THE IMPACT OF PREJUDICE ON FEMALE CANDIDATES: An Experimental Look at Voter Inference

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Current research suggests that gender prejudice no longer impedes women from winning top-level political positions. Nevertheless, the number of women in all levels of political office remains startlingly low – meriting a closer look at the role of gender prejudice. This study takes an experimental look at how voters respond to female candidates pushing unambiguous, tough policy stands. Interestingly, voters seem to infer that women possess traditional "feminine" strengths even when they emit a clear "masculine" message. Therefore, female candidates should not fear visceral reactions from voters if they assume an aggressive campaign posture. Rather, this "masculine" approach may be the optimal campaign strategy for women seeking top-level or administrative positions.

Gender prejudice, at first glance, still inhibits women from permeating the upper echelons of public office. Clearly, voters have not placed women into positions of political power. Only 2 women currently serve in the Senate, while 25 occupy seats in the House of Representatives (a paltry 6%). At the state level, two women are currently residing in the governor's mansion (with their "first men"), and, only 15.6% of state legislators are women – supposedly a fertile "jumping-off" point for female political aspirants.

Allport (1964) defined prejudice as "an antipathy based on a faulty and inflexible generalization. . . . It may be directed toward a group as a whole, or toward an individual because he is a member of the group. . . . The net affect of prejudice, thus defined, is to place the object of prejudice at some disadvantage not merited by his own misconduct."[1] Drawing on Allport, one can easily extract a simple definition of gender prejudice in the political arena. If the electorate holds a rigid set of beliefs (i.e., sex-role orientations), and imputes characteristics on a female candidate to her disadvantage, then the

AMERICAN POLITICS QUARTERLY, Vol. 19 No. 2, April 1991 248-261

woman is clearly a victim of prejudice. Such prejudice can manifest itself as an overt refusal to cast a ballot for a woman—because she is perceived as inherently unfit to pursue public office—or, in a more subtle form—the voters may arbitrarily assign to the candidate a battery of traits (e.g., "caring," "emotional," or "permissive") that make her seem unqualified for the job "regardless of her gender."

Recent research, however, tends to downplay the impact of prejudice. Carroll (1985) points to Gallop surveys that reveal the fading of overt hostility toward female candidates. Today, respondents are likely to claim they will vote for a woman regardless of the level of office (national or local) or her role (executive or legislative).[2] More rigorous studies tend to substantiate this polling data. At the local level, Karnig and Walter (1976, 608) found that female candidates for city council "are not victimized by insurmountable prejudice at the polls." Darcy, Welch, and Clark (1987, 55), focusing on state legislative races, conclude that "voter reluctance to support female candidates, as observed in the 1950's and 1960's, ha[s] all but disappeared." Eckstrand and Eckert (1981, 82), using experimental data to study gubernatorial races, discovered that "in a majority of cases bias against female candidates was not evident." Finally, at the national level, Darcy and Schramm (1977, 9) investigated the 1970, 1972, and 1974 congressional races, and concluded "candidate sex has little or no effect on electoral outcomes." Burrell (1988, 51) concurred, arguing that in the 1984 contests "incumbency advantage . . . rather than discrimination accounts for the small number of female members in Congress."

In sum, current research steers scholars away from assessing the impact of gender prejudice at any level of public office. Most urge a serious investigation of incumbency advantage, which insulates the resource-laden male office-holders (Carroll 1985; Darcy, Welch, and Clark 1987; Burrell 1988). Such "structural barriers" impede the progress of women despite a burgeoning pool of qualified and ambitious female candidates.[3] Put simply, few women are incumbents, incumbents routinely raze challengers, hence, the flow of women into public office trickles and drips in accordance with incumbent retirements and deaths. The dearth of female office-holders, it is commonly claimed, can best be remedied by electoral reforms, like limited terms and financial assistance to challengers.

