Why Women Earn High Marks: Examining the Role of Partisanship and Gender in Political Evaluations

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We present the results of a randomized survey experiment demonstrating that the public evaluates women politicians more highly than men across multiple characteristic assessments. This finding is consistent with a recent wave of research indicating greater preferences for women politicians. Which respondents rate women politicians more highly, and why? We find that women and younger voters do not account for the greater marks given to women politicians. Instead, respondent partisanship and the presumed partisanship of the politician account for a great deal of our findings, with gender playing a complicating role. Democratic and Republican respondents are apt to project their own partisanship onto politicians, and across both parties, we find higher assessments for co-partisan politicians and for women politicians. On the whole, women politicians are evaluated on par with or significantly higher than men politicians across six characteristics, scoring especially well relative to men when politicians are presumed to be members of the opposing party and when traditionally feminine characteristics are assessed.

Keywords: Women in politics, survey experiment, public opinion

*T*he early canon of the women in politics literature found that the public generally preferred men and stereotypically masculine traits over women and feminine traits (Alexander and Andersen 1993; Conover and Feldman 1986; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993b; Rosenwasser and Dean 1989). Around 1992 — the original "Year of the Woman" — women began to run more often than they had in the past and increased their overall numbers in elective office (Burrell 1994; Thompson and Steckenrider 1997; Wasburn and Wasburn 2011). Despite this, research continued to report preferences for men in politics (Dolan 2010; Eagly 2007; Sanbonmatsu 2002) well into the twenty-first century.

Today, women still only hold approximately 25% of all federal elected offices in the United States (Herman and Sloman 2019). Yet recent research points to a change in public assessments of women in politics. Though differences persist in some realms, women are now much freer from many of the expectations and constraints of gendered behavior that characterized the politics of the past (Anastasopoulos 2016; Brooks 2013). This research aims to enhance our understanding of this important shift by examining which types of voters perceive women to be as capable as men, under which conditions, and on which attributes. We start by reviewing the evidence that women are now more welcome in the political arena in the eyes of voters, and sometimes they are even preferred in that arena to men. We then explain and analyze experimental survey data collected in the summer of 2018 that echoes other recent research findings that voters are increasingly willing to rate women on a par with men in politics, and sometimes award even greater assessments to women. We posit and evaluate theories explaining this result.

While partisanship was not signaled directly in the study, we asked respondents to guess the partisanship of the politicians; when respondents presume a politician's partisanship is the same as their own, a presumption of shared co-partisanship is related to large increases in favorability evaluations. This design choice was made to help tease out the impact of candidate gender in respondent evaluations. Moreover, in the United States, nearly 75% of municipal-level elections are conducted and balloted in a nonpartisan way (MacManus and Bullock 2003); thus, for many people, electoral contests lack the explicit partisan cuing experienced on the national stage. While national general elections are undeniably characterized by partisanship, primary elections and races for many local political offices are either devoid of meaningful partisan cues or occur in such low-information environments that further investigation of individual voter party presumption processes is worthwhile.

We find that presumed partisanship unfolds in different ways for Democrats and Republicans. Democratic respondents more often project their own partisanship onto women rather than men politicians, which, in turn, boosts overall assessments of women. Republican respondents project co-partisanship equally onto men and women politicians — despite the fact that women politicians tend to be Democrats — and accordingly, we observe more positive assessments of women politicians overall.

GENDERED VOTER PREFERENCES AND POLITICIAN ASSESSMENTS

In the 1970s, women held fewer than 3% of all federally elected seats. At all levels, party elites in charge of recruitment efforts — who were mostly men — displayed marked preferences for men in efforts to field political candidates (Niven 1998; Stuart and Vanes 1978). Not only did party gatekeepers prefer men, but voters also preferred men and traditionally masculine stereotypes (Alexander and Andersen 1993; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993a; Rosenwasser and Dean 1989). Stereotypically masculine traits such as toughness or assertive leadership were associated with "good" political candidates, while feminine traits such as compassion, warmth, and understanding were viewed as less desirable and more associated with women (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993b). Gender was an easily visible cue used by voters to ascribe feminine traits to women and masculine traits to men, as well as to apply different standards, disadvantaging women in the process (Conover and Feldman 1986; Hedlund et al. 1979; McDermott 1998; Sapiro 1981; Sigelman et al. 1986).

Despite research showing general preferences for men in politics, the 1990s saw women winning federal seats at higher rates than in the past.[1] Since then, research has come to note a double bind, whereby women are expected to meet two irreconcilable demands. For example, voters think women should be tough, but not too tough, lest they risk coming off as emasculating and unfavorable (Gay and Tate 1998; Jamieson 1995). Women are also held to higher qualification standards than men

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1. In 1991, Anita Hill testified before an all-male, all-white Senate Judiciary Committee during Clarence Thomas's Supreme Court confirmation hearings. She was treated with marked derision, and Thomas was confirmed in a 52–48 vote shortly after her testimony, despite her reporting Thomas's previous sexual harassment toward her in the workplace. Hill's testimony moved the narrative around women in politics. There was a reactionary surge of women running for office at every level. The 1992 election brought the total number of women serving in the Senate to 7 and to 47 in the House, with 24 newly elected women.

when running for office (Bauer 2020), and there are other assessment areas in which voters and politicians themselves unevenly apply standards to potential men and women candidates (Aalberg and Jenssen 2007; Lawless 2004; Teele, Kalla and Rosenbluth 2018).

Gender remains an important and understandable cue for voters with very little other information (Mo 2014). But more recently, researchers have argued that gender stereotypes held by voters no longer harm women candidates when seeking office (Anastasopoulos 2016; Brooks 2013). In the 2016 general election, only 13% of the population reported an explicit opposition to electing a woman as president (Burden, Ono and Yamada 2017), despite ongoing evidence that sexism and racism still influence candidate choice (Ditonto 2019; Schaffner, MacWilliams and Nteta 2018; Valentino, Wayne and Oceno 2018). Thus, gender remains an important feature of political assessment, yet both empirical and experimental evidence shows that partisanship often matters more to voters than gender when both partisanship and gender are known (Badas and Stauffer 2019; Dolan 2014).

When voters are asked why they think there are fewer women in politics, opinions differ. Some still offer explanations that point to sexism in politics, but there is no longer overwhelming evidence of systemic biases favoring men over women in politics today (Dolan and Hansen 2018). The point of our research is not so much to explain why we have seen changes over time, but rather to contextualize which sorts of people give higher assessments to women over men politicians and to offer an explanation of gendered partisan projection as to why we now observe these differential outcomes.

