

# **Gender Stereotypes in the American Electoral Process**

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**Abstract**

*Gender stereotypes can increase the negative perception of female candidates during an election. This can decrease a female politician's chances of running for office and/or being elected to office. When these stereotypes are attached to female candidates, it can cause bias against them which then effects voting behavior among both men and women voters. Many of these stereotypes include looking at the typical personality traits as well as the perception of competency when dealing with social, economic and foreign policy issues. How do gender stereotypes present bias against women? Using data from the American National Election Study I assess the impact of gender stereotypes on female candidates for Congress in the 2008 election. Preliminary results suggest that gender stereotypes are playing a diminishing role in contemporary elections in the United States.*

## Introduction

There has been great debate about whether or not gender stereotypes negatively affect women politicians' chances of being elected to office. Gender stereotypes are merely just the attitudes or beliefs by an individual that one gender is less competent or inferior to the other. Women are usually the target of these beliefs which make them more vulnerable to being critiqued more harshly than their male counterpart. By doing this, women candidates are solely judged on their viability rather than the factual stances that they take on social, economic, and foreign policy issues. Most of the general stereotypes are based on key character traits that are historically thought of as male, which are aggression and assertiveness whereas women are perceived to be kind and passive. It is widely speculated that voters are willing to simplify their vote and make assumptions about a candidate based on these characteristics.

While the gender of a candidate is important to consider when a candidate is seeking to be elected or reelected to office, there is a known universal gap that is presented in the literature that may help to explain why; one can only hypothesize about how gender stereotypes affect voter's perception of candidates. Research and studies have been completed, but none show a steady correlation between how they are perceived and who gets elected to office. Since there is such a weighty reliance on experiments to be performed the gender of a candidate can be rather overstated a bit. Many voters are fascinated with the conception of female candidates running for office, but when it comes down to whom they actually put into that office, it seems to be the obvious choice, which is male. Is the system flawed and biased against women candidates? Do gender stereotypes negatively affect women candidates enough to where they do not run for political office? Throughout my paper I will explain the literature I have found, examine the

questions presented, and compile four cross tabulations plus three differences of means tests to aide in my research.

## **Literature Review**

The literature focuses on the main areas that are supportive to the hypothesis. The research explores the gender stereotypes attached to candidates as well as the ideological orientations of a candidate and the effects on the voters' choice. Huddy & Terkildsen (1993a) and (1993b) focus their research on the masculine traits, overall gender traits and the beliefs about these candidates. McDonagh (2010) looks at two effects, interpretive and resource, and explains how they can affect how a voter is swayed in either direction. The article from *The New York Times* by Zezima (2010) talks about the barriers that women face in a liberal state like Massachusetts, even if women are thought to be liberal Democrats. This gives an insight from a woman that saw and experienced the discrimination on a first hand basis. Dolan (1998) and Kahn (1992) put an emphasis on the idea that partisanship helps to coerce voters into voting for the candidate that is right for the position based on party lines, not on the stances that each candidate is linked to.

### **Gender Stereotypes**

The essential issue of gender stereotypes is the personality traits that individuals attach to male and female candidates. Voters can penalize a woman candidate for not having the masculine personality traits that they desire to see in higher levels of office. “Behind female candidates’ campaign strategy is the assumption that voters stereotype them as typical women-warm, gentle, kind, and passive-but perceive male candidates as typical men-tough, aggressive, and assertive” (Huddy, 504b). Without the masculine traits that these voters want these candidates to possess, there is less belief that women can handle traditional issues such as

economy and war. They perceive women as passive and kind and would not mind having a woman deal with issues such as health care or poverty, but they want to see these women at a lower level of office.

