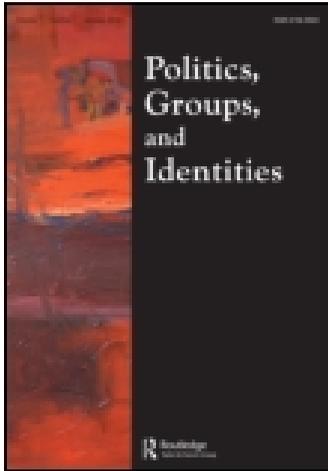


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Making the connection? Attitudes about women in politics and voting for women candidates

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Making the connection? Attitudes about women in politics and voting for women candidates

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Research on women candidates in the USA often considers the role that attitudes toward women in politics can play in shaping the electoral success of these candidates. However, besides anecdotal information about reactions to individual candidates, we lack systematic data that allow us to examine whether there is a link between the attitudes voters have about women in politics and their vote choice decisions when they are faced with a woman candidate. Relying on data from a two-wave panel survey of 3150 US adults in 2010, we test whether the political attitudes people hold are related to their voting decisions in mixed-sex (woman vs. man) races for the House of Representatives. We consider the role of attitudes alongside traditional political forces such as political party and incumbency and examine whether the party of the woman candidate is relevant. In all, we find that some attitudes about women in politics are related to voting for women candidates, but the relationships are not a central influence.

Keywords: women candidates; women in politics; elections; public opinion; gendered attitudes

Despite several decades of steady progress, women in the USA are still less likely to run for and hold elected office than are men. As a result, their sex and gender-related attitudes are still often at the forefront of their experiences as candidates and officeholders. Whether this attention entails a candidate being called an “empty dress,” being asked whether a woman could be both a good officeholder and a good mother, or even being lauded for being “better than men,” it is clear that our political environment still places a focus on candidate sex and the gendered issues their sex raises (McKinney, Spielman, and Korecki 2012; Erickson 2013; Lawrence 2013).

This, of course, leads to scholarly attention to the impact these considerations can have on the success of women candidates. Indeed, some of the enduring questions asked by scholars who study women candidates in the USA involve determining when, whether, and how public attitudes toward women shape political outcomes. And here we are often faced with a puzzle. On one hand, our nation has emerged from a history of concern about politics as an appropriate place for women to a present day in which the public voices high levels of support for their inclusion. At the same time, we know that examples of gendered reactions to women candidates and officeholders are not uncommon. Finally, all of these questions about attitudes toward women

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candidates take place alongside the evidence that women candidates win election at the same rate as men (Newman 1994; Seltzer, Newman, and Leighton 1997). This suggests that we need to continue our examination of attitudes toward women candidates and undertake more focused efforts to determine whether and when these attitudes matter to their electoral success.

In the research we report here, we examine attitudes about women in elected office in the USA with an eye toward understanding whether these attitudes influence vote choice for women and men candidates running for the US House in 2010. In doing so, we draw on survey data that allow us to capture respondents' attitudes toward women in political life as well as their voting behavior in actual elections. Our analysis suggests that attitudes have a limited impact on voting behavior in the presence of women candidates, and that women and men voters are not influenced by attitudes in the same way.

Attitudes toward a political role for women

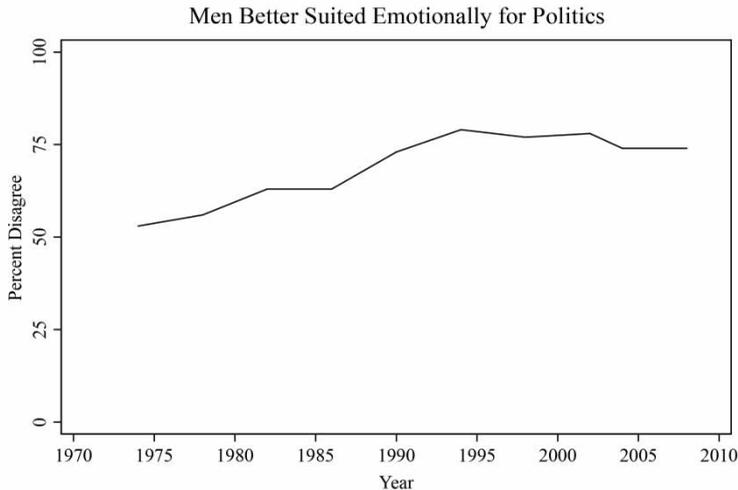
For much of our political history, one of the major obstacles to women's participation as candidates and officeholders was the lack of support for that participation among the general public. Beyond the barriers raised by political parties, electoral structures, and laws that limited their candidacies, women faced hostility to the notion that they could run and serve equally with men (Duverger 1955). Indeed, it is only in the mid-twentieth century that we see the beginnings of a steady, if slow, integration of women into candidacy and office-holding. This period of change is marked by shifts in public attitudes about the possibility of political leadership for women, which occurred during a time of women's greater success in running for and winning elected office. While public support for women candidates is not the sole, or even primary, explanation for the contemporary integration of women into elected office, it is assumed to be an important one (Hansen 1997; Morgan and Buice 2013; Bauer 2014).

The current time period would suggest that the American public is more supportive of a role for women in political life today than it has ever been. We see this evolution in attitudes toward women's place and abilities in public and political life more generally as well as in support for women in elected office. Figures 1 and 2 highlight several of these positive trends. Since 1972, the American National Election Studies has explored public attitudes by asking whether respondents believe women should have an equal role with men in running business, industry, and government or whether their place is in the home. Over the same time period, the General Social Survey has asked respondents whether they believe women have the right emotional temperament to be in politics. Figure 1 demonstrates that both attitudes have shifted toward a more positive view of women's abilities over time. While in 1972 less than a majority (47%) thought that women should have an equal role in public life, by 2008 84% of Americans held this view. This increase in support for women in public life has mirrored the decline in support for the idea that women are not well suited emotionally for politics. Women's assumed greater emotionality was long thought to be one of the major factors disqualifying them from public life. However, upwards of 75% of Americans disagree with the idea that women are less emotionally well suited for politics than men.

We see the same shift in specific attitudes about women's role in elected office. Since the 1930s, the Gallup Organization has asked people for their reaction to the idea of a woman candidate for president. Figure 2 demonstrates that very few people in those early times were willing to entertain the idea of supporting a woman for president, with only 28% of respondents in 1935 doing so. Since then, however, the public has slowly and steadily become more comfortable with the idea, such that we now see upwards of 90% of people saying that they would support a woman candidate of their own party for president. Finally, over the past 40 years, we have evidence that people have come to value the skills and abilities that women can bring to the political



Source: National Election Study, 1972-2008, <http://www.electionstudies.org/>.



