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Journal of Women, Politics & Policy

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/wwap20

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To cite this article: Marie Courtemanche & Joanne Connor Green (2020) A Fall from Grace: Women, Scandals, and Perceptions of Politicians, Journal of Women, Politics & Policy, 41:2, 219-240, DOI: 10.1080/1554477X.2020.1723055

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/1554477X.2020.1723055

JOURNAL OF WOMEN, POLITICS & POLICY
2020, VOL. 41, NO. 2, 219–240
https://doi.org/10.1080/1554477X.2020.1723055

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A Fall from Grace: Women, Scandals, and Perceptions of Politicians

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ABSTRACT

While political scientists have researched explanations for the dearth of women in elected office for decades, no consistent account has emerged. We enter the discussion using an original experimental survey on an adult sample at the national level to examine whether gender stereotypes affect the evaluation of candidates running for office. We specifically look at situations where there is alleged wrongdoing to explore whether evaluations are asymmetrically applied to men and women. We find that voters treat candidates differently, exhibiting a general preference for women. When malfeasance is alleged, however, women suffer greater consequences for wrongdoing under certain conditions, potentially as a result of a "backlash" effect for violating gender norms.

KEYWORDS

political scandals; gender stereotypes; candidate evaluations

Introduction

Examining how voters evaluate politicians is important for understanding the low number of women in elected office in the United States. According to statistics compiled by the Center for American Women and Politics, the scarcity of women officeholders extends to all levels of office. In 2019, women hold approximately 24% of the seats in Congress, nine gubernatorial offices, and nearly 29% of state legislative seats (Center for American Women and Politics 2018). While some years have experienced greater surges in women elected to public office (for example, 1992 and 2018), the overall modest increase in the percentage of elected women has stimulated a good deal of research over the past 25 years. Even though some have argued that disadvantages disappear when structural barriers such as incumbency and district-level characteristics are taken into consideration (Dolan 2004; Smith and Fox 2001), the fact remains that women face unique challenges when running for office (Lawless and Pearson 2008; Palmer and Simon 2006), providing evidence that women may still encounter many disadvantages in

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Supplemental data for this article can be accessed on the publisher's website at https://doi.org/10.1080/1554477X.2020.1723055.

getting elected. Of particular interest for our inquiry is work on the prevalence and use of gender stereotypes when evaluating female politicians to provide an explanation for these representational disadvantages.

Even as scholars demonstrate their existence, controversy over the relevance of these stereotypes abounds. Moreover, some work suggests that gender stereotypes interact in complicated ways with those of the party to influence attitudes of female politicians, benefiting some and acting in ways to harm others (Bauer 2018; Cassese and Holman 2018; Schneider and Bos 2016). Given the importance of ascertaining explanations for representational differences and the inability of current research to provide definitive answers as to the influence of gender stereotypes, we conducted research with the intent of exploring the effect of gender on political evaluations. In particular, we examined what occurs when women behave in ways counter to expectations by investigating norm violations. Research suggests that individuals can be punished for engaging in behaviors that contradict expectations for the group to which they belong (Eagly and Karau 2002; Jussim, Coleman, and Lerch 1987; Rudman 1998); if individuals hold analogous assumptions about men and women, no differences between the two should emerge. If individuals believe different things about men and women, however, these divergent sentiments should manifest when men and women are both caught engaging in equally unscrupulous behavior. For example, because women are often viewed as being more honest (Alexander and Anderson 1993; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; Kahn 1992, 1994), placing them in situations that contravene this belief allows us to discern if stereotypes exist, as well as the potential consequences of these violations. To test this expectation, we conducted an Internet-based national experimental survey with an embedded news story about a politician running for office who had been caught in a scandal where gender and assorted types of wrongdoing were manipulated. We found that women do seem to be held to a different standard for engaging in wrongdoing compared to men. Specifically, evaluations of women politicians diminish more than those of men politicians when caught in a scandal. This is mitigated by the scandal type, with evaluations being affected more by economic scandals than sex scandals. The findings suggest that women are punished for violating norms of group behavior and that stereotypes inform the evaluation process. Because the experimental design preferences internal validity and was not able control for all potential important contextual factors, such as partisanship and time, future work should look to include these factors to improve questions concerning external validity.

This research is important for trying to possibly explain differences in representation through a better understanding of what happens when stereotypes are violated. While some research argues that institutional barriers to access best explain underrepresentation and that women win when they run (Dolan 2004; Lawless and Pearson 2008; Smith and Fox 2001), additional work points to the many ways in which women are held to higher standards