Gender-trait and gender-belief stereotypes are partial explanations that play a role in how voters categorize candidates. Gender-trait labeling is the first stereotype that is examined. It highlights the gender-linked personality traits of men and women candidates. This is where women are viewed as kind, passive... etc., and men as aggressive, and assertive. Gender-belief labeling is the second stereotype to be looked at. This is where a higher emphasis is placed on the differing political viewpoints of each candidate. An example is where a voter believes that a woman candidate is better at displaying a more compassionate stance on social issues, rather than on military issues because women are perceived by the voter to be more liberal and Democratic than men. Both Gender-trait and gender-belief stereotypes are tested through a series of complex surveys that conclude to support that the expertise that male candidates possess is perceived to be greater than that of women. Female candidates have a greater sensitivity level when it comes to social issues of compassion; poverty and health care. However, these women can reverse the gender-trait stereotypes by emphasizing masculine traits (Huddy, 121a).

## **Voting Effects**

Two effects that are essential to look at include 1) interpretative effect and 2) resource effect. Interpretative effect is how individual voters look at candidates who would be the more suitable political leader based on what state they represent, and the people they chose to represent. Opposite of that is the resource effect which gives a breakdown of all of the factual information about a political campaign and the candidate. It provides individuals with accurate information, time, and materials to improve a voter's chance of becoming involved in the

campaign and voting. However, most voters typically do not want to put the time and energy into finding out the facts, but would rather interpret the candidate that is running themselves. When a voter is ready to vote they begin to look for cues such as a candidates' sex...etc., to guide them in the direction of making their decision. Women are more so correlated with health care and educational polices in the political system even if they do not have a direct involvement with them. This can then cause these women candidates to be associated with two more different traits; maternal and biological. "Women candidates, for example, are more likely to run for types of political office that are consistent with the stereotypes applied to them by the public" (McDonagh, 71). This simply suggests that if women run for offices that are associated more with their materialistic traits, then they will win. In spite of this, though, why should a woman candidate give in to these stereotypes and risk being held back from aspiring to their original goal of achieving a spot in the higher levels of office just to win?

### **Ideological Orientations**

Research has been conducted to test whether citizens use gender stereotypes among men and women candidates to infer their ideological orientations. It is indicated that most individuals draw distinctions of set issues involving competencies, character traits, and ideological orientations between men and women. There is the idea that candidate gender is used, like that of partisanship and demographics, as a low information outlet to help a voter determine where a candidate stands on a policy or issue whether or not the candidate has a stance on the issue. By knowing the gender of the candidate it causes many voters to simplify their political choice by making assumptions of the candidates' stances on differing issues. Voters make the distinction that a candidate, whether it is a woman or man, is either conservative or liberal and hold no other kind of characterization of that candidate.

Hypothetically, if most women hold liberal positions in office, their placement would be on the left, allowing citizens to make generalizations about those female candidates. This can demoralize conservative female candidates due to the fact that most citizens perceive these women as more liberal than they actually are which hurts their chances of receiving or holding positions in office in some circumstances. Most individuals do not listen to the factual evidence that is presented to them, but rather votes based on their first impulse of how they feel about that candidate.

Massachusetts recently had an election to fulfill the Senate seat of Edward Kennedy. The two candidates that were in the race to gain control of the seat were Scott Brown, a Republican and Martha Coakley, a Democrat. The defeat of Coakley in a state that is predominately liberal and consistently votes for a Democratic president has individuals concerned about whether or not women can succeed in politics. The fact that there are very few women running at the lower levels of office can contribute as to why there are fewer women in the higher levels of office in Massachusetts. There is no replenishing of women on the lower level of politics; therefore there is no candidate to move up to run for the Senate.

A former state treasurer, Shannon O'Brien commented, "When you close your eyes and think of a governor or a president, immediately a picture comes to mind-for many people that is not a woman" (*New York Times*, 2010). O'Brien has come under criticism for her gender and once received a letter condemning the fact that she had a child in office; a topic that is irrelevant to her position in office. She even pointed out the fact that it's harder for a woman to hold on to the positive feelings of running when there are reminders that a woman is perceived more differently than a male candidate. Women have to work a lot harder to credential themselves and once a negative attack happens, it's harder for the woman to recover. When a woman of almost

the same stature expresses something of that magnitude, how do other women believe that they will succeed in politics?

When citizens vote for candidates, gender is considered when they cast their vote.

Women are more likely to identify with a woman candidate than they are with a male candidate. Women feel a sort of gender identity to these candidates because of their positions on issues that can be related to them (Kahn, 510).