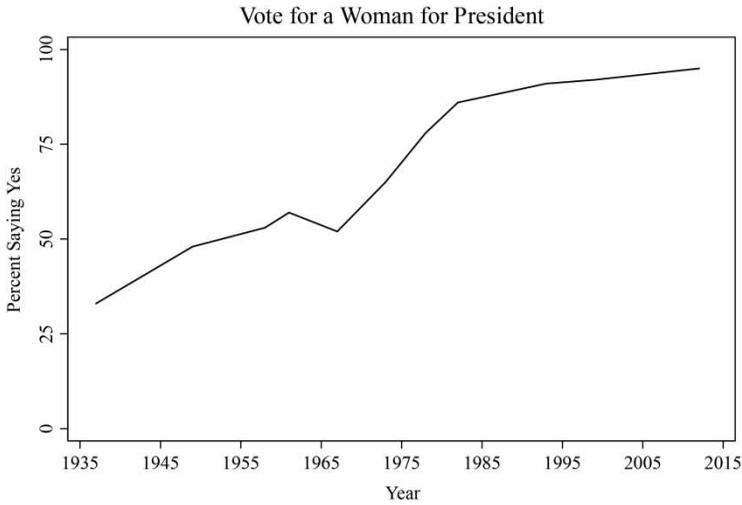
Source: General Social Survey, 1972-2008, <http://www3.norc.umd.edu/gss+website/>

Figure 1. Attitudes about the role of women in society.

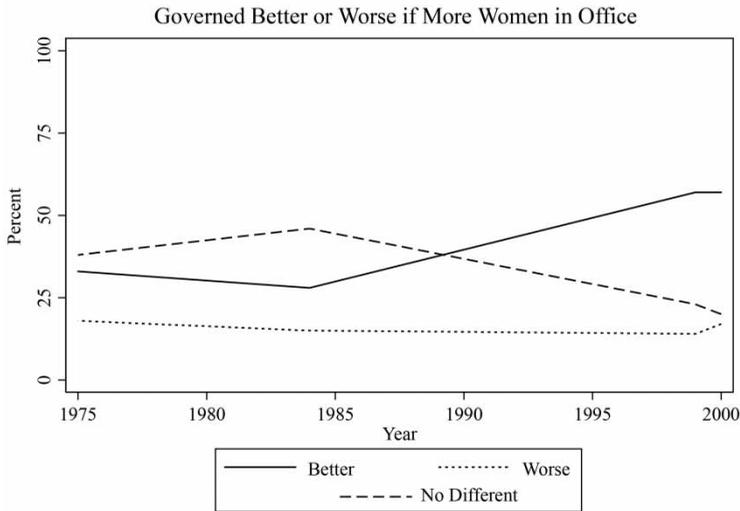
system. When asked whether people think our country would be “governed better” if there were more women in elected office, we see affirmative responses to this question rising from 33% in 1975 to almost 60% in 2000. In 2000, those who thought more women would be a positive for government did so because they saw women as more honest, conscientious, reliable, and fiscally responsible than men (Simmons 2001). Taken together, the data suggest a time and place in the USA in which attitudes toward women’s integration into public and political life are as positive as they have ever been.

What role do attitudes about women play?

At its most basic, the attention paid to attitudes about a political role for women suggests that scholars and observers see these attitudes as having an important connection to the political



Source: Gallup Organization, 1937-2012



Source: Gallup Organization, 1975-2000.

Figure 2. Attitudes about women in political life.

possibilities for women. Indeed, a significant body of research demonstrates that public attitudes about the place and abilities of women can be connected to the evaluations voters make of women candidates. These attitudes generally fall into two categories: gender stereotypes about the character traits and policy abilities of women and men, and attitudes about women’s descriptive representation in government and elected office.

Over the past several decades, gender stereotypes have received the most scholarly attention. It is clear that the public often views political women and men through the lens of their sex, ascribing traditionally feminine characteristics and traits to women and masculine ones to men (Alexander and Andersen 1993; Brown, Heighberger, and Shocket 1993; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993a, 1993b; Koch 1997; McDermott 1998). Other work focuses on the utility of stereotypes, with many scholars finding that candidate sex becomes a useful tool for voters trying to navigate

a complex political world (McDermott 1997; Huddy and Capelos 2002; King and Matland 2003). This reliance by voters on gender stereotypes led many scholars to the conclusion that a mismatch between feminine gender stereotypes and beliefs about the requisite qualities for leaders could leave women candidates at a disadvantage (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993a; Koch 1997; Lawless 2004; Smith, Paul, and Paul 2007). Indeed, several works suggest that voters would be less likely to vote for women candidates because of these concerns (Leeper 1991; Kahn 1992; Dolan 1997; Fox and Smith 1998). At the same time, the news about gender stereotypes is not all bad for women candidates. While it is clear that people evaluate women and men in stereotypical terms, there are circumstances when these stereotypes can work in favor of women, such as when voters might place particular value on women's perceived strengths, such as honesty, compassion, or a particular policy expertise (McDermott 1998; Dolan 2004; Fridkin and Kenney 2009). Recent work also suggests that traditional gender stereotypes may be on the wane or even moving in a direction in which women are evaluated more positively in comparison to men (Pew 2008; Fridkin and Kenney 2009; Brooks 2013; Hayes and Lawless 2015; Dolan 2014).

A second set of attitudes relevant to women candidates involves beliefs about whether women's underrepresentation in elected offices of government is a problem or not. It is clear that women in the USA are disproportionately underrepresented at every level of office, holding approximately 20–25% of positions from local to national office (Center for American Women and Politics 2014). What scholars are beginning to investigate more carefully is how the public feels about that underrepresentation and whether those beliefs have any impact on political behavior. Key attitudes here are whether people believe that there should be more women in office than there currently are, what they see as the “ideal” gender balance in government leaders, and whether people have a preference for candidates of one sex or the other (Sanbonmatsu 2003; Dolan and Sanbonmatsu 2009).

One of the major themes in any discussion of the status of women in elected office is the reality that women are dramatically underrepresented at every level. One of the clear consequences of this political history is that the experience of being represented by someone who shares your sex is still a novelty for women, while men probably take this for granted. As a result of this, researchers have investigated whether women and men think much about the sex of their elected representations and whether having representatives of the same-sex matters to people. Sanbonmatsu (2002) and Rosenthal (1995) both find what Sanbonmatsu calls a “baseline gender preference,” an underlying predisposition to vote for and be represented by a woman or a man, with women being more likely to prefer same-sex representation than men. Given women's underrepresentation at all levels of office, acting on a baseline gender preference might not be limited to voting, with people potentially being willing to engage in a range of candidate-supporting behaviors (Sanbonmatsu 2002).