and disadvantaged when running for office (Barnes, Branton, and Cassese 2017; Bucchianeri 2018; Palmer and Simon 2006). Consequently, illuminating what underlies these disadvantages could help female politicians craft messages in electoral campaigns to most effectively navigate an already difficult political landscape. Indeed, this research provides insight into what could happen when two politicians of different genders are both accused of engaging in wrongdoing and the repercussions each would face for having done so. But are all types of scandals treated equally? Does the public hold malfeasance of a sexual nature to the same standard as that of economic wrongdoing? And are women treated differently from men? Anecdotally, it seems feasible that women politicians might be held to a higher bar when it comes to wrongdoing. For instance, Amy Koch resigned in 2011 as the first female majority leader in the Minnesota Senate after allegations emerged that she had a sexual relationship with a staff member, Michael Brodkorb, and did not seek reelection. California representative Laura Richardson and Flordia representative Corrine Brown faced similar fates for engaging in wrongdoing. Allentown mayor Ed Pawlowski, on the other hand, successfully weathered fraud charges to win reelection. Likewise, Mayors Michael Hancock and Ed Murray (from Denver and Seattle) endured sexual scandals to remain in office, even if temporarily. Certainly, not all men survive scandals, with Representatives Duncan Hunter (California), Chris Collins (New York), and Steve Stockman (Texas) as recent examples of individuals being forced out of public office for alleged wrongdoing. Women might be treated differently, though, for engaging in similar behaviors. The potential differential gendered impact of scandals may even go so far as to help explain the outcome of the 2016 presidential election. Both candidates had flawed pasts, but maybe Secretary Hillary Clinton was held to higher standards for her past wrongdoings than was Mr. Donald Trump, both because of the type of scandal and her gender. Given that they engaged in different types of wrongdoing, it is difficult to parse out the unique effects of gender from the type of scandal. Accordingly, research designs employing experimental surveys are useful for filling in these gaps. Since the political landscape continues to change, work such as ours is warranted to investigate the potential manner in which gender stereotypes are employed when evaluating elected officials.

Using gender stereotypes to inform evaluations about politicians

Given intricate information environments, people often use mental shortcuts or heuristics to help make sense of the world (Lupia and Mathew 1998). Individuals may evaluate political candidates and potential leaders through the lens of stereotypes, a type of heuristic, filtering information through implicit biases regarding leadership qualities and traits.[1] Scholars have long explored the usefulness of these stereotypes in trying to explain the dearth of

women leaders in office. In examining perceptions of gendered leadership, the field tends to focus on gender-trait and gender-belief stereotypes (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993). Gender-linked personality traits include presumptions about women being warm, gentle, kind, moral, ethical, and trustworthy, while men are seen as tough, assertive, aggressive, and decisive (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; see also Alexander and Anderson 1993; Dolan 2010; Eagly and Karau 2002; Fridkin and Kenney 2009a). Gender-belief stereotypes encompass differing views on men and women based on assumptions about political views (for example, that women are more liberal than men and better able to handle issues related to education, health care, and the family) (King and Matland 2003; Koch 2000, 2002).

However, controversy over the impact, and even the relevance, of gender stereotypes abounds as scholars debate their influence. Some research has found inimical effects of stereotypes for women politicians (Eagly and Karau 2002; Holman, Merolla, and Zechmeister 2011; Paul and Smith 2008). For instance, because women are not typically associated with being strong on security, individuals are less likely to support their candidacies for office when national security is threatened (Lawless 2004). Similarly, voters have expressed preferences for women to have more traditional backgrounds such as being married and having children, circumstances which might make holding political office challenging given unequal distributions of household and social duties (Teele, Kalla, and Rosenbluth 2018). In contrast, others have found that stereotypes can be advantageous in certain instances (Barnes and Beaulieu 2014; Kahn 1992, 1994; McDermott 1998; Sanbonmatsu and Dolan 2009), with women being preferred to men when issues like education dominate the national agenda (Lawless 2004). Additional research suggests that women politicians are a unique subclass of women, with common stereotypes, such as being more compassionate, not applying to them (Schneider and Bos 2013). Instead, female politicians have new stereotypes unique to them and neither benefit from the positive stereotypes of women nor are rewarded for possessing stereotypes associated with men (for example, being assertive). Other inquiries have minimized the influence of stereotypes, even suggesting that they are irrelevant (Brooks 2013; Craig and Rippere 2016; Dolan 2014a; Dolan and Lynch 2016, 2017; Fulton 2014). For instance, Bauer (2015a) found that negative stereotypes only harm women when they are activated during an election. When stereotypes are not triggered by campaign communications, however, they have no discernible impact. Similarly, it has been argued that as women have achieved greater representation and have proven themselves as capable leaders, the relevancy of stereotypes may have diminished considerably (see, for instance, Bauer 2015b; Brooks 2013; Dolan 2010; Fridkin and Kenney 2009b). In particular, Dolan (2014b) pushed researchers to rethink the importance of stereotypes, asserting that they may not impact actual political behavior as much as other factors like partisanship and concluding that the use of them is complex,

inconsistent, and contextual (see also Dolan and Lynch 2016, 2017). Other work has demonstrated that gender stereotypes interact in complicated ways with those of the party to influence attitudes of female politicians, benefiting some and acting in ways to harm others (Bauer 2018; Cassese and Holman 2018; Schneider and Bos 2016), with Republican women generally receiving fewer advantages (Dolan and Lynch 2013; Holman, Merolla, and Zechmeister 2011; Koch 2002; Sanbonmatsu and Dolan 2009).