## **Partisanship**

Partisanship provides a reasonable argument as to why more women voters are voting for women candidates. Generally speaking, women are considered to vote Democratic in elections. Most of the women that were up for election in 1992 were Democrats and as a result, women voters voted for these women candidates in attempt to get them elected to the House. “They also find that the relation is amplified when women candidates run ‘as women,’ and are easily identified as feminists,” (Dolan, 273). Gender can be viewed as an essential variable in any congressional election. The overall issue that anticipated discrimination could alter the way that women run for office. If a woman candidate were to read that she was inferior to her counterpart, that woman may begin to have uncertainties as to whether or not she could win in that election. This overall uncertainty can diminish the women’s likelihood of running for office.

Women candidates, both Democrat and Republican, tend to be perceived as liberal opposed to men whether they belong to the same political party or not. When looking at just men and women as individuals, research shows that both tend to agree on traditional women issues which can include the Equal Rights Amendment and rights to abort a fetus. Though women are less likely to support war efforts, they are willing to protect traditional family values and welfare as well. Once the candidates have made a distinction about which issues they are



most likely to support, women voters are seen to vote for the candidate, which is mostly a woman that displays a gentler stance on a policy. In other words, since women voters identify themselves with women candidates because they tend to feel sympathetic on such issues, they vote for female candidates. The stereotypes that are presented, affect the issues that these candidates emphasize within their campaign and the majority of these candidates will use the feminine image traits in hopes that they will get elected to office (Herrnson, 245).

While gaining the support of their constituents, women also have to obtain support and recognition of their party. Whether a woman candidate has received a party nomination under the condition that there is no hope for that party to win has been disputed a great deal. One Democratic National Committee Chair is known for his comment, “The only time to run a woman is when things look so bad that your only chance is to do something dramatic” (Burrell, 83). Although this was proven to hold true, there are some that believe that women could potentially be beneficial in assisting to unite a party as a stronger faction. However, it is difficult to find a strong woman who is willing to put out their beliefs when they feel that the party they attach themselves to is biased and reluctant to see them prevail.

## **Media**

When a candidate is beginning the process of running for office, the media is usually the major vehicle for reaching out to their constituents. This is the foundation for them to start their process of acquiring an identity in politics based on using media as an outlet. This demonstrates the importance of having unbiased media coverage in their campaign coverage.

The issue of whether or not male and female candidates receive the same amount of media coverage has been and may possibly always be under question. A study was conducted from 1982-1986 of twenty six Senate races displaying the differences in media coverage of men

and women candidates (Kahn, 500). A code was given to the highest ranking newspaper within a state everyday from the start of September 1<sup>st</sup> through the day of the election. If a candidate was mentioned within the newspaper, it also received a code (Kahn, 501 Table 1). It was concluded that women receive less media coverage than men. When the coverage was on the women it was about their viability rather than stances on issues. The newspapers referred to the male candidates as sure winners whereas the females were only seen as competitive or somewhat competitive. This type of media report can place women candidates at a disadvantage considering that it gives males a positive outlook in an election while the women are seen as competitive, but not quite up to par with the standards of their counterparts.

The quantity of media coverage on a candidate plays an important role in one's campaign because the recognition can be crucial. If news editors and reporters feel that female candidates are newsworthy than they receive more attention in the news. However, if these same news editors feel they are not newsworthy, than they lose attention thus giving their competitor more time in the news spotlight. While newspapers vary in size, the more coverage a candidate can get within the larger newspapers, like *The New York Times*, can boost the campaign by a long shot. With these results, voters will have a difficult time with obtaining violable information on the female candidates. The limitation of such information can lead to a biased account and lean towards the favor of men candidates over women. With the current patterns of media coverage, some conclude that women running for office have a critical obstacle to overcome.