Beyond this, scholars have examined the place of public attitudes about women's underrepresentation. As an example, Paolino (1995) points to public concern about a lack of women in the US Senate as a motivator of voting for women Senate candidates in 1992. Mo (2014) finds that candidate gender preference and concern about the need for more gender balance in government influence vote choice in an experimental setting for both women and men candidates. Goodyear-Grant (2010) finds that attitudes about women's underrepresentation in Canada is related to vote choice in that country's federal elections in 2004 and 2006, although Bittner, Terry, and Piercey (2010) do not find evidence of the same dynamic in 2008.

A new examination

For many years, proponents of women's inclusion in elected office, as well as academics, have raised the concern that negative gender attitudes could work to harm the electoral chances of

women candidates (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993a, 1993b; Witt, Paget, and Matthews 1994; Lawless 2004). While this may have been the case earlier in our political history, it is clear that any negativity about women in office has been counterbalanced by increasingly egalitarian attitudes about women's roles over the last 30 or 40 years (Huddy 1994; Pew 2008; Dolan 2014). However, even in a time of liberalizing attitudes toward women in politics, it is unclear to us whether the presence of supportive attitudes among members of the public is truly an important precursor to electoral success. This is, in part, because we have relatively little empirical evidence that allows us to connect attitudes about women in politics with voting behavior in real-world elections involving women candidates. Given this reality, we need to examine more directly the place that attitudes have in the electoral success of women candidates.

To that end, we present research that examines three important aspects of the relationship between attitudes about women in elected office and the electoral success of women candidates. First, we examine whether a series of attitudes about women in office are related to vote choice in races involving women candidates running against men for the US House in 2010. One of the primary limitations in our current understanding of the impact of attitudes on support for women candidates has been the heavy reliance in this work on experiments and hypothetical election situations (Sapiro 1981/82; Leeper 1991; Brown, Heigberger, and Shocket 1993; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993a, 1993b; Rosenthal 1995; Fox and Smith 1998; McDermott 1998; Sanbonmatsu 2002; King and Matland 2003; Lawless 2004). While experimental findings can make important contributions, their artificiality limits our ability to predict what we can expect in real elections. So while many of the existing studies suggest the impact of attitudes on the success of women candidates, we have to exercise caution in assuming that we have an accurate understanding of the dynamics in real elections. Indeed, several recent studies conducted in real election situations present findings that are distinctly at odds with previous experimental research (Hayes 2011; Fridkin and Kenney 2014, 2009; Dolan 2014; Hayes and Lawless 2015).

A second aspect of this project examines the relative impact of attitudes about women on vote choice with those of more traditional political influences by testing a more fully specified model of vote choice. Here again, the current work is incomplete. The nature of experiments and hypotheticals is generally to restrict focus to one or two key variables of interest, such as candidate sex, which often results in important potential influences being excluded from consideration. This is a particular problem when studying elections, since we know from years of research that there is a set of political variables that consistently shape vote choice, chief among these being political party identification and incumbency (Downs 1957; Conover and Feldman 1989; Popkin 1993; Rahn 1993; Lau and Redlawsk 2001).

The third element of our examination focuses on the impact of voter sex on evaluation of women candidates. Theoretical assumptions about the impact of attitudes such as baseline gender preference and beliefs about women's descriptive representation acknowledge that these beliefs can stimulate a sense of gender consciousness in women and influence women and men voters in different ways (Tolleson-Rinehart 1992; Sapiro and Conover 1997; Huddy, Cassese, and Lizotte 2008). A long line of scholarship suggests that women's underrepresentation in office creates a unique set of circumstances for women in the public, leading them to be more likely to value same-sex representation, an increase in women in office, and to take women leaders as role models in a way that men never need to consider (Rosenthal 1995; Sanbonmatsu 2002). Taking a cue from Bobo and Gilliam's (1990) theory of black empowerment, Fridkin and Kenney (2014) hypothesize that the presence of women in political office should lead to an increase in women's engagement in politics. While evidence for this linkage is somewhat mixed, most of the recent work finds that increases in the number of women in politics lead to greater participation and more positive political attitudes among women (Koch 1997; Atkeson

2003; Reingold and Harrell 2010; Fridkin and Kenney 2014; but see Sapiro and Conover 1997; Lawless 2004; Dolan 2006).

In examining these considerations, we hypothesize the following:

H₁: Voters with more positive attitudes about women in office should be more likely to vote for women candidates than those with less positive attitudes.

H₂: Attitudes about women in office should be less central to voting for women candidates than are political party identification and incumbency.

H₃: Women voters will be more likely to be influenced by attitudes about women in office than are men.

The 2010 elections

To provide an empirical test of our argument, we employ data from a 2010 panel survey of voters who took part in mixed-sex (woman vs. man) House elections. The elections of 2010 provided a particularly good opportunity to investigate the impact of attitudes about women in office on the fortunes of women candidates for several reasons. First, there was no presidential election to overwhelm voters and compete for their attention. Second, the midterm elections that year also were more competitive than many in recent memory, particularly for Congress. Third, whether a result of the historic candidacies of Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin, the Speakership of Nancy Pelosi, or spurred on by the populist themes of the Tea Party and a general anti-incumbent mood, 2010 saw a historically high number of women candidates run for Congress. A record-setting 262 women ran in primaries for the US House. While there was significant, and surprising, parity in the political party of these candidates – 134 women Democrats and 128 women Republicans – Republican women were less successful in winning their primaries than were Democratic women, as 37% of Republican women and 68% of the Democratic women candidates survived to run in the general election. On Election Day, 54% of the Democratic women candidates were elected, as were 51% of the Republican women. Despite the fact that some number of the Democratic women lost their seats in 2010, a number of new Republican women were elected, leaving the net number of women in the House after the 2010 election exactly the same as it was before at 73 (CAWP 2011).

