Politics & Gender, 18 (2022), 575–604.

Are You My Candidate? Gender, Undervoting, and Vote Choice in Same-Party Matchups

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Partisanship is the dominant force that dictates American electoral behavior. Yet Americans often participate in elections in which either the partisanship of candidates is unknown or candidates from the same party compete, rendering the partisan cue meaningless. In this research, we examine how candidate demographics — specifically gender — relate to voter behavior and candidate selection in these contexts. Leveraging survey data from same-party matchups in congressional elections (resulting from "top-two primaries"), we examine the relationship between candidate gender and undervoting and vote choice. We find that in same-party matchups, women candidates are associated with lower levels of undervoting among women voters. Furthermore, we find that in mixed-gender contests, women voters from both parties and Democratic men are more likely to favor female candidates. The findings presented here have important implications for the literatures on gender and politics, electoral politics, partisanship, and the design of electoral institutions.

Keywords: Elections and voting behavior, women candidates, same-party matchups, top-two primary

When California voters entered the voting booth in 2018, they were tasked with deciding whether to cast their ballot for incumbent senator Dianne Feinstein or her challenger Kevin de León. Normally,

We would like to thank Jan Leighley, Patrick Kraft, Michael Olsen, Christian Grose, Monica Komer, and the three anonymous reviewers for their support and helpful feedback on this project.

doi:10.1017/S1743923X20000677 1743-923X

we might expect voters to make their decisions based on their own partisan identities, with Democrats voting for Democratic candidates and Republicans voting for Republican candidates. The 2018 general election in California, however, did not afford voters the ability to vote along party lines because de León was also a Democrat. While voters may have held information about Feinstein based on her years of service in the Senate, or de León for his service in the California State Senate, the party label next to each candidate's name provided no additional cues to voters about these candidates. This unusual general election setup was the result of California's adoption of the "top-two primary" in 2012, under which candidates from both parties participate in a single primary, with the top two vote getters — irrespective of party — advancing to the general election.[1]

Though the same-party matchup presented to Californians in 2018 was unusual for such a high-profile office, voters are often confronted with electoral choices in which they are unable to draw on party as a heuristic to aid in their decision-making process. An inability to draw on partisan cues could also be the result of nonpartisan elections for state- or local-level office or elections in which multiple candidates from the same party appear on the same ballot, such as primary races. In these contexts, voters are unable to rely on partisanship as a way to gauge which candidate they are more likely to be aligned with. In the face of this increasingly difficult decision, many voters opt out of selecting a candidate for a particular race (undervoting) or fail to turn out at all (Masket 2016). Those who do decide to select a candidate must rely on other cues when making their selections. In this article, we examine whether candidate demographics — in this case, gender — are associated with voter decision-making in contexts in which partisanship does not meaningfully differentiate the candidates.

We explore candidate gender and both the decision to undervote in a particular race and the decision of who to vote for. Beginning our analysis with undervoting (or skipping over a particular race on the ballot), we examine the relationship between the gender composition of candidates and voter decision-making. We posit two reasons why candidate gender may be related to the decision of whether to skip over a particular race. The first reason is informational. In the absence of information about partisanship, candidate gender may serve as an

1. Washington is the only other state with this primary system, although other states have introduced bills that would result in similar systems.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X20000677 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ideological cue to voters — who are likely to perceive women as more liberal (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; Koch 2002; McDermott 1998). In cases in which gender differentiates the candidates, these cues lead to lower costs of selecting a candidate by making it easier to differentiate between candidates when choosing who to vote for (Ondercin and Fulton 2020). Thus, in cases in which gender — but not party — differentiates candidates, we may expect to see lower rates of undervoting as voters will feel better able to select one of the candidates. The second reason is symbolic. Drawing on the literatures on descriptive and symbolic representation, we argue that women are less likely to undervote when they have the opportunity to vote for a woman candidate in a mixed-gender race or in races with two women on the ballot.

