

*The Electability
of Women Candidates:
The Effects of
Sex Role Stereotypes*

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WOMEN HAVE ALWAYS HELD fewer political offices than men. Although comprising 53 percent of the total voting population, they hold only about 4 percent of all elective political positions. Moreover, the figures vary depending upon the type of political office. (More women hold state and local than national office.) These aggregate level data raise several important questions. Why do women hold so few public offices? Are certain political offices identified as being more “women oriented” than others? Can sex role stereotyping by individuals explain this trend? The data used here to answer these questions were taken from a survey conducted in Milwaukee County, Wisconsin in late 1976. The questions asked were about likely voting behavior in local elections where women had been candidates and were likely to be candidates in upcoming elections.

EXPLANATIONS FOR FEMALE UNDER-REPRESENTATION

Explanations for the relative absence of female office holders generally fall into one of three categories—personality differences;

situational factors; and sex role socialization, which is generally divided into two distinct explanations, a lack of interest on the part of women, and low support from others for their participation.

Personality

The reluctance of women to seek political office and the low support given women candidates who seek political office are frequently attributed to the existence of particular personality traits. Women, it is argued, have less political efficacy than men¹ and those women who enter politics are more fearful and anxious than their male counterparts² and become politically active primarily out of affiliative concerns.³

Significant methodological problems exist, however, that limit the extent to which generalizations can be developed based upon these studies. The sex comparisons have been based on research conducted at different points in time,⁴ or have used test instruments that do not allow direct comparisons of male-female personality characteristics.⁵ The largest drawback, however, is that the research, particularly that done with political elites, does not go beyond description; and, as such, the impact of personality differences can only be inferred. How these personality differences, if they do indeed exist, result in fewer women holding political office is never specified.

Situational

Unlike the personality explanation, the situational approach does not consider the variance in women's office-holding in terms of innate traits or of early learning experiences. The low percentage of women in public offices, it is argued, is a result of their "situation"

¹ A. Campbell, *et al.*, *The American Voter* (New York: Wiley, 1960).

² E. Werner and L. M. Bachtold, "Personality Characteristics of Women in American Politics," J. Jaquette, ed., *Women in Politics* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1974).

³ G. Almond and S. Verba, *The Civic Culture* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1965).

⁴ Werner and Bachtold, "Personality Characteristics of Women in American Politics."

⁵ E. Constantini and K. H. Craik, "Women as Politicians: The Social Backgrounds, Personality, and Political Careers of Female Party Leaders," *Journal of Social Issues* (1972).

in society—a low socio-economic status⁶ and very little free time.⁷ Both of these variables are generally associated with low levels of political activism. Women's activity in a volunteer capacity for political endeavors, however, suggests that this explanation is not an entirely adequate reason for the under-representation of women in political office.⁸

Socialization of Sex Role Stereotypes

A third explanation sometimes suggested argues that women are less politically involved due to the political socialization of both women and men. The socialization explanation encompasses two distinct perspectives for the lack of women in political office. Both stress the consequences of sex role stereotyping, or the acquisition of norms which hold that certain behavior is appropriate for each sex. In the United States as in most other nations, proper behavior for a woman includes being oriented toward the family and toward nurturing others, displaying dependence, and showing very low levels of aggressiveness and achievement orientation.⁹

Given the aggressiveness and dominance associated with politics, it is not at all surprising that political activity is largely regarded as inappropriate for women. While legal barriers have been abolished, cultural norms still prescribe politics as a "man's activity."

One type of socialization effect is seen in the development of lower levels of political interest by women. It has been assumed by many that the absence of women in political offices is attributable to the socialization of girls to be less interested in politics than boys.¹⁰ The extent to which disinterest can account for this phe-

⁶ *Ibid.*, Cf. P. J. Dubeck, "Women and Access to Political Office: A Comparison of Female and Male State Legislators," *The Sociological Quarterly*, 17 (1976).

⁷ Campbell, *et al.*, *The American Voter*; and S. M. Lipset, *Political Man* (New York: Doubleday, 1960).

⁸ Campbell, *et al.*, *The American Voter*, E. Boneparth, "Women in Campaigns: From Lickin' and Stickin' to Strategy," *American Journal of Political Science* (July, 1977), and, M. M. Lee, "Toward Understanding Why Few Women Hold Public Office," M. Githens and J. L. Prestage, eds., *A Portrait of Marginality* (New York: David McKay, 1977).

⁹ B. E. Forisha, *Sex Roles and Personal Awareness* (Morristown, N. J.: General Learning Press, 1978).

