SHORT ARTICLE

Corruption, Accountability, and Gender: Do Female Politicians Face Higher Standards in Public Life?

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Previous research suggests that female politicians face higher standards in public life, perhaps in part because female voters expect more from female politicians than from male politicians. Most of this research is based on observational evidence. We assess the relationship between accountability and gender using a novel survey vignette experiment fielded in the United Kingdom in which voters choose between a hypothetical incumbent (who could be male or female, corrupt or noncorrupt) and another candidate. We do not find that female politicians face significantly greater punishment for misconduct. However, the effect of politician gender on punishment varies by voter gender, with female voters in particular more likely to punish female politicians for misconduct. Our findings have implications for research on how descriptive representation affects electoral accountability and on why corruption tends to correlate negatively with women's representation.

Perceptions of corruption tend to be lower where female political representation is higher (Dollar, Fisman, and Gatti 2001; Swamy et al. 2001), but the mechanism behind this pattern remains uncertain. Female politicians may have fewer opportunities to participate in corruption as they are excluded from predominantly male networks (Bjarnegård 2013). Women in politics may also be more highly qualified (Anzia and Berry 2011), more risk averse (Esarey and Schwindt-Bayer, forthcoming), or more opposed in principle to corruption (Dollar et al. 2001).

We focus on a further mechanism suggested by Esarey and Schwindt-Bayer (forthcoming): female politicians in high-accountability contexts may be less corrupt because they believe they are more likely to be held accountable by voters. We assess whether this belief is accurate: Is it true that female politicians are more heavily punished for comparable levels of misconduct? If so, is this due to differences in how men and women evaluate female politicians' records, as suggested by the work of Jones (2014)? We address these questions with a vignette experiment in the United Kingdom.

Our point of departure is gender stereotyping of politicians. One widely accepted view is that men are seen as more agentic, that is, competent and assertive, and women as more communal, that is, compassionate, warm, and emotional (Dolan 2004). Women are also seen as more honest than men (Alexander and Andersen 1993; Dolan 2014b; Fridkin, Kenney, and Woodall 2009; Kahn 1992). Consistent with this, voters who value honesty are more likely to vote for women than for men (Dolan 2004; Frederick and Streb 2008).[1]

These gender stereotypes imply that voters respond differently to misconduct by male and female politicians. In the absence of evidence of misconduct, voters who view women

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1. The persistence of gender stereotypes stands in contrast to the weak to nonexistent penalty for female candidates at the ballot box (Dolan 2014a). This discrepancy may exist because female politicians are generally of higher quality and because voters face multiple considerations in addition to candidate gender.

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as more honest would support a female politician more than an otherwise-similar male politician. The flip side of this stereotyping is that female politicians have "further to fall" if wrongdoing is revealed: to the extent that female politicians' support draws more on voters who are attracted to perceived integrity, their support stands to suffer more when a lack of integrity is found (Funk 1996, 18).[2] Our first hypothesis is therefore as follows:

H1. Female politicians are punished more severely than male politicians for equivalent misconduct.

Turning to the gender of voters, women have been found, on average, to be tougher on corruption (Alatas et al. 2009; Eckel and Grossman 1996), perhaps because they value honesty and integrity more. Our second hypothesis is thus as follows:

H2. Women punish misconduct more severely than men.

Finally, the difference between male and female voters' behavior could depend on whether the politician is male or female. If female voters care more about corruption and/or adhere more to gender stereotypes portraying female politicians as honest, then the stronger punishment for female politicians may come disproportionately from female voters. (For example, the "further to fall" hypothesis may apply only to female voters.) Alternatively, following Jones (2014), female voters might punish female politicians more because they are more engaged when evaluating female rather than male politicians. In either case, the higher aggregate punishment of female politicians might originate with female voters. Our third hypothesis is as follows:

H3. Women punish female politicians more severely for misconduct than men.[3]

EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

We use a population-based survey experiment similar to choice-based conjoint analysis (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014). To our knowledge, our experiment is the first to consider how politician and voter gender affect punishment for corruption (though Schwindt-Bayer, Verge, and Wiesehomeier [2016] have considered the context of corruption in conjunction with politician gender).

We surveyed 1,962 British voters on June 2–3, 2014, with respondents drawn from the YouGov online panel of over 360,000 people. The sample was designed to be representative of the British voting-age population in terms of age, gender, region, social grade, and newspaper readership, though participants will be more experienced than the general population in taking (political) surveys. YouGov samples nevertheless accurately depict effect sizes of key predictors on vote choice (Sanders et al. 2007).