The effect of incumbency advantage is indisputable and clearly devastating to challengers of any gender. Nevertheless, current research is remiss in quietly dismissing the impact of voter prejudice—particularly in races for upper-level or executive posts. True, an overt refusal to cast a ballot for a woman is an electoral relic. However, voters persist in assigning traits to a woman (in spite of her actual character). Female candidates are commonly perceived as passive, emotional, and caring; men, as active, ambitious, aggressive, and competent (Sapiro 1983; Mandel 1981; Frieze et al. 1978). Research has suggested that such "voter inference" of feminine traits will emerge under certain conditions:

1. *The paucity of women in upper-level offices may draw attention to their gender.* Conover (1981) argued "the minority status of one candidate as compared to others—be it ideological, partisan, racial, or sexual in nature—may encourage voters to apply the stereotype associated with the minority group or the individual candidate." As Patricia Schroeder said, women seeking high-level office are "still a novelty act"[4]—hence, voters may be drawn to the unique "feminine character" of one of the candidates.
2. *Studies reveal that if a voter is presented with an ambiguous campaign environment (not exactly an electoral oddity), the voter is likely to use gender as a "cue" and mechanically infer a number of characteristics (e.g., "warm," "caring," or "permissive") about the candidate.* Gender, then, is a low-cost source of information when the candidates are calculatedly vague (Conover 1981; Conover and Feldman 1986).
3. *Voters may value and actually seek a candidate with traditional "male" traits when casting a ballot for an executive or top-level leader.* This question was raised by Rosenwasser and Seale (1988) in their study of hypothetical presidential candidates. The authors found that female candidates were rated higher than men on "feminine" presidential duties, and men were rated higher on "masculine" duties. The authors also discovered that feminine presidential duties were not considered as important as masculine duties. Therefore, women achieve little if they remain ambiguous or tout their feminine strengths during their campaign. This left Rosenwasser and Seale to muse,

> If political offices such as the presidency are perceived primarily in terms of traditional masculine characteristics, then perhaps women will be successful in running for these political offices only when they are perceived as having masculine attributes. However, the possibility

exists that "masculine" women could be penalized for violating traditional norms for women. Would a "masculine" woman be less likely to win than a "masculine" man?[5]

Thus we are left to conclude that voters infer a number of feminine traits about a female candidate if she is running for an executive or upper-level post, and, if she remains somewhat ambiguous in her campaign themes. This could be damaging to women's chances of electoral success – if, as Rosenwasser and Seale suggest, voters seek traditionally ascribed masculine traits in a candidate. Further, as Rosenwasser also suggests, if a woman chooses to aggressively seek an executive post by emitting masculine traits and stressing masculine themes, she may be punished by the tradition-bound voters toting conventional norms. Ruth Mandel (1981) labels this the "double bind": "If you're assertive and aggressive enough to do the job, you're unfeminine and therefore unacceptable; if you're not aggressive enough, you can't do the job – and, in either case, good-bye."[6]

It is the purpose of this study, then, to investigate (1) to what extent voters infer traits about a female candidate in an ambiguous environment, (2) whether these inferences are still made when the candidate sounds clearly masculine themes, and (3) whether voters actually look to masculine women with disfavor, and punish them at the polls.

The first task, assessing the extent and effect of voter inference in an ambiguous environment, was completed by Virginia Sapiro (1981-2). Sapiro provided students in two introductory political science classes with a short portion of a speech delivered by a "candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives." The speech, actually entered into the *Congressional Record* by Senator Howard Baker, was selected because it was topical (it discussed the economy), ideologically neutral, and painfully ambiguous. The students were told that the research in which they were participating was "a study of people's reactions to political speeches." So, they had no prompting to use gender as a cue. The speech was followed by a battery of questions asking for evaluations of the speech and the candidate. Cleverly, Sapiro informed one class the speech was delivered by "Joan Leeds," while telling the other "John Leeds." Sapiro hypothesized that the subjects will draw on sex as a cue when the candidates fail to present clear, cogent policy stands.

