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Gender Bias in U.S. Elections

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Given women's political underrepresentation in the United States (currently, women hold only 19.4% of the seats in the U.S. Congress, only 24% of statewide executive seats, and only 25% of all state legislative seats), political science research has long focused on the potential for gender bias in U.S. elections. The historically groundbreaking candidacy of Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential election has only served to further ignite this research topic. The extant literature largely focuses on two primary sources of potential bias against female candidates: (i) institutional barriers, such as party selection, campaign contributions, and media coverage; and (ii) women's reluctance to run for office, perhaps in reaction to these institutional barriers.

A third factor potentially contributing to women's underrepresentation is voter bias against female candidates. However, this mechanism is underexplored relative to the first two. This is due in large part to the many difficulties in isolating the effect of candidate gender on vote choice using data from real-world elections. There are many factors potentially confounding the effect of a candidate's gender on vote choice. For example, the institutional barriers to entry for female candidates could potentially make women who run for office sufficiently 'different' from their male counterparts such that any observed differences in voteshare or probability of victory could be explained by these other candidate-level discrepancies (such as quality) instead of purely the fact that these candidates are women (Fulton, 2012; Pearson and McGhee, 2013). Nonetheless, while institutional barriers to entry and a reluctance among women to run for office have been shown to exist (Fox and Lawless, 2010; Kanthak and Woon, 2015; Sanbonmatsu, 2002b; Jenkins, 2007; Lawless and Pearson, 2008), the potential for voters to exhibit bias against women even when they do run for office is important and should not be overlooked.

Using experimental data, scholars have evaluated the various sources of potential gender bias among voters. These studies show that there is heterogeneity among voters in terms of their gender stereotypes, whether cues about candidate quality can overcome these stereotypes, and how these might affect vote choice (Sanbonmatsu, 2002a; Mo, 2015). While such

findings develop our understanding of the psychological origins of certain biases against female candidates, they leave us wondering: what explains this heterogeneity in gender stereotypes among the voting population? One potential explanation is that women exhibit an affinity for female candidates (Dolan, 2008). Another explanation is that there are differences in voter bias against female candidates according to party affiliation. In recent strides towards documenting the causal effect of candidate gender on probability of victory, it has been shown that being a woman reduces a candidate's chances of winning congressional seats (in cases where the primary was extremely close) *exclusively among Republican women* (Bucchianeri, Forthcoming). While differences in the institutional barriers to entry for women (such as campaign funding) may partially explain this partisan heterogeneity, differences in voters' willingness to vote for female candidates may also vary along party lines, which is something that recent observational studies on voter gender bias have not investigated (Hayes and Lawless, 2016).

The results suggest only slight affinity towards female candidates among women, and only in certain conditions. The results also suggest that there may be a slight partisan effect among men when it comes to voting for female candidates.

Descriptive statistics from a recent online survey experiment shed light on these potential sources of heterogeneity in voter willingness to vote for female candidates. I sourced subjects from Survey Sampling International.¹ Among other experimental tasks (the results of which are not reported here), subjects ranked their likelihood of voting for two hypothetical candidates, a man and a woman.² Since voters tend to take cues from candidate gender (McDermott, 1998; King and Matland, 2003), I hold the effect of partisanship constant by matching both the male and female candidates' party identification to the subject's self-reported partisanship in a pre-survey. In order to test voters' reactions to explicit policy information in such a setting, I randomly

assign subjects to one of three conditions. In the first condition, the in-group candidate (the male candidate among male subjects, and the female candidate among female subjects) matches the subject's pre-stated position on the death penalty (oppose or support)³ while the out-group candidate does not match the subject's position. In the second condition, this relationship was flipped such that the candidate with the shared gender was now incongruent with the voter's position on the death penalty, while the out-group candidate matched the voter's position. In the third condition, subjects were shown the same two male and female candidates, but this time both candidates matched the subject's pre-stated position on the death penalty.

Table 1 reports mean voter preferences for the female and male candidates, as well as cases in which subjects reported equal likelihoods of voting for both candidates. These mean preferences are broken down by subjects' gender and partisanship. First, mean preferences for the female candidate in Table 1 can help address whether women exhibit an affinity for female candidates. When the female candidate is congruent to their position on the death penalty (and the male candidate is incongruent — the first three columns), Democratic women are eighteen percentage points *less* likely to prefer the female candidate than their male Democratic counterparts, and there is an even wider spread (29 percentage points) between Republican women and men. However, very few voters (only 28 individuals out of 596, or 4.7%) in these four groups of gender-partisans actually prefers the policy-incongruent male candidate. In effect, the difference in preference for the female candidate along gender lines is accounted for by the fact that women are much more likely than men to rank the male and female candidates as equal in this condition. This pattern is in fact mirrored in the next condition in which the female candidate does not match the voters' policy position. In this condition where the female candidate is incongruent, men are now more likely to assign equal preference for both candidates (similar to women in the previous condition). This could be driven by social desirability bias in which some men and women do not want to seem to favor the shared-gender candidate, even when that candidate matches their policy preference.

