



Penalties for going against type: How sexism shapes voters' perceptions of candidate character

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abstract

Although women are increasingly represented in elected office, little is known about how a female candidate's gender influences voter approval when her messaging emphasizes her strong leadership ability—a character trait generally regarded as masculine. Drawing from theories of social cognition and gender stereotypes, we examine in this article how citizens react to male and female politicians who emphasize particular character traits. After synthesizing relevant literature, we report on a study conducted to see whether women lose public support for emphasizing their leadership ability—thus “going against type.” In a survey of more than 800 American adults, we found that respondents penalized a fictional woman running for Congress when her messaging to voters emphasized the core character trait of leadership, as opposed to compassion (a trait traditionally associated with women) or no character trait at all. In contrast, respondents viewed a fictional man more favorably when his messaging to voters went against type by highlighting compassion than when he emphasized leadership. These findings suggest that female candidates have fewer options than men do when selecting which personal characteristics to present in their messaging to gain the approval of the voting public. This result underscores the need for policies and programs that promote female leadership in all walks of life, thereby leading the public to associate leadership skill with both genders equally.

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Although women are increasingly running for and winning elected office,¹ they remain underrepresented in government. Researchers across such disciplines as political science and public administration have provided insights into the unique barriers they face.

For one thing, women are held to a higher standard than men, with the result that women are often more qualified than the men they serve alongside.²⁻⁵ In addition, gender stereotypes, which are pervasive in leadership⁶ and in society more broadly,⁷ can turn voters against female candidates who do not fit their view of femininity.

In this article, we synthesize several lines of research that shed light on how gender stereotyping can ensnare female candidates in a double bind, in which women are required to have strong leadership ability but are penalized at the polls if their efforts to demonstrate their credentials lead to the perception that they are unfeminine.⁸⁻¹¹ We then discuss a study we conducted that indicates gender stereotypes lead voters to respond less favorably to female than to male candidates when their messaging runs counter to stereotypes for their gender.

Insights From Past Research

Not surprisingly, scholars in political behavior find that citizens perceive a great deal about the character and personalities of politicians from gender and other visible characteristics.^{9,12-19} Gender stereotypes can lead to assumptions about a politician's ideology,²⁰⁻²² policy expertise,^{10,20} and character.²³⁻²⁶

Research in social psychology has demonstrated that certain character traits are perceived to be "owned" by each gender. The research identifies two primary dimensions of social cognition (which refers to the ways people process information about the social world, such as norms): *communion* and *agency*.^{27,28} People who are driven by communion focus on getting along with others, whereas those driven by agency focus on achieving or getting ahead. These dimensions are overarching concepts that encompass multiple traits,²⁹ such

as compassion, honesty, and understanding in the case of communion, and leadership skill, competence, and assertiveness in the case of agency. Traits associated with communion are typically perceived to be owned by women, whereas traits associated with agency are perceived to be owned by men.^{16,24} (See note A.)

Leadership has come to be associated with males not only because of its agentic quality but for historical political reasons as well. People look to current leaders as models for future leaders,³⁰ and politics and management have historically been the domains of men. It follows, then, that many traits associated with being a successful leader and considered crucial for holding elected office, such as competitiveness and assertiveness, would be commonly viewed as male characteristics.¹⁷

Scholars find that, in general, perceptions of empathy, strong leadership, competence, and integrity are associated with approval of and votes for public figures.³¹⁻³³ Yet investigations have also shown that women often encounter a backlash for having those "male" qualities.³⁴⁻³⁶ In other words, as Kathleen Hall Jamieson noted in 1995,³⁷ women face a double bind: They must demonstrate competent, strong leadership to succeed in public service but, in doing so, are perceived as less feminine than voters would like them to be and, in turn, as less desirable as an office holder.⁸⁻¹¹

Various overlapping theories in the social sciences help to explain why women seeking leadership positions might face a backlash for "going against type," or conveying traits that do not conform to gender stereotypes. *Expectancy violation theory* argues that individuals react most strongly to information that runs counter to expectations, and it suggests that voters could have strong reactions against female candidates who do not meet their expectations for femininity.³⁸ Similarly, *role incongruity theory* argues that leaders are evaluated by how much they conform to gender expectations,^{36,39} and *implicit leadership theory* argues that leaders are evaluated in part based on whether they look like other real-world leaders, who have traditionally been men.^{40,41}

