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Light in the midst of chaos: COVID-19 and female political representation[☆]



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ABSTRACT

The promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women are global policy priorities across countries and development institutions. Research on gender and politics shows that exceptional environments can activate stereotypes of women as honest, trustworthy, and competent lawmakers in public health and, in doing so, can generate increased public support for female political candidates. We argue that the 2019–2020 Coronavirus Pandemic has the potential to produce this outcome, as recent public opinion polls highlight widespread discontent with male-led governments' responses to the pandemic and elevated concerns surrounding public health. Recent positive media reports of female world leaders' responses to the pandemic provide further reason to suspect a forthcoming increase in political support for female candidates. We posit that such an outcome may prove essential not only for enhancing development and improving long-standing gender inequities but also for alleviating the pandemic's disproportionately allocated hardships.

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The promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women is formally recognized as a global policy priority both by the world's countries and by leading development institutions. Not only is gender equality morally and ethically just, but scholars and development practitioners agree that the empowerment of women engenders positive political, economic, and social yields for societies writ large. As such, government and non-government actors have developed wide-ranging initiatives in pursuit of this goal with varying degrees of success.

Operating under the belief that political empowerment is an important precursor to gender equality in wide-ranging development metrics, political scientists have worked to understand the factors underlying women's political representation. Their research finds that factors ranging from electoral gender quotas (Sacchet, 2018; Wylie, 2018) to proportional representation electoral systems (that permit multiple electoral winners) boost women's electoral prospects (Ahn, Kim, & Kang, 2019; Githens, Lovenduski, & Norris, 1994; Matland, 1998; Salmond, 2006). The caveat is that

these factors are less impactful in enhancing women's political representation in the absence of accompanying public support for female candidates (Franceschet & Piscopo, 2008).

Recent research suggests that exceptional environments – involving conflict and including political corruption scandals accompanied by downturns in public trust as well as public health crises – can generate the public support for female political representation that public policies or institutions alone may not. Such unique environments may promote female candidates either because they increase the demand for desirable qualities associated with women or because they focus voters' attention on issues that women are perceived to be especially competent in addressing. We argue that the 2019–2020 Coronavirus Pandemic may have fostered an environment capable of promoting female representation through both mechanisms. In this piece, we overview key findings from related research and introduce preliminary insight into contemporary global attitudes related to the coronavirus. Both help us to weigh in on whether the Coronavirus Pandemic may lead to favorable electoral outcomes for female candidates.

The literature on gender stereotypes asserts that female politicians are perceived to be more empathetic, compassionate, honest, trustworthy, and liberal than their male counterparts (Alexander & Andersen, 1993; Dollar, Fisman, & Gatti, 2001; Funk, Hinojosa, & Piscopo, 2019; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993; McDermott, 1997;

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Morgan, 2015). Exceptional environments that are deficient in these areas may generate demands for female inclusion. Recent and ongoing scholarship on the exceptional environments associated with conflict and political corruption revelation explores the validity of this claim, seeking to understand the connection between gender stereotypes relating to qualities and personality traits and electoral dynamics.

Regarding conflict, both a robust literature on peace-building and Security Council Resolution 1325 concede that women are fundamental to post-conflict resolutions (See Zuckerman & Greenberg, 2004). Underlying calls for increased female representation in post-conflict states is the “women and peace” hypothesis that women hold more pacific or compromising attitudes than men, plausibly a function of “traditionally female characteristics such as empathy and caring” (Brounéus, 2014; Tessler, Nachtwey, & Grant, 1999; Tessler & Warriner, 1997). Additionally, some accounts suggest that women improve the process and outcome of peace talks because they build trust and bridge divides (O'Reilly, 2015).

Speaking on corruption, Funk et al., 2019 discern that gender stereotypes work to the political benefit of female political candidates in exceptional Latin American environments penetrated with perceived corruption and political distrust. They find that Latin American political parties nominate more women when the public lacks trust in the national legislature under the presumption that voters will look more favorably upon female candidates due to their association with the desirable qualities of honesty and trustworthiness. Ongoing research corroborates this conclusion, finding that revealing corruption in Brazilian municipalities increases the number of women contesting mayoral offices, especially in places where male incumbents were revealed to engage in malfeasance (Diaz & Piazza, 2020). Both studies suggest that political environments that spark public distrust, such as those plagued with corruption, can activate gender stereotypes relating to qualities or personality traits that render female candidates more attractive than their male counterparts.