Sapiro's findings confirmed her suspicions. She found that Joan Leeds was evaluated favorably—more favorably than John—on feminine issues not directly addressed in the speech ("improving the educational system," "maintaining honesty and integrity in government," and "dealing with health problems"). Interestingly, the issues *directly* mentioned in the speech did not appear to provoke different evaluations. Joan and John were evaluated similarly in specific economic spheres like "assisting the poor," "dealing with big business," and "protecting the interests of the consumer." Apparently, explicitly grappling with an issue may cut into the likelihood of voter inference and into the punishing application of prejudice. It is still not clear, though, whether a woman can unambiguously stress masculine themes without invoking the wrath of tradition-bound voters.

THE METHODS

This study, like Sapiro's, drew students from introductory political science courses and provided them with a portion of a campaign speech. In this case, however, the students were told the address was delivered by a gubernatorial candidate from a midwestern state. The students were informed this was a study to measure what information voters glean from campaign speeches, and they were asked to assess the candidate's competence based on their perceptions drawn from the speech. One half of the students were told the speech was delivered by "Jim Preston," the others, "Elizabeth Preston." The questionnaire appears in Appendix B.

The speech was intentionally less ambiguous and more partisan than Sapiro's selection. It was delivered by Kay Orr (R-NE) during her successful 1986 gubernatorial bid (see Appendix A). Orr's address was selected because her message was unmistakable and her image seemed inappropriate according to those who subscribe to the "double bind." Local politicos had long labelled Orr "The Dragon Lady," a name reflective of her serious demeanor and sharp tongue. Predictably, during the campaign, Orr relentlessly hammered themes reflective of the toughest of Reagan Republicans. In the excerpt given to the students, for example, she said:

> I am a traditionalist. . . . Government's role is not to dominate our lives, but to offer the help that will allow us to reach our full potential. Government's role is not to shackle us with an antiquated tax system. To the contrary . . . we must fashion a government which encourages people to prosper. Personal success cannot be given to us. We must earn it.

Already, it is clear that Orr is not shrouding herself in perceived, stereotypical, feminine themes (caring, compassion, permissiveness). She delivered a strong laissez-faire message, frowning on governmental programs and new taxes. She also took an unequivocal stand on crime:

> I vow to do all within my power to bring about the day when our children can go to school happy and safe – free from the drug pushers, peddling their fake happiness. . . . The fight against drugs and other ills of our society must be waged on many fronts: By law enforcement agencies, by the media, by our schools, by our churches, and most of all, by our mothers and fathers, working with their children. Strong family values offer the best prospect for causing most people to be and remain law-abiding citizens.
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> But, strong constraints are needed too . . . the murderer must know that the state could impose the ultimate penalty. I would not hesitate to implement the dealth penalty if it were to protect [our] citizens.

Orr made it quite clear that heinous criminals and drug kingpins would garner no sympathy from her. Orr's solution to the drug problem, like the economy, was through volunteer efforts (one can count four "points of light" in her address – the family, media, church, and the schools) and also, through the "ultimate penalty," the ultimate (and increasingly popular) display of campaign toughness. The respondents, then, were exposed to tough stands on issues and a somewhat masculine demeanor. If Sapiro's suggestions prove correct, the respondents will not differentiate between the man and the woman when considering explicitly mentioned themes (like crime and the economy), even though they appear to be masculine stands. Further, it seems likely that when information is left unclear and ambiguous, the respondents will fill in the gaps with stereotypical beliefs, viewing the woman as more competent when grappling with traditional feminine issues.

THE FINDINGS

The data produced from the survey cut into the notion that women are inextricably trapped in a "double bind." It appears that female candidates can employ tough messages without being rebuked by startled voters. A glance at the means (Table 1) provides evidence that voters may infer that tough, aggressive women still possess latent (stereotypical) warmth. When asked to assess the competence of the candidates, respondents were clearly more inclined to evaluate Elizabeth more favorably in traditionally female areas of strength—such as "maintaining honesty and integrity in government," "improving education," "assisting the poor," "encouraging the arts," and "dealing with health concerns." All of these areas achieved some level of statistical significance, even though they were of little significance to Orr in the speech.

In regard to issues explicitly sounded in the speech ("dealing with crime" and "strengthening the economy"), the respondents did not perceive one candidate as particularly more competent than the other. It is interesting that Elizabeth could pull even with Jim in these traditionally "male" areas of strength.