Studies of negative campaigning support these conceptions. In two experiments, Erin C. Cassese and Mirya R. Holman found that voter approval of female candidates plummets when the female candidates are attacked in ways that undermine how well they are viewed on character traits that are most closely associated with femininity.⁴² Scandals, in particular, are especially harmful to female leaders because scandals undermine women's perceived superiority in morality.^{43,44}

Given the stereotyping that female candidates face and the fact that voters hold men and women seeking public office to different standards, we wondered whether gender-based biases might lead voters to react differently to identical messaging by male and female politicians. The question is important because the choice of rhetoric has been shown to influence voters' opinions: In general, when politicians use campaign messages that emphasize their compassion or their leadership, voter ratings of whether they have the touted trait go up.⁴⁵ But we suspected that this pattern might not hold or might not be equally true for male and female politicians.

Present Study

Background & Hypotheses

In our experiment, we examined one way that gender stereotypes might affect women's electability: by constraining the messages about personal character that they can use to earn a favorable opinion from voters.

Women are confronted with a choice when drafting campaign messages: Follow their prescribed gender role and choose to emphasize their capacity for compassion, or go against type and emphasize their leadership ability to demonstrate that they are strong in a stereotypically male-associated character trait that voters normally value. As we have already noted, women running for office face the double bind of being criticized as unfeminine for conveying stereotypically masculine characteristics or being viewed as less powerful than a leader should be if they do not convey the stereotypical masculine traits of leaders.⁸

“We asked what would happen when a woman seeks to run for office on her strength as a strong leader.”

We asked, what would happen when a woman seeks to run for office on her strength as a strong leader rather than as a compassionate nurturer? Building on prior work, we predicted that women would receive little benefit from emphasizing their compassion, because women are already assumed to be compassionate. If they emphasized their strength in the trait of leadership, however, we predicted that the outcome would be worse, because the public would view such appeals as a violation of gender norms. Stated formally, we hypothesized that female candidates who emphasize leadership will receive lower approval than female candidates who emphasize compassion or no trait at all.

We also asked whether men running for office who went against type and emphasized their compassion would likewise be penalized by the public. We thought not. Because the political arena is historically male dominated, voters are accustomed to seeing men evoke a multitude of character traits. From Bill Clinton claiming that “I feel your pain”⁴⁶ to George W. Bush branding himself the “compassionate conservative,”⁴⁷ men in politics have a long history of portraying themselves as both compassionate and strong leaders. In addition, compassion is often seen as a positive leadership trait regardless of gender.^{48,49} Therefore, we also hypothesized that male candidates who emphasize compassion will receive higher approval than male candidates who emphasize leadership or no trait at all.

We had additional reasons for not expecting men to suffer a penalty similar to that experienced by women who go against type. Research into backlash effects has found that the penalty against women seeking leadership

roles is often predicated on a threat to status quo power dynamics and moderated by a desire to preserve gender hierarchies.³⁶ By embedding themes of compassion in their messaging, men do not pose any threat to power structures and, at the same time, convey that they embody a trait found to be desirable by voters.⁴⁵ Individuals will not perceive compassionate men to be violating a norm or threatening existing power structures, whereas women who emphasize leadership may face a backlash for challenging the status quo and social norms. As such, women would be expected to face a greater penalty for going against type than men would.

Method

To assess whether voters penalize candidates for going against type, we conducted a survey of 807 American adults through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk; <https://www.mturk.com/>), which provides participants for survey research. Our survey ran February 25–28, 2020. Participants were similar across experimental groups in gender, socioeconomic status, and educational level.

We used an experimental design known as a *vignette study*, which presents a simple scenario depicting elements of a topic being examined. The scenario elicits a response in the participants, and the researchers gather data on the responses.

In our study, survey participants each read a block of text purporting to be an excerpt from a news article announcing a candidate's bid for the U.S. House of Representatives. What varied was the gender of the candidate and the message he or she emphasized in the article. We randomly divided the participants into six groups: one control group and two treatment groups featuring a male candidate, and one control group and two treatment groups featuring a female candidate (see the Supplemental Material for examples of the news articles). The control groups read an article that contained only basic background information on a candidate—either David Allen or Debbie Allen—and a picture of that person. In the treatment groups, a quote from either David Allen

or Debbie Allen invoked a character trait as the motivating factor for the candidate's run.