Data and methods

This project relies on data from a two-wave panel study of a nationally representative sample of US adults conducted during the 2010 elections. The sample of 3150 respondents was drawn from 29 states and stratified to include voters who experienced either single-sex or mixed-sex races for the US House. The survey was funded by the National Science Foundation and conducted in an online environment by Knowledge Networks through their KnowledgePanel.¹ As a result of this design, we are able to examine real voters faced with real candidates in a way that includes a diversity of candidates and election contexts. The primary goal of the survey was to measure the gender attitudes that voters hold and determine whether these attitudes could be linked to the vote choice decisions voters made in the elections in which they took part. Gender attitudes were measured in Wave 1 of the panel survey (September/October 2010) and vote choice in Wave 2 (November 2010). Information on the candidates and races represented in the data set is provided in the [Appendix](#). The analysis provided here includes a bivariate examination of the relationship between the political attitudes and voter sex, and then continues to a multivariate regression analysis of the individual-level sources of the attitudes. We conclude with a multivariate logistic regression analysis of the determinants of vote choice in US House races in which women candidates ran against men.

Dependent variable

The dependent variable in the analysis of the determinants of vote choice measures vote for women and men candidates in the different race matchups in the House elections in which respondents took part. One model employs a variable that measures vote for Democratic women in races against Republican men. A second model uses a variable that measures vote for Republican women in races against Democratic men. The analysis is run separately for each model. These measures of vote choice provide appropriate real-world variables from which we can evaluate the potential influence of these attitudes.

Independent variables

Given that our goal is to determine whether the attitudes voters hold are related to their vote choice decisions, the primary independent variables are a series of survey items designed to tap respondent attitudes about support for women in elected office. These questions measure respondent reaction to the current *number of women in elected office*, respondent *baseline gender preference* for candidates of a particular sex, whether they value *same-sex representation* when choosing candidates, and whether they see women or men as *emotionally better suited* for politics (see [Appendix](#) for question wording and variable coding). If our hypothesis is correct, we should see people who hold more supportive positions toward women being more likely to vote for the woman candidate in their House race and those who take less supportive positions choosing her male opponent.

The remaining independent variables employed include major political and demographic influences on vote choice. The political variables are *political party* and *incumbency*. Since the vast majority of partisans support their party's candidates, we predict that party correspondence between the voter and candidate will be the primary determinant of vote choice, regardless of the sex of the candidate. The measure of political party accounts for whether the respondent shares the political party of the woman candidate. We also anticipate that incumbency will be a significant influence on vote choice. Incumbency variables measure the incumbency status of the woman candidate. In addition, we include several measures of respondent characteristics as controls – *education, age, race, and ideology*.

Given our hypothesis that attitudes should influence women's and men's vote choice decisions differently, we conduct the analysis of vote choice separately for women and men respondents. This approach is a common one in research on gender gaps in public opinion and partisanship (Gilens 1988; Gidengil 1995; Sapiro and Conover 1997; Chaney, Alvarez, and Nagler 1998; Kaufmann and Petrocik 1999; Goodyear-Grant 2010). Finally, recent work suggests that political party is important to the way women candidates are evaluated, with the overlap of partisan and gender stereotypes creating different expectations of, and experiences for, Democratic and Republican women (Dolan 2014; Koch 2002, 2000; Sanbonmatsu and Dolan 2009; Winter 2010). Dolan (2014) finds that voters are more likely to use female stereotypes in evaluating Democratic women than Republican women, which is in line with Winter (2010) finding that Democrats in the USA have become "feminized." Other work on the fate of Republican women candidates finds that they still lag behind Democratic women in numbers and can face a more challenging path through party primaries (King and Matland 2003; Fox 2014). As a result, we examine vote choice in races in which a Democratic woman ran against a Republican man separately from races in which Republican women ran against Democratic men.

Public attitudes toward women in elected office*Support for women in office*

The first step in the analysis is to examine the attitudes people hold about women in office. [Table 1](#) presents the responses to a question gauging how people feel about women's

Table 1. Attitudes about women in politics – all respondents.

	Men	Women	Total
<i>Number of women in office</i>			
Fewer	7.76	4.14	5.89
Current number about right	43.08	30.59	36.64
More	49.16	65.27	57.47
<i>N</i>	1353	1256	2609
<i>Baseline gender preference</i>			
Man	65.47	33.49	48.92
Woman	34.53	66.51	51.08
<i>N</i>	1295	1207	2502
<i>Same-sex representation</i>			
Not at all important	58.39	37.46	47.59
Only somewhat important	35.30	49.19	42.47
Very important	6.30	13.35	9.94
<i>N</i>	1377	1277	2654
<i>Men better suited emotionally</i>			
Strongly disagree	15.00	12.93	13.93
Disagree	54.15	55.46	54.83
Agree	26.77	29.01	27.93
Strongly agree	4.08	2.59	3.31
<i>N</i>	1358	1261	2619

Note: A significant difference is found between men and women respondents on all items except emotional suitability.

current representation in elected office. Currently, women are dramatically underrepresented in elected office, making up 19% of the members of Congress, 23% of statewide elected officials, and 24% of state legislators (CAWP 2014). One question in the survey asks respondents whether they think there should be more women in “important political office such as governors and members of Congress,” whether there should be fewer, or whether the current number is “just about right.” Table 1 demonstrates that people are generally supportive of more women in elected office, with 58% saying there should be more women in office, 37% of respondents saying that current numbers of women in office are about right, and only 6% saying there should be fewer. This is in line with other public opinion surveys, which tend to find that people believe more women in government would be a good thing for our system (Simmons 2001; Sanbonmatsu 2003; Dolan and Sanbonmatsu 2009). At the same time, that 40% of respondents say that the current underrepresentation of women is “just right” or even too high might be a cause for concern among those who seek more representation of women.

In thinking about attitudes toward women in political life, one of the obvious assumptions is that women voters will feel differently about these issues than will men. While people’s attitudes are the product of complex political considerations and life experiences, it is not unreasonable to hypothesize that sex and gender matter to how people come to think about the appropriate place for women, particularly given women’s underrepresentation. When we examine respondents’ beliefs about the appropriate level of women in elected office, we see that this is indeed the case. When asked whether there should be more or fewer women in office or whether the current number is just about right (Table 1), women are more likely than men to say that there should be more women in office (65% of women and 50% of men) and less likely than men to see the current status of women as “just right” (31–43%).