## **Methods and Analysis**

The data that was used for my analysis was taken from a data set provided by the American National Election Study from 2008. This data set included variables that were beneficial to my thesis including respondent gender, better handle education for both Democratic

and Republican House candidates, better handle foreign affairs for both Democratic and Republican House candidates, and congressional districts. The variable better handle education is just simply stated as whether a male or female Democrat or Republican would do a better job as is the better handle foreign affairs variable; would a male or female Democrat or Republican do a better job. The variable for the congressional districts only included certain districts within a state, not the gender or political party of that candidate. I created two variables REPCANGDR and DEMCANGDR to help distinguish between the Republican and Democrats and which races were male vs. male, female vs. female, and male vs. female. I coded women with a 0 and men with a 1.

First in my research, I decided to create three tables of difference of means scores according to how Democratic or Republican male and female respondents feel on a feeling thermometer to both Democratic and Republican House candidates. The feeling thermometer has a range of zero, not feeling warmly, to one hundred, feeling very warmly towards a candidate. The negative numbers are proving my hypothesis to be correct, but only a couple shows to be statically significant.

In the first table I created I wanted to see how Democratic respondents felt towards both a female and male Republican and Democratic House candidate. Results show that when it is a Democratic House candidate that is a female, a male respondent does not feel very warmly towards them leaving it with a mean of 55.65, but feels more warmly towards the male at 60.76; the difference is -5.11 leaving it statically significant. The difference of means with female Democratic respondents is only -0.928 which is not statically significant. Opposite of that, when it is a Republican House candidate that is a female, male Democratic respondents feel warmly towards them by only 55.03 while they only feel a mere 55.47 warmth towards the male

candidates. The difference is not a very large sum and only stands at -0.44. When it is a Democratic female respondent they only felt a warmth factor of 53.37 towards the women Republican House candidate and only felt a warmth factor of 56.36 towards the male Republican House candidate. My initial belief was that the Democratic respondents would feel more warmly towards a Democratic House candidate, which was the truth, but even further I believed that the male candidates would receive a higher warmth feeling from males which is shown to be statically significant when it comes to Democratic House candidates among male respondents.

(Table 1 about here)

For the second table that I created, I wanted to see how Republican male and female respondents felt on the feeling thermometer towards Democratic and Republican House female and male candidates. When it is a Democratic female House candidate, male respondents feel more warmly towards them at 60.23 while they only felt a warmth factor of 59.35 which is a difference of 0.88. When it was still a Democratic House candidate that was a male, female Republican respondents only felt warmth of 63.02 towards them while only feeling warmth of 61.88; difference of -1.135. Opposite of that, when it was a Republican House candidate that was a female, male respondents felt a worth of 58.52 versus feeling a 54.94 warmth towards male Republican House candidates; difference of 3.745. Among female Republican respondents they felt warmth of 56.97 towards female Republican House candidates while they only felt a warmth factor of 55.65 towards the male Republican House candidates; difference of 1.321. I originally believed that the Republican respondents would feel more warmly towards the Republican candidates, but this does not prove to be true. There was also the belief that the male Respondents would feel more warmly towards the male candidates, but results show that male

respondents felt more warmly to the female candidates than they did with the male candidates. No number proved to be statically significant.

(Table 2 about here)

For my last table using the feeling thermometer and difference of means analysis, I wanted to compile all of the male and female respondents into two larger groups of Democratic and Republican respondents; by political party. When it was a Democratic House female candidate, Democratic respondents felt a warmth factor of 59.24 while the same respondents felt a warmth factor of 62.16 towards the male Democratic candidates; difference of -2.91 making this statically significant. Still looking at the Democratic House candidate when it was a female Republican, respondents felt a warmth factor of 61.17 towards them while feeling a warmth factor of 61.42 towards the male Democratic House candidate; difference of -0.241. Now looking at the Republican House candidate when it is a female running, Democratic respondents felt a warmth factor of 54.05 towards them and felt a warmth factor of 55.95 towards the male Republican candidate; difference of -1.9. Now looking among Republican respondents when it's a Republican House female candidate, Republican respondents felt a warmth factor of 57.63 towards them while feeling a warmth factor of 55.33 towards the Republican male House candidates; difference of 2.326. The idea of doing this was to show that Democrats would favor Democratic House candidates and Republicans would favor Republican House candidates. However, results only show that the Democrats favor male candidates over female candidates while the Republicans favor the female candidates over the male candidates.