The violation of gendered expectations

Our research delves in and extends the existing body of work into new areas by exploring the effect of gender stereotypes across multiple situations simultaneously. Specifically, we examine what happens when women act in ways that are inconsistent with normed expectations across a variety of circumstances. It is our contention that women will be evaluated harshly for exhibiting behaviors incongruent with existing stereotypes. This anticipation is derived from expectancy violation theory, which posits that individuals are punished for contravening stereotypes associated with their group (Eagly and Karau 2002; Jussim, Coleman, and Lerch 1987; Rudman 1998). Indeed, research across fields has found that individuals violating group expectations of behavior are oftentimes rebuked by others for their actions (Bowles and Gintis 2011; Burgoon 1992; Chen and Li 2009; McDermott, Schwartz, and Vallejo 2015). Applying this theoretical concept to the literature on gender stereotypes allows us to indirectly substantiate the existence of stereotypes as well as view what happens when they are violated. If individuals hold analogous assumptions about men and women, no differences between the two should emerge when both are caught engaging in similar negative actions. However, if individuals hold different beliefs about men and women, even if subconsciously, these divergent sentiments should manifest when they are both caught in wrong behavior.

Agreement does not exist as to the consequences of women acting counter to stereotypes. Several scholars have demonstrated that those who do behave in ways inconsistent with expectations receive pushback, while others have found little to no evidence of an apparent "backlash" (Bauer 2017; Brooks 2011, 2013; Schneider 2014). For example, women are not punished more than men for expressing anger, an emotion typically associated with men (Brooks 2011), nor are they penalized for going on the attack after their opponent has done so within an election cycle (Craig and Rippere 2016; Krupnikov and Bauer 2014). Similarly, Smith, Powers, and Suarez (2005) observed that women are not treated more harshly than men for scandals even if politicians are evaluated more harshly for stereotypically masculine scandals (abuses of power) than stereotypically feminine scandals (hiring an undocumented domestic laborer or sexual misconduct with a superior).

Not all have found that acting in ways diverging from expectations go unnoticed or unpunished. Studies have shown that women are judged severely when their actions are incongruent with expectations about their societal roles, such as engaging in self-promotion, a behavior that pushes against the gendered norm of modesty (Eagly and Karau 2002; Rudman 1998; Rudman and Fairchild 2004). Along the same vein, Okimoto and Brescoll (2010) observed that women candidates are negatively evaluated for not conforming to gender stereotypes when they hold power-seeking intentions. Applying this conceptual framework to scandals, Bhatti, Hansen, and Olsen (2013) found that experimental participants treated male politicians more harshly for engaging in adultery than female politicians (see Carlson, Ganiel, and Hyde 2000 for similar findings).

It is also possible that gender stereotypes could benefit women embroiled in alleged malfeasance, as these stereotypes might make certain claims less plausible or serve to mitigate allegations. People are often disposed to view information selectively in a way that comports with their existing beliefs to achieve congruency. This motivated reasoning can be a powerful mechanism through which people evaluate scandals (see Fischle 2000). Thus, information about women who violate norms might be discounted or disregarded entirely, depending on the strength of the belief. Along these lines, perhaps as a result of motivated reasoning, survey respondents were significantly less likely to believe that fraud occurred in a scenario described for women than for men (Barnes and Beaulieu 2014), with the researchers hypothesizing that stereotypes of women being more honest and ethical may have mitigated the allegations against them (see also Kahn 1994).

The research on the potential asymmetrical impact of alleged abuses for men and women is decidedly mixed, largely because the research on the prevalence of gender stereotypes is inconclusive. Our changing social environment may explain some of the contradictory findings in the literature as norms and expectations evolve; mixed methodologies could also explain some of the inconsistencies. We believe that the environment has not sufficiently changed across the country and hypothesize that women are punished more severely than men for alleged malfeasance as they suffer a pushback when they violate gender norms. As a result, women are penalized in what Rudman (1998) called a "backlash effect" for violating gender-based stereotypes.

As such, we hypothesize that:

> *Female political candidates will be judged more harshly for engaging in behaviors that violate expectations for their group than their male counterparts.*

Using scandals to understand the impact of gendered norm violations

To understand the consequences of norm violations for female politicians, we employed the use of scandals as a means of assessment. Scandals are a good tool for uncovering gendered considerations often embedded in heuristics.

Because scandals involve intrusions on moral behavior and can impact trustworthiness, individuals caught in one should experience damage to evaluations of character. If women are automatically considered more trustworthy then men, they should experience greater pushback when they are accused of violating these norms. There is indeed evidence to suggest that women are perceived as having more integrity than men. When asked to do character assessments, individuals often rate women as being more honest than men (Alexander and Anderson 1993; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; Kahn 1994). Extending these findings beyond perceptions about the individual to the institutional, scholars have demonstrated that governments with larger proportions of women are often thought to have less corruption than those with fewer women (Dollar, Fisman, and Gatti 2001; Swamy et al. 2001). More recent scholarship suggests that this relationship is conditional on institutional environment, and that women respond to threats of potential accountability for their actions perhaps differently than men (Barnes and Beaulieu 2019; Esarey and Schwindt-Bayer 2018). Nevertheless, because women are often viewed as being more trustworthy, placing them in situations that contravenes this belief allows us to discern the existence of stereotypes as well as the potential consequence of norm violations.

Research has overwhelmingly suggested that engaging in wrongdoing has damaging consequences for a political career. Scandals negatively affect what people think of politicians, regarding evaluations of character and job performance (Doherty, Dowling, and Miller 2014; McDermott, Schwartz, and Vallejo 2015), and diminish electoral success (Basinger 2013; Praino, Stockemer, and Moscardelli 2013). Scandals also hurt a politician's ability to raise money over the course of the scandal (Rottinghaus 2014), in addition to weakening their capacity to obtain endorsements (Cohen et al. 2008). These factors could potentially explain why some who have been caught in a scandal elect to retire early rather than face the onerous task of fighting to retain their seat (Basinger 2013; Praino, Stockemer, and Moscardelli 2013).