Since the 2016 election, a growing chorus of researchers have found that voters want more women in politics. Teele, Kalla, and Rosenbluth (2018) report that women candidates still face discrimination in ways that men do not, but, all else being equal, respondents show a slight preference for women candidates. Additionally, in a recent meta-analysis of more than 40 experimental studies, Schwartz and Coppock (2020) report a slight overall preference for women candidates.

In the summer of 2018, we fielded a survey experiment to examine assessments of men and women politicians. A set of experimental images of politicians were pretested, and we selected the two that were rated most similar on personality assessment measures.[2] Like others, our results

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2. The following personality components were presented in the pre-test pool: friendly, attractive, wealthy, trustworthy, feminine, intelligent, age, competent, masculine, educated, moral, compassionate, respectable.

indicated that respondents tended to give women politician higher marks on multiple trait assessments than they did for men after viewing a story about the politician. The first two years of Donald Trump's presidency coincided with the powerful uprising of women symbolized by the 2017 and 2018 Women's Marches and the #MeToo movement. Indeed, Trump's comments about women spurred massive backlash in online communities (Maas et al. 2018). We expect that this sort of consciousness raising contributed to a shifting landscape of preferences. The timing of our survey offers a window into the types of people who are more inclined to rate women more highly than men in the contemporaneous political environment and under what circumstances. In the following sections, we first describe the main effect of politician gender on respondent evaluations. Then, we lay out several theoretical explanations about who and what may drive the higher ratings for women before testing these hypotheses explicitly. We conclude by discussing the results with attention to the situational context of 2018.

EXPERIMENTAL METHOD

In June 2018, we fielded a randomized survey experiment on a diverse national sample of more than 1,400 U.S. citizens aged 18 and over through Survey Sampling International (SSI).[3] The SSI sample closely matches U.S. Census benchmarks: the sample has a median age of 45; 51% are women; 77% are white, 10% are Black, and 12% identify as Hispanic; and the modal education level is a bachelor's degree. Moreover, the sample included respondents from every state and Washington, D.C. Political party affiliation was well distributed, with 46% Democrats, 46% Republicans, and 9% independents (so-called leaners are categorized as partisans), resembling the national

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3. SSI is now known as Dynata. SSI/Dynata relies on online, nonprobability, opt-in sampling. While the sample closely resembles national benchmarks, there is well-founded concern about whether the data produce inferences that are comparable to face-to-face, probability-based, and/or random sampling. Since we leverage an experimental design, our inferences rely heavily on comparisons across the key treatment manipulation and the sample characteristics are a methodological trade-off. The potential for misestimation of particular sample characteristics, such as political engagement (Karp and Lühiste 2016), remains a concern, especially when inferences rely on describing populations (Malhotra and Krosnick 2007); however, research has found that opt-in panels and online surveys provide cost-effective alternatives for social science research (Vavreck and Rivers 2008). We had 72 respondents who failed the attention checks. While we kept these respondents, in following the best practice established and justified in (Aronow, Baron and Pinson 2018), we also performed each analysis presented in this article with this group removed, and the results were not meaningfully different; these results are available by request.

Table 1. SSI (national) sample descriptive statistics

		Census Benchmark
N	1,464	
Age (%)		
18–24 years	11	13
25–44 years	39	35
45–64 years	31	35
65+ years	19	17
Female (%)	53	51
One race (%)	98	98
White	77	75
Black	10	12
American Indian	1	1
Asian	4	4
Pacific Islander	1	1
Other	3	6
Two or more races (%)	2	2
Hispanic (%)	12	16
Education (%)		
Less than high school diploma	2	12
High school graduate	19	31
Some college or associate's degree	31	26
Bachelor's degree	29	19
Advanced degree	19	11
Rural (%)	23	19
Household income		
< $50,000	39	45
$50,000–$99,000	40	29
$100,000–$149,000	14	14
> $150,000	6	12
Partisanship		
Democrat (%)	46	48
Independent (%)	9	8
Republican (%)	46	44

distributions found by the Pew Research Center (2018). Key demographic summaries are reported in Table 1.

Using images of comparable men and women politicians, we measured how voters reacted to a fictionalized short newspaper article delivered online about either a man or a woman politician. Each article included an image of the politician and referred to the politician with gendered language.[4] Treatments were randomized across politician gender,

4. See the appendix for the articles and images. The images were official photos of sitting members of Congress. Members were selected who were not party leaders or well-known figures. The images were

emotional reaction (anger or sadness), and policy domain (education or defense). Since the treatments were randomized and evenly distributed, the analyses here pool the treatments and include treatment controls when appropriate.[5] Following exposure to the newspaper article, respondents were asked to evaluate the politician's favorability, competence, perceived partisanship, and several qualities including strong leadership, intelligence, compassion, and sincerity, on a scale of 1–5, with 5 as the most positive assessment.[6]

Despite no explicit mention of partisanship, we asked respondents which party they thought the politician belonged to. The decision to exclude explicit mentions of partisanship was deliberate; since researchers have established that partisanship typically trumps gender, we sought to evaluate and leverage the degree to which politician gender may alter perceptions of partisanship. In other words, research has shown that citizens will make inferences based on what they believe to be most relevant to or diagnostic of the task at hand. For example, a woman politician addressing defense policy might be perceived as more ideologically conservative than a woman politician addressing education, yet she might also be perceived as more liberal than a man politician addressing the same topic. Indeed, prior research has found that white citizens perceive Black candidates as more liberal than ideologically identical white candidates, and these misperceptions indirectly influence vote choice (Jacobsmeier 2015). We will return to this rationale later in the article. After finding consistently higher marks for women politicians across treatments, this article focuses on potential explanations for that observation.

pilot-tested with a separate out-of-sample survey to establish comparability. The selected images did not significantly differ on perceptions across a range of characteristics, such as age, friendliness, and intelligence. The design is between-subjects; participants in the survey experiment only saw a woman or a man politician.

5. Explicit analyses of the impact of different emotional reactions and policy domains on the evaluation of politicians are the subject of a different article. The randomization was effective; there are no significant differences in the proportion of respondents in each treatment category across each of the variables and demographic factors of interest.