(Table 3 about here)

I started with a simple crosstabulation table of the education perception of Democratic candidate gender and respondent gender. The education variable is simply asking who would be

better to handle education a female or male candidate among male and female respondents. The education variable was used as my dependent variable while the independent variable was the one I created for DEMCANGDR and I controlled for the respondents gender. By doing this I was able to determine that, while there is not a strong correlation, male respondents felt a female candidate would do a better job than a male candidate. The male respondents felt that a female Democratic House candidate would do a better job by 23% while they felt that male Democratic House candidates would only do better by 2.9%. Female respondents also felt that a female Democratic House candidate would do a better job at handling education at only 16.8%.

(Table 4 about here)

I also created a second crosstabulation table of the education perception of Republican candidate gender and respondent gender. I kept the education variable as my dependent variable, but changed the independent variable to REPCANGDR and still controlled for the respondents gender. I was able to establish a connection between all the variables and my hypothesis. Both female and male respondents believed that when it is a Republican House candidate, a female would do a better job at handling education over a male candidate. Male respondents felt that a female Republican candidate would do a better job by 17.3% and female respondents felt that the female Republican candidate would do better than a male Republican candidate by 18.9%. However, the respondents felt that they would both do an equally good job, but there is still that small margin that shows otherwise.

(Table 5 about here)

For further crosstabulation tests, I wanted to examine the relationship between both the House Republicans and Democrats when it comes to the idea of foreign affairs. The foreign affairs variable is asking who would be better at handling foreign affairs between a female or

male candidate among male and female respondents. I kept my independent variable the same with DEMCANGDR while my dependent variable changed to who is considered better in foreign affairs and still controlling for the respondent gender. The percentages are not marginally that different, but amongst male respondents they felt that male Democratic House candidates would do a better job handling foreign affairs by 16.7%; the female candidate only received 3.3% of the vote. Female respondents felt that a male Democratic House candidate would do a better job than a female by 13%. Again, the female Democratic House candidate only received 3.4% of the respondents.

(Table 6 about here)

I performed the same test of relations between the House Republican candidates this time. I changed my independent variable back to REPCANGDR and kept my dependent variable at who is better in foreign affairs, still controlling for the respondent gender. It was concluded that both male and female respondents felt that a male Republican House candidate would do a better job than a female Republican House candidate. Male respondents felt that the male candidate would do a better job by 17.6% while female respondents believed that the male candidate would do a better job by 13.7% opposed to women candidates that received only 1.4%. It is interesting to look at the equally would to a good job spot on each crosstabulation. The majority of respondents believed by a huge margin that each would do an equally good job as the other candidate.

(Table 7 about here)

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

When looking at the results of my research my hypothesis is not proven to the fullest. My literature provided proof that my hypothesis is warranted; female candidates are thought to

be stereotyped that causes a negative perception of them, not all the time though. The results from my analysis are fairly conclusive that while there is a large portion showing that stereotypes do not affect women candidates, there is still a small portion that displays otherwise. In some instances the male respondents felt more warmly towards female candidates than they did towards male candidates that belonged to the same political party. Overall my results are inconclusive and ultimately my hypothesis calls for more research to be done in the future.



## Appendix

Table 1. Difference of Means Analysis-Feeling Thermometer – Among Democratic Male and Female Respondents

	Candidate Gender	Male Respondents	Female Respondents
		Mean	Mean
Democratic House Candidate	Female	55.65	62.29
	Male	60.76	63.22
Difference		-5.11*	-0.928
Republican House Candidate	Female	55.03	53.37
	Male	55.47	56.36
Difference		-0.44	-2.998

\*Significant at .05 level

Table 2. Difference of Means Analysis-Feeling Thermometer – Among Republican Male and Female Respondents

	Candidate Gender	Male Respondents	Female Respondents
		Mean	Mean
Democratic House Candidate	Female	60.23	61.88
	Male	59.35	63.02
Difference		0.88	-1.135
Republican House Candidate	Female	58.52	56.97
	Male	54.94	55.65
Difference		3.574	1.321

