Effects of Candidate Gender on Voting Behaviors

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Abstract

The current study examines the effects of the gender of the candidate on voting behaviors. Participants completed a ten-item survey, in which they rated how likely they would be to vote for a candidate. The ten items were ten different candidate speeches, five of which were male and five of which were female. We expect to find that participants will be more likely to vote for the male candidates than the female candidates. Our results did show this trend, but they were not significant.
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Hillary Clinton is a well-established politician, from her time spent in the Oval Office as First Lady, to her current status as Secretary of State. The 2008 Presidential election pitted two candidates who are a part of historically disadvantaged groups in the American society and in politics. Clinton, being female, was the candidate who could not overcome the voting behaviors of the culture. In the primary elections, Obama, of the African American minority, had a total of 2,201 delegate votes, and Clinton ended up with 1,896, a difference of only 305 (Election Center 2008, 2008). According to Neuman (2008), the biggest obstacle that she faced in the election was that of conflicting roles. Clinton had to violate the expectations of what it is to be a woman, in that she had to take on masculine roles (e.g. competitive) in order to be seen as an appropriate leader. Theoretically, the general public did not find these characteristics to be innate in Clinton, as she was a woman, and these were qualities supposedly held only by men, and so they found her vulnerable. While this is the opinion of only one writer, it led us to question whether or not gender could be a deciding factor in an election. Does a candidate’s gender have a greater impact on the voter than the qualities and qualifications they possess?

When we look at the meaning of sexism and some of the research on gender effects in politics, we have found that the candidate’s gender can play a role in voter’s choices. First, a closer look at a definition of sexism is necessary to have a basic understanding of exactly what we are looking at. According to Dwyer, Stevens, Sullivan, and Allen (2009), “Modern sexism is characterized by the denial of continued discrimination, antagonism towards women’s demands, and lack of support for polices
designed to help women.” There are two parts of this definition that require more in depth analysis: discrimination and women’s demands. Discrimination can be defined as differential treatment of someone because of their membership in a group (Aronson, 2008). It is evident that men and women are treated differently in everyday life, simply by looking at the pay differences in males and females of the same educational background. According to Devan Filchak (2011), in 2010 the median weekly income for women was $1,258, whereas for men the weekly income was $1,758. Furthermore, Filchak reports that women earn only 75% of what men do, even with the same education levels. What’s more, according to the definition of sexism as given by Dwyer et al. (2009) denial of this discrimination between men and women in the workplace, at school, in the household, etc. only leads to more sexism.

The demands of women can be broken down to something as simple as wanting to be seen for their brains and not for their bodies. In today’s society, the media and television sexualize women and portray them in typical female roles. A prime example of this is the Desperate Housewives series. The women on that show are displayed as the typical housewives. They marry many men, shop all day, do not work, and are all extremely beautiful, which they use to get what they want. The problem with shows like this is that it creates a barrier for women who want to get out of these stereotypes. More and more women want to be seen as individuals, who are just as capable as men; however, these types of shows act as “antagonists” to these women, or barriers to their aspirations.
The final piece of this definition refers to the lack of support for policies designed to help women. This idea is relatively self-explanatory, as sexism appears when people do not help advocate issues and terms like sexual harassment policies and Title IX.

It seems that this sexism is deeply rooted in our culture, as we see examples of it in the perceived competence of males and females in their jobs. It has been found that females are rated as being better at typical female jobs, whereas males are perceived as being better at typical male jobs (Gerdes & Kelman, 1981). In a monthly review by Wootton (1997), she found that 79% of cashiers, 93% of registered nurses, and 84% of elementary teacher were female. Theoretically, because these jobs are mostly held by women, they would be considered typical female jobs, and therefore women would be considered more competent in these areas. In addition, she found that only 1% of automobile mechanics, 1% of carpenters, and 8% of engineers were women, leaving the remaining percentage of the jobs to be held by men. Again, these jobs would be the ones thought to be typically male, and so men would be rated as being better at them. It is important to note that men and women are not better at these jobs, respectively, but rather that they are only seen as being better at them. There are many examples of successful female engineers, as well as many thriving male elementary school teachers. It is only in our minds that men are better at so-called male jobs and vice versa.