Another way to analyze the data is to examine the percentage of respondents willing to label the candidate "competent" (or, conversely, "incompetent") in regard to the various issues. Table 2 shows these results. In the areas left unambiguous by the candidate (e.g., the economy and dealing with crime), Jim and Elizabeth were judged to be equally competent. Of the respondents 56% placed Mrs. Preston on the competent side of the scale, while 51% believed Mr. Preston to be competent. As for "dealing with crime," Mrs. Preston again eked out a small advantage over her male counterpart, 63% to 59%.

Respondents consistently perceived Elizabeth as more competent than Jim in areas *not* predominant in the speech, and from traditional "female" areas of strength. Education was mentioned in the speech, but only fleetingly, as a means to an end (better jobs, less crime). A full 68% identified Elizabeth as more competent, while only 41% tagged Jim as competent in the educational arena. On the flip side, 30% believed Jim to be incompetent handling educational concerns, and only 16% envisioned Elizabeth as unable to improve education.

TABLE 1
Average Competency Rating of Jim and Elizabeth Preston

Category	*Mean Scores (on a 1-7 scale)*	
	Jim	*Elizabeth*
Maintaining honesty, integrity	4.03	3.06[a]
Improving education	3.71	3.20[b]
Assisting the poor	4.62	4.05[b]
Encouraging the arts	5.05	4.42[b]
Dealing with health concerns	4.45	3.97[c]
Protecting the consumer	3.97	3.90
Strengthening the economy	3.66	3.38
Dealing with crime	3.24	3.38
Dealing with big business	3.71	3.75
Dealing with unions	4.53	4.61
Making decisions on farm issues	4.89	4.65
	$N = 71$ (40 female, 31 male)	$N = 71$ (41 female, 30 male)

a. Significant to the .01 level.
b. Significant to the .05 level.
c. Significant to the .10 level.

In the area of "maintaining honesty," Elizabeth was viewed as competent by 52% of the respondents—Jim by 42%. People were twice as prone to see Jim as incompetent in regard to honesty and integrity in government—37% to 16%. The other areas in which Mrs. Preston was evaluated more favorably (although neither candidate, given the tenor of the speech, was evaluated too favorably) nestled neatly into traditional female areas of strength—"assisting the poor" and "dealing with health problems."[7]

CONCLUSIONS

Thus, after investigating the mean scores and the respondents' views of candidate competence, one is left to conclude that women do not have to enunciate their feminine strengths. The voters will infer these traits in the absence of an explicit message. Further, female candidates do not have to fear sending tough, masculine messages to the elec-

TABLE 2
Percentage Labelling Candidate "Competent" and "Incompetent"

Category	*Competent*		*Incompetent*	
	Jim	*Liz*	*Jim*	*Liz*
Maintaining honesty, integrity	42	52	37	16
Improving education	41	68	30	16
Assisting the poor	25	31	52	41
Dealing with health concerns	20	30	48	27
Encouraging the arts	16	16	55	56
Protecting the consumer	31	34	28	27
Strengthening the economy	51	56	23	18
Dealing with crime	59	63	23	20
Dealing with big business	48	41	31	38
Dealing with unions	21	13	42	42
Making decisions on farm issues	13	8	45	46
	$N = 71$ (40 female, 31 male)		$N = 71$ (41 female, 30 male)	

torate. Voters are just as likely to accept a woman's tough themes as they are a man's – and, this does not appear to affect the likelihood of vote (see Table 3). Curiously, Table 3 also reveals that voters, while equally eager to vote for men and women, perceive women as less likely to pierce the political arena. Women, despite their appeal, are apparently still perceived as "long-shots" for top-level posts.