Baseline gender preference and same-sex representation

Two other attitudes that might influence support for women candidates involve whether and how voters think about their own *representation* when they are choosing candidates. Among the respondents in this sample, baseline gender preferences were evenly split, with 51% identifying a preference for women candidates and 49% preferring men (Table 1). We also see that about 66% of women and 65% of men state a baseline gender preference for a same-sex representative and 35% prefer representatives of the opposite sex. Another question asked respondents whether they thought sharing the sex of their representative was an important consideration or not. Just about half of the sample, 48%, said that this was not at all important to them, while 43% said it was somewhat important. Only 10% of respondents described this as very important to them. As might be expected, women, and men approach these considerations differently. Women are much more likely to hold a baseline gender preference for a woman candidate than men. About 60% of women prefer a woman candidate, while about 30% of men take that position. With regard to same-sex representation, men were much more likely than women to say that sharing the sex of a representative was not at all important, 58% to 38%. Indeed, men share the sex of their representative almost all of the time, so this is probably not something that occurs to them often. Women, on the other hand, are much less likely to experience same-sex representation, making it something that they could easily value more highly. Just about half of women, 49%, say that having a woman representative is somewhat important, compared to 36% of men. And women are more than twice as likely as men to say that same-sex representation is very important, 13–6%. Beyond understanding how voters feel in general about the concept of same-sex representation, these attitudes could become important motivators to action. Women who have a baseline preference for women candidates and see sharing the sex of their representative as an important thing might act on these attitudes in choosing a woman candidate in an election.

Emotional suitability

One of the long-standing arguments against women having a role in political life was that they were too emotional and did not possess the reason or dispassion to adequately provide political leadership. To examine whether this belief still shapes voter attitudes about women in politics, respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed that most men are better suited emotionally for politics than are most women (Table 1). A significant majority (70%) of respondents disagreed with this statement, 55% saying they disagreed and 15% saying they strongly disagreed. This finding suggests that most people no longer subscribe to the worldview of women as emotionally fragile or too unstable for politics and is in line with public opinion data that find a clear trend away from the belief that women are not emotionally suited for politics. At the same time, it is interesting to note that fully 30% of the sample agreed that men are more emotionally well suited for politics, with 26% saying they agreed and 4% saying they strongly agreed. This attitude is clearly one that has the potential to undercut support for women candidates, as people are probably unlikely to support candidates they believe to be temperamentally unsuited for the job (Leeper 1991; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993a). What is perhaps most interesting about these responses is that there was no gender difference in patterns of response – women and men held exactly the same positions on whether men were better suited emotionally for politics than women, with 30% of each group agreeing or strongly agreeing. Up to this point, we have seen patterns of gender difference in attitudes about women in politics, with women taking the more “pro-woman” or egalitarian position more often than men. But here we see that sex does not matter to perceptions of women’s emotional suitability.

Table 2. Predictors of attitudes.

	Baseline gender preference	Number of women in office	Emotional suitability	Same-sex representation
Education	0.069* (0.03)	0.024** (0.01)	-0.035*** (0.01)	-0.034*** (0.01)
Age	0.006 (0.00)	0.001 (0.00)	-0.001 (0.00)	-0.001 (0.00)
Woman	1.424*** (0.12)	0.181*** (0.03)	0.017 (0.04)	0.266*** (0.03)
Party identification	0.118** (0.04)	0.051*** (0.01)	-0.022 (0.01)	0.005 (0.01)
Ideology	-0.221*** (0.05)	-0.037* (0.02)	-0.000 (0.02)	-0.018 (0.02)
White	-0.278 (0.15)	0.096* (0.04)	-0.061 (0.05)	-0.065 (0.04)
House woman incumbent	-0.232 (0.15)	0.020 (0.04)	-0.098* (0.05)	-0.046 (0.04)
Constant	-1.041 (0.54)	1.972*** (0.16)	2.757*** (0.17)	1.986*** (0.17)
R^2	.13	.09	.01	.06
N	2070	2135	2141	2166

Notes: Two-tailed test of significance. Baseline gender preference: 0=man, 1=woman; number of women in government: 1=should be fewer, 2=current number is about right, 3=should be more; men better suited emotionally: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=agree, 4=strongly agree. Same-sex representation: 1=not at all important, 2=only somewhat important, 3=very important. Logistic regression employed for baseline gender preference, OLS employed for all other attitudes; R^2 is pseudo- R^2 for the logistic regression and adjusted R^2 for all other models. Only respondents who indicated their House vote are included in these models.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

Sources of attitudes

After having examined the distribution of attitudes toward women in office, it may be helpful to more fully understand the sources of these attitudes among voters. To that end, Table 2 presents an analysis of the determinants of attitudes with a focus on demographic and political characteristics of the respondents. To begin, we see confirmation of the differences in attitudes between women and men. Women are more likely than men to take the more supportive position on each issue with the exception of emotional suitability. Beyond this, we see that the most important influences shaping people's positions on women in office are education, political party identification, and ideology. Respondents with higher levels of education are more likely to have a baseline gender preference for women candidates and desire more women in office than people with lower levels of education, and are less likely to see women as emotional unsuitable for politics. Interestingly, people with more education are less likely than others to see same-sex representation as an important value. Not surprisingly, party identification and political ideology work to influence attitudes in similar ways, with Democrats and liberals being more likely to hold a baseline gender preference for women and desire more women in office than Republicans and conservatives. This finding should not be surprising in light of research that demonstrates that people tend to stereotype women as more liberal than men, which could certainly contribute to a lesser likelihood of Republicans and conservatives desiring more women in office (Koch 2002). However, neither party nor ideology has any impact on beliefs about women's emotional

suitability for politics or the importance of same-sex representation. The other demographic variables included, age and race, have almost no relationship to these attitudes.

Finally, one additional source of attitudes we include is whether the respondent is represented by a woman in the House of Representatives at the time of the survey. Given our focus on whether attitudes about women matter to vote choice, we should consider the possibility that the attitudes people express are shaped by their experiences with a woman representation. Research that examines the impact of being represented by a woman has found little effect, but we should account for the possibility (Lawless 2004). Our analysis demonstrates that people who are represented by a woman House member are only significantly different from people who experience a male House member in their beliefs about women's emotional suitability, with these respondents being more likely to agree that women are emotionally well suited for politics. While it might make sense that people who experience a woman member of the House hold this belief about women's abilities, it is important to note that this experience does not appear to influence people's preference for women candidates, stimulate a desire for more women in office, or lead women voters to value same-sex representation any more than people who are represented by men. As a result, we can feel confident that responses to the attitude measures are not being conditioned by reactions to a particular woman in a respondent's immediate political universe.

Do attitudes toward women in office influence vote choice?

This examination of public attitudes about women's place in elected office demonstrates that people take a range of positions, with some people seeing women as well suited for political office and desiring greater numbers of women in office and others appearing to see women's current levels of underrepresentation as appropriate or even too high. Given that we can demonstrate the presence of these attitudes among voters, the next step is to investigate their utility. Specifically, we examine whether these attitudes can be positive or negative motivations in the vote choice decisions when voters are faced with a woman candidate. To investigate these possibilities, we analyze the impact of attitudes on vote choice in mixed-sex races. We analyze the impact of each of the attitudes on vote choice separately – baseline gender preference, whether there should be more or fewer women in office, beliefs about women's emotional suitability, and beliefs about the importance of same-sex representation. Beyond the attitude, the other explanatory variables include the respondent demographics – race, age, and education and ideology, as well as the political variables – political party correspondence between the woman candidate and the respondent, political ideology, and incumbency. Finally, because the results of the bivariate analyses confirm the hypothesis that women hold different attitudes toward women in office than do men, the models examining the determinants of vote choice are separate for women and men.