Beyond examining how the gender composition of candidates is associated with the decision of whether to vote in a particular race, we also evaluate the relationship between candidate gender and the decision of who to vote for in mixed-gender contests. Drawing on the literatures related to ideological stereotypes and gender-affinity effects, we argue that in races in which gender, but not partisanship, differentiates the candidates, Democrats and women will, on average, be more likely to vote for the female candidate. We further examine gender differences within party to gain a more thorough understanding of this relationship. To test our expectations, we draw on data from the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) — which includes a validation of voter turnout — from 2012 to 2018, to explore both candidate gender and voter participation in specific contests (conceptualized as whether voters undervote in a given race) and candidate gender and vote choice.

In our analysis of undervoting, we find inconsistent evidence that male voters undervote at different rates based on the gender composition of the candidates. Moreover, a supplemental analysis of perceived ideological distance between the candidates indicates that voters are not using gender as a heuristic in this manner. We similarly find little evidence of an information story occurring among women voters; however, we find that women are significantly less likely to undervote in both mixed-gender and female-female matchups compared to male-male contests, consistent with expectations related to symbolic representation. Our analysis of vote choice in mixed-gender matchups provides evidence that Democrats are, on average, more likely to support women candidates than Republicans, and women in each party are more likely to select the female candidate compared to their male co-partisans. This finding is

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X20000677 Published online by Cambridge University Press

consistent with recent research on gender-affinity effects in nonpartisan elections (Badas and Stauffer 2019b).

We note from outset that because we are using observational survey data (rather than experimental data), our ability to evaluate causal relationships is necessarily limited. That said, our study serves as a complement to existing experimental work related to candidate gender and voter decision-making (Badas and Stauffer 2019b; Crowder-Meyer, Gadarian, and Trounstine 2020; Kirkland and Coppock 2018; Sen 2017), and we uncover patterns consistent with much of this research.

The results presented here offer important insights into gender and voter decision-making in the context of same-party matchups. As the number of states considering top-two primaries increases, the number of these types of matchups is likely to increase in the future. We conclude with a discussion of the implications our findings have for the literature on gender and politics, heuristics and voting in low-information elections, and the design of electoral institutions.

HEURISTICS AND VOTER DECISION-MAKING IN LOW-INFORMATION ELECTIONS

Voters are most motivated to turn out in contexts in which the decision-making process is least taxing. That is, voters turn out at higher rates in elections when the effort required to discern which candidate is the "correct" choice is minimal (Bartels 2000). The most powerful heuristic for voters is often partisanship (Badas and Stauffer 2019b; Campbell et al. 1966; Dolan 2008; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008), which quickly signals to voters which candidates are on their "team." While partisanship is one of the most useful heuristics for voters, this information is not always readily apparent at the ballot box. Some estimates suggest that about half of all elections that occur in the United States are nonpartisan (Wright 2008). Still other races might feature multiple candidates from the same party, meaning that the cue of party no longer meaningfully distinguishes candidates from one another. Because information about partisanship is unavailable or does not meaningfully differentiate candidates, voters may turn to other cues in these contexts. For instance, candidate demographics can sometimes aid in the decision-making process (Badas and Stauffer 2019b; Crowder-Meyer, Gadarian, and Trounstine 2020; Matson and Fine 2006; McDermott 1997). In this article, we focus on the relationship between candidate gender and voters' decisions to vote in an electoral contest and in candidate selection.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X20000677 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Candidate Gender and the Decision to Vote

Before voters can select a candidate to vote for, they must first decide to make a choice at all. In contexts in which candidate partisanship is not immediately clear to voters, or in cases in which partisanship does not meaningfully distinguish the candidates (such as primary elections or other same-party matchups), the information costs associated with candidate selection increase markedly. In these contexts, many voters choose to simply opt out of making a selection. Indeed, previous research finds that turnout is depressed in nonpartisan races (Hall 2007; Schaffner, Streb, and Wright 2001) and that voters are more likely to skip races on the ballot when they feel they have insufficient information to make a choice (Wattenberg, McAllister, and Salvanto 2000).