\*Significant at .05 level

Table 3. Difference of Means Analysis-Feeling Thermometer – By Political Party

	Candidate Gender	Democratic Respondents	Republican Respondents
		Mean	Mean
Democratic House Candidate	Female	59.24	61.17
	Male	62.16	61.42
Difference		-2.91*	-0.241
Republican House Candidate	Female	54.05	57.63
	Male	55.95	55.33
Difference		-1.9	2.326

\*Significant at .05 level

Table 4: Crosstabs of Education Perceptions by Candidate Gender and Respondent Gender for Democratic Candidates

Respondent: gender			Gender of Democrat House Candidate		Total
			Female	Male	
Male	Better handle education	A Democrat who is a man would do better job	9 5.9%	20 2.9%	29 3.5%
		A Democrat who is a woman would do better job	35 23.0%	146 21.4%	181 21.7%
		They would do an equally good job	108 71.1%	517 75.7%	625 74.9%
	Total	152 100.0%	683 100.0%	835 100.0%	
Female	Better handle education	A Democrat who is a man would do better job	2 1.1%	23 2.5%	25 2.3%
		A Democrat who is a woman would do better job	30 16.8%	168 18.2%	198 18.0%
		They would do an equally good job	147 82.1%	731 79.3%	878 79.7%
	Total	179 100.0%	922 100.0%	1101 100.0%	

Table 5: Crosstabs of Education Perceptions by Candidate Gender and Respondent Gender for Republican Candidates

Respondent: gender			Gender of Republican House Candidate		Total
			Female	Male	
Male	Better handle education	A Republican who is a man would do better job	4 3.8%	20 2.7%	24 2.8%
		A Republican who is a woman would do better job	18 17.3%	141 18.9%	159 18.7%
		They would do an equally good job	82 78.8%	586 78.4%	668 78.5%
	Total	104 100.0%	747 100.0%	851 100.0%	
Female	Better handle education	A Republican who is a man would do better job	3 2.1%	19 1.9%	22 2.0%
		A Republican who is a woman would do better job	27 18.9%	138 14.0%	165 14.7%
		They would do an equally good job	113 79.0%	826 84.0%	939 83.4%
	Total	143 100.0%	983 100.0%	1126 100.0%	

Table 6: Crosstabs of Foreign Affairs Perception by Candidate Gender and Respondent Gender for Democratic Candidates

Respondent: gender			Gender of Democrat House Candidate		Total
			Female	Male	
Male	Better in foreign affairs	A Democrat who is a man would do better job	31 20.4%	114 16.7%	145 17.4%
		A Democrat who is a woman would do better job	5 3.3%	25 3.7%	30 3.6%
		They would do an equally good job	116 76.3%	543 79.6%	659 79.0%
	Total	152 100.0%	682 100.0%	834 100.0%	
Female	Better in foreign affairs	A Democrat who is a man would do better job	25 14.2%	119 13.0%	144 13.2%
		A Democrat who is a woman would do better job	6 3.4%	52 5.7%	58 5.3%
		They would do an equally good job	145 82.4%	743 81.3%	888 81.5%
	Total	176 100.0%	914 100.0%	1090 100.0%	

Table 7: Crosstabs of Foreign Affairs Perceptions by Candidate Gender and Respondent Gender for Republican Candidates

Respondent: gender			Gender of Republican House Candidate		Total
			Female	Male	
Male	Better in foreign affairs	A Republican who is a man would do better job	17 16.3%	131 17.6%	148 17.4%
		A Republican who is a woman would do better job	3 2.9%	24 3.2%	27 3.2%
		They would do an equally good job	84 80.8%	590 79.2%	674 79.4%
	Total	104 100.0%	745 100.0%	849 100.0%	
Female	Better in foreign affairs	A Republican who is a man would do better job	25 17.6%	134 13.7%	159 14.2%
		A Republican who is a woman would do better job	2 1.4%	37 3.8%	39 3.5%
		They would do an equally good job	115 81.0%	805 82.5%	920 82.3%
	Total	142 100.0%	976 100.0%	1118 100.0%	

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