Table 3 presents the analysis of the impact of having a baseline gender preference on vote choice of women and men, respectively. In examining the determinants of women's vote choice, we see that women who have a baseline gender preference for women candidates are more likely to vote for the Democratic woman candidate over her Republican male opponent. This would support the notion that having a baseline gender preference for women candidates can be important in motivating action when a woman voter has a chance to act on this belief. At the same time, we see that baseline gender preference is not significantly related to voting in races with Republican women candidates, indicating that women who prefer women candidates do not necessarily seek to act on this preference in all circumstances in which a woman is running, but instead when a Democratic woman is running. This finding would seem to suggest that women respondents view women candidates differently based on their political party and that

Table 3. House vote choice, baseline gender preference.

	Women R	Women R	Men R	Men R
	Dem. women vs. Rep. men	Rep. women vs. Dem men	Dem. women vs. Rep. men	Rep. women vs. Dem men
Baseline gender preference	0.871* (0.43)	-0.783 (0.50)	0.961* (0.43)	-1.288* (0.55)
Education	0.121 (0.12)	-0.242 (0.16)	0.130 (0.11)	-0.087 (0.12)
Age	-0.010 (0.01)	0.026* (0.01)	0.019 (0.01)	0.004 (0.02)
Share party	2.603*** (0.75)	2.855** (0.97)	1.820*** (0.45)	3.253*** (0.82)
Ideology	-0.361 (0.37)	0.124 (0.25)	-0.566** (0.20)	0.294 (0.24)
White	-0.466 (0.63)	2.360** (0.78)	-1.299** (0.44)	0.728 (0.52)
Incumbent	2.119*** (0.49)	1.235* (0.62)	1.242* (0.50)	0.041 (0.54)
Constant	-1.576 (3.14)	-2.606 (1.91)	-0.858 (1.93)	-2.703 (1.62)
Pseudo- R^2	.49	.48	.43	.45
N	200	101	270	116

Note: Two-tailed test of significance. Clustered standard errors are shown in parentheses. Baseline gender preference: 0=man, 1=woman.

* $p < .5$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

the impact of a preference for women candidates is tied up with broader ideological beliefs, rather than just candidate sex.

Table 3 reveals an interesting difference between women and men in terms of the impact of baseline gender preference on voting for women candidates. Here we see that men who have a baseline gender preference for women candidates are significantly more likely to choose the Democratic woman candidate when she runs against a Republican man. This is similar to the dynamic we saw for women voters. However, unlike women voters, we also see men's baseline gender preference being significant to their vote choice in races in which women Republicans run against Democratic men. Here we get the opposite impact, with men who have a baseline gender preference for women being less likely to vote for the Republican woman when they run against Democratic man. The most likely explanation for this finding is that men with a baseline preference for men candidates, who are more likely to vote for the Republican woman in these races, may be more traditional on gender issues, which may increase their likelihood of voting for Republican candidates. Here these Republican candidates happen to be women, but these male voters are unlikely to be choosing them because of their sex.

In turning to an analysis of the impact of a desire to see more women in elected office, we again see that the impact of attitudes on vote choice is different for women and men. Despite women being more likely than men to believe that there should be more women in office than there currently are, this belief does not shape women's vote choice in any races in which women candidates run (Table 4). Women who are faced with the opportunity to vote for women candidates do not appear to be using their vote choice to advance their desire for more women in office.

Men, on the other hand, appear to be influenced by their desire to see more women in office. As Table 4 demonstrates, men who want to see more women in office are significantly more likely to vote for a Democratic woman running against a Republican man. However, this desire does not motivate men’s vote choice in races in which a Republican woman runs against a Democratic man. As we saw with baseline gender preference, attitudes in support of women in office only influence men’s vote choice decisions in races in which they can vote for a Democratic woman. This would suggest that these attitudes are not indicating a global desire for more women in office so much as there are a desire to see a particular kind of woman, namely Democrats.

While baseline gender preference and a desire for more women in office demonstrate some impact on vote choice decisions, the two remaining attitudes – ideas about women’s emotional suitability for politics, and respondent desire for same-sex representation – are not significantly related to vote choice for women or men in any set of race matchups (Tables 5 and 6), suggesting that people may hold attitudes in favor of a particular political outcome, but they do not always act in pursuit of that outcome. With regard to beliefs about women’s emotional suitability for politics, neither women nor men appear to factor these feelings into vote choice decisions (Table 5). So while about 30% of respondents, both women and men, expressed concerns about women’s emotional suitability for politics, this concern does not shape their vote choice decisions when they are faced with a woman candidate. In the end, knowing that people who see women as less well emotionally suited for politics than men are not turning that concern into votes against women candidates may allay concerns about the negative impact of attitudes.

The same pattern is evident with beliefs about same-sex representation (Table 6). Women respondents who believe that same-sex representation is important to them are no more or less

Table 4. House vote choice, number of women in office.

	Women R	Women R	Men R	Men R
	Dem. women vs. Rep. men	Rep. women vs. Dem men	Dem. women vs. Rep. men	Rep. women vs. Dem men
Number of women in office	0.106 (0.38)	-0.855 (0.53)	0.901* (0.39)	-0.227 (0.44)
Education	0.145 (0.13)	-0.204 (0.15)	0.191 (0.12)	-0.074 (0.12)
Age	-0.006 (0.01)	0.023 (0.01)	0.014 (0.01)	-0.001 (0.02)
Share party	2.827*** (0.80)	2.810** (0.88)	1.778*** (0.44)	3.093*** (0.81)
Ideology	-0.337 (0.37)	0.222 (0.25)	-0.594** (0.19)	0.313 (0.25)
White	-0.530 (0.68)	2.360** (0.74)	-1.326** (0.43)	1.225* (0.57)
Incumbent	2.004*** (0.46)	1.316* (0.54)	1.092* (0.47)	0.133 (0.51)
Constant	-1.809 (3.56)	-1.705 (2.13)	-3.007 (2.10)	-2.798 (1.96)
Pseudo- R^2	48	47	43	45
N	209	107	279	121

Note: Two-tailed test of significance. Clustered standard errors are shown in parentheses. Number of women in government: 1=should be fewer, 2=current number is about right, 3=should be more.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

Table 5. House vote choice, emotional suitability.