Although much of the literature focuses on voters' decisions to turn out to vote, an equally important question is the degree to which these same-party or nonpartisan contests lead to undervoting. Unlike traditional measures of turnout, undervoting describes situations in which voters fail to make a selection in a specific contest. That is, while the voter did turn out to the polls, they opted to skip over certain races on their ballot. Undervoting should be especially likely to occur in contests in which party does not distinguish the candidates, because without this information many voters will feel ill-equipped to make a decision. Instead, they simply opt to skip over the race (Nagler 2015). In cases with two co-partisans on the ballot, undervoting should increase for all voters, though recent research suggests the effects are especially pronounced for "orphaned" voters — partisan voters without a candidate on the ballot (Fisk 2020).[2]

While the lack of a party heuristic may lead to increased undervoting, if there are other easily discernible characteristics that differentiates the candidates — such as gender — this may help counteract these negative effects. Specifically, in races between male and female candidates, voters may use gender as a proxy for ideology, stereotyping women candidates as more liberal than male candidates (Dolan and Sanbonmatsu 2009; Koch 2002). In their study of voter turnout, Ondercin and Fulton (2020) argue that these stereotypes help voters more easily place candidates on an ideological spectrum, making the vote choice decisions more

2. For example, in the 2018 contest between Dianne Feinstein (D) and Kevin de León (D), Republicans would be the orphaned voters as there was no Republican candidate in the race. Likewise, in cases in which two Republicans compete against each other, Democratic voters are orphaned.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X20000677 Published online by Cambridge University Press

accessible and, in turn, leading to increased turnout. Importantly, the authors find these effects in the context of partisan congressional elections, in which candidate partisanship presumably already gives voters a fair amount of information. We expect that races between male and female candidates will similarly lead to decreases in undervoting in same-party matchups. In their analysis, Ondercin and Fulton (2020) analyze turnout in elections that were partisan contests. In our context of same-party/nonpartisan races, voters lack this critical piece of information, which should magnify the degree to which they rely on other cues to differentiate candidates. Additionally, because we are interested in undervoting rather than turnout, the costs incurred by voters for participating in any particular race are already fairly low, meaning that it should take minimal additional information to encourage them to make a candidate selection. Based on this, we formulate our first hypothesis:

***H*$_1$:** In same-party matchups, undervoting will occur less frequently in races in which gender differentiates the candidates (mixed-gender races).

While being able to differentiate candidates based on their gender should result in lower levels of undervoting, it is also important to consider whether there is a unique relationship between the presence of women candidates on the ballot and the behavior of women voters in these same-party/nonpartisan matchups. Theoretical work contends that women's presence as political candidates and officeholders has important ramifications for women's engagement in public life. With the exception of voting, women are less likely to participate in politics, exhibit lower levels of political knowledge, and display lower levels of political efficacy than men (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001; Frazer and Macdonald 2003; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995). Work on representation argues that when women (and members of other historically marginalized groups) see people "like them" serving in politics, it sends the signal that the system is open to them and their interests/perspectives (Dovi 2002; Mansbridge 1999; Phillips 1995; Sapiro 1981). This perceived openness is thought to foster greater engagement and confidence in the political system and to encourage participation.

