggests higher barriers or lower ambition for women, especially women of color, in legislative races. Factors include gendered perceptions of political power (Schneider et al., 2016) and stereotypes assigning mixed masculine and feminine traits to women of color, which may affect electability (Gonzalez & Bauer, 2022).

DISCUSSION

This study set out to explore the disproportionate representation of women of color in judicial office versus legislative office in Louisiana. The findings, both qualitative and quantitative, confirm a persistent radicalized gender gap in political candidacy while revealing the unique motivations that draw women of color to the judiciary.

Descriptive analysis reveals that while women of color, particularly Black women, remain underrepresented across all elected offices, their presence is relatively higher in judicial elections. Peaks around 2015 coincide with national discourse around justice reform and the visibility of Black women in public service, suggesting that judicial office can be a more accessible avenue under specific socio-political conditions.

Qualitative insights from the interview with “Nikki” illustrate that this trend is not only about access but also identity and values. Nikki’s path to the bench was driven by a desire to serve her community, uphold justice, and model ethical leadership. Unlike legislative offices, often perceived as inherently partisan and conflict-laden, judicial roles offers a platform for moral clarity, relational justice, and community engagement. Her emphasis on service over self-preservation contrasts with broader institutional norms, highlighting a tension between personal and systemic motivations.

This tension aligns with literature on political ambition. Traditional models focused on rational self-interest and career advancement fail to fully capture the experiences of women of color. As Frederick (2013) and Brown (2014) argue, women of color navigate ambition through justice, relational duty, and resistance to exclusion. Judicial roles, framed as opportunities for systemic intervention and representation, align more closely with these motivations than legislative roles.

Additionally, the judicial path may seem more navigable due to standardized qualifications, appointment structures, and visible role models in the legal field. Williams (2008) notes that women often feel more qualified to serve on the bench because of clear eligibility. In contrast, legislative office requires engagement in party politics, donor networks, and public

campaigning, all of which are spaces where women of color face exclusion or heightened scrutiny (Fox & Lawless, 2004; Moyer et al., 2022).

Stereotypes also play a role in shaping self-perceptions. Gonzalez and Bauer (2022) highlight how the dual stereotype of women of color as both strong and nurturing can be a burden or an asset. In judicial contexts, strength, impartiality, and community orientation enhance perceived, whereas legislative roles demand assertiveness and political maneuvering, traits that can be negatively perceived when expressed by women of color.

Pursuing judicial office is not merely a function of structural opportunity but a deeply personal act of identity affirmation, communal responsibility, and moral realization. This finding challenges the dominant race-neutral frameworks of political ambition and suggests that new models must be intersectional, relational, and justice-oriented to fully capture the aspirations of women of color in public office.

CONCLUSION

This study sheds light on an underexplored phenomenon: the relatively higher political ambition of women of color for judicial office compared to legislative office. Despite systemic barriers, women of color pursue judgeships using deep community ties, professional resilience, and a transformative vision of justice. Their journeys emphasize resistance, representation, and relational leadership rather than traditional political power.

This disproportionate ambition for judicial roles also signals a missed opportunity in legislative politics, where women of color remain critically underrepresented. As this research illustrates, supporting women of color in political office requires more than expanding access. It

demands reshaping institutional cultures, dismantling stereotypes, and reframing public service to honor diverse motivations and experiences.

Future research should extend beyond Louisiana and continue integrating intersectional, qualitative, and narrative approaches to understand how women of color navigate candidacy across political arenas, moving toward a truly representative and inclusive political landscape.

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