6. While our sample was of a typical size for such survey experiments, and our randomization was effective, some methodological cautions remain around estimating heterogenous treatment effects when cutting up the sample for closer examination of certain types of respondents (Gelman and Carlin 2014). In each of our analyses, our sample sizes are noted and meet or exceed norms used to report average treatment effects; we also discuss the precautions and limitations of our results in the conclusion.
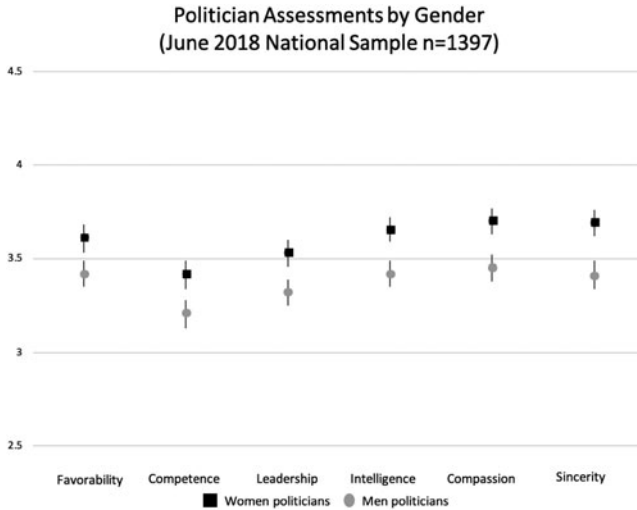
FIGURE 1.   Politician assessments by gender (June 2018 national sample, *n* = 1,397)

UNDERSTANDING AND EXPLAINING THE PREFERENCE FOR WOMEN POLITICIANS

Like others, we find clear evidence that assessments of politicians' general favorability, competence, leadership, intelligence, compassion, and sincerity are significantly higher for women than for men politicians in contemporary politics.[7] Figure 1 shows the overall assessments of men and women politicians across various types of evaluations, with 95% confidence intervals for each.

Why are women repeatedly besting men in these political assessments? Indeed, we recognize that the timing of the survey undoubtedly plays a role, yet our result is not unique, as the discipline has increasingly noted positive results for women politicians. Importantly, for some of these traditionally feminine characteristics, such as compassion and sincerity, women have been rated higher than men for some time (see Alexander and Andersen 1993). Yet on measures of favorability, competence, leadership, and intelligence, either men have done better than women, or men and women politicians have been assessed similarly until very recently.

7. For the traditionally feminine traits of compassion and sincerity, women have generally been rated higher than men for a longer time period. It is on the traits of favorability, competence, leadership, and intelligence that contemporary research, including that done here, finds greater differences when compared with older studies.

We find an across-the-board significant difference in favor of women across all categories, which is a departure from past research and corroborates much of the contemporary research being produced now.

What factors or characteristics explain the differences in these evaluations? In what follows, we leverage our experimental design and additional data collected during our survey to put forward a set of possible explanations why we observe greater marks for women over men politicians. We posit two explanations based on respondent characteristics and two based on partisanship. Because of the randomization of the experiment, testing individual hypotheses is relatively straightforward. After exploring each theoretical expectation on its own, we then directly compare the competing explanations for the higher ratings for women over men politicians.

Women Supporting Women

In 2018 in particular, there was no shortage of media coverage arguing that the women-led resistance movement had a strong impact on the nomination and potential election of women (Gambino 2018; Kurtzleben 2018). In a CBS poll fielded six months before our survey, women were far more likely than men to say that the country would be better off if more women served in elected office (De Pinto 2019). Previous academic research also lends support to this theory. In 1992, when women began to run for office at higher rates, researchers found that among all partisans — but especially within the Democratic Party — voter sex was significantly related to vote choice, with women tending to vote for women candidates more than men (Dolan 1997, 1998; Plutzer and Zipp 1996). Increased numbers of women in public office also inspired adolescent women to consider greater political involvement (Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006). Sometimes gender affinity can even break the pulls of partisanship. In instances when a woman Democrat runs against a man Republican, women who are generally Republican voters have shown a slight shift toward women candidates (Brians 2005). For judicial nominees, Badas and Stauffer (2018) find that shared gender identity mediates the effect of being ideologically distanced on the decision to support a nominee.

Some research has shown that when women's issues are made more salient, we can expect greater same-gender affinity among women voters (Koch 1997). Thus, the post–2016 election period and the 2018 campaigns featuring women and women's issues might be a particularly

ripe time to expect that women respondents would account for the boost in women politicians' assessments. Thus,

H_1 Women respondents rate women politicians higher than men politicians.

Younger Respondents Supporting Women

When women started to enter U.S. politics in greater numbers, research found that younger voters made up some of the core support for women candidates (Welch and Sigelman 1982). In the first "Year of the Woman," analyses found that younger voters showed greater support for women than older voters, all else being equal (Dolan 1998). If younger voters are more enthusiastic about women, and if these respondents give women overwhelmingly positive assessments, that might account for the overall favorability marks we observe in 2018. Additionally, in explicitly political realms, older voters generally hold stronger gender stereotypes than younger voters (Dolan 2014). Thus, we might expect to observe greater favorability for women candidates among younger respondents, as generational shifts in attitudes suggest they are less prone to draw on potentially detrimental stereotypes. Thus,

H_2 Younger respondents rate women politicians higher than men politicians more so than older respondents.

Democrats Supporting Women

The Democratic Party has a history of electing more women politicians than the Republican Party. From the 1970s onward, Democratic women have outnumbered Republican women in Congress for all but four years. This partisan difference has increased over the past 20 years in a marked way. Figure 2 shows the number of Republican and Democratic women elected to the House and Senate from the 92nd Congress (1971–73) to the 116th Congress (2019–21).

Both Democratic Party elites and voters show greater preferences for women politicians compared with Republicans when looking at election results. There is also a greater supply of women candidates who desire to run as Democrats than Republicans (Crowder-Meyer and Lauderdale 2014). In the past, even when the partisanship of the candidate did not align with that of Democratic voters, Democratic voters tended to trust

Women In Congress by Party
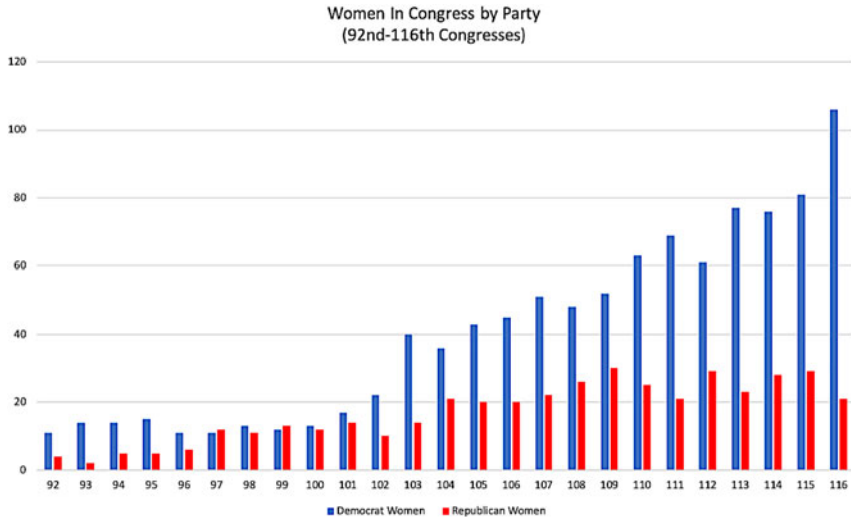(92nd-116th Congresses)

FIGURE 2.   Women in Congress by party (92nd–116th Congresses)

women candidates and view them as more qualified than men (King and Matland 2003). However, the more recent extreme polarization may make findings such as these less applicable in contemporary politics.