Indeed, some empirical evidence does suggest that women are more engaged, interested, and knowledgeable when women are present as candidates and elected officials (Atkeson 2003; Hansen 1997; High-Pippert and Comer 1998; Reingold and Harrell 2010). Fridkin and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X20000677 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Kenney (2014), for example, find that when women are represented by women senators, they are more likely to be knowledgeable about politics (see also Dolan 2006; Jones 2014). Burns, Schlozman, and Verba (2001) suggest that if everyone lived in a state with just one woman on the ballot in Senate or gubernatorial races, the gender gap in political interest would be reduced by more than half. This heightened interest and engagement with politics could result in lower levels of undervoting among women when they are faced with same-party/nonpartisan choices at the ballot box. If women are more engaged and knowledgeable, the loss of the party cue should be less damaging. These women will have additional knowledge to draw upon, decreasing the incentive to skip over a particular race. More directly, women candidates may have an empowering effect on women voters, encouraging them to engage in the cognitively more challenging task of making a selection in same-party/nonpartisan matchups.

At the same time, some scholars have argued that the link between women candidates and women's symbolic representation in the electorate has more to do with partisanship than gender. Lawless (2004), for example, finds minimal evidence that greater descriptive representation increases feelings of efficacy or participation among women after controlling for party congruence with one's representative. Dolan (2006) similarly finds no relationship between women's presence as candidates and women's participation and argues that partisanship is the greatest driver of women's attitudes and voting behaviors.[3] While this research speaks to the important role that party plays in women's political attitudes and engagement in many elections, it cannot speak to contexts in which partisanship is essentially removed from (or neutralized in) the equation. In these contexts, voters should be more likely to draw upon demographic cues to aid in their decision-making (Badas and Stauffer 2019b; Crowder-Meyer, Gadarian, and Trounstine 2020; McDermott 1997). Though previous literature has examined the role of candidate gender in shaping voter turnout, the design and analysis we present here is one of the first to examine whether the intersection of candidate and voter gender is associated with the decision to vote in same-party/nonpartisan contests.

Based on these arguments, we formulate two additional hypotheses. If $\boldsymbol{H_1}$ is supported, both men and women should undervote at lower rates

3. Broockman (2014) and Wolak (2015) also find no link between being represented by a woman and women's decision to turnout.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X20000677 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in mixed-gender contests compared to contests between two male candidates. However, if the presence of a woman candidate has symbolic effects for female voters, we would expect the effect of moving from a male-male matchup to a mixed-gender matchup to be stronger among women voters. We state this expectation formally as H_{2a}. Our expectations for races with two female candidates compared to two male candidates are outlined in H_{2b}. Here we expect to only find effects among women voters, as we do not anticipate that female-female matchups would provide information that would allow all voters to more easily differentiate the two candidates.

H_{2a}: In same-party matchups, compared to elections with two male candidates, undervoting will occur less frequently in mixed-gender contests, and this effect will be stronger for women.

H_{2b}: In same-party matchups, compared to elections with two male candidates, women will undervote less frequently in races with two female candidates. There will be no effect for male voters.

Candidate Gender and the Decision of *Who* to Vote For

While the role that candidate gender plays in shaping turnout/undervoting in elections is important, it is also important to understand how candidate demographics may be correlated with vote *choice* as well. On this question, we are interested in examining the relationship between candidate gender and vote choice in mixed-gender contests. As we discussed earlier, we expect that in these races, voters will feel more equipped to select a candidate because they perceive a greater contrast between the candidates, compared to same-gender matchups. In addition to allowing voters to feel that they have sufficient information to make a decision, women candidates (and the stereotypes attached to them) should similarly be linked to the choice ultimately made by voters in these contests.

Though the cue of candidate partisanship provides little guidance in same-party matchups, voters in these races still retain, and act out of, their partisan identities. Given this, we expect that Democrats will be more likely to support female candidates, as opposed to male candidates, for two reasons: (1) because women are stereotyped as liberal (Dolan and Sanbonmatsu 2009; Koch 2002), Democrats may assume that the woman candidate is closer to their preferences (and Republicans that a presumably more conservative male candidate is closer to theirs); and (2)