	Women R	Women R	Men R	Men R
	Dem. women vs. Rep. men	Rep. women vs. dem men	Dem. women vs. rep. men	Rep. women vs. dem men
Emotional suitability	-0.205 (0.28)	-0.589 (0.47)	0.216 (0.28)	-0.498 (0.54)
Education	0.138 (0.14)	-0.240 (0.17)	0.197 (0.13)	-0.109 (0.11)
Age	-0.008 (0.01)	0.020 (0.01)	0.014 (0.01)	0.007 (0.02)
Share party	2.829*** (0.81)	2.761** (0.90)	1.768*** (0.43)	3.181*** (0.83)
Ideology	-0.302 (0.35)	0.234 (0.22)	-0.586** (0.19)	0.354 (0.22)
White	-0.556 (0.62)	2.344** (0.84)	-1.230** (0.44)	0.914 (0.50)
Incumbent	1.920*** (0.45)	1.579** (0.58)	1.089* (0.44)	0.374 (0.54)
Constant	-1.032 (3.55)	-2.076 (2.37)	-1.391 (2.12)	-2.334 (1.71)
Pseudo- R^2	.47	.46	.40	.45
N	206	105	280	120

Note: Two-tailed test of significance. Clustered standard errors are shown in parentheses. Men better suited emotionally: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=agree, 4=strongly agree.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

likely to vote for a woman candidate than women who do not value this representation. Women are also no more likely to be moved by a desire for same-sex representation than men. This lack of connection between concerns about same-sex representation and vote choice for women candidates among women runs counter to our expectation that women's underrepresentation could be a motivator to action for women voters. However, this finding is in line with some of the previous research on symbolic mobilization that finds women candidates and officeholders have little impact on the attitudes and behaviors of women voters (Lawless 2004; Dolan 2006).

The primacy of political variables

To this point, the discussion has focused on whether voters act on the gendered attitudes they hold in making vote choice decisions about women and men candidates. In all, there is only limited evidence of an impact for these attitudes, and the impact we do see appears to be motivated by partisan or ideological considerations more than gendered ones. Beyond this, we must acknowledge that these attitudes pale in comparison to other more traditional political variables as an influence on vote choice. Indeed, in all of the vote choice models, for both women and men, the primary influence on voting for all candidates is political party. In each of the models, sharing the party of the candidate is the overwhelming influence on voting for that candidate, whether the candidate is a woman or a man, a Democrat or a Republican. These findings make sense, given the primacy of political party in American elections, but they assure us that partisan influences work in expected ways when women candidates are present. There is no evidence of partisan antipathy toward women candidates among the supporters of either party, nor evidence that

Table 6. House vote choice, same-sex representation.

	Women R	Women R	Men R	Men R
	Dem. women vs. Rep. Men	Rep. women vs. Dem Men	Dem. women vs. Rep. men	Rep. women vs. dem men
Same-sex representation	-0.369 (0.33)	-0.512 (0.55)	-0.325 (0.34)	-0.120 (0.59)
Education	0.124 (0.14)	-0.232 (0.16)	0.127 (0.13)	-0.065 (0.11)
Age	-0.008 (0.01)	0.017 (0.01)	0.015 (0.01)	0.000 (0.02)
Share party	3.042*** (0.81)	2.491** (0.95)	1.876*** (0.42)	3.242*** (0.83)
Ideology	-0.341 (0.37)	0.217 (0.23)	-0.567** (0.19)	0.331 (0.25)
White	-0.488 (0.62)	2.872*** (0.87)	-1.220** (0.43)	1.109* (0.48)
Incumbent	2.014*** (0.45)	1.117 (0.66)	1.041* (0.47)	0.228 (0.54)
Constant	-0.742 (3.47)	-2.695 (2.09)	0.098 (2.00)	-3.461* (1.74)
Pseudo- R^2	49	46	41	45
N	211	108	285	125

Note: Two-tailed test of significance. Clustered standard errors are shown in parentheses. Same-sex representation: 1=not at all important, 2=only.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

voters cross party lines to support or avoid a woman candidate. The traditional power of incumbency works in largely the same way. In 11 of 16 models, incumbency is significant to vote choice decisions across all race matchups. Interestingly, incumbency appears to shape the vote choice decisions of women (significant in seven of eight models) much more often than that of men (significant in nine of eight), where is it only a significant influence for men in races between Democratic women and Republican men.

Discussion

In all, the analysis presented here provides mixed support for our hypotheses. In some cases, attitudes about women in office can motivate voter behavior toward women candidates. Voters with positive attitudes toward women in office and as candidates were more likely to vote for women candidates than those with less supportive attitudes. At the same time, the impact of these attitudes is not particularly robust and two of the attitudes examined show no relationship to vote choice for either women or men voters. Our second hypothesis about the relative impact also receives support in that a shared political party and the incumbency of the woman candidate are the overwhelming determinants of vote choice in these races. So, while attitudes can matter in some circumstances, their impact is limited or blunted by that of more traditional political forces. Finally, we do see evidence that women and men are influenced by attitudes differently, although not necessarily in the direction we predicted. We expected women, who held significantly more positive attitudes about women in office than men on three of the four attitude measures, to be more likely to draw on these attitudes in their vote choice decisions than men because of a shared

identity with women and an interest in greater descriptive representation. However, while women's vote choice is influenced in the hypothesized direction by a baseline gender preference for women candidates, men's votes were influenced by their attitudes on baseline preference and the desire to see more women in office. These findings add to the body of mixed research results on symbolic mobilization – the expectation that women are motivated to political activity in the presence of women candidates and officeholders (Atkeson 2003; Lawless 2004; Dolan 2006; Fridkin and Kenney 2014). In support of this counterintuitive finding, a full-sample analysis of vote choice for women candidates (not shown) finds that women are no more likely to vote for women candidates in any of these House races than are men.

Conclusion

Scholarly thinking on women in politics has long suggested that public support for these women would be critical to their success. Indeed, for much of our nation's history, public antipathy was a significant limitation on women's political opportunities. Yet today we have evidence of greater support for women in political life than ever before. Gender stereotypes appear to be easing and general attitudes about women's integration into politics are largely positive or neutral.

