

# Differently Disadvantaged: The Importance of Intersectional Nuance in Candidate Studies

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## Abstract

As the literature on disadvantaged candidates grows, the field of political science is at risk of leaving certain kinds of candidates behind. Many studies which focus on disadvantaged candidates fail to place intersectionality at the forefront of their analyses, and as such, fail to consider the experiences of certain kinds of candidates. Without intersectional considerations, those candidates which are *least* disadvantaged tend to be focused on the *most*, while the experiences of candidates who are disadvantaged as a result of multiple overlapping identities are minimized. Unless we acknowledge that candidates from different demographics are disadvantaged in different ways, we will continue to erase the experiences of many types of candidate.

The broad claims which dominate the literature on disadvantaged candidates are that the primary obstacle faced by women is the ambition gap, and that women can fundraise as successfully as men. Based on my research, the experiences of candidates from different disadvantaged groups are distinct, both from each other and from the default straight, white, male candidate. White women tend to fundraise successfully but face a massive ambition gap, with the exception of Republican White women, who struggle to fundraise. Black women, on the other hand, face a much smaller ambition gap than White women do. Black and Hispanic women struggle to fundraise. These findings suggest that failing to include nuanced intersectional studies in our analyses of disadvantaged candidates privilege the experiences of progressive White women above all else.

## Hypotheses

- The gender gap in ambition should persist across all racial demographics.
- The gender gap in ambition should vary in magnitude between different racial groups.
- Black people overall should be less politically ambitious than White people.
- Black candidates should lose at substantially higher rates than White candidates.
- Black women should win at a higher rate than Black men do.
- Queer people should demonstrate extremely depressed political ambition.
- Female candidates should be able to raise as much money as male candidates.
- People of color overall, especially women of color, should struggle to raise money as compared to White people.
- Democratic female candidates should be able to raise more money than Republican female candidates.
- A gender affinity effect in donors should exist, such that female candidates receive more donations from female donors than male candidates do.
- Queer candidates should be able to fundraise as successfully as non-queer candidates.

## Data Collection & Results

In order to test these hypotheses, I looked at federal-level candidate data. I collected data on ambition and fundraising for all the candidates running in a Congressional primary in the 2014, 2016, and 2018 election cycles.

For quantified measures of ambition, it's most feasible to measure *expressive* ambition. This means that I'm concerned with candidates who have made the decision to run and taken steps to carry out that decision. While choosing to measure expressive ambition does set a relatively high bar, since it requires more than a simple expression of interest, it is also the mark of a serious candidate.

My measure of ambition is binary: if a candidate appears on the ballot for a Congressional primary in any of the abovementioned election cycles, they are ambitious. If not, they are not. While collecting data on ambition, I also collected demographic information on every candidate – namely, their sex, race, and sexuality. These data were provided by Ballotpedia.org, non-partisan non-profit institution dedicated to archiving information on elections.

Since one of the key focuses in this study is the gender ambition gap, I devised a metric to quantify it. By creating a fraction with the number of women running in any given demographic over the number of men running in that same demographic, I create a decimal between 0 and 1; the closer to 1 the result is, the smaller the ambition gap is, since the numerator and denominator are the same size. The closer to 0 the result is, the larger the gap between men and women is – there are always more men than women running, so a smaller number always represents a worse outcome for women.

Ambition Gap Data: 2014, by race

Race:	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian
Total Numbers:	205/1198	41/108	24/60	8/14
Ratio:	0.171	0.380	0.40	0.571