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X20000677 Published online by Cambridge University Press

issues of gender equality, diversity, and inclusion are a more central feature of the Democratic Party (Crowder-Meyer and Cooperman 2018), which may lead Democrats to being generally more supportive of women candidates. Importantly, we expect that these effects to be present whether the candidates are two Democrats or two Republicans as ideological stereotypes transcend party, such that Democratic women are viewed as more liberal than Democratic men and Republican women more liberal than Republican men (Dolan and Sanbonmatsu 2009). Thus — assuming voters have decided to make a selection in a same-party contest — we expect to see a party divide in support for the women candidates. Democrats should be more likely to support these candidates than Republicans. Indeed, experimental work consistently finds that women candidates in low-information elections are advantaged, on average, around 2 percentage points (Crowder-Meyer, Gadarian, and Trounstine 2020; Kirkland and Coppock 2018; Sen 2017). Recent evidence from Crowder-Meyer, Gadarian, and Trounstine (2020) suggests that this effect is largely driven by Democratic voters.

While this research provides incredibly valuable insights into the relationship between candidate gender and voter decision-making, by its very nature, it cannot capture the full complexities that come with actual elections. As we explain in more detail later, we view our work as an important contribution to these studies through testing with survey data from real elections how voters respond to actual women candidates in same-party congressional elections. Importantly, we emphasize that our decision to rely on observational survey data is not meant as a criticism of experimental research in this area. To the contrary, we believe that our observational findings complement this research and rely on much of this work to develop our theoretical arguments. Based on this, we formulate our third hypothesis.

***H*$_3$:** In same-party matchups in which gender differentiates the candidates, Democratic voters will be more likely to vote for the female candidate (as opposed to the male candidate) than Republicans.

In addition to partisanship, voter gender may also be related to how voters select candidates in mixed-gender contests. A great deal of research has examined the degree to which gender serves as a meaningful political identity that informs vote choice and support for public officials (Badas and Stauffer 2018, 2019a, 2019b; Dolan 2006; Plutzer and Zipp 1996; Zipp and Plutzer 1985). Popular political narratives discuss the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X20000677 Published online by Cambridge University Press

"women's vote," with the implicit assumption that women candidates may have an inherent advantage among women voters. Despite the prevalence of the "gender-affinity effect" narrative in popular commentary, evidence of women's preference for women candidates is mixed at best. While some scholars have found support for the idea that women voters prefer women candidates (Cook 1994; Fox 1997; Plutzer and Zipp 1996; Seltzer, Newman, and Leighton 1997), others have found effects in some elections but not others (Brians 2005; Dolan 1998), and still others have found no effects (King and Matland 2003; Thompson and Steckenrider 1997). These mixed findings suggest that women may vote for women in some contexts, but this relationship is conditional on particular candidates and electoral contexts.

Several explanations have been posited to explain why women may prefer same-sex representation in some contexts. Some argue that women have a "baseline preference" for same-sex representation (e.g., Sanbonmatsu 2002) or that women have a sense of "gender consciousness" and group loyalty that compels them to pursue group interests. This, in turn, leads them to support in-group candidates (e.g., Tolleson-Rinehart 1992). Paolino (1995) argues that elections in which "group-salient issues" are prominent, such as sexual harassment, are the contexts in which gender-affinity effects are most likely to manifest. Perhaps the simplest explanation of gender-affinity effects is that women support women candidates because a shared sex serves as a simple heuristic (Cutler 2002; Pomper 1975). Work by Dolan (2006), however, suggests a more complicated picture. Dolan (2014) argues that women candidates are viewed through a partisan lens and finds that women display higher affective evaluations of Democratic women candidates, but not Republican women. Indeed, Dolan argues that political factors such as partisanship and ideology are far more likely to influence support (among both men and women) for female candidates than candidate gender.