¹⁰ R. D. Hess and J. V. Torney, *The Development of Political Attitudes in Children* (Chicago: Aldine, 1967).

nomenon, however, is questionable since, as pointed out above, a considerable amount of volunteer political activity is performed by women.

A second effect of political socialization is seen in the perspectives and beliefs developed among boys as well as girls. This outlook argues that females are less well suited and prepared to hold political office and that politics is a male domain. Thus, although women may be interested in political activity, have the appropriate skills, personality traits, and so on, they find it especially difficult to achieve public office because of the sex role stereotype that politics is a "man's activity."

Several studies point to such socialization as being an important explanation for female under-representation. For example, recent surveys have shown that women are given significantly less general support for political office than men.¹¹ Further, even when women are elected, it is frequently a result of factors considered irrelevant for male candidates.¹² However, it remains an open question if political socialization has this impact on the development of political attitudes and behavior.

THE STUDY

Using survey data collected by a 1976 omnibus election survey, this report examines the extent to which there was voter support or opposition for women candidates for various offices. The respondents had all voted in previous primary elections in which candidates for judge and school board were selected. Since these have been low turnout elections, held in February of odd years, the survey respondents represent an "elite" of voters. The data collected include general predispositional information on respondent preferences in voting for candidates having sex and demographic characteristics,¹⁸ projected voting behavior for various un-

¹¹ Louis Harris and Associates, Virginia Slims Opinion Poll, 1972; Lee, "Toward Understanding Why Few Women Hold Public Office"

¹² C. S. Bullock, III and P. L. F. Heys, "Recruitment of Women for Congress: A Research Note," *Western Political Quarterly* (September, 1972).

¹³ Predispositional information was collected by questions asking the respondent to indicate how likely it is that he or she would vote for a school board and a judicial candidate who had a certain trait or set of traits, e.g., female, female with children, Black, etc. These data are measures of one's propensity to vote for candidates portrayed in terms of certain stereotypes in an absolute, non-competitive sense.

named candidates described in terms of these sex and demographic characteristics,¹⁴ and standard background information.

A random sample of respondents was identified from lists of voters who had voted in the last primary which selected candidates for school board and judicial offices. Telephone calls to this sample of elite voters were made in October of 1976. A total of 233 respondents answered the majority of questions in the telephone survey and constitute the sample for this report.

RESEARCH EXPECTATIONS

Prior research and speculation suggest a number of specific expectations which are germane for this study. Because of the modest sample size and the single locale nature of the data, we do not view this current report as rigorous hypothesis testing and therefore *do not* formulate these expectations in hypothesis format.

1. Less support is given to women candidates for all political offices than to male candidates.

This statement is based upon the premise that sex role stereotyping prescribes politics as an unacceptable vocation for women.

2. Support for women political candidates varies across political offices.

Most research centering upon comparisons of candidates has failed to take the different office levels into consideration. As Adams points out:

The tacit premise seems to be that the voter's criteria remains basically the same for all offices. Although there may be more information to put into the decision equation for some races than for others, the voter's essential formula has been presumed to stay constant.¹⁵

There is considerable evidence to suggest that for women, as for

¹⁴ Vote intention data were collected through a set of questions which asked about vote choice in terms of definite alternatives. The question format asked respondents to indicate which of two equally qualified candidates for school board and judge would receive their vote if one was a man and the other was a woman, or if one was a man and the other was a woman with young children, and so on. This latter set of questions provides data on likely respondent voting behavior when confronted with an electoral choice framed in terms of several sex role stereotypes.

¹⁵ W. C. Adams, "Candidate Characteristics, Office of Election and Voter Response," *Experimental Study of Politics* (1975), 79.

minority groups, the willingness to vote for a candidate depends upon the particular office. It has been argued that since local positions do not carry a great deal of prestige and power they are considered suitable for women while offices at the state and especially the national level are not.¹⁶

3. The higher the SES of an individual, the greater will be that individual's support for women's political candidacy.

Although several investigators have examined these variables in relation to sex role stereotyping, only two studies have specifically examined them with respect to support for women in political positions. The Wells and Smeal study¹⁷ is limited since their sample consists solely of women while Bernstein and Polly¹⁸ use demographic characteristics of a precinct. Although these studies are suggestive, the shortcomings of the data limit their generalizability.

4. Characteristics of the candidate which reinforce sex role stereotypes inhibit further the support given women for political office.

It is anticipated, based on socialization premises, that variables which remind the voter of the candidate's sex or which reinforce the dependent or nurturing role will reinforce stereotyping resulting in less support being given the woman. Thus, a woman who is married and has children will receive less support since, to most voters, this variable reminds them of her gender and her role which they have been socialized to believe makes women less suitable and available for public office. Even less support is likely to be given when additional sex-based factors are included.

