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The Impact of Gender Performance on Competency Evaluations of Women Candidates

INTRODUCTION

For the entirety of human history,¹ women have been disadvantaged in nearly all aspects of life, and obtaining positions of leadership and influence has been no exception. It has only been a recent phenomenon that women are running for leadership positions in governments, and there is considerable debate on whether performing gender along traditional stereotypes aids or hinders electoral success. The unfortunate reality of measuring public attitudes is that data can be easily skewed when survey respondents refrain from answering truthfully, but even with such potentially inaccurate, data we can look at trends in beliefs and examine which areas have the largest impact on voter opinions of women candidates.

I am especially interested in how women performing their gender impacts how the public evaluates their competency as a leader and when it is useful to adhere to gendered stereotypes and when doing so jeopardizes their potential success. In certain geographical areas² and political races, there is no doubt that more closely aligning one's self with traditional gender norms will aid in public perception, but I believe that, in general, women who run for office are more

¹ Read: recorded history

² In more rural areas it is likely that voters would feel more comfortable voting for a woman that represents more traditional values rather than one who embraces the independence that the twenty-first century provides women.

successful when they exude independence and advocate for more progressive policy stances.

Men have an advantage over women on practically everything and rarely need to concern themselves with how their gender performance affects how the public evaluates their leadership qualities, and understanding why and to what extent women must do this will allow future candidates to be more successful in their campaigns.

It will likely be many years, potentially decades, until we are able to address the systemic prejudices that underlie American politics, but research on this topic is necessary to understand how to better support women candidates and transform the arena in which they run. The disparity among scholars is unfortunate and likely contributes to the perpetuation of gendered stereotypes, which in turn hinders the success of women who run for office, and without sufficient agreement we cannot even start to adequately address the issues facing women candidates today.

CURRENT LITERATURE

As previously stated, opinions on the impact of gender performance on the electability of women candidates widely vary, and prior studies on this subject offer numerous viewpoints from which one can jump off to study how extensive and prevalent this impact is among the American public. We know that gender performance does indeed have an impact on public perception of women candidates, but we do not yet have an adequate understating of how or why such performances influence voter preferences, and existing research is not sufficient to explain it. When considering contemporary examples of women running for elected office via a review of existing literature, I have identified a few areas that seem to influence public perception of women candidates: media coverage, party politics, motherhood, and competency evaluations.³ It is with these

³ This is by no means an exhaustive list of factors as there are a multitude of aspects that seemingly influence perceptions of competency on behalf of the American public.

four categories in mind that I expand on current literature that examine the issues women face when seeking elected office.

MEDIA COVERAGE

The majority of media portrayals of women, regardless of political ambition, work to reinforce traditional gender roles in American society, and candidates are often portrayed in terms of long-standing gender stereotypes, and US media coverage of men and women candidates has historically corresponded with common gender stereotypes (Kittilson and Fridkin 2008). For women candidates with less visibility in the media, pre-existing attitudes about women politicians strongly predict perceptions of them, which is likely attributed to a lack of information regarding actual positions and capabilities of women candidates (Bligh, Casad, Schlehofer, and Gaffney 2011). Mass media has a considerable influence in shaping public perceptions of women candidates, so changes in how women are portrayed are necessary to negate the discrimination that they face on the campaign trail.

The magnitude of gender differences in press treatment appears to be influenced by several factors, such as the electoral office, the political context, the status of the candidate, and the gender of one's opponent, but there are likely many more factors that contribute to gender differences in how women are treated by the press (Kittilson and Fridkin 2008). The tone and focus of a media message can contribute to overall negative opinions of women politicians, however higher numbers of women in office do not automatically translate into more gender-neutral media coverage⁴ (Bligh, Casad, Schlehofer, and Gaffney 2011; Kittilson and Fridkin 2008). It

⁴ I would not be surprised to see coverage even out once there are an equal number of men and women in the government, but until that point we can only draw conclusions from the data that is available.

would be no surprise to me if the political leanings of a given media outlet influence the tone of coverage of women candidates, but the limited research on this topic prevents us from drawing any satisfactory conclusions.

PARTY POLITICS

Even within political parties, women experience different levels of support and success in running for office, adding yet another pane to the glass ceiling.⁵ It would seem that Democratic women experience more favorable attitudes from voters when compared to their Republican counterparts, but information on this phenomenon is limited, and we are only able to draw conclusions based on historical data.⁶ People's judgements about women's capabilities shape their willingness to support them in an election, but voter familiarity with visible woman Democratic politicians may explain the stereotype that women politicians are more liberal than men politicians (Dolan 2009; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993). The only variable related to people's willingness to support a woman Republican for president is their evaluation of male policy issues,⁷ and stereotypes play a larger role in the perceptions of Republican women (Dolan 2009; Dolan and Lynch 2014).

MOTHERHOOD

Motherhood frequently plays a critical role in public perception of women candidates, which can likely be attributed to longstanding examples of mothers taking care of the home and children

⁵ The two-party system of the US limits our understanding of how gender stereotypes operate within political parties, and a multi-party system would likely allow for more comprehensive assessments.

⁶ Such historical data is extremely scarce and does not allow for adequate evaluations of electability.

⁷ "Male" policy issues are those pertaining to government spending and the economy while "female" policy issues are those surrounding education and healthcare.

while fathers work to support the family. Though there are conflicting opinions on the influence of motherhood on candidate success, it is clear that women face a double bind on whether their public life is compatible with domestic responsibilities (Smith 2017). Media coverage has been evening out between men and women, but women still receive more attention about their marital and familial statuses, which is perhaps due to a woman candidate's relative "novelty" in a race⁸ (Kittilson and Fridkin 2008; Smith 2017).