Ambition Gap Data: 2016, by race

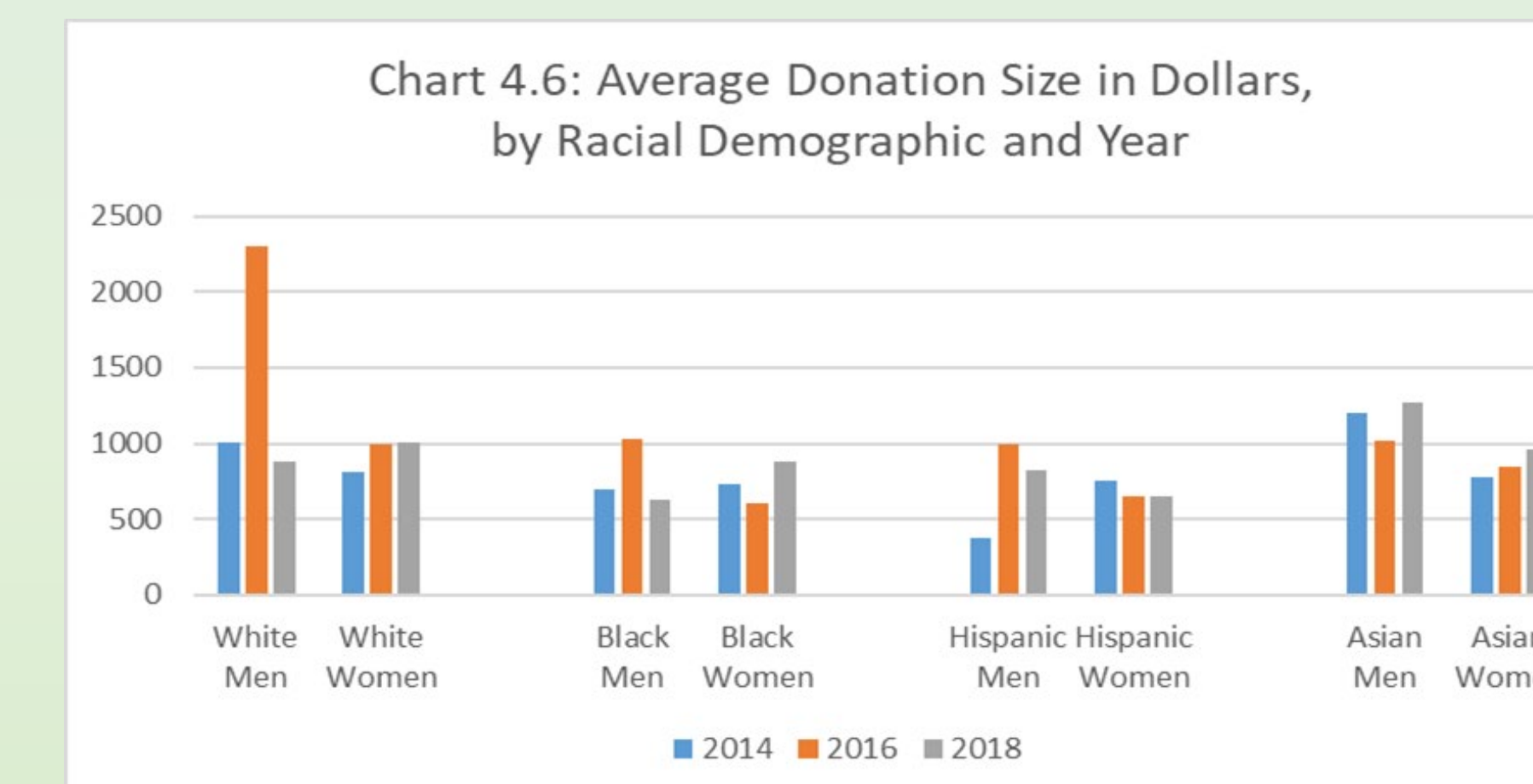
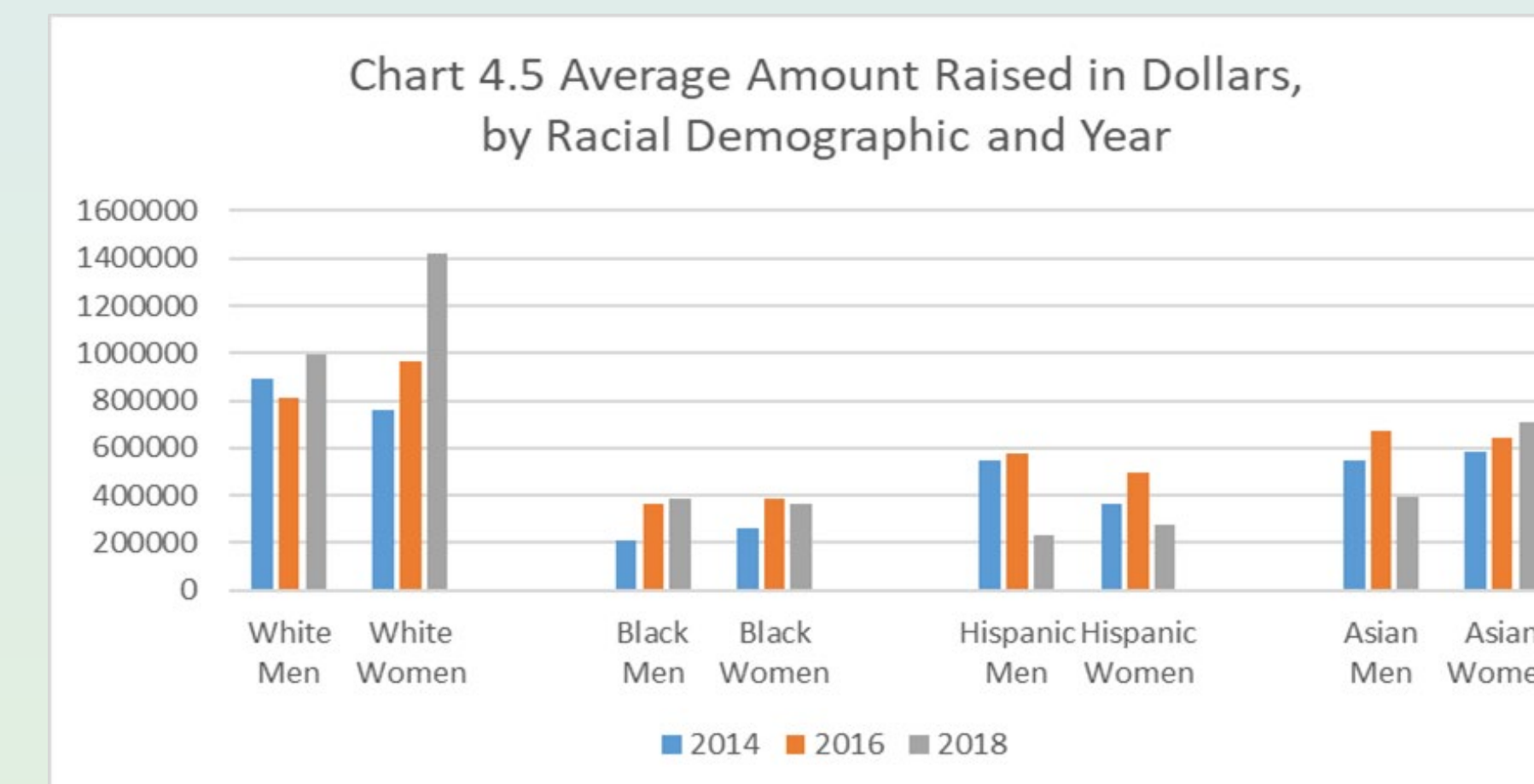
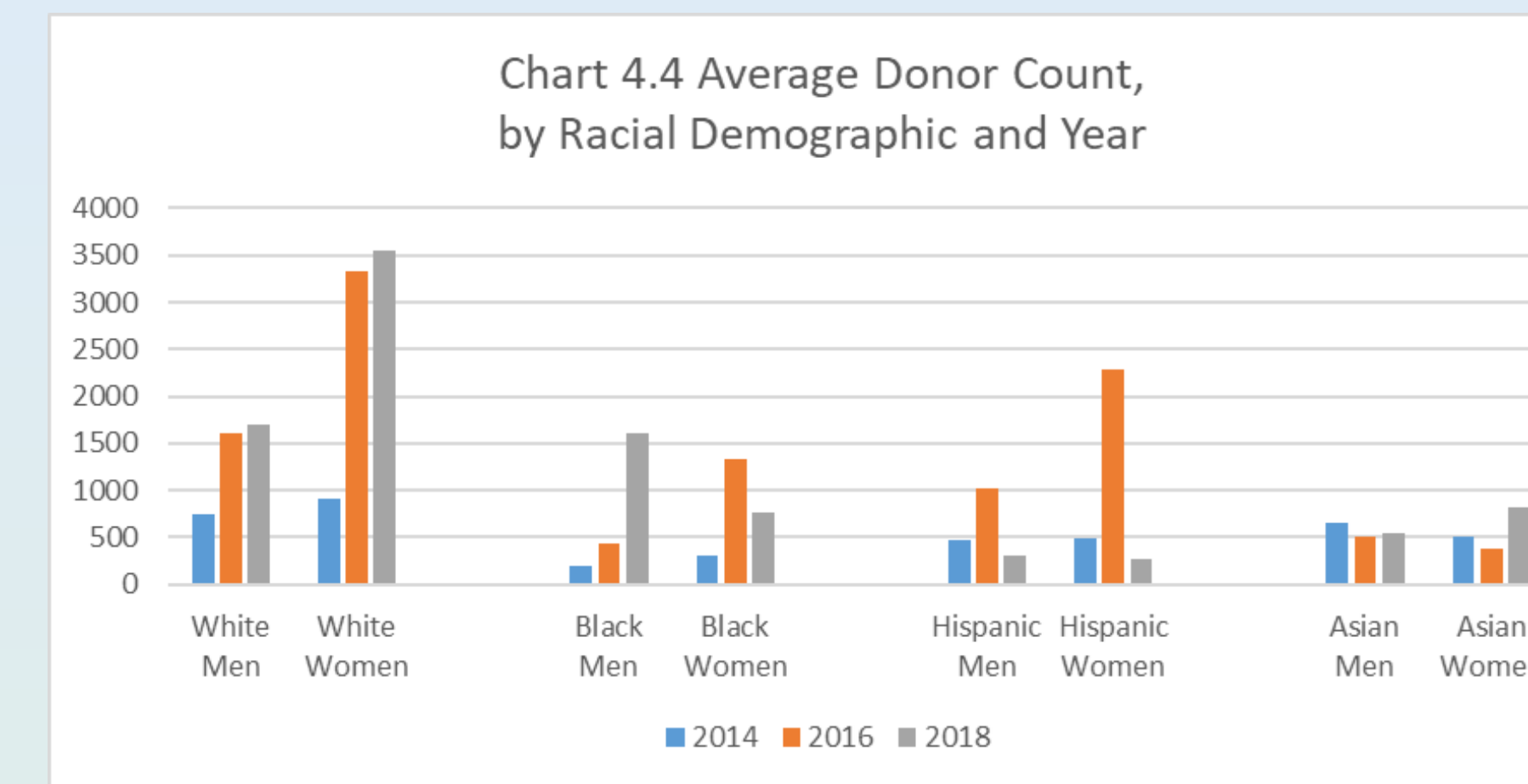
Race:	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian
Total Numbers:	221/1318	61/132	34/82	11/18
Ratio:	0.168	0.462	0.415	0.611