While nearly all scandals impact individuals negatively, repercussions seem to vary in intensity depending on conditioning factors. Scandal type, for instance, seems to matter in determining the severity of political assessments. Experimental research exploring the differential impacts of financial and sexual wrongdoing has found the former to be more damaging than the latter (Carlson, Ganiel, and Hyde 2000; Doherty, Dowling, and Miller 2014; Funk 1996). When examining scandals involving corruption, sex, finances, or politics from 1972 to 2012, Basinger (2013) discovered that while all were viewed negatively by voters, financial scandals were the most troublesome for incumbents running for reelection. Research by Doherty, Dowling, and Miller (2014) confirmed these findings with the authors speculating that moral scandals could be viewed as requiring less foresight and planning while financial scandals indicate more "sustained criminal behavior" (358).

Additional factors appear to also moderate the effect of scandal type. Specifically, race has been shown to play a role in conditioning the influence of wrongdoing, with African American candidates being harmed more by sex scandals than white candidates (Berinsky et al. 2011). These findings point tentatively to individuals holding various groups of people accountable differentially, based on violations of expected group behavior. Consequently, if women are considered more trustworthy, engaging in behaviors that undermine this trust should be more damaging to evaluations of them. Damage to character assessments, however, might be mitigated by scandal type. For instance, individuals could find news reports of a woman politician engaging in a sex scandal less credible given stereotypes of purity, thus diminishing the impact of wrongdoing. Additionally, strong prior assumptions might work to contravene new information that pushes against these prior beliefs. Consequently, examining the relationship between sex and allegations of malfeasance should be useful in illuminating the continued impact, if any, of long-established gender stereotypes and the consequences of gendered norm violations.

Research design and methodological framework

To test the effects of wrongdoing and gender on candidate support, we created an original experimental survey that was distributed via the Internet to a national sample of adults. This type of design allows for making claims about causation, rather than just correlation. In a controlled setting, variation in question responses may be safely attributed to be the effect of the treatment. We contracted SSI, a private survey sampling company specializing in the recruitment of subjects, to distribute the questionnaire to a national sample of adults. SSI employs diverse sources of recruitment and incentivization as a means of moderating participation bias and has been used by scholars whose work has been published in top outlets (see Bullock 2011; Kam 2012). The survey was conducted online using the Qualtrics platform, with participants receiving a unique link from SSI soliciting their involvement. Only individuals over 18 years of age were eligible to participate.[2] By using a national sample of adults, this study mitigates against some of the shortcomings of using "college sophomores" for experimental surveys (Sears 1986). Moreover, the random assignment of participants to treatments allowed us to overcome the self-selection and control problems common to nonexperimental research (Chong and Druckman 2007). The research design also permitted us to explore the influence of gender cues by mitigating against response bias. This is especially important as survey participants might disguise their true beliefs about female politicians due to norms about what is socially desirable (Krupnikov, Piston, and Bauer 2016; Mo 2015; Streb et al. 2008). Experimental surveys moderate this bias as the intent of the research is hidden from participants in a way not feasible for regular surveys where respondents are asked to make explicit gender-based comparisons about

candidates. Slightly more than half of the 3,063 participants completed the survey fully with many being dropped due to manipulation checks (see below for greater detail). Of the roughly more than 1,800 individuals who made it past the manipulation check, 1,024 (55%) were women and 825 were men (45%). As a result, women appeared in slightly larger numbers than they do in the general population. Other demographic characteristics (such as race/ethnicity and education) largely mirrored the general population.

The experiment followed a completely randomized design, with two primary treatments of interest for this study: the type of wrongdoing engaged in by the politician (sexual malfeasance versus economic malfeasance) and the sex of the politician (male versus female).[3] In additional to manipulating type of wrongdoing, the location of the wrongdoing (in the workplace versus at home) was also varied as was the ambition level of the politician. Thus, the basic experiment design was a 2 (Gender of candidate: female politician or male politician) × 2 (Scandal type: economic versus sexual) × 2 (Location of scandal: work or home) × 2 (Ambition level: ambition mentioned or no mention of ambition). For this article, these last treatments were collapsed into their broader categories (sexual scandal versus economic scandal) to maintain focus.[4] Participants were randomly assigned to either a treatment group or a control group, but began the experimental survey by answering basic demographic questions to foster some level of comfort as a means of eliciting candid responses. After answering these items, subjects were given their respective news story, all with the same basic structure describing a political candidate who was running for office but with varying details depending on their assignment. For example, each story began by stating that Mayor Laura (or Luke) Williams was running for reelective office in a small city in southeastern Pennsylvania. It went on to provide a brief history of their accomplishments in office, while including a particular challenge facing their current bid. These challenges involved having recently been caught in a sexual or economic scandal. Individuals received just one news frame. As a control, the last treatment did not reference any type of scandal, but did mention gender. The party identity of the candidate was never divulged to focus the analysis on the gendered-interpretation of personal wrongdoing without introducing another variable and reducing power. The decision to exclude this potentially important variable is discussed in greater depth in the conclusion. Future experimental research manipulating partisan identification, in addition to gender and scandal, could provide even greater insight into the differential treatment of women.

