



Are Gender Stereotypes a Problem for Female Candidates?

Nichole Bauer, Louisiana State University-Baton Rouge

Nearly 175 women ran for House and Senate seats in the 2014 congressional elections, and enough of them won to push women's ranks to a record high of 104 members in Congress. More women are running for U.S. political offices than at any other time in history, but they remain underrepresented at all levels. Women hold only a fifth of seats in Congress, a quarter of state legislative posts, and six out of fifty gubernatorial seats – and of course no woman has as yet been nominated for the presidency by a major party. Female candidates face many obstacles – including lack of support from party gatekeepers. My research focuses on the role of gender stereotypes as a potential source of bias among voters.

The Political Relevance of Gender Stereotypes

Gender stereotypes are concepts about the traits, roles, and behaviors appropriate for women and men. Feminine stereotypes characterize women as more caring, compassionate, and emotional than their male counterparts, who tend to be seen as tough, assertive, and decisive. In politics, masculine stereotypes can be a source of advantage because they match longstanding popular expectations for political leaders, while feminine stereotypes contradict those expectations.

Scholars debate the extent to which gender stereotypes affect voter perceptions of women candidates. Some studies argue that gender stereotypes can be helpful because they give female candidates an aura of empathy and honesty – valued traits for political leaders. Other studies argue that such stereotypes lead voters to see female candidates as *lacking* crucial masculine qualities. One reason for mixed findings, I argue, is that previous studies assume voters will *always* see female candidates through the lens of gender stereotypes. I test this assumption and show that voters only use feminine stereotypes under specific conditions.

A Theory of Conditional Stereotype Reliance

Most individuals can define feminine stereotypes, but this does not mean people use these ideas to judge all women they encounter. For example, a person who sees a woman walking down the street is unlikely to automatically believe she is sensitive and over-emotional. Psychological research suggests that people only use stereotypes to judge others when the relevant concepts are “activated” – that is, when the concepts come to mind and seem relevant. Noticing that a person is a woman is, by itself, unlikely to activate feminine stereotypes. However, seeing a woman with a baby can call these concepts to mind, activating them as a basis for judgment. Seeing a mother brings to mind other feminine qualities such as sensitivity, compassion, and emotionality.

Here is how this process of activation can work in politics. Simply seeing a woman's name on a ballot will not lead voters to think the candidate is weak, passive, and over-emotional. However, reading a news article that

describes a female candidate as caring can encourage voters to ascribe additional feminine qualities to her. Essentially, the hypothesis is that voters only think about stereotypical qualities when they receive feminine information about a woman candidate. When activated, however, voters will use gendered concepts to evaluate the leadership abilities of female candidates. In those specific circumstances, voters may use feminine stereotypes to infer that a woman candidate *lacks* key qualifications deemed necessary for political office.

Testing the Theory

I tested my hypotheses using two approaches: a survey experiment and an analysis of the impact of feminine stereotypes in campaign ads on votes in U.S. House Congressional elections.

- The experiment took place in two stages. In stage one, participants were provided the names of a woman and a man and were told these individuals were running for Congress. Participants then answered a series of questions including items designed to measure the automatic activation of feminine stereotypes. Wave two followed up with the same set of participants one week later. This time participants read a newspaper article about a female or male candidate described as having feminine traits or non-gendered traits. A unique aspect of this study is that participants only evaluated candidates with whom they shared a partisan identification: Democratic participants read about a Democratic candidate and Republican participants read about a Republican candidate.
- The second test analyzed how frequently male and female candidates referred to feminine traits in actual campaign ads during the 2000 and 2004 House elections. Pairing advertising data with public opinion data allowed me to then estimate how likely it was a voter saw a campaign ad, and to determine whether feminine ads tended to have a positive or negative effect on support for a female candidate.

Several key findings emerged from the experiment. Voters do not automatically use feminine stereotypes to judge female candidates (and they have no effect for male candidates). But attributing stereotypical feminine characteristics to women candidates does tend to activate gendered concepts that reduce people's support for women running for office. As long as feminine stereotypes are not activated, female candidates actually tend to be evaluated more positively than male candidates.

In an experimental setting, feminine stereotypes have a limited effect. But of course experiments are not the same as actual campaigns. Analysis of real campaign ads shows that they often invoke feminine traits to describe candidates – and **when voters see a high level of feminine references in ads they are nearly 15% less likely to vote for a woman candidate, than if they see ads about her that do not invoke feminine concepts.**

The Implications for Female Candidates

For women running for office, my study has good and bad news. Voters do not automatically consider female candidates to be weak, passive, or emotional. At the onset, gender stereotypes are not an obstacle for female candidates. But support can be reduced if voters see campaign messages – in speeches, ads, websites, or news reports – that describe the woman candidate as caring or compassionate. Female candidates need to be

incredibly strategic in crafting and controlling their campaign image. As long as they avoid invoking feminine stereotypes, voters will evaluate them in nonstereotyped ways.

Read more in Nichole Bauer, "[Emotional, Sensitive, and Unfit for Office? Gender Stereotype Activation and Support for Female Candidates.](#)" *Political Psychology* (forthcoming).

Read more in Nichole Bauer, "[Emotional, Sensitive, and Unfit for Office? Gender Stereotype Activation and Support for Female Candidates.](#)" *Political Psychology* (forthcoming).