Lastly, all else being equal, voters tend to think that female candidates are more liberal or Democratic leaning than men (Koch 2000, 2002). Assuming that people prefer politicians who hold ideological viewpoints close to their own, the greatest boost to women candidates may come from Democratic respondents showing outsized preferences for women candidates.[8] Thus,

H₃   Democratic respondents (compared with independents or Republicans) rate women politicians higher than men politicians.

Our final hypothesis posits an explanation that relies on respondent assumptions about politicians. While there were no references to partisanship in our treatments, we asked respondents to guess the partisanship of the politician after they provided assessments on favorability, sincerity, and some additional attributes. With empirical

8. There is a difference between ideology and partisanship, such that not all Democrats consider themselves "liberals" and not all Republicans consider themselves "conservative," and thus this hypothesis could have been reconsidered in an ideological rather than a partisan framework. However, for the respondents in the survey, the correlation between party and ideology is quite high at 0.58.

reality as a guide, a guess that the woman was a Democrat is reasonable, as people rely on the most narrowly relevant information available when constructing an attitude or opinion in the absence of other information (Crawford et al. 2011; Karl and Ryan 2016). Thus, in a political setting, assuming a woman of unknown partisanship is a Democrat is understandable.

However, research indicates that people generally assume — sometimes incorrectly — that others people they encounter or assess share characteristics similar to their own (Mathison 1988; Thielmann, Hilbig, and Zettler 2020). The false consensus effect (Ross, Greene, and House 1977), whereby individuals project their own opinions onto others, is more common when the other is a woman. In particular, men, more so than women, are more likely to assume that a woman shares the same impression that the man has (Lenton et al. 2007). Some research has also found that those with conservative ideological viewpoints tend to falsely project their own views onto others more often than liberals (Rabinowitz et al. 2016), as do those who score higher on social dominance and authoritarianism batteries (Strube and Rahimi 2006).

Partisanship tends to trump gender in political preference formation, but the intricacies of how stereotyping and expectations play out is complicated; when partisanship and gender are explicitly appealed to, Democrats and Republicans value different sorts of cues in particular ways (Bauer 2018). However, our expectation precedes this sort of dual stereotype conundrum, and it is a bit simpler on its face. If people in general have a tendency to project their opinions onto others, and if this tendency is enhanced when the other in question is a woman, there is reason to believe that one's own partisanship may be more likely to be projected onto the politician when she is a woman, and one's evaluation, in turn, would be more favorable overall. However, another potential pathway by which partisan projection would lead to higher marks for women politicians is dependent on the patterns of projection for Democratic and Republican respondents. If Democratic respondents presume that women share their partisanship because women in politics tend to Democrats *and* Republican respondents presume that women share their partisanship because those with conservative ideological outlooks — which overlaps with Republican partisanship — tend to project their own beliefs onto other more often, women politicians ought to be the overall benefactors of any presumed shared partisan bumps. For our final hypothesis, we test whether women and men politicians have respondent partisanship projected onto them, and

whether the same respondent-politician partisan projection is related to greater favorability.

H_4 Voters are more likely to presume that women politicians share their own party identity and therefore are more supportive of women candidates.

ANALYSES AND RESULTS

Recall that when examining differences of means across various assessments, respondents evaluated women politicians more favorably than men (Figure 1). However, when breaking out these assessments by respondent gender, the evaluative differences between men and women politicians are much more pronounced among men respondents. Figure 3 displays the assessments of men and women politicians by respondent sex. On average, men respondents gave significantly more preferential assessments to women politicians in every outcome category, whereas women respondents thought men and women politicians were equally favorable and competent, and women politicians were only slightly preferred on the measures of leadership, intelligence, compassion, and sincerity. Thus, our first cut at group averages does not support the hypothesis that same-gender affinity drives the result of greater overall support for women politicians.

As a more precise test of H_1, we estimated difference-in-difference scores for each dependent measure. This estimation allows men and women respondents to vary in baseline evaluations and examines the magnitude of the treatment effect (shifting from a man to a woman politician) among each gender, and then compares the size of the shift across respondent gender. For four of the six dependent measures, men and women respondents are *not* significantly different in the degree to which their evaluations of politicians change based on the politician's gender; for the remaining two measures (favorability and competency), the magnitude of the shift in evaluations is significantly *smaller* among women than men respondents (see Table 2).

Again, H_1 is not supported: men and women respondents either evaluated women politicians more favorably to a similar degree as men politicians, or men respondents did so to a significantly greater degree than women respondents.