From the examples above, it is obvious that we see sexism in the day-to-day jobs that people have. The question remains, however, if we can see sexism in politics. According to the gender-incongruency hypothesis (Smith, Paul, & Paul, 2007), the answer is yes. History tells us that high political positions, such as President, are classically held by men. Because of this, when a woman runs for a high position, it is
unfamiliar to voters, and so they do not see her as being capable to hold the spot. Thus, people tend not to vote for women in these high roles. This is the gender-incongruency hypothesis, which states that “discrimination will occur when the role and the person do not ‘fit’ (p. 226).” Men are seen as being more competent in higher roles because these roles are traditionally held by men. On the other hand, more women are running for lower level positions, like the Senate and House of Representatives, which increases the prevalence of women in these areas (Smith, Paul, et al., 2007).

This perceived competence or incompetence, which leads people to vote for men for certain positions and women for other positions, lies in the gender-trait hypothesis. This hypothesis and the gender-incongruency hypothesis are related in that they both attempt to explain the reason for voter’s behaviors when gender plays a role. This hypothesis states “that gender is a cue to masculinity and femininity, and it is these traits that guide voter perceptions and choice (p. 226).” More simply, being male or being female carries certain stereotypes of personality traits, which leads voters to see males as being competent or incompetent in different positions. For example, men are perceived as being more assertive and competitive, which makes them seem as though they can handle policy issues dealing with war and crime. Conversely, women are perceived as being more compassionate and honest, making them likely candidates for issues having to do with education and the social side of politics. (Smith, Paul, et al., 2007)

When posed with the general question of voting for a female, individuals showed no strong preference for or against a female being elected. However, when the opponent is not of the same gender, the female faces the stereotype that she does not hold the
supposed “better” qualities that her opponent does. This is when the voting bias is present. (Sigelman & Sigelman, 1982)

Based on the previous research, we wanted to try to figure out if the masculine and feminine stereotypes of everyday jobs and of politics would be seen in a generic survey of voting preferences. We do believe that because of the traditional stereotypes we will see a gender difference. In addition, because we are looking at gender differences in politics, we believe that both the gender-incongruency hypothesis and the gender-trait hypothesis will come into play. The gender-incongruency hypothesis will be seen when the participants do not see the gender of the candidate and the role that they are trying to fill as congruent or consistent. We did not specify what office the candidates were running for, so the participants will have to use their own judgment to determine if the role and the gender fit. It is likely that because the higher levels of political office are usually held by men, and because those offices are some of the most prevalent and talked about, that participants will assume or imagine that the candidates are running for one of these high levels. In turn, the female candidates will be at a disadvantage because these positions are traditionally held by men. Participants will use the gender-trait hypothesis by looking at the gender of the candidate and deciding what traits would be associated with this person. When the traits are not those of a good leader, as is the case for women, the participants will rate the candidate lower. Because of these two hypotheses, and the way that we believe they will be at work in our study, our hypothesis is that participants will be more likely to vote for men than for women. In order to test this, we asked participants to complete a survey, in which they rated how likely they would be to vote for a candidate. The candidates’ gender was evident through
their name, which was given before and after a brief excerpt from an unbiased political speech. Participants were told that the speeches were given by the imaginary candidates.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants were obtained through a convenience sample from a small Midwestern college. There were a total of 38 participants (19 male, 19 female) between the ages of 18 and 22.

**Materials**

Participants completed a ten question survey in which they were asked how likely they would be to vote for a particular candidate. The survey contained small excerpts from non-biased political speeches found via the Internet. Before each excerpt there the name of the candidate was presented in bold. After the excerpt, the name was presented again in italics. It was presented both times to increase the likelihood that the participants would see the name. Five of the candidates were men and the other five were women, and the names that were used were all gender congruent so that there was no confusion on the gender of the candidate. There were two different forms of the survey, the only difference being that the names of the candidate associated with the quote were switched. For example, on one form the name James Smith was presented with the quote:

> “And I say to our fellow members of the world community: let no one see this contest as a sign of American weakness. The strength of American democracy is shown most clearly through the difficulties it can overcome.”