Men have an advantage over women candidates in this respect and are privileged that their personal lives are rarely used as a basis for evaluations of competency, and we frequently see women criticized for seeking work opportunities instead of raising their children, and this criticism is exacerbated when women have no children at all, regardless of the circumstances or decisions that underlie such a situation.

COMPETENCY EVALUATIONS

With the history of the world as a point of reference, it should come as no surprise that women are typically seen as less competent a leaders than men are, but research is finding that public attitudes are changing. While public opinion is often a predictor of women's political success, women's underrepresentation is likely caused by incumbency effect rather than lack of voter support for women candidates (Sanbonmatsu and Dolan 2009). When evaluating competency, voters more highly value traditionally "male" traits as they tend to overlap with leadership traits, and voters may even identify specific positions as "appropriate" for a woman, which works to box women candidates in when establishing themselves as politicians (Alexander and Andersen

⁸ The novelty is that women have not historically been in elected leadership positions and in doing so break from established gender norms.

1993; Kittilson and Fridkin 2008). Women struggle to portray themselves as having masculine traits, and when little information exists, traditional gender beliefs are used to form initial opinions (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; Alexander and Andersen 1993).

Competency expectations are most likely rooted in social stereotypes about men and women in general that are applied in a political context, and it could be that voter stereotypes discourage women from running for office in the first place (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; Sanbonmatsu and Dolan 2009). Women in positions of authority are frequently rated as competent in their roles but are disliked because being an authority figure violates traditional feminine gender roles, which may be attributed to the negative connotations women face by being “too emotional” or “shrill” when trying to assert themselves in the political arena (Bligh, Casad, Schlehofer, and Gaffney 2011). An interesting point, though, is that women senators are viewed more positively in terms of their leadership when compared to their male counterparts, which is a phenomenon that has yet to be comprehensively evaluated (Fridkin and Kenney 2009).

It is clear that there are several factors that work to influence public perception of women candidates and their potential success in office, and with this information in mind, I suggest the following:

Performance Hypothesis: *Performing, and thus reinforcing, traditional gender stereotypes impacts the electoral success of women candidates.*

Success Hypothesis: *Women who more frequently act along gender norms will be less successful in running for office.*

DATA AND METHODS

Data for this project will come from a public opinion survey designed to examine the impact of gender performance on women candidates using a nationally representative, random sample of respondents. The largest setback for this project in terms of data is that evaluations of traditional gender stereotypes most frequently come from a sample of college students⁹ or individuals from large metropolitan areas, two groups that often lean left in their social and political attitudes. This project seeks to expand the sample from which data is extracted to include a more diverse and representative pool of respondents. A survey offers the opportunity to ask a large sample of people specific questions¹⁰ that have been designed to gauge public attitudes regarding women candidates and women in general, and information extracted can be used to evaluate trends in support of female candidates. The survey should have at least 1,000 respondents in order to obtain useful information that can be applied to such a discussion.

The most efficient means to administer this survey is likely via the internet, and I believe that when respondents are in the comfort of their home (or whatever locale that provides them access to the internet)¹¹, their answers will be more truthful than if the survey was administered in person. With the ever growing presence of computers and the internet, I don't believe that older people will be disadvantaged and unrepresented because navigating the internet is becoming progressively more intuitive and allows for easier access to a wide range of people.

CONCLUSION

⁹ Though college students represent the future of the country and thus the future of public perception of women candidates, it is necessary to use a much wider sample to gauge *current* attitudes of the public.

¹⁰ A list of survey question topics can be found in the appendix of this paper.

¹¹ The anonymity that being behind a computer screen provides is arguably one of the best means to ensure accuracy of answers since respondents are less likely to feel pressured to respond in a certain way.

It will be interesting to see how the data from this project can be used to express public attitudes, and with a survey such as this, we can gain insight into how sexism plays into public perceptions of women candidates and attempt to explain some of the variance in competence evaluations of these women. By understanding the roots of variance in competency evaluations we will be able to address the prejudices that are embedded in the American political system and allow for women candidates to be more successful in running their campaigns and, ultimately, winning elected office. It is safe to say that there is a long way to go until we can comprehensively explain the effects of gender performance on women candidates, but research from projects such as this will contribute to the efforts in achieving such a goal. Ultimately we may never have a decent grasp on the influences of voter perceptions of women candidates, but nevertheless we must pursue all means to achieve this end.

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APPENDIX

1. Age Range — 18-25, 26-35, 36-50, 51-65, 66+
2. Highest level of education — below HS, HS, some college, associates, bachelors, masters, doctorate
3. Annual family income — 0-15k, 15k-30k, 30k-45k, 45k-60k, 60k-75k, 75k-90k, 90k+
4. Party identity — Far left, lean left, center, lean right, Far right
5. Race — American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, White, Two or more
6. Gender — male, female, transgender, non-binary, other
7. Marital status — single, married, divorced, widowed
8. Women as domestic servants (5 pt Likert)
9. Women as mothers (5 pt Likert)
10. Women as breadwinners (5 pt Likert)
11. Women as leaders (5 pt Likert)
12. Women as politicians (5 pt Likert)
13. Motherhood: leadership (5 pt Likert)
14. Mothers and work (5 pt Likert)
- Five-point Likert scale — success as a leader
15. Condoleezza Rice
16. RBG
17. Hillary Clinton
18. Sarah Palin
19. Betsy DeVos
20. Michelle Obama
- Five-point Likert scale — overall attitudes
21. Condoleezza Rice
22. RBG
23. Hillary Clinton
24. Sarah Palin
25. Betsy DeVos
26. Michelle Obama
27. Media representation (5 pt Likert)
28. More women in politics? (5 pt Likert)