Given the importance of having read the news story in being able to capture treatment effects, two quality checks were conducted to ensure the receipt of valid and meaningful responses. First, to affirm that the subjects did in fact read what they were asked, a question about the news story was included directly after

the frame. Those who were unable to answer the question correctly were thanked for having participated and directed to the end of the survey, dropping 941 people. Because some may not have read the story but simply guessed the response to the comprehension question correctly, all individuals who took less than 20 seconds to read the story were dropped from the analysis. This procedure expunged 273 additional people. While this technique likely excluded individuals who might have shared characteristics (for example, lack of interest), including participants who did not read the frame is hard to justify. Moreover, studies have shown that those with little knowledge or interest in politics are generally more susceptible to framing effects (Druckman 2004; Slothuus and de Vreese 2010), making our estimates conservative by nature. Indeed, when we ran the analysis including those who were eliminated for not having taken enough time to read the frame, the results varied only marginally, in many instances increasing in strength (contact authors for findings).

After successfully answering the comprehension question, individuals were prompted to express their views on a battery of questions about the candidate of which they had just read. These included questions related to the general willingness to support the political candidate (***vote***), as well as general judgments of character like trustworthiness (***trust***), fitness (***competence***), and strength as a leader (***strength***).[5] For the purposes of this study, we explored each of these separately, to discern their unique effect. One might think a politician lacks trustworthiness, for instance, but still be willing to vote for him or her. In general, we expect that scandals will have a negative impact on all types of evaluations. All questions were recoded 0–1 to facilitate comparisons. Low values on each of these measures indicate low levels of support or evaluation with high values indicating the opposite. People were asked a variety of additional questions for control purposes (largely demographic questions as well as general political questions).

Analysis

To test our hypothesis that women are evaluated more harshly than men for alleged improprieties, we first compared the general level of support for each sex. When combining all frames (controls and treatments) based on gender to discern their individual effect, individuals appeared more likely to support a candidate who was female, regardless of whether they were presented with flaws (see Table 1). These differences were statistically significant across each of the dependent variables. For instance, respondents were much more likely to show interest in voting for female candidates compared to male candidates ($F(1, 1848) = 9.60$, $p < 0.05$).[6] Similarly, survey participants evidenced greater feelings of trust toward Mayor Laura Williams than toward Mayor James Williams ($F(1, 1840) = 10.54$, $p < 0.05$). The same held for other assessments

Table 1. Average Assessments of Candidates by Gender.

	Vote	Trust	Competence	Strength
Female candidate, all conditions	0.408 (n = 927)*	0.371 (n = 924)*	0.553 (n = 924)*	0.546 (n = 922)*
Male candidate, all conditions	0.361 (n = 923)	0.327 (n = 918)	0.517 (n = 918)	0.500 (n = 915)
Difference	0.047	0.044	0.036	0.046
Female candidate, control	0.720 (n = 178)*	0.667 (n = 177)*	0.725 (n = 177)*	0.744 (n = 176)*
Male candidate, control	0.641 (n = 165)	0.592 (n = 163)	0.665 (n = 163)	0.672 (n = 162)
Difference	0.079	0.075	0.06	0.072
Female candidate, all scandals	0.334 (n = 749)*	0.301 (n = 747)*	0.513 (n = 747)*	0.499 (n = 746)*
Male candidate, all scandals	0.300 (n = 758)	0.270 (n = 755)	0.485 (n = 755)	0.463 (n = 753)
Difference	0.034	0.031	0.028	0.036

Comparisons for statistical tests are between gender and similar circumstances (that is, females versus males in control and females versus males for scandal treatments grouped together). Asterisk indicates $p < 0.05$, based on one-tailed test.

of character such as competence and leadership strength. On all four variables of interest, respondents showed a definite preference for women candidates.

These general trends remained even when separating the treatment groups from the control groups (see Table 1). Regardless of whether wrongdoing was present, female candidates tended to fare better than their male counterparts. For instance, survey respondents were much more likely to rate women who had not engaged in scandal as more competent than their male counterparts ($F(1, 338) = 6.52$, $p < 0.05$). Likewise, subjects were more likely to state a willingness to vote for a woman over a man, even if she had engaged in wrongdoing ($F(1, 1505) = 4.63$, $p < 0.05$). These findings held even when controlling for the individual characteristics of the participants such as partisan affiliation, gender, and education level (see online supplemental material).

The trends in Table 1 support our hypothesis that women will be judged more harshly than men for alleged wrongdoing. The gap between men and women narrowed significantly between the controls and the treatments. While women were initially favored across the board, this preference decreased substantially in the presence of a scandal. Women received much higher levels of support, compared with men, when not engaged in scandalous situations. The difference between the two contracted substantially, however, in the presence of wrongdoing (see Table 1). For example, even though individuals expressed a greater willingness to support women whose reputations were untarnished (mean support of 0.72), this dropped when women were involved in wrongdoing (mean support of 0.334), a difference of 0.386 points. While men started with lower levels of support (when they did not engage in wrongdoing), their drop was not as steep as women when they did engage in wrongdoing. Men went from having a mean level of support of 0.641 to a mean of 0.300, or a 0.341 decline. These general trends held across the various assessments and were remarkably consistent in magnitude. In other words, men were harmed by alleged wrongdoing, but they were not