Similar to post-conflict and corruption-laden environments, the 2019–2020 Coronavirus Pandemic has ushered in a deficiency in public trust around the world. Poor public perceptions of both government responses to COVID-19 and government truthfulness abounded in March and April 2020 and were especially acute in countries with male leaders. According to data from the International Survey on Coronavirus (Fetzer et al., 2020),¹ as of April 6, 2020, less than 25% of respondents in countries ranging from the United Kingdom to Brazil to Indonesia perceived their governments' reactions to the pandemic to be sufficient. Per this same source, more than 60% of respondents in countries ranging from the United States to Chile to Nigeria perceived their governments to be untruthful in communications regarding the pandemic. Though causal tests remain outstanding, other data from the International Survey on Coronavirus suggests corresponding high levels of distrust in government in a subset of countries, including the United States, Colombia, Venezuela, and Russia. More than 70% of respondents in these countries have indicated a distrust in government to take care of its citizens in light of the raging pandemic.² In line with the previously reviewed literature, the meager levels of public trust in government following from the 2019–2020 Coronavirus Pandemic may increase demands for female representation, compel political parties to field female candidates, and potentially improve female candidates' chances of electoral success.

¹ This survey is not representative. Respondents self-select into participating in it online. However, it is valuable in the sense that it covers attitudes on the pandemic as it unfolds across a diverse group of countries.

² Notably, the countries with the lowest levels of public trust are all run by male presidents, prime ministers, and dictators.

Aside from qualities or personality traits, the literature on gender stereotypes acknowledges differences in perceived issue competencies across male and female politicians. Whereas male politicians are perceived as proficient policymakers in the “high politics” areas of the economy, agriculture, employment, fiscal affairs, crime, and security (Herrnson, Lay, & Stokes, 2003; Lawless, 2004), female politicians are generally considered to be especially adept policymakers in the “low politics” areas of education, health, and other issues relating to “children and family” (Alexander & Andersen, 1993; Herrnson, Lay, & Stokes, 2003; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993; Leeper, 1991).

Recent research has moved beyond documenting these stereotypes to demonstrating their influence on electoral behaviors. Most pertinent to this paper, Piazza & Schneider, 2021 assess whether the exceptional environment stemming from the 2015–2016 Zika Epidemic and the accompanying priming of the “women’s issue” of (infant) health resulted in an electoral boost for female candidates. Their difference-in-difference analyses show that if the number of cases of Zika per 100,000 residents increases by 10% in the two months leading up to the 2016 Brazilian municipal elections, then the vote share for female mayoral candidates is predicted to increase by 0.6%. They find that this effect is especially pronounced in Brazilian municipalities with high incidences of the Zika virus among pregnant women.³ The authors attribute these results to popular perceptions of female candidates’ unique competencies in the area of public health and, more specifically, in infant health and family planning.

Like the Zika virus, the 2019–2020 Coronavirus Pandemic has primed the “women’s issue” of public health around the world. Public opinion polls from mid-March 2020 conducted in diverse contexts including the United States, Canada, and Italy point in this direction.⁴ On the basis of mid-March social media surveys, Nelson et al., 2020 find that 70.1% of Americans expressed concerns of getting sick from COVID-19, and 46.3% expressed concerns of not being able to get medical care. An Angus Reid Institute poll conducted March 13–15 found that a similar share of Canadians (68%) perceived the coronavirus outbreak to be a serious threat to their country, with 57% expressing personal concerns about getting sick from the novel coronavirus and 76% expressing concern for their friends and family members. An IPSOS survey of 1,000 Italian adults conducted from March 10 to March 12 found that 86% of Italians perceived the coronavirus as a threat to Italy, with 48% expressing a perceived personal threat.

We interpret the common concern with the 2019–2020 Coronavirus pandemic across these diverse global contexts as a strong signal that the public health crisis and evaluations of incumbent responses to it will factor into upcoming electoral decisions world-wide. Insofar as both these public health concerns predominate and endure in the lead up to electoral contests⁵ and global publics interpret these concerns to correspond with “women’s issues,” research on the 2015–2016 Zika Virus Epidemic suggests that female candidates may experience an electoral boost in upcoming political contests.

We identify two critiques to our argument. First, research from economics and law finds that organizations appoint more women to “glass cliff” leadership positions in moments of crisis (Ashby, Ryan, & Haslam, 2007; Haslam & Ryan, 2008). Ryan, Haslam, and Kulich, 2010 claim that this phenomenon extends to candidate

³ Specifically, if the number of reported cases of pregnant women diagnosed with Zika per 100,000 residents increases by 10%, then the vote share for female mayoral candidates is predicted to increase by 1%.

⁴ See <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/blog/running-numbers/lcc/global-public-opinion-and-coronavirus-March-18-update> for more specific details on cited surveys.

⁵ Even in light of election postponements around the world, see <https://www.idea.int/news-media/multimedia-reports/global-overview-covid-19-impact-elections> for details.

selection strategies in politics. In line with this research, the Coronavirus Pandemic may increase female representation not due to their perceived trustworthiness or competence in public health but because party leaders are more likely to assign women to leadership positions with high risk of failure in moments of crisis. Second, though intimately connected with public health, the 2019–2020 Coronavirus Pandemic is less directly related to the types of health in which women are perceived to have a comparative advantage. This means that the Coronavirus Pandemic may not increase support for female candidates in the same way that the Zika Epidemic did. While these critiques are valid, we believe that media reports of female leadership in response to the coronavirus mitigate them and bolster our argument.