After an introductory screen, respondents were presented with five vignettes, each depicting a contest between an incumbent and a challenger (see fig. 1 for an example choice task). The incumbent could randomly exhibit good or bad conduct: "Last year, the current MP received a commendation for diligent and ethical service from a Westminster watchdog" or "Last year, the current MP was found to have inappropriately claimed £10,000 in expenses." By comparing bad to good behavior (rather than to a neutral scenario), we provide the same amount of information in all scenarios and minimize the impact of respondents' prior beliefs about behavior of members of Parliament. The gender, party, age, and former job of both politicians also varied randomly. The incumbent could be Labour or Conservative and the challenger Labour, Conservative, or Liberal Democrat. The possible ages were 45, 52, and 64 (incumbent) and 40, 52, and 64 (challenger). The previous jobs were general practitioner, journalist, political advisor, teacher, or business manager.

Respondents were asked, "If you were living in this constituency at the next general election, which party would you vote for?" Depending on the parties of the politicians, the answer options were "the current Labour/Conservative MP," "the Labour/Conservative/Liberal Democrat challenger," "the Labour/Conservative/Liberal Democrat candidate," "a candidate from another party," or "no one, I would not vote."

In an observational study, it would be difficult to determine whether differences in how voters respond to misconduct by male and female MPs are due to hard-to-measure characteristics (such as the severity of misconduct or the nature of local political preferences) that may vary with MP gender. Different responses to comparable misconduct by male and female MPs could also be caused by differences in how misconduct is reported: media coverage of misconduct depends on MP gender (Larcinese and Sircar 2017). In our experiment, the conduct and gender of the MP are, by design, unrelated to the political context and respondent

2. Formally, denote by $x_{g,c}$ the support level of a politician of gender $g \in \{m, f\}$ (where m is male and f is female) given observed misconduct $c \in \{0, 1\}$. The claim is that $x_{f,0} - x_{f,1} > x_{m,0} - x_{m,1}$. In the simplest stereotype-based account, $x_{f,0} > x_{m,0}$, because the stereotype favors women in the absence of observed misconduct, but $x_{f,1} = x_{m,1}$, because once corruption is observed the stereotype does not matter.

3. Accountability may also be lower when people evaluate politicians of the same gender as themselves (Jones 2014). Our experimental design allows us to test this.