Prejudice, then, is apparently still evident among American voters, although not necessarily to the candidate's disadvantage. If women vying for executive posts stress unambiguous masculine themes, they can expect voters to still assign to them a battery of feminine traits – possibly giving them an edge over their one-dimensional male opponent. On the other hand, a female candidate who opts for ambiguity, or stresses feminine strengths, is likely to be easy prey for voter inference and an opponent's attacks.[8]

Those who desire more women in public office should view these results with guarded optimism. Female candidates need not worry about appearing too strident or uncharacteristically tough. Indeed, given the current mood of most voters, it would behoove female candidates to forcefully ask voters to read their lips when discussing

TABLE 3
Likelihood of Vote and Perceived Likelihood of Victory

	Jim Preston	*Elizabeth Preston*
Likelihood of vote	41	45
Believed likelihood of victory	83	59[a]
	N = 71 (40 female, 31 male)	N = 71 (41 female, 30 male)

a. Significant to the .05 level.

crime and taxation issues. Current research should not summarily discount the role of prejudice in contests involving female candidates. Rather, it should focus on what sort of cognitive baggage voters persist in bringing to the polls, and, how voters respond to various types of female candidates with different kinds of messages.

APPENDIX A

King Solomon, who is said to have been "the wisest of all men," wrote in the Book of Proverbs: "Where there is no vision, the people perish." I believe that gem of wisdom is as true today as when written over 3,000 years ago.

I have a vision of a better state. I want to tell you about my dream . . . and ask you to help me make it a reality.

It is a clear, realistic, achievable vision of our state with much better living conditions. My vision is of a state with the highest standard of living in America. My vision is of a state with a strong, healthy people, living in a healthy environment. My vision is of a state that helps its senior citizens maintain their independence and dignity within their own homes . . . as long as possible.

My vision is of a state with a superior system of education, at elementary, junior, and senior high schools, at independent colleges, and within our university system.

Finally, my vision is of a state that will have attractive jobs for all, particularly our bright young men and women . . . so they don't feel they have to leave the state to find golden opportunities.

I am a traditionalist. I cherish the traditions that have endured in our state. We have strong traditions of decency, fair play, individualism and independence. Government's role is not to dominate our lives . . . but to offer the help that will allow us to achieve our full potential. Government's role is not to shackle us with an antiquated tax system. To the contrary . . . we must fashion a government which encourages people to prosper.

The gates of opportunity must be opened wide, allowing entrance to all who will work for a better life. Personal success cannot be given to us. Each of us must earn it.

I consider one of society's greatest challenges the maintenance of strong families and high moral values. I vow to do all within my power to bring about the day soon when our children

can go to school happy and safe – free from the drug pushers, peddling their fake happiness in the form of "grass," "coke," and heroin. The fight against drugs and other ills of our society must be waged on many fronts: by our law enforcement agencies, by help from the media, by our schools, by our churches, by our mothers and fathers, working with their children. Strong family values and education offer the best prospects for causing most people to be and remain law-abiding citizens.

But, strong legal restraints are needed too. The repeating criminal must know that he faces certain incarceration, and the murderer must know that the state could impose the ultimate penalty. I would not hesitate to implement the death penalty if it were to protect the citizens of our state.

Law enforcement cannot succeed without dedicated men and women like you . . . who lay your lives on the line every hour you're on duty protecting and preserving the security of this city. I thank you for your efforts. But, recognition is not enough. You must be compensated adequately for protecting our citizenry. As I see it, there are several tasks we need to accomplish if our public employees are going to receive the scale of wages and salaries they deserve.

The number one task is to create private sector jobs – jobs, jobs, jobs – more jobs and better paying jobs. But government can be helpful in establishing the climate conducive to job creation.

One of the first tasks I will accomplish as governor to help create more jobs is putting our state's financial house in order. For the past few years, our state has staggered from one financial crisis to another. With 2 years experience as chief of staff in the governor's office, I have already played a major role in building state budgets from the bottom up.

With 5 years as your state treasurer I have a good understanding of the income and expenditures of state government – in other words, your tax dollars. I have the know-how to prepare hard-nosed, realistic, conservative budgets . . . where projected spending will not exceed projected income. I will set priorities around essential programs. I promise you there will be no new taxes . . . and no tax increases.

We can create more and better jobs by achieving higher levels of excellence in education. We must strive for the best educational system from Kindergarten to graduate school.

We can do as much for our citizenry as we dare to dream. We can do more for our citizens than we have dared to dream by creating an economic climate that will generate more jobs, better-paying jobs. When more people are working, making more money, establishing new enterprises, more money is being generated. It follows, then, in a healthier, more diversified economy, the tax money to pay for government services is generated without a need to raise taxes.