Performing similar difference of means analyses across age categories, we again find no support for H_2. Instead, older respondents tended to rate
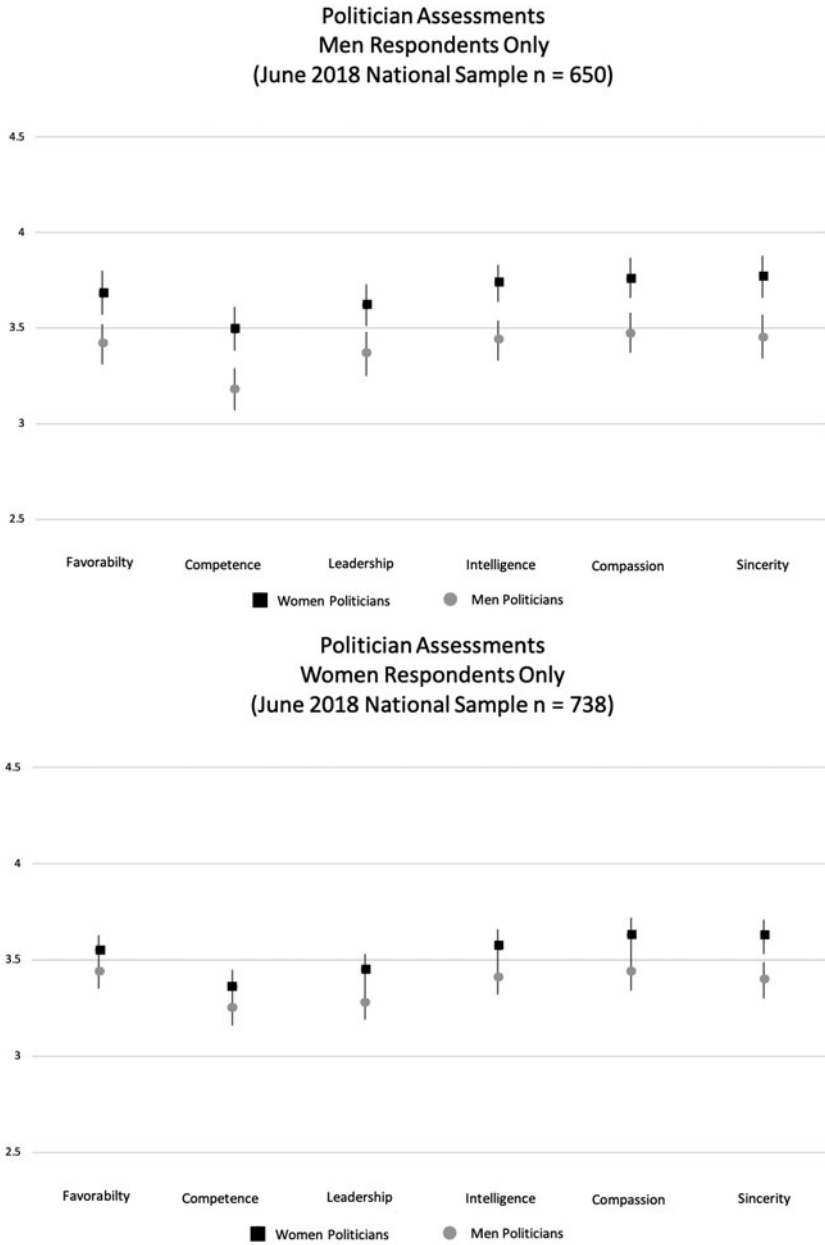
FIGURE 3.   (a) Politician assessments, men respondents only (June 2018 national sample, $n = 650$). (b) Politician assessments, women respondents only (June 2018 national sample, $n = 738$).

Table 2. Difference-in-difference estimations across respondent sex

	Favorability	*Competency*	*Leadership*	*Intelligence*	*Compassion*	*Sincerity*
Woman respondent	0.062	0.127	–0.060	0.017	0.008	–0.034
	(0.076)	(0.080)	(0.075)	(0.072)	(0.077)	(0.077)
Saw woman politician	0.266***	0.333***	0.263***	0.318***	0.304***	0.312***
	(0.078)	(0.082)	(0.077)	(0.074)	(0.079)	(0.079)
Diff-in-diff	–0.191*	–0.255**	–0.085	–0.151	–0.131	–0.095
	(0.108)	(0.113)	(0.106)	(0.102)	(0.109)	(0.109)
Constant	3.417***	3.354***	3.711***	3.584***	3.473***	3.370***
	(0.099)	(0.104)	(0.098)	(0.094)	(0.101)	(0.101)
Observations	1,267	1,270	1,268	1,265	1,266	1,267
R^2	0.016	0.022	0.044	0.024	0.025	0.023

Notes: All models include controls for respondent age, respondent partisanship, and treatment condition. Means and standard errors are estimated by linear regression.
*** $p < .01$; ** $p < .05$; * $p < .1$.

women politicians more highly than men politicians, on average, whereas younger respondents tended to rate women and men politicians equally. Full results are similar for all outcome assessment measures, and thus they are omitted in the interest of space but are available upon request.

To examine H_3, that Democrats give women politicians higher marks than Republican respondents, we begin by breaking the sample down into partisan categories and then perform the same difference in means calculations (see Figure 4).[9]

We find that Democratic respondents gave women politicians significantly higher assessments across all categories, on average. Among Republican respondents, we only find significant differences in respondents' assessments of women politicians' intelligence, compassion, and sincerity. As with the analyses for respondent gender, we turn to difference-in-difference estimations for each dependent measure. This more precise test of H_3 reveals that the difference between the magnitude of the treatment effects (i.e., the increase in assessment when moving from a man to a woman politician) across partisanship is only significant for evaluations of favorability (see Table 3).

In other words, Democrats are significantly different from Republicans in the degree to which they prefer women politicians in terms of overall favorability, but the degree of preference is not significantly different in all other assessments. Interestingly, in no assessment category did men politicians perform better than women.

To assess our partisan projection hypothesis, we first consider what sort of presumptions respondents displayed. After evaluating the politician, we asked respondents whether they could guess which party the politician belonged to. For this analysis, we only kept the respondents who identified as Democrats or Republicans, to leverage same-party preferences. Most respondents (75%) presumed the politicians to be members of a major party. Table 4 shows the breakdown of respondent presumptions of partisanship for women and men politicians.

As is shown, same-party presumptions are not evenly distributed among partisans. On average, Democrats who saw a woman politician thought she, too, was a Democrat, but those who saw a man thought he was nearly equally likely to be a Republican or a Democrat. For Republican