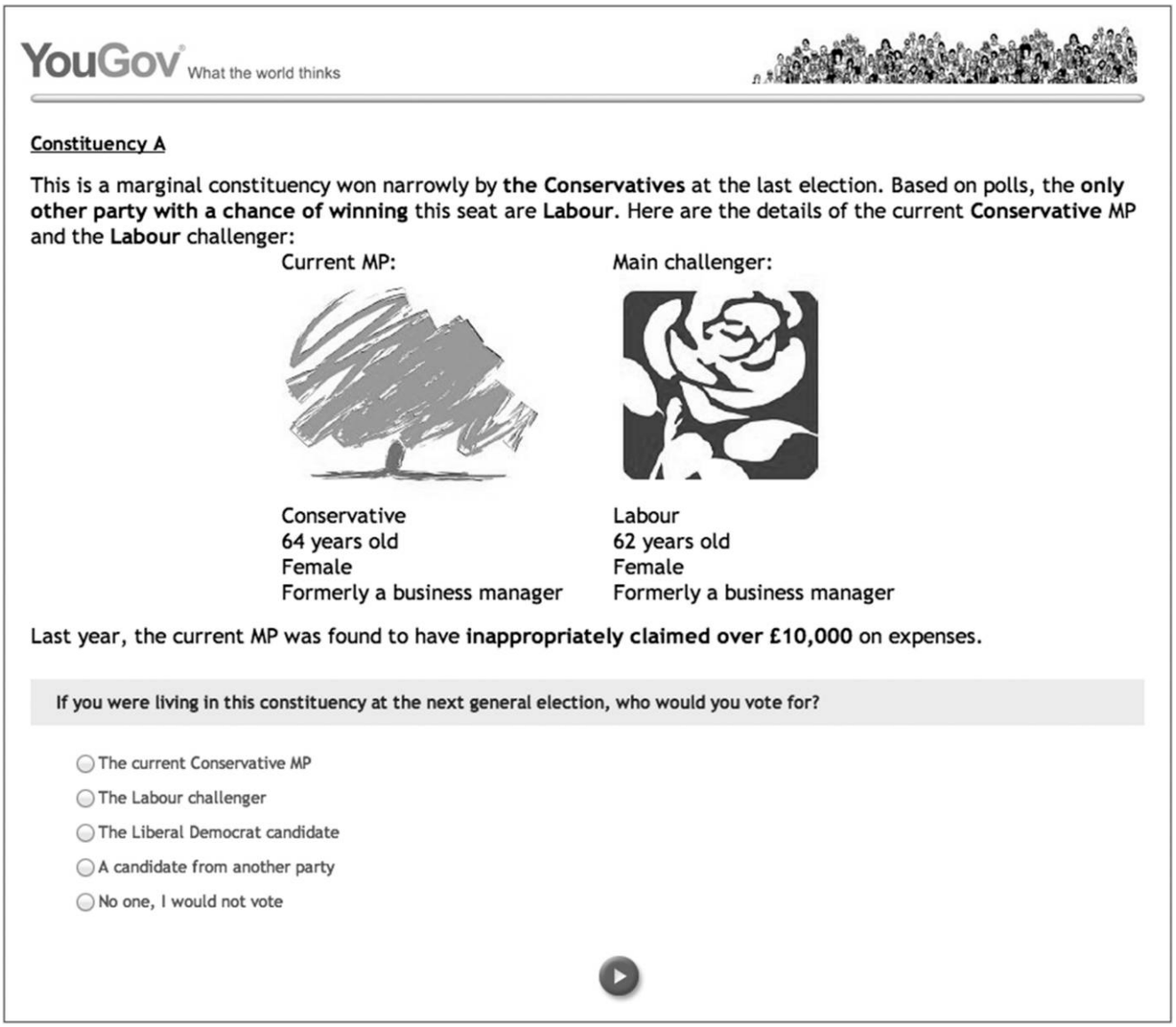

Figure 1. Screen shot of example choice task

characteristics, as is the information about MPs and their conduct. Thus, although differences in voter responses to similar behavior by male and female MPs could in general be related to differences in the information voters receive about male and female MPs' behavior or to voters' gender biases (or both), our experiment focuses only on the latter channel.

Our survey experiment cannot replicate real-world vote choice, but we try to maintain external validity in two ways. First, we present respondents with a multidimensional, reasonably realistic choice setting. This should also reduce social desirability bias, as respondents can justify their vote on the basis of a number of considerations (Hainmueller et al. 2014). Second, we primed respondents to think about partisan considerations rather than MP gender or conduct in office by displaying party logos in the choice tasks and including an introductory screen that characterized general elections as opportunities to select a national government (see app. A, available online).

RESULTS

Table 1 presents a series of linear probability models for incumbent vote. The raw descriptive results (app. B) exhibit the same patterns. Models with controls for respondent, incumbent, and challenger characteristics (app. C); with interactions between treatments and all measured respondent characteristics (app. D); for the first choice task only (app. E); and taking into account challenger gender (app. F) also all yield substantively identical results.

Table 1. Probability of Voting for Incumbent, MP Misconduct, and Gender

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Intercept	.406***	.401***	.392***	.400***
	(.011)	(.012)	(.013)	(.015)
MP misconduct	−.240	−.231***	−.212***	−.222***
	(.011)	(.013)	(.015)	(.019)
MP female	.014	.023*	.014	−.001
	(.009)	(.014)	(.009)	(.020)
Respondent female	−.008	−.008	.019	−.005
	(.012)	(.012)	(.017)	(.022)
MP misconduct × MP female		−.018		.020
		(.018)		(.026)
MP misconduct × respondent female			−.055***	−.019
			(.021)	(.027)
MP female × respondent female				.048*
				(.028)
MP misconduct × MP female × respondent female				−.072**
				(.036)
Observations	9,810	9,810	9,810	9,810
R^2	.071	.071	.072	.072
Adjusted R^2	.070	.070	.071	.071

Note. Ordinary least squares models. Dependent variable: Respondent votes for the incumbent MP (1) or not (0). Standard errors are clustered by respondent.

* $p < .1$.

** $p < .05$.

*** $p < .01$.

Model 1 shows that corrupt MPs are penalized: the probability of choosing the incumbent MP is 24 percentage points lower for "bad" than for "good" MPs. Model 1 also shows that female incumbents in general are not less likely to be supported and that female voters are about as likely to vote for the incumbent as men.

Model 2 shows little support for hypothesis 1: female politicians are not punished significantly more for wrongdoing than male politicians. The probability of voting for a male politician is 23 percentage points lower, on average, if the MP engaged in misconduct. This punishment is only 2 percentage points larger for female politicians, and the difference in effects is not statistically significant.

Model 3 shows that, consistent with hypothesis 2, female respondents punish MP misconduct more harshly (by over 5 percentage points) than male respondents. While this echoes a finding in Esarey and Chirillo (2013), the differential punishment by gender we detect cannot be attributed to differences in the extent to which male and female voters are aware of MP misconduct.