penalized as sharply as women. To demonstrate the effect of the changes across the treatment types, the differences between men and women candidates were calculated (see Table 1) and tested using a 2 × 2 factorial design where condition type (control versus scandal) was interacted with candidate gender. If the narrowing in the gap across the conditions depended on the gender of the candidate, the interactive term in this analysis would be significant. When combining all scandals together, no discernable difference due to gender was detected across any of the dependent variables [Vote: ($F(1, 1846) = 1.59$, p = n.s.); Trust: ($F(1, 1838) = 2.01$, p = n.s.); Competence: ($F(1, 1838) = 0.90$, p = n.s.); Strength: ($F(1, 1833) = 1.13$, p = n.s.)]. The difference between men and women in the control condition was not statistically different from the difference between men and women across the combined scandal conditions (for example, 0.079 and 0.034 for vote willingness respectively). This does not signify, however, that gender failed to influence individual responses to scandals. Because the various scandal types were combined together in the analysis, the effect of a particular type of scandal could have masked the effect of another. Thus, it is important to explore the influence of each scandal type separately.

The type of scandal did seem to affect assessments of the political candidates. In general, participants were harsher in their judgments of politicians who had engaged in economic wrongdoing than sexual wrongdoing (see Table 2). Levels of support decreased by half depending on the situation. The mean response, for example, for a female candidate who had engaged in sexual malfeasance was 0.47 compared with the mean for a female politician involved in an economic scandal, 0.20. This of course also meant that politicians engaged in economic scandals fell the hardest. Moreover, women tended to be punished more harshly than men for engaging in an economic scandal. Even though individuals initially

Table 2. Average Assessments of Candidates Disaggregated by Gender, Control, and Scandal Type.

	Vote	Trust	Competence	Strength
Female candidate, control	0.720 (n = 178)*	0.667 (n = 177)*	0.725 (n = 177)*	0.744 (n = 176)*
Male candidate, control	0.641 (n = 165)	0.592 (n = 163)	0.665 (n = 163)	0.672 (n = 162)
Difference	0.079	0.075	0.06	0.072
Female candidate, sex scandals	0.470 (n = 374)*	0.405 (n = 374)*	0.597 (n = 374)*	0.564 (n = 374)*
Male candidate, sex scandals	0.415 (n = 383)	0.355 (n = 383)	0.550 (n = 383)	0.529 (n = 383)
Difference	0.055	0.05	0.047	0.035
Female candidate, economic scandals	0.200 (n = 375)	0.197 (n = 375)	0.428 (n = 375)	0.436 (n = 375)*
Male candidate, economic scandals	0.183 (n = 375)	0.183 (n = 375)	0.419 (n = 375)	0.396 (n = 375)
Difference	0.017	0.014	0.009	0.04

Comparisons for statistical tests are between gender and similar circumstances (that is, females versus males in control and females versus males for specific scandal treatment). Asterisk indicates $p < 0.05$, based on one-tailed test.

demonstrated a greater willingness to vote for women in the absence of scandals (mean support of 0.72), this diminished when they were involved in economic wrongdoing (mean support of 0.200), a difference of 0.520 points. While men tended to have less support without any wrongdoing, the willingness to vote for them did not drop as substantially, going from a mean of 0.641 to a mean of 0.183, or a 0.458 decline. These trends held across the various dependent variables and were consistent in size. To again demonstrate the effect of the changes across the treatment types, the differences between men and women candidates were calculated (see Table 2) and tested using a 2 × 2 factorial design where condition type (control versus economic scandal) was interacted with candidate gender. The interaction between these two variables should demonstrate the extent to which there was a statistically significant difference across the conditions dependent on candidate gender. Unlike those above, these analyses yielded statistically significant results for many of the dependent variables. For instance, the gap between men and women in the control group gauging an individual's willingness to vote for a candidate was statistically different than the gap between the economic scandals [0.079 and 0.017, respectively); ($F(1, 1089) = 3.79$, $p < 0.05$)]. Indeed, there was no discernable gender difference in the economic scandal condition, suggesting that women are treated on par to men when it comes to engaging in this type of wrongdoing. This effect held for evaluations of trust ($F(1, 1084) = 4.18$, $p < 0.05$) and, to a more limited extent, for competence ($F(1, 1084) = 1.99$, $p < 0.1$). Assessments of character strength did not seem to be affected, however ($F(1, 1080) = 0.86$, p = n.s.). Disentangling scandal types proves important for assessing how differences across treatments are affected by gender. Doing so demonstrates that gender seems to influence how individuals respond to economic scandals, punishing female candidates more than their male counterparts.

The examination of sexual scandals provided results that were similarly nuanced. Like the previous analysis, women received much higher levels of support, compared with men, in the presence of sexual wrongdoing, 0.470 and 0.415 respectively, for vote willingness (see Table 2). Interestingly, while this dropped from the control condition for each, the gap between the control and the sex treatments was not as large for each as compared to the economic treatments. For example, in situations with alleged sexual improprieties, women dropped only 0.25 points in vote willingness compared with 0.52 in the economic condition. Similarly, men dropped 0.226 and 0.458, respectively. To see if changes across treatment types were influenced by candidate gender, the differences between men and women candidates were calculated (see Table 2) and tested using a 2 × 2 factorial design where condition type (control versus sex scandal) was interacted with candidate gender. The analysis shows limited evidence of a discernable difference due to gender across the dependent variables [Vote: ($F(1, 1096) = 0.41$, p = n.s.); Trust: ($F(1, 1090) = 0.57$, p = n.s.); Competence: ($F(1, 1090) = 0.14$, p = n.s.); Strength: ($F(1, 1087) = 1.21$, p = n.s.)].