However, the assumption undergirding much of this work is that Americans have information about candidate partisanship when voting. While this assumption certainly holds for most national and many state-level elections, there are many contexts in which voters do not have information about candidates' party identification. Situations in which voters cannot rely on partisan cues may be precisely the contexts in which gender is likely to serve as a significant determinant of vote choice (Crowder-Meyer, Gadarian, and Trounstine 2020). Indeed, Badas and Stauffer (2019b) find evidence of gender-affinity effects in nonpartisan,

but not partisan, judicial elections. This suggests that gender may serve as a meaningful heuristic in voter decision-making in these elections, but only in contexts in which more salient information (such as candidate partisanship) is unavailable. We extend the implications of this argument to legislative elections in which voters are confronted with two candidates from the same party.[4] Because candidates' partisanship cannot be used to meaningfully differentiate the candidates, we expect gender to serve as a cue for women voters. This leads to our fourth hypothesis.

***H*$_4$:** In same-party matchups in which gender differentiates the candidates, women voters will be more likely to vote for the female candidate (as opposed to the male candidate).

THE OPPORTUNITY OF TOP-TWO PRIMARY ELECTIONS

To test our hypotheses, we leverage survey data from general elections in which candidates share a party as a result of a top-two primary race. The top-two primary is a relatively new primary system. In 2008, Washington State adopted this open primary system, under which the top two vote getters (regardless of their party affiliation) advance to the general election for most major offices. In 2012, California adopted a similar system. A consequence of this system has been the exclusion of one major party's candidates from many elections. For example, in 2018, California voters were asked to vote for Dianne Feinstein or Kevin de León — both Democrats — for U.S. Senate, providing voters with no Republican alternative on the ballot. Since 2012, nearly 20% of races in California's November elections have featured two candidates from the

4. Though our work builds upon past work on nonpartisan elections (Badas and Stauffer 2019b; Crowder-Meyer, Gadarian, and Trounstine 2020), we note a few important features of the current study that distinguish it from past work. First, we test our hypotheses in the context of congressional elections. Though for many respondents these races are low information, many voters likely hold more information about these contests — and the candidates competing — than in the judicial elections examined by Badas and Stauffer (2019b) or the hypothetical elections examined by Crowder-Meyer, Gadarian, and Trounstine (2020). Thus, tests in some ways offer a more conservative test of the role of candidate gender as a heuristic. Second, while Badas and Stauffer (2019a) studied nonpartisan elections, the elections we examine in this research are better conceptualized as intraparty races because the partisanship of the candidates is still known to the respondents. Though partisanship does not differentiate the candidates, the presence of this cue may nonetheless shape the behavior and decision making of voters (see Fisk 2020). Finally, we note that our analysis is novel in that, unlike past research, we also examine candidate gender and the decision of whether to select a candidate at all.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X20000677 Published online by Cambridge University Press

same party; similar instances have occurred in Washington, but to a lesser degree.

Academic research on the top-two primary has largely examined whether the new primary system has led to the election of more moderate candidates, as intended by many of its proponents. Although most studies have shown that the reform has not reduced levels of ideological extremity in legislators (see Ahler, Citrin, and Lenz 2016; McGhee and Shor 2017), recent work argues that the top-two primary has been more effective at reducing ideological polarization compared to closed primary systems (Grose 2020). Other work has focused exclusively on general elections featuring two co-partisan candidates. These one-party contests generally occur in noncompetitive jurisdictions but allow co-partisan challengers to be more effective in their campaign spending (Sinclair et al. 2018; Sparks 2018). While Fisk (2020) finds that ideology plays a role in the decision to vote in same-party matchups, Sinclair (2020) finds that in the 2018 California Senate race, Republicans who voted were more likely to support de León, the more liberal candidate. This finding is attributed to accountability assessments of long-serving Senator Feinstein. One article particularly relevant to the scope of our work examines the effect of candidate ethnicity on obtaining support from co-ethnic voters. Sadhwani and Mendez (2018) find a role for differentiating candidates in terms of ethnicity in their study of co-partisan Republican general elections in California. Specifically, they find that Latino voters were more likely to support Latino Republican candidates. Their study makes similar assumptions on voters picking up on this heuristic of candidate ethnicity, as our study does with candidate gender.