Next, model 4 tests hypothesis 3 by including a three-way interaction that permits punishment by MP gender to vary by voter gender. This interaction term is significant: the conditioning effect of politician gender on punishment for misconduct is different for male and female voters. Figure 2*A* presents the estimated treatment effect of MP misconduct across different combinations of voter gender and MP gender. Among female voters, the negative effect of misconduct is about 5 percentage points greater for female incumbent MPs. In contrast, among male voters, the effect of misconduct does not differ significantly by MP gender, although the point estimate of punishment is slightly smaller (in absolute terms) for female MPs.

Figure 2*B* presents predicted probabilities based on model 4. These show two reasons why the punishment is particularly large when the voter and the MP are female: the highest incumbent support is when a female respondent faces a noncorrupt female incumbent, and the lowest incumbent support is when a female respondent faces a corrupt female incumbent. So, female respondents particularly like a female incumbent who is not corrupt and particularly dislike a female incumbent who is corrupt. The figure also helps to explain why we find no difference in punishment of female and male MPs (hypothesis 1): female voters appear to punish

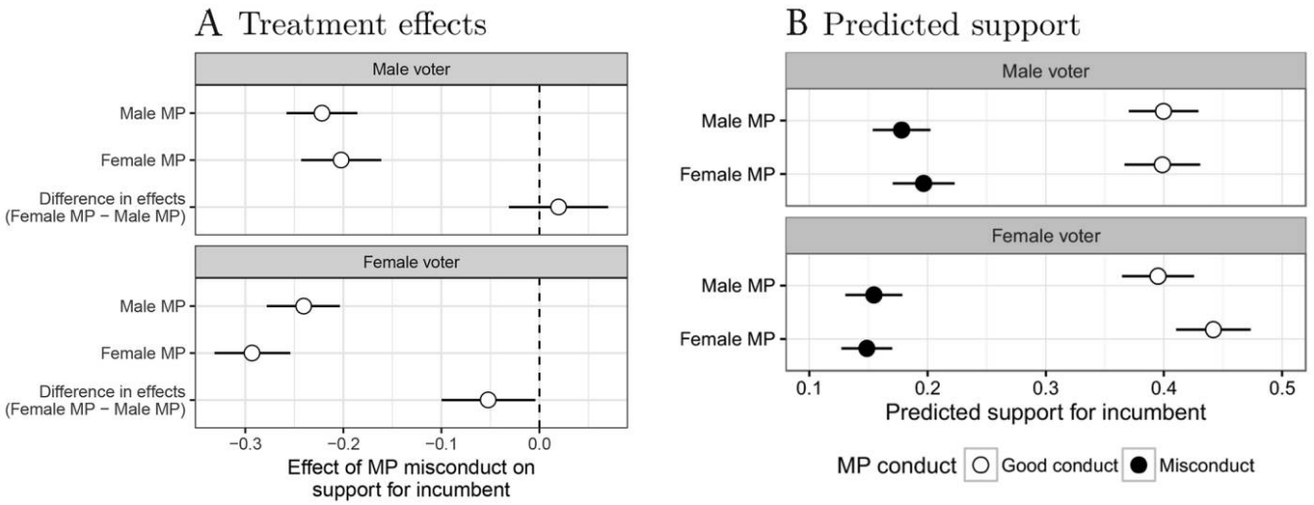

Figure 2. Effect of incumbent conduct by incumbent gender and respondent gender, based on model 4 of table 1. Panel A compares the treatment effects of MP misconduct as MP and voter gender varies. Panel B plots predicted probability of voting for the incumbent; 95% confidence intervals are shown.

female MPs more than male MPs, but male voters if anything punish them less.

CONCLUSION

Our results suggest that voters on average punish misconduct similarly among male and female politicians. If female politicians do face greater accountability, this is probably not because voters treat female politicians more harshly. Yet, our findings leave open the possibility that voters are more aware of misconduct by female politicians (e.g., Larcinese and Sircar 2017) or perceive similar behavior by men and women differently. Our findings also suggest that female voters are more responsive to corruption among female than among male politicians, in particular because women react more to good behavior by female politicians. This provides the first experimental evidence that men and women differ in how they hold male and female politicians accountable for misconduct.

Would similar effects be found in a real UK election? While we used a representative sample and included strong incumbency and party cues and a weak gender cue, our effects might be biased upward if our participants reacted to key attributes more strongly than they would in a real election. Would similar effects be found in other contexts? Electoral systems affect accountability patterns (Esarey and Schwindt-Bayer, forthcoming). Gender effects might be greater under open-list than under closed-list proportional representation systems, as in the former it is easier to cast a personal vote. Future research in other institutional settings can usefully test this proposition.

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