¹The sample looks similar to CCES 2016 data on a host of covariates; results upon request.

²Candidates were presented as photographs of a man and woman described as two candidates for office. The photographs of the man and the woman were ranked as equally competent to each other by both men and women and by Republicans and Democrats in a pre-test (also run on respondents from Survey Sampling International).

³This policy was chosen based on pre-test results, which showed that there were no significant differences in the extent to which men and women, or Republicans and Democrats, supported or opposed the death penalty.

Table 1: Preferences for Female vs. Male Candidates

	Female Candidate <i>Congruent</i>			Female Candidate <i>Incongruent</i>			Both Candidates <i>Match</i>		
	Woman	Man	Equal	Woman	Man	Equal	Woman	Man	Equal
Republican Women	49%	5%	46%	4%	66%	30%	19%	4%	77%
<i>N</i>	71	8	66	6	99	45	13	3	52
Democrat Women	50%	3%	47%	5%	60%	35%	23%	3%	74%
<i>N</i>	78	4	73	8	92	54	15	2	49
Republican Men	78%	4%	18%	6%	51%	43%	7%	14%	79%
<i>N</i>	125	7	28	9	78	65	5	10	56
Democrat Men	68%	7%	25%	13%	37%	50%	14%	7%	79%
<i>N</i>	93	9	34	20	56	75	10	5	56

Note: Subjects were asked to report their likelihood of voting for both a female and male candidate using a 7 point scale ranging from 3 *Extremely likely* to -3 *Extremely Unlikely*, where 0 is *Neither likely nor unlikely*. Thus, the percentages reported above are based on (i) the subject reporting a higher probability of voting for the woman over the man; (ii) the subject reporting a higher probability of voting for the man over the woman; or (iii) the subject reporting equal probabilities of voting for both candidates. The policy issue that is mentioned for both candidates is whether they support or oppose the death penalty. Both candidates always match the subject's party ID.

When both candidates match the voters' policy position (the last three columns), there is some evidence of affinity for female candidates among women. In this condition, women are on average about 10.5 percentage points more likely than men to prefer the female candidate, twelve percentage points among Republicans and nine percentage points among Democrats (this partisan difference is statistically insignificant). This female affinity is only slightly attenuated in magnitude (significant at the 1% level) when subjects' positions on the death penalty, as well as the importance of the death penalty to them (also asked in the pre-survey), are held constant.⁴ When these individual-level voter controls are included, women are still nine percentage points more likely than men to prefer the female candidate in this condition where both candidates match the voters' policy positions.

The second hypothesis that these results can speak to is whether there is a difference in willingness to vote for female candidates among male partisans. Again, the last three columns, where both candidates match voters' policy positions, shed light here. In this condition, Democratic men are twice as likely to vote for the

female candidate than their Republican male counterparts. The magnitude of this effect is unchanged when the individual-level voter controls of death penalty position and importance are included, where Republicans are seven percentage points less likely to prefer the female candidate than their Democratic male counterparts (significant at the 10% level).

The findings presented here are descriptive statistics from a larger experiment, and thus should be interpreted as an exploration of the heterogeneity in the proclivity to vote for female candidates among men and women along partisan lines, when partisanship is held constant (such as a party primary) and policy congruence with the shared-gender candidate is manipulated. The results suggest only slight affinity towards female candidates among women, and only in certain conditions. The results also suggest that there may be a slight partisan effect among men when it comes to voting for female candidates. Taken together, these results suggest that it is worth further probing the issue of whether gender-bias exists not just at the institutional or candidate level, but also among voters. That is, voter gender-bias may contribute to women's underrepresentation

⁴Results are from an OLS regression using the same dependent variable from Table 1, including a dummy for whether the voter is male as the explanatory variable, as well as the mentioned controls for voter positions and importance placed on the death penalty policy.

in the U.S. government. This underrepresentation is important for several reasons. First, it has been shown that women who replace men in the same electoral district tend to then focus more on ‘women’s issues’ such as child care (Gerrity, Osborn and Mendez, 2007), suggesting that descriptive representation translates into substantive representation. And second, while there does not seem to be an effect at the presidential level (West, 2017), women in politics can lead to increased political participation and efficacy among women voters (Burns, Schlozman and Verba, 2001; Atkeson and Carrillo, 2007; Atkeson, 2003), and even spur political ambition among adolescent women (Campbell and Wolbrecht, 2006).

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Special Topic: Women and the Profession

Visions in Methodology (VIM): Origins and Evolution

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I. VIM Goals

The **Visions in Methodology (VIM)** initiative was designed to address the broad goal of supporting women who study political methodology. In addition to providing a forum to share scholarly work, VIM also serves to connect women in a field where they are underrepresented. VIM provides opportunities for scholarly progress, networking, and professional mentoring in research and teaching to support women in the political methodology community. The VIM conferences provide a forum for discussion on career-focused issues