9. The group means for independents are not presented, but they do not substantively change the results. We also did the same calculations by political ideology (liberal, moderate, conservative) and found substantively similar results to those obtained by using partisanship.
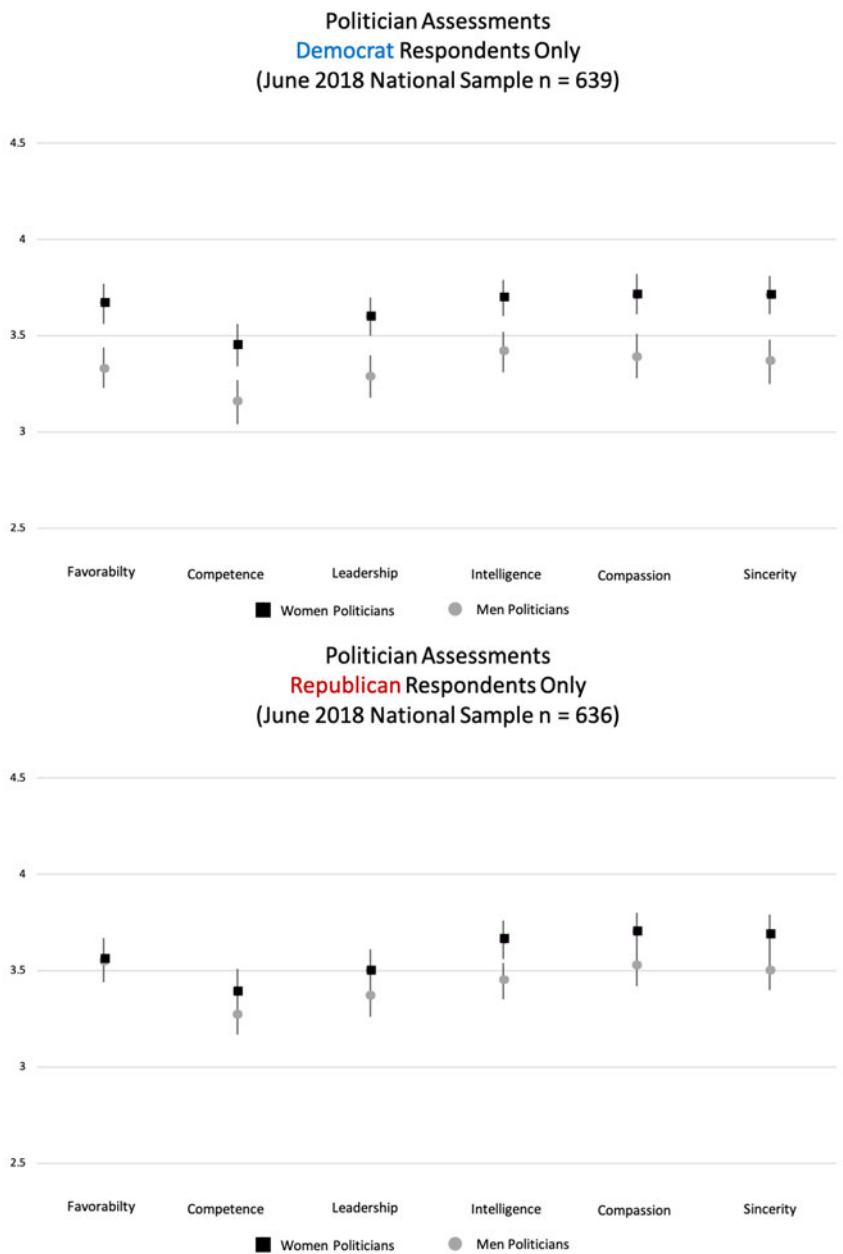
FIGURE 4.   (a) Politician assessments, Democratic respondents only (June 2018 national sample, n = 639). (b) Politician assessments, Republican respondents only (June 2018 national sample, $n = 636$).

Table 3. Difference-in-difference estimations across respondent partisanship

	Favorability	Competency	Leadership	Intelligence	Compassion	Sincerity
Democratic respondent	−0.205***	−0.124	−0.072	−0.025	−0.125	−0.129*
	(0.076)	(0.080)	(0.075)	(0.072)	(0.077)	(0.077)
Saw woman politician	0.020	0.121	0.143*	0.209***	0.164**	0.180**
	(0.076)	(0.079)	(0.075)	(0.072)	(0.077)	(0.077)
Diff-in-diff	0.290***	0.155	0.150	0.059	0.142	0.162
	(0.107)	(0.112)	(0.106)	(0.102)	(0.109)	(0.109)
Constant	3.543***	3.461***	3.773***	3.640***	3.544***	3.437***
	(0.099)	(0.104)	(0.097)	(0.094)	(0.100)	(0.100)
Observations	1,267	1,270	1,268	1,265	1,266	1,267
R^2	0.020	0.019	0.045	0.023	0.025	0.025

Note: All models include controls for respondent age, respondent partisanship, and treatment condition. Means and standard errors are estimated by linear regression.
*** $p < .01$; ** $p < .05$; * $p < 0.1$.

Table 4. Respondent projection of partisanship onto politicians by
respondent and politician type

	Guessed the Woman Politician Was a		Guessed the Man Politician Was a	
	Democrat	*Republican*	*Democrat*	*Republican*
Democratic respondents	65%	35%	51%	49%
Republican respondents	36%	64%	33%	67%

respondents however, a majority of respondents presumed that both
men and women politicians were also Republicans. Even though,
empirically, women politicians at the federal and state levels are
much more likely to be Democrats, Republican respondents tended
to think the men and women they saw were equally likely to share
their own partisanship. This does not appear to be attributable to an
information gap; in our sample, Democratic and Republican
respondents rank themselves as similar on a political interest scale,
hold similar levels of education, and report consuming similar
amounts of media. While curious, this result supports other work
finding that those who are politically conservative have greater
tendencies to project consensus than liberals (Stern et al. 2014).
Partisan projection is an issue of similarity, and thus finding that
Republican respondents are more likely to project their partisanship
may be rooted in an attitude like assumptive consensus.

What relationships do gender, age, and partisanship of the respondent
exhibit with partisan projection? Using the explanatory variables from the
foregoing potential explanations, we model the likelihood that
respondents presumed the politician in question shared political party
affiliation. We find that both partisanship and exposure to a woman
politician are related to projection, but this effect is different for
Democratic and Republican respondents. We also find that as age
increases, respondents are slightly less likely to assume that a politician
shares their party identification. The full table of results is presented in
Table A1 the appendix (in the supplementary material online), and in
Figure 5 we present the marginal effects describing how the projection
of co-partisanship varies by respondent partisanship and the sex of the
politician.

As indicated, among Democratic respondents, seeing a woman
politician (versus a man politician) significantly increased respondents'

Likelihood that a Respondent Projected their own Partisanship onto a
Politician: By Politician Gender and Respondent Partisanship
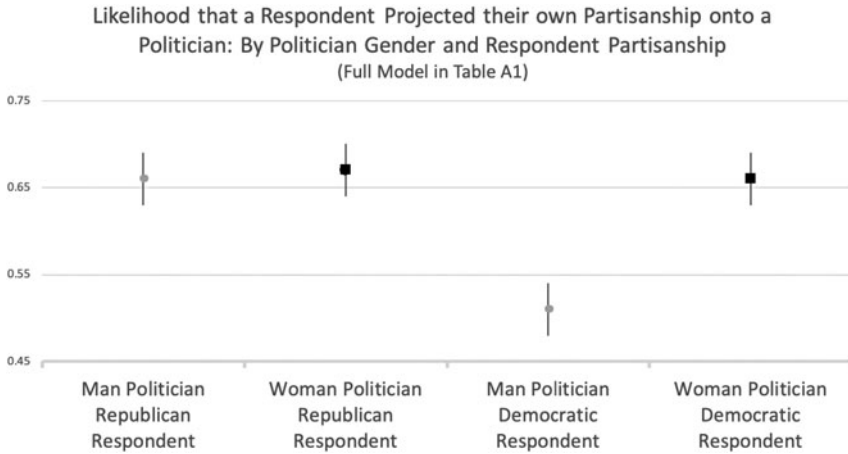(Full Model in Table A1)