In two of the treatment groups, either David Allen or Debbie Allen asserts, "I am running for Congress because I care about the people of this district." In the two other treatment groups, either David Allen or Debbie Allen asserts, "I'm running for Congress because I know how to lead." (See the full scripts in the Supplemental Material.) This experimental design allowed us to assess how women and men seeking public office are viewed when they emphasize character traits that historically have gendered connotations.

After reading the simulated news article, participants answered questions about the candidate mentioned in the story. To assess perceptions of compassion, we asked participants to indicate how well the phrase "he really cares about people like you" or "she really cares about people like you" described Allen. Similarly, to assess perceptions of leadership, we asked how well the phrase "he provides strong leadership" or "she provides strong leadership" described Allen. All responses were given using a scale ranging from *very poorly* (0), *somewhat poorly* (0.25), *neither poorly nor well* (0.5), *somewhat well* (0.75), and *very well* (1). Because the answer choice values were quantified from 0 to 1, the means were converted into a treatment effect scored between -1 and 1 by subtracting the mean value in the control condition from the mean value in each treatment condition.

We also assessed participants' overall view of the candidate, asking, "Overall, how favorable or unfavorable is your impression of David Allen?" or "Overall, how favorable or unfavorable is your impression of Debbie Allen?" All responses were given using a scale ranging from *strongly unfavorable* (0), *somewhat unfavorable* (0.25), *neither favorable nor unfavorable* (0.5), *somewhat favorable* (0.75), and *strongly favorable* (1). These numbers were quantified similarly to the measures of compassion and leadership, so we quantified the effects of the treatment—that is, the effect of reading a candidate's quote on compassion or leadership—the same way: by measuring the extent to which evaluations of a

candidate's favorability differed between each treatment group and the control group.

See the Supplemental Material for more details on our methodology and further analyses.