As such, the difference between men and women in the control condition was not statistically different than the difference between men and women caught in sex scandals (for example, 0.079 and 0.055 for vote willingness, respectively). Indeed, this suggests that women had a softer fall when engaging in a sexual scandal compared with an economic one. To investigate why this might be the case, we assessed the believability of having committed the offense. After answering questions evaluating the candidates, respondents were asked the extent to which they believed that the politician had committed the wrongdoing mentioned in the news story (see online supplemental material for more information). In general, subjects were less likely to believe that women would engage in sexual malfeasance, compared to men. This difference is significant ($F(1, 655) = 3.43$, $p < 0.05$). If participants were not as likely to see the alleged transgressions of women as credible, it is also likely that they were reluctant to judge women harshly for them. Interestingly, there was no statistically meaningful difference between men and women regarding economic wrongdoing (in contrast to Barnes and Beaulieu's findings [2014] that women were not believed to have engaged in economic transgressions). Rather than punishing women across all conditions, individuals appeared to push back against some of the scenarios of wrongdoing, though not all. Despite women being stereotyped as being more honest, respondents were equally as likely to believe that women engaged in economic malfeasance as men, but they did not believe that women engaged in sexual impropriety. Even though the women's movement of the 1960s challenged traditional gender roles, women still face restrictive societal norms when it comes to sexual expression. Having a woman use power for her own sexual gratification in a news vignette might have been difficult for some to believe; perhaps too much of the information went against strongly held societal expectations of typical behavior. Individuals receiving material about this type of candidate were consequently unable to view the allegation as credible, suggesting that gender stereotypes can also serve to mitigate contextual information inconsistent with prevailing norms or existing beliefs. The economic frame worked well because it did not contradict as many commonly held beliefs. It only contravened the notion that women should be trusted. For the sexual scandals, on the other hand, individuals had to find credible the fact that women were not only unscrupulous, but also promiscuous. This degree of dissonance might have been burdensome, so individuals pushed back by not finding the scenarios plausible. It could also be that honesty stereotypes involving women are more tenuously held than those regarding sexuality. As such, information running counter to these weakly held stereotypes might be more easily accommodated than information that contradicts stronger attitudes. Stereotypes that are more pervasive likely encourage motivated reasoning, whereby strongly held beliefs counteract new information. Additional research should be conducted to explore and elaborate on the possible mechanisms underlying the nuance in the findings.

Conclusion

This article assessed the role that gender plays in informing attitudes about political candidates as a means of explaining why women are less likely to hold office compared with men. Illuminating how stereotypes might contribute to electoral disadvantages could help female politicians navigate electoral challenges. Research on the effect of stereotypes has not been consistent, however, which could be due in part to varying methodologies and changing circumstances. We conducted a nationwide experimental survey to investigate the unique effect of gender on political evaluations as a means of providing some needed clarity. This survey included news stories placing politicians in analogous circumstances, but manipulated individual characteristics such as gender and engagement in wrongdoing. Placing candidates in similar compromising positions allowed us to discern if stereotypes exist, as well as the potential consequence of norm violations. Our findings demonstrate that women were punished more harshly for alleged wrongdoing than their male counterparts. This dynamic is nuanced, however, with female candidates caught in certain types of scandals treated more punitively than male candidates. Specifically, women caught in economic scandals were punished more severely than were men caught in analogous circumstances. Conversely, women politicians caught in sexual scandals were not punished as severely. In general, this suggests that stereotypes serve to inform gendered assessments, but might be mitigated by countervailing beliefs. Because the findings were based on hypothetical candidates, however, evaluations might not completely capture real-world experiences such as actual voting behaviors instead of just voting intentions. Thus, additional research should be conducted to determine if the results hold across environments and differing methodologies.

While acknowledging potential weaknesses, the findings are nevertheless important for a variety of reasons. First, they tentatively demonstrate that women are not treated equally to men across all circumstances. When investigating the role of gender in an individual's willingness to support a candidate, we observed that participants were more likely to express support for female candidates as compared to their male counterparts even after controlling for the relevant characteristics of the individual participants such as partisan affiliation, gender, and education level. Given the highly gendered environment in which the survey was conducted (from September 4, 2016, until October 1, 2016) and impositions on external validity, more research is needed to see if these results are corroborated. If they are, they may suggest that times are changing regarding overall preferences. The results of the 2018 midterm elections appear to illustrate these preferences with a record number of female candidates winning office. Time will tell if these trends hold and how other additional barriers, such as

differences in party recruitment and fundraising challenges, will likely continue to disadvantage women more than men (Lawless and Pearson 2008; Palmer and Simon 2006).