On the second form, the same quote would be associated with the name Katherine Jones. Participants rated how likely they would be to vote for the candidate on a Likert scale,
one being definitely not and seven being definitely yes. At the end of the survey there were two additional questions asking for the participant’s gender and their political affiliation.

**Procedure**

Participants reported to the assigned room and signed an informed consent form. The directions for the survey were read aloud, ensuring that they would thoroughly read the survey. Participants completed the survey, were given a debriefing form, thanked, and allowed to leave.

**Results**

We expected to find that participants would be more likely to vote for men than for women. Our results showed this to be true, with males being rated slightly higher ($M=4.82$) than females ($M=4.61$), but these results were not significant according to a dependent t-test used to compare the mean scores, $t(38)=1.320, p=.195$. (See figure 1)

*Figure 1.* Mean candidate scores based on gender.
Discussion

Our results were not significant, but we did see the trend that we wanted to see, with participants rating men higher than women when considering if they would vote for the candidates. Because we saw the tendency we were expecting, we cannot rule out the possibility of a gender difference in ratings of candidates. Interestingly, all that was changed between the two forms of the survey was the name associated with the speech. So it seems that the gender of the candidate being taken into consideration. The difference that we found might be able to be explained by the stereotypes that we see everyday. Even though we are making strides at equalizing men’s and women’s rights, responsibilities, and power, women are still seen as different and less competent because of the deeply rooted stereotypes. The fact of the matter is that these ideals are “accepted, cultural, societal, or unconscious” making them virtually impossible to escape. When we are surrounded by the stereotypes everyday, we often do not even know that we harbor these detrimental ideas. (Agars, 2004) Again, our results were not significant, so while we saw the trend that we wanted, and we can speculate that the differences in the means were due to the gender stereotypes, we also cannot reject chance as the difference between our means.

It is not entirely unexpected that our results would show this trend, of men being rated more highly than women, but that they are not significant. Agars (2004) reports that in a meta-analysis looking at women and the evaluation of performance, they were found to be seen in a less favorable light when compared to men doing the same task time and time again. However, even though the results were consistent, they were not
significant enough to induce a change. The differences that were found were small. In other studies on leadership and hiring decisions, the same pattern has been seen, where the results show that women are consistently rated as being less competent, but the differences are small. (Agar, 2004) Perhaps our results reveal the same information: that there is a small, unconscious gender bias when it comes to perceptions of male and female competence.

We did find several limitations within our study, starting with our small sample size. More participants would help to strengthen the statistical power and possibly help lead to significance, although more participants could also lead to non-significance as well. Either way, more participants would help to give us a better idea of the direction and power of our findings.

While we did not consider it a limitation in our study, it is possible that specifying the office that the candidate was running for would help us to see if there is a gender difference, and if so, where it lies. By not tying the candidates to a specific office, we were able to look at the general trend of voting for males and females. However, as stated above, people are less likely to vote for females running for high level positions, so had we put our female candidates in these positions, we might have seen significant results. In the future, we might consider doing two different surveys, one where the candidates are running for Presidency, and the other where they are running for a lower level position like Governor, where women are more prominent. We would then compare the ratings of how likely participants would be to vote for men and women in the different offices.
In looking at our study as a whole, the trend that we saw within our results is consistent with previous research, although it is not significant. The insignificance of our results goes to show that there is still much research to be done in the field of gender biases in voting. The question still remains: Is gender the determining factor? There is so much conflicting research and data that is so close to being significant to just pretend gender does not play a role. For example, Falk and Kenski (2006) make the argument that once women have their foot in the door in a political field other than President, that there really is no gender difference in voting. The voting is based off of who has the best credentials. At the same time, they also state that stereotypes can determine the outcome of voting for women, more often in an unfavorable way than a favorable one. Overall, the goal should be to focus voters’ thoughts away from general stereotypes encountered everyday, and focus more on credentials and the characteristics of the candidate. Future research would benefit from finding exactly how to complete this task.
References