THE FINDINGS

The initial task involves determining what sex role stereotypes are held by this sample of elite primary voters in terms of candidate predispositions and projected voting preferences. Table 1 shows that, with regard to candidate predispositions, the largest propor-

¹⁶ *Ibid.*; and A. S. Wells and E. C. Smeal, "Women's Attitudes Toward Women in Politics," J. Jaquette, ed., *Women in Politics* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1974).

¹⁷ Wells and Smeal, "Women's Attitudes Toward Women in Politics."

¹⁸ R. A. Bernstein and J. D. Polly, "Race, Class and Support for Female Candidates," *Western Political Quarterly*, 28 (December 1975), 733-736.

TABLE 1
 CANDIDATE PREDISPOSITION BY SCHOOL BOARD AND JUDICIAL OFFICES
 (percent by column)

RESPONDENT'S CANDIDATE PREDISPOSITION ^a	PUBLIC OFFICES	
	School Board	Judge
Less likely to vote for female	4.8	15.7
Makes no difference	66.5	65.7
More likely to vote for female	28.7	18.7
N	230	230
Less likely to vote for female with small children	29.4	40.1
Makes no difference	43.9	48.0
More likely to vote for female with small children	26.8	11.9
N	228	227
Less likely to vote for candidate with well-known name	15.5	14.9
Makes no difference	55.9	56.6
More likely to vote for candidate with well-known name	28.6	28.5
N	220	221
Less likely to vote for a Black person	7.2	7.9
Makes no difference	74.4	77.3
More likely to vote for a Black person	18.4	14.8
N	223	229

^a The exact question wording was "If the candidate for _____ (office) is a female, would you be more likely to vote for this person or less likely to vote for this person?"

tion of respondents for every trait or set of traits and for both types of elective office report that having these traits makes no difference to them in terms of their likelihood to vote for or against females, well-known candidates, or Blacks, these last two offering comparisons for other stereotypes. These responses suggest that large numbers of high participation voters perceive themselves as being open and uncommitted *a priori* in terms of voting for or against a woman candidate. Striking shifts are noted when the nurturing role of mother is added to the simple sex role stereotype of female office holder. The changes involve many formerly neutral respondents concluding that a woman with small children would be less likely to receive their vote. However, what is obvious in Table 1 is the large number of respondents reporting favorable predisposi-

tions for women and to a lesser extent women who have young children. Thus, sex role stereotyping seems to affect negatively a female candidate's chances *most* when young children are included.

Comparing these with the stereotypes of well-known political names and a candidate's race indicates that the simple sex role stereotype (i.e. female only) probably has no more of a negative impact than do these others and may actually have a somewhat less severe negative impact.

Another important trend in these data is the difference noted for type of office. Here, sex role stereotyping seems to have an important impact, in that noticeably smaller proportions of respondents report being predisposed to vote for a woman and a woman with small children when the position is judicial than when it is school board. The image of the judicial office thus seems to affect negatively a female candidate's chances while having a well-known political name or being Black seems *not* to have the same effect by office type. Thus, the office being sought by a woman does seem to have an important impact on the respondent's predispositions.

While the data provide important and useful insights regarding sex role stereotypes, the questions are primarily useful for indicating some underlying general support dimensions for a woman's candidacy. In order to assess the affects of sex role stereotypes on electability, a more realistic electoral setting must be created. The most desirable data would indicate the respondent's actual voting behavior in elections where these sex role stereotypes are operative. Obviously, this is impossible to accomplish in most survey situations; thus, in the present study respondents were asked to project their voting preferences for these two types of political offices when the hypothetical candidates projected images which included certain sex role stereotypes. These data, displayed in Table 2, show that when respondents are given a choice between candidates having various female *and* male sex role stereotypes, the patterns are different from those noted in Table 1 when no opposition candidate was presented. In every case when respondents were given a choice among candidates, fewer of them took a neutral, "Makes no Difference" stance than they did when the only choice was the degree of likelihood of voting for a candidate.

In terms of electoral support for women candidates, Table 2 shows that when respondents know that a man is the opposition candidate, they are *not* necessarily more likely to gravitate toward supporting the male candidate. Some respondents, more than in

TABLE 2

PROJECTED VOTING PREFERENCE BY SCHOOL BOARD AND JUDICIAL OFFICES
(per cent by column)

RESPONDENT'S PROJECTED VOTING PREFERENCE*	PUBLIC OFFICE	
	School Board	Judge
Male	13.5	30.1
Makes no difference	51.2	47.6
Female	35.3	22.3
N	207	206
Male	37.5	55.3
Makes no difference	37.0	34.1
Female with small children	25.5	10.6
N	216	217
Male	20.4	27.8
Makes no difference	48.3	50.5
Black Female	31.3	21.7
N	211	212
Male with well-known political name	24.4	34.0
Makes no difference	45.0	42.5
Female	30.6	23.6
N	209	212

* The exact question wording was "If two candidates for _____ (office) were equally qualified except one is a male and the other is a female, for whom would you vote?"