This is not a pipedream . . . it is a vision for the immediate future. To achieve this vision, I need your help. I need the help of your friends and neighbors. I need the help of all the people of this state, working with diligence and with unity to make it an even greater state.

APPENDIX B

1. How well do you think Mrs. Preston understands the issues discussed in the speech?
   (1) Very well
   (2) Fairly well
   (3) Not very well
   (4) Not well at all

2. How clear are Preston's stands on the issues?
   (1) Very clear
   (2) Fairly clear
   (3) Not very clear
   (4) Not clear at all

3. If Preston's proposals are put into action, what kind of effect do you think they would have?
   (1) Very positive effects
   (2) Somewhat positive effects
   (3) No effect
   (4) Somewhat negative effects
   (5) Very negative effects

4. How much do you agree or disagree with Preston?
   (1) Strongly agree
   (2) Somewhat agree
   (3) Neutral
   (4) Somewhat disagree
   (5) Strongly disagree

5. What is the likelihood that you would vote for Preston?
   (1) Very likely
   (2) Somewhat likely
   (3) Not very likely
   (4) Not at all likely

6. What is the likelihood that Preston will win the election?
   (1) Very likely
   (2) Somewhat likely
   (3) Not very likely
   (4) Not at all likely

7. What qualities/characteristics do you believe a governor should possess?

8. Based on your impressions drawn from the speech, please provide your best guess as to the candidate's competence regarding the following issues:

	(1 = Very Competent						7 = Very Incompetent)	
1. Strengthening the economy	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK
2. Encouraging the arts	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK
3. Assisting the poor	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK
4. Dealing with big business	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK
5. Improving our educational system	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK
6. Maintaining honesty and integrity in government	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK
7. Protecting the interests of the consumer	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK
8. Dealing with health problems	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK
9. Dealing with crime	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK
10. Dealing with unions	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK
11. Making decisions on farm issues	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK

NOTES

1. Allport, judging from the wording of his definition, was not thinking specifically of gender prejudice.

2. See, for example, the *Gallup Opinion Index* (1969, 7) for a summary of findings since 1936. In 1984, 90% said they would vote for a woman for mayor; 87% for governor; 91% for Congress; and, 78% for president (*Gallup Opinion Index* 1984, 10-3).

3. Darcy, Welch, and Clark (1987) display nicely how this "drag" will impede the progress of women into state legislatures. By considering prospective increases in the female proportion of the candidate pool, and then applying *current* rates of success to this growing number of candidates, the authors estimate that women will double their numbers in state legislatures by the year 1998—giving them about a third of the total. Darcy, Welch, and Clark also project by the year 2006, women will constitute a majority of the new candidates, but, will still only occupy about 42% of the seats. This information is contained in Chapter 7, "Women Candidates and Legislative Turnover."

4. Mandel (1981, 9).

5. Rossenwasser and Seale (1988, 597).

6. Mandel (1981, 43).

7. Interestingly, the mean scores revealed a statistical difference in the area of "encouraging the arts," despite the fact that both Jim and Elizabeth were seen as relatively incompetent (55 and 56%, respectively). *T* tests revealed a substantial difference between the means (significant to the .05 level), probably indicating that Elizabeth's scores hovered around the neutral zone, while Jim was more frequently placed at the end of the continuum. There was certainly nothing in the speech to suggest that the candidate would extend government help to any aesthetic cause.

8. For example, Norma Paulus (R-OR) chose to stress feminine strengths (exemplified by her campaign slogan, "a candidate who cares") in her campaign for governor in 1986. Her opponent, Neil Goldschmidt, succeeded in evoking voter fears about her being too "weak" for the job, and, eventually goaded Paulus into angrily lashing out over charges that she supported legalized prostitution—thus shattering her warm and caring campaign posture. Women may simplify the campaign work of men if they refuse to play hard ball from the outset. Men do not have to do much to exacerbate voter fears of weakness over such popular issues as taxation and crime.

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