

Study examines why girls lose interest in political ambition

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Research by Tulane political science professors J. Celeste Lay and Mirya Holman shows that as they get older, girls lose political ambition because they perceive political leaders to be men. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

Research by a pair of Tulane School of Liberal Arts professors shows that there is a disconnect between the way children, especially girls, look at political leaders. While careers in politics are in theory open to men or women, girls seem to think the job description is more fitting for men.

In their study, political science professors J. Celeste Lay and Mirya Holman asked children to draw a political leader — and often, the drawings depicted men. This perception could be the result of gendered political socialization, a tendency to think that political ambition may somehow conflict with gender roles. This early thinking may limit girls' political ambition and interest later in life.

Holman and Lay spoke with Tulane's [On Good Authority podcast](#) about the study. Despite parental messages that they can be anything they want to be, kids seem to be soaking up messages to the contrary.

"They don't just learn from us," Lay said. "They learn from their schools, their friends, television, the internet, and all sorts of things. ... We may be giving them these positive messages, and they may be hearing that from teachers at school. But that's not what they're seeing, particularly when it comes to politics."

"We also noticed a lot in our study that kids are paying attention when we think that they're maybe not paying attention," Holman said. "Kids have really distinct ideas about who belongs in politics and who doesn't belong, and who's a good person and who's not a good person. And that maybe is from adult conversations that they're overhearing, or watching the nightly news, or reading books in the library. But they're taking up information from lots of different sources."

The children who participated in the study are ages 6 to 12. Holman and Lay found that while boys in general drew male political leaders, the youngest girls were more likely to draw a female leader. But girls in middle school begin to drop off — they are less likely to picture a political leader of their same gender.

Holman and Lay also looked at children and career ambitions; boys drew more toward careers that are associated with traits such as assertiveness, while girls seemed to prefer careers where compassion and caring are elements.

Since the researchers hypothesize that career ambitions strengthen as children age, girls are less likely to act on political ambition when they grow up. They may feel unnecessarily bound by what society "expects" of them.

"It's not just that women lose out, it's also that men lose out," Holman said, "that neither gender is able to fully experience the human existence because we're confined by these gender roles."

To listen to the full podcast, click below.