Table 1, indicated a vote preference for a woman candidate; however, larger gains are usually seen for the male candidate than for the female. Knowing that the electoral opponent is a man leads respondents to move away from a neutral position and more of this movement seems to be toward the male candidate.

In Table 2 as in Table 1, large differences exist between the two offices. Clearly, a woman seeking a judicial position encounters much greater opposition than if she seeks a school board post. This is true regardless of the traits added to the sex role stereotype. Most damaging is the stereotype of the candidate for judge being a mother with young children. Thus, trends regarding sex role stereotypes and their potential negative impact for female candidates are even more pronounced when respondents are provided with an opposition candidate who is male.

TABLE 3

ASSOCIATION AMONG INDEPENDENT VARIABLES AND PREDISPOSITION/
VOTING PREFERENCE ITEMS
(entries are gammas)

PREDISPOSITION/VOTING PREFERENCE ITEMS	SEX	AGE	EDUCA- TION	IDEOL- OGY
Likely vote female, School Board	.248	-.062	-.011	.060
Likely vote female with children, School Board	-.040	-.179	.077	.121
Likely vote candidate with well-known political name, School Board	.017	.093	-.241	.071
Likely vote Black, School Board	.176	-.332	-.006	-.520
Projected vote female, School Board	.306	-.139	-.015	-.110
Projected vote female with children, School Board	-.040	-.234	.144	-.012
Projected vote male with well- known political name, School Board	.138	-.103	.218	-.070
Projected vote Black female, School Board	.217	-.171	.093	-.313
Likely vote female, Judge	.378	-.144	.012	-.240
Likely vote female with children, Judge	-.017	-.228	.132	-.131
Likely vote candidate with well- known political name, Judge	.072	.137	-.284	.106
Likely vote Black, Judge	.245	-.260	.139	-.249
Projected vote female, Judge	.315	-.208	.010	-.228
Projected vote female with children, Judge	.145	-.346	.137	-.201
Projected vote male with well- known political name, Judge	.209	-.166	.220	-.189
Projected vote Black female, Judge	.260	-.220	.091	-.412

Socialization of Sex Role Stereotypes

A final concern is with the effects of various socialization-based variables on sex role stereotypes. Table 3 summarizes the relationships among four such variables and the sex role stereotype items. One variable, education, appears to have weak or non-existent relationships with these stereotype items. This finding is at variance with what one might expect from other studies. One explanation may be that since the sample represents high participation primary

election voters, the sample does not represent the full range of education levels. Self-rated political ideology appears to be related only when the candidate stereotype includes the candidate's race. Liberals are more likely to be predisposed toward a Black and to project voting for a Black female than for a male candidate; however, the same is not true for a non-Black female candidate or a female candidate who has children. A self-identified liberal is no more likely to be predisposed or to project voting for these latter types of candidates than for their male opponents.

The two most important variables in terms of their relationships with the predisposition and projected vote items are sex and age. These variables have the largest number of statistically significant relationships using a chi-square measure of association with the sex role and other stereotype items; however, sex and age are not uniformly related to the stereotype items. Thus for some of the predisposition and voting preference items, women are no more likely to support the female candidate than are men—e.g., when children or well-known opposition candidates are added to the sex role stereotype.

SUMMARY

This study of primary voters' predispositions and voting preferences regarding various candidates for local school boards and judicial positions presented in terms of various sex role and other stereotypes shows that

1. The dominant posture taken by respondents on all but one predispositional question was that it made no difference in terms of their vote whether or not a candidate was a woman, was a woman with small children, had a well-known political name, or was Black.
2. The type of public position had an important impact on support levels. Respondents were less likely to indicate a predisposition toward a female candidate with children if the position was judicial than if it was school board. (Candidates who are Black and who have well-known political names do not show the same difference based upon the office being sought.)
3. When respondents were asked about their projected voting preference between two candidates, they were more likely to

- indicate a vote intention for one candidate or the other than had been true when the predisposition questions were asked.
4. Many of the socialization-related independent variables do *not* have the expected strength and direction of impact upon the predispositional and voting preference items.

While it is clearly premature to conclude that political socialization experiences have no impact on differing voting behavior responses to candidates described in sex role stereotype terms, this study raises questions regarding the postulated link; however, sex-role stereotyping does seem to take place among high participation voters.