FIGURE 5. Likelihood that a respondent projected their own partisanship onto a politician: by politician gender and respondent partisanship. The full model is presented in Table A1 in the appendix.

presumption that partisanship was shared with the respondent. Republican respondents tended see both men and women politicians as Republicans in the first place. Recall our expectation that partisan projection might happen slightly more often to women politicians. We find mixed support for this, as Republican respondents are equally likely (about 65% of the time) to project their partisanship onto both men and women politicians. Alternatively, Democrats are more likely (about 65% of the time) to project their partisanship onto women politicians, yet they only project their partisanship on men politicians at the rate of chance (about 50% of the time). In other words, Democrats are less likely to perceive men politicians as co-partisans.[10] Among Republicans, this could be taken as evidence of greater partisan projection onto women, as, empirically, women politicians tend to be Democrats, or as evidence of a greater presumptive tendency in conservative respondents.

Do respondents who project their partisanship onto the politician view the politician more favorably? Yes, and, as in most previous scholarship,

10. Additional analyses examined several potential factors to explain this result and revealed that media use, political interest, and gender attitudes are not significantly associated with partisan projections. The results indicate that Democratic men respondents accounted for much of the shift among Democrats, as they either more strongly projected their partisanship onto women politicians or projected Republican partisanship onto men politicians (in comparison with Democratic women respondents). Unfortunately, our study design does not allow us to tease apart these two alternative mechanisms.

both Democratic and Republican respondents weigh perceived partisanship more heavily than observed gender in their evaluations. As a way to evaluate each of the potential explanations together, we model politician assessments as a function of the gender and partisanship of the respondent, the gender of the politician, an indicator perceived co-partisanship, and an interaction between the gender of the politician and the indicator of co-partisan presumption. The interaction term suggests that the impact of a politician's gender on how they are assessed may depend on their perceived partisanship (see Table 5).

Overall, the partisanship of the politician — even if it is just a guess — dominates these assessments and is significantly linked to every outcome measure by a magnitude of at least double that of the politician's gender. Consistent with previous research, we find that people presume partisanship, even in the absence of explicit cues, and those perceptions account for much of their evaluations. We also find that gender affects presumed partisanship, at least for some respondents. Yet partisanship is not the whole story; while the effects of seeing a man or woman politician are smaller in size, this is not surprising considering the dominant role of party identification in American politics. Specifically, being exposed to a woman politician is associated with significantly higher evaluations of leadership, intelligence, compassion, and sincerity. Thus, the significant impact of gender in four (of six) evaluations despite the outsized influence of partisanship is striking.

Notably, however, gender and partisanship play complicating roles in each of these cases. Favorability and competency are the only candidate qualities that appear strictly related to presumed same partisanship, with no greater assessments for women. We turn to the potential for differential support "bumps" for either men or women politicians and/or politicians who are presumed to be of the same party as the respondent. First, assessments of feminine qualities (i.e., compassion and sincerity) demonstrate that women politicians are evaluated significantly higher than men politicians regardless of whether the politician is presumed to be of the same or different partisanship. In other words, when asked about perceptions of compassion and sincerity, politicians who are perceived as co-partisans are rated significantly higher relative to out-partisans, but among presumed co-partisans and among out-partisans as well, women politicians are evaluated significantly higher than men politicians (see Figure 6).

Turning to assessments of leadership and intelligence, the significant interaction term in Table 5 indicates that men and women politicians
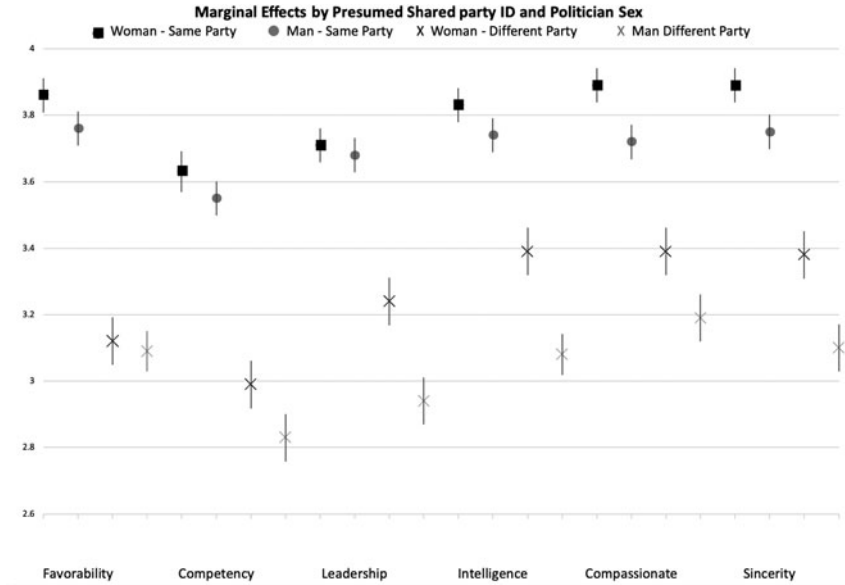
FIGURE 6. Marginal effects by presumed shared party ID and politician sex.

are evaluated differently based on their perceived partisanship. Specifically, politicians who are presumed to be co-partisans with the respondent are significantly preferred over out-partisans, and politician gender does not impact the degree of this preference. Yet the gender of the politician does differentially impact assessments of out-partisans on these two measures: women who are presumed to be out-partisans are evaluated significantly higher than men who are also presumed to be out-partisans. Going further, this higher out-partisan assessment for women is true across five of the six assessment categories, excluding favorability.

Considered together, we find that higher evaluations of women politicians appear to be explained by an overall Democratic preference for women and the sizeable influence of presumed partisanship, which Republicans tend to extend equally to men and women. Explanations relating to the characteristics of respondents, such as their own gender or age, find no support in our analyses. Interestingly, the assessments of overall favorability and competence — once other factors are controlled for — are no longer significantly higher for women politicians; rather, people tend to view men and women politicians equally on these outcomes. In the discussion, we consider the context of our survey experiment, interpretations of the results, and what to anticipate from future research.