Ambition Gap Data: 2018, by race

Race:	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian
Total Numbers:	361/1445	83/135	51/87	16/21
Ratio:	0.250	0.615	0.586	0.762

I collected three different kinds of fundraising data: the total amount raised per candidate, the average donation size per candidate, and the average number of donations – not unique donors – per candidate. Of these three metrics, the total amount raised per candidate is arguably the most important, since that number is what ultimately determines whether a candidate can stay in the race, but the other two metrics are interesting for understanding the different ways that different types of candidate fundraise.

Information on fundraising comes courtesy of OpenSecrets.org and their Bulk Data project. I was able to download massive .csv files that included data on all donations made to all candidates in the 14, 16, and 18 election cycles. Importantly, this includes donations made as early as three years before the final year of each cycle. The data appear below separated by race and gender.



## Discussion

Based on the data I've collected, the overgeneralized claims made by the literature are inaccurate. It is believed that women can fundraise as well as men, and that therefore fundraising is not a problem for women; rather, the main problem faced by women in running for office is the ambition gap, which is extremely large.

In fact, women can only fundraise as well as the men in their racial demographic. There are large gaps in fundraising ability between the different racial demographics, with the largest being between White and Black candidates; White candidates consistently raise far more money than candidates of any other demographic. However, candidates of different genders within the racial demographics raise roughly the same amount of money.

By this logic, it is *technically* true that women can fundraise as well as men – as long as we take race into account. However, the blanket claim that women can fundraise as well as men is misleading, as it implies that a Black women can fundraise as well as a White woman, which is evidently untrue. As such, the claim that women do not suffer from a fundraising problem minimizes the experiences of women of color, especially Black and Hispanic women.

In terms of ambition, the gender ambition gap varies wildly in size between the different racial demographics. However, it is consistently the largest by far among White women. As such, the outsized focus on the ambition problem in women privileges the experiences of White women over those of women of color.

## Conclusion & Future Research

Evidently, the problems faced by differently disadvantaged candidates are distinct. The struggles a White woman faces are not the same as the struggles a person of color faces, and the same goes for women of color. By making overgeneralizations and treating all non-straight-white-male candidates as the same by virtue of their atypicality, the field tends to privilege the problems faced by the *least disadvantaged* candidates, namely straight White women. If we want to make real changes in the ability of disadvantaged groups to successfully run for office, we need to be careful to include intersectional nuance in our studies.

Future researchers who wish to further investigate these topics would do well to study candidates at local- and state-level offices rather than federal offices. Much of the literature indicates that queer candidates and candidates of color run at higher volumes for lower level offices, and with larger sample sizes, future researchers may be able to draw conclusions which escaped me. For example, my research and data collection included queer candidates, but I found data for so few of them that I was unable to make any conclusions about their experiences.

Further, future researchers with more resources may be able to quantify recruitment. While the literature on candidate recruitment suggests that recruiters treat different demographics differently, possibly favoring certain demographics over others, I was unable to collect data on recruitment, since that is typically gathered through candidate interviews.