Respondents in this survey are generally supportive of women in political life. While there is certainly no unanimity on these issues, this trend in supportive public attitudes should be a positive for women who seek office. At the same time, the evidence suggests that attitudes are generally not central to shaping concrete actions such as vote choice. This is an important finding, since scholars and political leaders have long thought that positive attitudes toward women were important to their success and negative attitudes could stand in their way. Only two of the gendered attitudes – baseline gender preference and a desire for more women in office – are related to vote choice. Neither beliefs about women's and men's emotional suitability for office or beliefs about the importance of same-sex representation were related to vote choice. This suggests that while voters may hold attitudes toward women in politics, these attitudes do not always play a role in structuring vote choice, particularly in comparison to the more traditional and primary political influences on the vote, such as political party and incumbency. Having said this, we do need to acknowledge that we examined general election results, where the influences of party and incumbency are likely to be strongest. Future research could examine primary elections, where attitudes about women in politics may have greater ability to shape voter preferences for candidates.

At the end of the day, these data contain mixed news for women candidates. It is clear that attitudes about the role of women in political life are more supportive now than they have ever been. The good news is that people appear to want more women in office. At the same time, we have to acknowledge that attitudes about women appear to have relatively little impact on voting for women, which means that they are both less helpful and harmful to women candidates than they could be. Perhaps most surprising is the lack of impact these attitudes have on the behavior of women, who articulate more positive attitudes toward women, but largely fail to turn these beliefs into action. However, since we only examine vote choice here, we must hold open the possibility that women's attitudes might motivate them to take part in other activities, such as donating money or working on behalf of women candidates. Finally, it also appears that how we examine these questions matters. When we move beyond studies of hypothetical candidates and make efforts to connect voter attitudes with their actions toward real women, we get a clearer picture of the dynamics of elections in which women candidates run. The evidence presented here stands in contrast to the findings of some earlier works and presents us with an opportunity to revise our assumptions about the impact of abstract attitudes on the fate of women candidates.

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Note

1. Relying on a sampling frame that includes 97% of US households, Knowledge Networks uses address-based probability sampling techniques to draw samples that are representative of the US population. They provide, at no charge, laptops and free monthly Internet service to all sample respondents who do not already have these services, thereby overcoming the potential problem of samples biased against individuals without access to the Internet.

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Appendix

Respondent congressional districts

Democratic woman candidate running against a Republican man: 64 races:

AL-7; AZ-1, 6, 8; AR-2; CA-5, 6, 8, 9, 12, 14, 16, 19, 23, 25, 32, 33, 34, 35, 38, 39, 40, 47, 48, 50, 53; CO-1, 4; CT-3; FL-3, 7, 9, 11, 12, 15; IL-8, 9, 11, 18; KS-3; ME-1; MN-2; NV-1, 2, 3; NH-1, 2; NY-4, 11, 14, 18; OH-9, 11, 12, 13, 15; PA-3, 13, 16; SC-3; WA-8; WI-2, 4, 7.

Republican woman candidate running against a Democratic man: 27 races:

AL-2; AZ-4, 7; AR-4; CA-45, CT-1, 2; FL-18; GA-4; IL-12, 13; IA-2; MO-1, 4, 8; NY-8, 10, 19, 25; NC-2; 5, 9; OH-2; PA-14; WA-3, 5; WY-AL.

Two men candidates: 173 races:

AL-3, 5; AZ-2, 3, 5; AR-1, 3; CA-1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 10, 11, 13, 15, 17, 18, 20, 24, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 41, 42, 43, 44, 46, 49, 51, 52; CO-2, 3, 5, 6, 7; CT-4, 5; DE-AL; FL-2, 5, 8, 10, 13, 14, 16, 19, 22, 23, 25; GA-1, 2, 3, 5,

7, 8, 10, 12, 13; IL-1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19; IA-1, 3, 4, 5; KS-1, 4; KY-1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6; ME-2; MN-1, 3, 5, 7, 8; MO-2, 3, 5, 6, 7; NM-1, 2, 3; NY-1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 9, 13, 15, 16, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 26, 27, 29; NC-1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13; OH-1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 14, 16, 17, 18; OK-2, 3, 5; PA-2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 15, 17, 18, 19; SC-1, 2, 4, 5, 6; WA-1, 2, 4, 6, 9; WI-1, 3, 5, 6, 8.

Dependent variables

House vote choice (Democratic women vs. Republican men) = 0 = vote for Republican man, 1 = vote for Democratic woman.

House vote choice (Republican women vs. Democratic men) = 0 = vote for democratic man, 1 = vote for Republican woman.

House vote choice (Democratic men vs. Republican men) = 0 = vote for Republican candidate, 1 = vote for Democratic candidate.

Independent variables

Attitudes regarding women in politics

Number of women in office = 1 = should be fewer women, 2 = current number of women is about right, 3 = should be more women.

Question: “Thinking about the number of women in important political office such as governors and members of Congress, would you say that there should be more women in these positions, fewer women, or is the number about right?”

Baseline gender preference = 0 = man, 1 = woman.

Question: “If two equally qualified candidates of your party were running for office, one a man and the other a woman, do you think you would be more inclined to vote for the man or the woman?”

Importance of same sex representation = 1 = not at all important, 2 = only somewhat important, 3 = very important.

Question: “People can prefer political candidates for a variety of different reasons. How important is it for you that people elected to represent your interests are women/men – not at all important, only somewhat important, very important?”

Emotional suitability = 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = strongly agree.

Question: “Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Most men are better suited emotionally for politics than are most women.”

Political variables

Incumbent = 0 = woman candidate not an incumbent, 1 = woman candidate incumbent (in male-only races 0 = Democratic candidate not an incumbent, 1 = Democrat candidate incumbent).

Share party = 0 = respondent does not identify with the party of the woman candidate 1 = respondent shares the partisan affiliation of the woman candidate (in male-only races 0 = not a Democrat, 1 = Democrat).

Independent = 0 = respondent not an independent identifier, 1 = respondent independent.

Demographic variables

Education = 1 = no formal, 2 = 1st–4th grade, 3 = 5th or 6th grade, 4 = 7th or 8th grade, 5 = 9th grade, 6 = 10th grade, 7 = 11th grade, 8 = 12th grade no diploma, 9 = High School graduate/GED, 10 = some

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college, 11 = Associate's degree, 12 = Bachelor's degree, 13 = Master's Degree, 14 = Doctorate/Professional degree.

Age = respondent age in years (ranges from 18–94).

Woman = 0 = respondent not a woman, 1 = respondent is a woman.

Ideology = 1 = extremely liberal, 2 = liberal, 3 = slightly liberal, 4 = moderate, 5 = slightly conservative, 6 = conservative, 7 = extremely conservative.

White = 0 = respondent not White, 1 = respondent is White.