Table 5. Politician assessment by respondent characteristics, party presumption and politician sex (ordinary least squares)

	Favorability	*Competency*	*Leadership*	*Intelligence*	*Compassion*	*Sincerity*
Respondent age	−0.001	−0.004*	−0.007**	−0.002	0.001	0.005**
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Woman respondent	−0.002	0.025	−0.071	−0.049	−0.037	−0.071
	(0.058)	(0.061)	(0.057)	(0.056)	(0.060)	(0.059)
Democratic respondent	−0.035	−0.010	0.022	0.020	−0.064	−0.032
	(0.059)	(0.062)	(0.058)	(0.057)	(0.060)	(0.060)
Saw woman politician	0.037	0.167	0.296**	0.314**	0.205*	0.287**
	(0.094)	(0.097)	(0.098)	(0.091)	(0.100)	(0.101)
Presumed same party	0.672**	0.729**	0.740**	0.663**	0.531**	0.655**
	(0.081)	(0.086)	(0.084)	(0.082)	(0.088)	(0.089)
Woman politician *Presumed same party	0.068(0.120)	−0.088(0.124)	−0.267*(0.121)	−0.228*(0.116)	−0.036(0.124)	−0.150(0.125)
Treatment Controls	Yes[+]	Yes[+]	Yes[+]	Yes[+]	Yes[+]	Yes[+]
Constant	2.999**	2.953**	3.316**	3.221**	3.123**	2.954**
	(0.117)	(0.124)	(0.115)	(0.113)	(0.121)	(0.122)
Observations	1,026	1,029	1,028	1,025	1,026	1,026
R^2	0.133	0.124	0.135	0.104	0.091	0.101

Note: Robust standard errors.
** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

DISCUSSION

Recent experimental and survey research finds greater support for women politicians than ever before, and we, too, find similar results. However, consistent with many other lines of research, partisanship tends to be the most important determinant of how people evaluate political actors. The results of our study suggest that even in the absence of explicit partisan cues, many people presume a politician's partisanship, and those perceptions are significantly related to evaluations. While Democrats and Republicans prefer members of their own party, there are differences in the types of respondents who project their own partisanship onto others and how partisans assess men and women presumed to be members of the other party. Presumed co-partisans, whether they be men or women, are generally preferred by respondents, and presumed co-partisanship was the key force related to favorability. However, even controlling for presumed co-partisanship, women were given higher marks than men for competency, leadership, intelligence, compassion, and sincerity.

Democratic respondents in our study presumed partisanship differentially by the gender of the politician. Those who saw a woman were slightly more likely to think that she was a Democrat, and those who saw a man were equally likely to presume that he was a Democrat or a Republican. Democratic respondents who guessed that politicians were Republicans still rated women significantly higher than men on competency and leadership. Thus, while presuming shared partisanship positively influences assessments, men and women stand to gain equally, and, coupled with the underlying pro-woman preferences among respondent partisans, the preference bump for women politicians persists.

For Republican respondents, the story is one of stronger partisanship. Whether presented with a man or a woman, majorities of Republican respondents were apt to presume politicians shared their partisan identification, and in accordance with that presumption, were assessed more favorably. Despite the fact that women in elected office are more often Democrats, nearly 70% of Republican respondents guessed that women politicians were also Republicans. When Republicans presumed the politicians were Democrats, there is no significant difference in their evaluations of men or women politicians. Thus, since Republicans more often assumed that women were also Republicans, the preferences that co-partisans extend to one another are conferred to more women overall. The phenomenon of party projection and our findings that women were

more often projected to share partisanship with respondents — despite
women more often being Democrats in politics — suggests a fruitful
avenue of future research.

Using comparable men and women politicians, we find that our sample
of U.S. respondents show significantly higher assessments for women. This
is not a small or fragile result. Collectively, and in every treatment condition
individually, respondents found women politicians to be significantly
more favorable, more competent, more apt to exhibit leadership, more
intelligent, more compassionate, and sincerer than men. Like other
contemporary scholars, there is evidence that times and attitudes are
changing in ways that likely benefit women political aspirants.

More broadly, however, the summer of 2018 offered a unique backdrop
for women in politics. The charged #MeToo movement highlighting the
difficulties women routinely face at the hands of men cast a gendered hue
on much of the media coverage for a variety of topics. In coverage of
candidate recruitment for the midterm elections, gender was particularly
salient, as was the idea of new candidates with a fresh start (Dovere 2017;
Merica and Grayer 2018). The press coverage of the 2018 midterms
contextualizes our results in ways that make these findings more
understandable. The fresh memory of the 2016 election may also have
allowed the generic politicians used in the experiments to be
placeholders for the most recognized politicians at the time, Hillary
Clinton and Donald Trump. The overall positive ratings for women over
men for outcomes such as competency, intelligence, and compassion
may signal that voters had the two previous candidates in mind as
references when thinking about political matters. Work done in future
years without a highly salient, gender-differentiated election as a
comparison for voters to mentally refer to may yield different outcomes.

These results should leave those seeking the inclusion of more women
in politics hopeful. But support for women is not uniform, and
partisanship still plays an outsized role. Women and younger people —
theoretically more inclusive cohorts of voters — do not drive the bulk of
these observed differences. Rather, it appears that Democrats tend to
see the greatest differences in men and women candidates, and they
prefer women candidates over men with the greatest margin.
Republicans were partisans above all else, but when assuming
co-partisanship, they also showed a preference for women politicians
for outcomes such as intelligence and compassion. Future research
could explore instances in which a person presumes the partisanship of
a candidate and then is "corrected" to learn about the candidate's

actual partisanship to see how first impressions generated based on individual presumption change in the context of additional information. Knowing that Republican respondents projected Republican partisanship onto men and women, would penalties be the same for both men and women who did not hold in fact that identity? More generally research into the prevalence of different sorts of presumption in political arenas seems ripe for research.

Despite women's successes in the 2018 midterms, a more important context to note is that of the 111 new members elected to Congress, only 42% were women. While this is the highest percentage of women ever elected in a new class, the overall composition of the Congress still lags behind a representative split. We maintain that these results do not signal the end of sexism in American politics, but may point to a shift from when women used to have a much steeper hill to climb to earn public acceptance. While our results indicate a change in some ways, they also confirm related research on the overwhelming importance of partisanship. Who says that the future could actually be female? Both politicians and voters have a role to play, and if more Republican women candidates ran for office, our results suggest that Republican voters would be amendable to giving them support, whereas Democrats will likely continue to show support for women politicians. The work of candidates combined with voter preferences will have the final say on empirical successes for women, but our results point to a budding preference for women that has the potential to bloom into a more representative set of political actors.

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

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