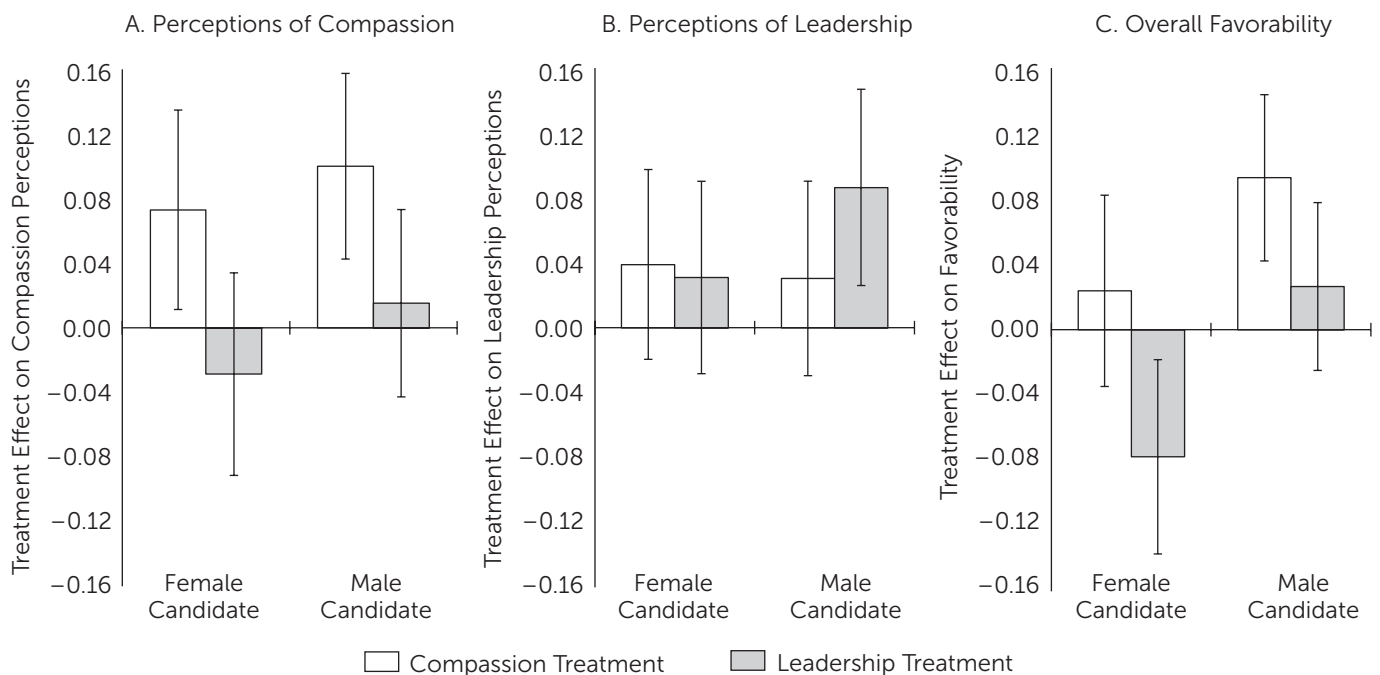
Results

As Figure 1A shows, when Debbie Allen or David Allen conveyed compassion by claiming to care about the people they were running to represent, they were viewed as significantly more compassionate than when they made no claims of compassion ($p < .05$ for the female candidate and $p < .01$ for the male candidate). (For more on the statistical terms used in this article, see note B.) Although compassion is a trait normally associated with women, men appear to easily overcome gender-based skepticism about having this trait. Simply claiming to care significantly increased participants' perceptions that the person described in the story cared about people like them.

When David Allen claimed to have leadership ability, he was viewed as a stronger leader than when he made no claims regarding leadership ability, but when Debbie Allen conveyed the same message, it did not give participants' assessments of her leadership a statistically significant boost (see Figure 1B). Women are thus not as able to overcome gender-based skepticism regarding their leadership abilities.

In terms of electability, perceptions of leadership, compassion, and other characteristics matter, but what affects the outcome most is how favorably the candidate is perceived overall.⁵⁰ Our results show that conforming to gender expectations had little effect on favorability (see Figure 1C). When Debbie Allen conveyed compassion and when David Allen conveyed leadership, their general favorability scores rose, but the effects were small and not statistically significant. This indicates that messaging conforming to gender stereotypes

Figure 1. How campaign messaging about leadership or compassion affects voter perception



Note. Treatment effects in this figure refer to the results of campaign messaging that emphasized compassion (white bars) or leadership (gray bars). The effect of a treatment was quantified by determining the difference between the survey results for voters in the treatment condition (compassion or leadership evoked in the candidate's messaging) versus the control condition (neither compassion nor leadership evoked). A. Messaging emphasizing compassion caused statistically significant effects on perceptions of compassion for both candidates. B. Messaging emphasizing leadership caused statistically significant effects on perceptions of leadership only for the male candidate. C. Messaging conforming to gender expectations had little effect on perceptions of favorability, but messaging that went against type harmed the female candidate's favorability ratings yet helped the male candidate's favorability ratings. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. When the error bars cross zero, the effect is not statistically significant at this level.

“when Debbie Allen emphasized her strong leadership skills, her overall favorability fell by nearly 8 percentage points”

had little effect, likely because male and female candidates are already assumed to possess those traits.

When the candidates went against type, however, a very different pattern emerged. When David Allen emphasized his compassion, his mean favorability score rose more than 9 percentage points relative to the control group—a statistically significant gain ($p < .01$). But when Debbie Allen emphasized her strong leadership skills, her overall favorability actually fell by nearly 8 percentage points relative to the control group—a statistically significant drop ($p < .05$). Both male and female participants reacted similarly, in that they both penalized the female candidate on favorability when she invoked leadership and rewarded the male candidate on favorability when he invoked compassion. (See Tables S1 and S2 in the Supplemental Material for full results.)

These findings show clearly that female and male candidates are on very different playing fields. Although compassion is conventionally viewed as a feminine quality, men gain an advantage by showing they are not just strong leaders but caring ones as well. Women, on the other hand, face a harsh backlash for going against type. Strong leadership skills are expected of politicians, yet when women seek to run on leadership, they suffer in the public eye.

Overall, our findings show that conveying compassion is unlikely to boost a female candidate's public approval and that conveying strong leadership can backfire. Women who seek public office are therefore under pressure to adopt a do-no-harm strategy that avoids touting gender-nonconforming stereotypes.