Our research design allowed for the effect of gender cues to be isolated in a way that is not feasible with regular surveys. One reason for this is that experimental designs do not draw attention to the intention of the research, thus mitigating the effect of social desirability that can be problematic when assessing support for female candidates (Krupnikov, Piston, and Bauer 2016; Mo 2015; Streb et al. 2008). By prioritizing internal validity, our research also allowed for greater confidence in the establishment of causal relationships. However, in doing so we were unable to include within the design a variable of known significance, party affiliation. Ideally, our experimental vignettes would have manipulated partisan identification along with gender and scandal type, as female politicians are more likely to be affiliated with the Democratic Party. Thus, individuals could have been responding to what they believe are partisan cues in their assessments and not to gendered ones. Indeed, partisan identification has been found to be of great importance within the literature, with some suggesting that it overrides the relevance of gender (see, for instance, Bauer 2015b; Dolan and Lynch 2016, 2017). Others have suggested that partisanship interacts with gender in nuanced ways (Bauer 2018; Cassese and Holman 2018; Schneider and Bos 2016). To accommodate this complexity, we could have manipulated partisan information within the news stories. While perhaps not ideal, we opted against doing so as it would have increased the number of treatments substantially, thus also requiring many more participants due to the between-subjects design. Given cost considerations, it was ultimately decided to focus on the treatments reported.[7] Even though some may disagree with this decision, and these criticisms are warranted, the findings remain potentially informative across numerous contexts. While our current political environment is swathed in partisanship, there are many instances where partisanship cues are not realized or are moot. For instance, nonpartisan cues such as gender become more salient in primaries, where candidates from the same party run against each other. Similarly, many elections are nonpartisan by nature, such as the selection of state supreme court justices in roughly 15 states, many city council positions, and numerous mayoral positions. This is also true for states that have imposed ranked-choice primaries (for example, California). Furthermore, because gender may interact with partisanship in a way that harms some politicians, but benefits others (Bauer 2018; Cassese and Holman 2018; Schneider and Bos 2016), discerning the impact of gender remains meaningful even when partisanship is a strong cue.

Given the political realities of the day, these findings are as important as ever. If stereotypes do inform candidate assessments, they suggest that women can attempt to capitalize on them. For instance, as the focus turns to scandal and corruption within government, women might run and win

due to perceptions of honesty. The results also suggest what occurs when women engage in counterstereotypic behavior, however, and how they can navigate controversial situations. While most political scandals in our past have involved men, as more women run for office and get caught in scandals, it seems likely that overall perceptions of trust will erode to potentially be on par with men. Thus, women might lose the advantage of being seen as more honest. The findings suggest that a woman candidate will be punished more harshly, but that an economic scandal is more difficult to weather than a sexual one, though the changing political landscape may prove to challenge this standard. Since the #MeToo movement's spotlight on sexual assault and sexual harassment, one must question how sex scandals will be seen in the future. Some men are currently being punished for actions once overlooked. It is unclear if this atmosphere of holding people accountable for inappropriate sexual behavior will continue and, certainly, the impact of any scandal is conditional on time and local norms. Hence, while we are examining hypothetical situations, it is important to note that society is undergoing changes and local values can influence how certain types of behavior are viewed. One would expect the public to hear with greater frequency about scandals involving women, either of a sexual or an economic nature, as more women get elected to office. Time will show if the asymmetrical trends in assessing responsibility we found in this research will continue to exist, and whether women will continue to be judged more harshly for certain types of wrongdoing, especially as they violate gender norms.

Notes

1. Note that most research focuses on white women (primarily because of the shortage of women of color in elected office); however, given the larger proportion of women of color elected as compared to men of color, more research should be conducted in this area (see Frederick 2013; Gershon 2013 for exceptions).
2. The experiment was run over the course of a one-month period (from September 4, 2016, to October 1, 2016). The findings of the study are meant to be suggestive and recognize the limits of the experimental design, including possible bias of place, time, and sample. Additional research, employing different research designs and contexts, will need to be conducted to corroborate the general findings of this study. For more information on the experimental survey, such as demographics, specific question wording, and the collapsing of variables, see the supplemental material posted online.
3. Though the frames are slightly different in nature, they were intended to reflect real-life scenarios within the political realm. Indeed, much of the literature tends to focus on economic and sexual wrongdoing. Future research involving media content analysis is warranted to systematically gauge the external validity of the experimental manipulation.
4. No significant interactive effect emerged between ambition and gender. Nor did one occur between location of wrongdoing and gender. Location as a main effect was significant, something that is being pursued with additional research.

5. These evaluations were likely influenced by cues about the scandals that were made accessible by question wording. By mentioning the scandal another time, it likely reinforced its overall effect. This could replicate, however, the natural media environment, where certain stories and frames tend to garner greater attention, especially regarding scandals.
6. All statistical tests were based on directional hypotheses and thus one-tailed.
7. We tried to account for inferred partisan cues informing candidate assessments retrospectively using statistical tests. To explore this possibility, we ran an ordinary least squares regression analysis that included partisan identification using only treatments with women to determine if Democrats were more likely to support the female candidate. Across the majority of the dependent variables, Democrats were not more likely to vote for the female candidate than were Republicans (see online supplemental material for results). Only in the case of voting did partisanship play a role with Democrats more willing to vote for a female candidate than Republicans. This did not occur for any of the other variables. It is impossible to say, however, that individuals did not infer partisanship, as a direct test would provide the strongest evidence.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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