Reports praising German Chancellor Angela Merkel's science-based response, widespread testing, transparency, stringent social distancing policies, travel restrictions, and relational appeals to the public to induce compliance⁶ and New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's clarity, compassion, strict national lockdown, travel restrictions, and pervasive testing (Mahdawi, 2020)⁷ have fostered the narrative that female executives have more effectively, efficiently, and impressively handled the coronavirus pandemic (Cherneski, 2020). Whether a function of over competence, the disproportionate hurdles women need to overcome to be elected in the first place, or a disposition to seek out advice from experts in moments of crisis, the contemporary dynamics suggest that female world leaders are handling the virus in an impressive manner (Mahdawi, 2020; Yancey-Bragg, 2020). There are compelling reasons to suspect that these narratives instill gender stereotypes relating to trustworthiness and/or competence in public health, and insofar as they do, it is plausible to anticipate an improvement in female candidates' prospects in upcoming electoral contests.

To summarize, research suggests that exceptional environments may activate gender stereotypes that improve the electoral prospects of female candidates. Though distinct from other exceptional climates in its global reach and magnitude, we argue that the 2019–2020 Coronavirus Pandemic also has the potential to produce an outcome favorable to prospective female politicians. Recent public opinion polls highlight both general discontent with how politicians have managed the pandemic and widespread concerns surrounding the "women's issue" of public health. Contemporary public opinion, along with the positive media coverage of female leaders in times of crisis, may lead both party elites and voters to turn towards female candidates.

⁶ In response to its first reported case of COVID-19 on January 27, 2020, Germany, under Chancellor Angela Merkel's leadership, began developing a test for the virus (Blackburn & Ruyle, 2020) and required healthcare providers to immediately report suspected cases of COVID-19 to public health authorities (Wieler & Gottschalk, 2020). From the outset, national responses were science-based, and information collected was made transparent. Within a month, tests were widely available at no cost to probable carriers of the virus and swiftly rolled out (Wieler & Gottschalk, 2020). Shortly thereafter, Merkel adopted stringent social distancing policies, mandated the closure of schools and retail businesses, limited public gatherings, and operated with travel restrictions (Blackburn & Ruyle, 2020). In an effort to induce compliance with these policies, Merkel "asked citizens to consider how their behavior impacts those they love" (Cherneski, 2020). As a result, the number of daily confirmed cases in Germany has, at the time of this writing, diminished both in terms of the number of daily confirmed cases and deaths.

⁷ Since the pandemic's outbreak, the media has frequently touted New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's successes in curtailing the coronavirus. Prior to New Zealand's first reported case of COVID-19, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern banned travel from China (Blackburn & Ruyle, 2020). In late-March, one month after New Zealand's first reported case, New Zealand implemented a strict national lockdown that closed schools and non-essential businesses, banned social gatherings, and mandated a 14-day self-isolation period for travelers entering the country (Blackburn & Ruyle, 2020). Ardern evoked compliance by compelling the country's citizens to 'be kind to each other' (Cherneski, 2020). As a result, New Zealand was, as of mid-June 2020, considered to be coronavirus free.

In the midst of chaos, an increase in women's political representation could establish an important foundation from which to protect recent development advances and achieve related goals. It may also prove fundamental in alleviating the pandemic's disproportionately allocated hardships. According to Grown and Sánchez-Páramo, "there is a high risk that gender inequalities will widen during and after the pandemic and that gains in women's and girls' accumulation of human capital, economic empowerment, and voice and agency, painstakingly built over the past decades, will be reversed" (Grown & Sánchez-Páramo, 2020).⁸

Substantiating Grown and Sánchez-Páramo's fear, recent reports indicate that the coronavirus has hit economic sectors with high female employment shares (e.g. the service and "essential worker" sectors) especially hard, intensified women's domestic responsibilities, and increased violence against women (Alon, Doepe, Olmstead-Rumsey, & Tertilt, 2020; Bahn, Cohen, & van der Meulen Rodgers, 2020; Campbell, 2020; Cherneski, 2020; Gausman & Langer, 2020; Graves, 2020; Grown & Sánchez-Páramo, 2020; O'Donnell, Peterman, & Potts, 2020; Wenham, Smith, & Morgan, 2020). These consequences may be especially pronounced for women of racial and ethnic minority groups, who bear the brunt of enforcement sanctions, job losses, and the adverse public health effects of the virus itself (Kirby, 2020). In the event that the 2019–2020 Coronavirus Pandemic increases public support for female political candidates who exude qualities of trustworthiness and uphold their mandates in the realm of public health, there may be some promise for relief.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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⁸ As Wenham, Smith, & Morgan, 2020 and Gausman & Langer, 2020 describe, this prospect is in line with experiences from past outbreaks including the Ebola and Zika virus outbreaks.

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