Discussion

This research leads to several important conclusions. First, we found that men are perceived as more compassionate or stronger leaders when they convey messages indicating that they possess the character trait of compassion or leadership, respectively. Second, women are perceived as more compassionate when they seek to convey compassion but are not perceived as stronger leaders when they convey messages related to leadership. Third and most important, men are perceived more favorably overall when they go against type and emphasize their compassion, but women are penalized when they go against type and emphasize their leadership.

These findings reveal a pattern of gender bias in which men do not pay the same costs as women. They are consistent with the expectancy violation, role incongruity, and implicit leadership theories discussed earlier in this article.

Our finding that female candidates who emphasize leadership are penalized even though voters want competent leaders supports past work showing that people view women as less feminine for demonstrating stereotypically masculine leadership traits.^{8,35} Women face the difficult task of needing to convey that they possess masculine character traits, such as the strength and decisiveness needed to hold an executive office, while avoiding a backlash from using messaging that emphasizes their leadership; at the same time, women need to show feminine traits, such as warmth and compassion.⁵¹

We note some limitations to our research design. First, we are unable to speak to the ways in which the candidate's gender may intersect with their race, age, or religion, as they do in the real world. In addition, although the survey measures we used are traditionally used in the study of public opinion, we assessed favorability, perceptions of compassion, and perceptions of leadership using single survey questions as opposed to multiple questions. This approach opens the possibility for measurement error. The treatments we used may have communicated something other than leadership or compassion, confounding the

results we found. To extend our results, it will be critical for researchers to analyze real-world events to understand how gender stereotypes limit the types of messages female candidates can convey to gain voter support.

Women remain underrepresented in leadership in both elected and career public positions. However, they bring a unique leadership perspective. Female leaders tend to take a transformational approach, meaning that they lead by example, presenting themselves as role models to gain the trust and confidence of followers,⁵² and they tend to be more inclusive.⁵³ Women in politics are, on average, more collegial, although they remain partisan, perhaps in part because of today's extreme political polarization.⁵⁴

Women in politics are also more effective. When female leaders are working in a supportive environment, they are more effective than men at introducing and advancing ambitious rules in regulatory agencies.⁵⁵ And female members of Congress propose more bills and have broader policy agendas than their male colleagues do. Greater representation of women in leadership also benefits the public in other ways. For example, it has been found to increase citizen coproduction, where citizens work with government agencies to deliver public services such as recycling programs and community policing,⁵⁶ and enhance citizen trust in government.⁵⁷

The source of gender bias is deeply embedded within society itself. These barriers and stereotypes can only be addressed by having more women in leadership roles, which would normalize their inclusion and thereby reduce perceptions that gender influences leadership abilities. This fact makes organizations that work to level the playing field for women seeking leadership positions—such as *She Should Run*—particularly important. And although our study focused on elected office, new policies and programs ensuring the representation of women on the boards of private corporations and nonprofit organizations and in nonelected policymaking positions with local governments alike would also be expected to help erode the perception of leadership being

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a masculine trait. In addition, research finds putting rules in writing can help reduce the gender biases female leaders contend with in the workplace.⁵⁸ Anyone can be a positive bystander to help address gender bias by calling out and addressing sexism wherever it occurs—from the classroom to the boardroom to the political arena.

As more women enter leadership positions and younger generations of American women become more engaged in politics,⁵⁹ perhaps politics and management will become less masculine, or at least more supportive of women, so women can freely lead without adhering to or compensating for gender stereotypes.

endnotes

- A. Danny Hayes also finds that gender stereotypes have a more limited effect than party stereotypes do.¹⁶ For example, a Republican woman may be perceived as being strong in foreign policy, even though women are not generally assumed to have that strength, because Republicans are assumed to be strong in that domain.
- B. Editors' note to nonscientists: For any given data set, the statistical test used—such as the chi-square (χ^2) test, the t test, or the F test—depends on the number of data points and the kinds of variables being considered, such as proportions or means. The p value of a statistical test is the probability of obtaining a result equal to or more extreme than would be observed merely by chance, assuming there are no true differences between the groups under study (this assumption is referred to as the *null hypothesis*). Researchers traditionally view $p < .05$ as the threshold of statistical significance, with lower values indicating a stronger basis for rejecting the null hypothesis. A 95% confidence interval for a given metric indicates that in 95% of random samples from a given population, the measured value will fall within the stated interval.

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supplemental material

- <http://behavioralpolicy.org/journal>
- Method & Analysis