These general elections provide an ideal context to test our hypotheses for several reasons. First, because these are races for prominent federal-level offices, survey data are more readily available than for other types of elections that are likely to feature co-partisans running against each other (primary elections, town council, school board, etc.). Second, while previous research has examined the effect of candidate gender as a heuristic in experimental settings (Crowder-Meyer, Gadarian, and Trounstine 2020; Kirkland and Coppock 2018; Sen 2017), the elections produced by top-two primaries allow us to test these effects with survey data from real elections. Third, nearly 50% of all same-party matchups in California have included one male candidate and one female candidate, providing us with sufficient variation to test our hypotheses. Finally, because we examine same-party matchups in just California and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X20000677 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Washington, we are essentially able to hold constant electoral rules and state features that might otherwise influence our dependent variables.

DATA

The data we use come from the Cooperative Congressional Election Study.[5] Top-two primaries are used for all partisan legislative and executive races for state-level and congressional offices in California and Washington. In all subsequent models, we include a binary indicator capturing whether respondents lived in California to account for any baseline differences due to respondents' state of residence. For the purposes of our analysis, we examine congressional elections because of the salience of federal elections, but also because of data availability. Because the CCES is such a large survey, we can leverage the data from congressional races in California and Washington, specifically looking at same-party matchups. Between 2012 and 2018, there were 32 congressional races in which the primary election resulted in two candidates from the same party. Most of these races (25) featured two Democrats. Out of all same-party matchups, 15 races were what we call *mixed-gender*, featuring one male and one female candidate. The remaining matchups were between two male candidates (13) and two female candidates (4).[6] (For more information on these matchups, including candidate names and election outcomes, see Table A1 in the appendix in the supplementary material online.) We include only respondents who voted in the November election in our analysis, as we are interested in undervoting rather than turnout.[7] Overall, our sample

5. The CCES is a 50,000-plus-person national stratified sample survey administered by YouGov. The survey consists of two waves in election years. In the pre-election phase, respondents answer two-thirds of the questionnaire. Spacing of interviews across these intervals allows researchers to gauge the effects of campaign information and events on the state and district electorates. In the post-election phase, respondents answer the other third of the questionnaire, mostly consisting of items related to the election that just occurred. The post-election phase is administered in November.

6. Our analysis assumes that if voters are unfamiliar with the candidates prior to voting, they are able to infer the gender of each candidate from first names on the ballot. This assumption could be challenged in the case of gender-ambiguous names that do not clearly signal gender. However, our analysis includes very few, if any, gender-ambiguous names, and thus we do not consider this to be a serious issue for the analysis. Sadhwani and Mendez (2018) make similar assumptions about how voters can infer ethnicity in their study of same-party matchups featuring Latino candidates. Additionally, some research has found that voters will seek out other information when candidate party labels no longer serve a meaningful heuristic (Sinclair and Wray 2015).

7. We opt to study undervoting rather than turnout for two reasons. First, because there are multiple races on each ballot, it is difficult to determine the extent to which factors related to any one contest influences the decision to turn out. Second, most of the races in our sample are down-ballot and most likely not the main factor related to decisions to go to the polls.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X20000677 Published online by Cambridge University Press

includes more than 7,500 respondents in congressional races with same-party matchups, with more than 3,000 respondents in races that include one male and one female candidate.

Importantly, we note that because our analysis uses survey data from congressional races, the results we present here are likely conservative. Voters are far more likely to hold information about candidates in these races as opposed to lower-information races for state and local office. Because voters are more likely to hold information about candidates in these races, we expect gender cues to have less of an effect than in lower-level races. To the degree that we do observe a relationship between candidate gender and undervoting/vote choice, this should be even more pronounced in contests in which voters have even less information.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Our first set of analyses are aimed at testing our hypotheses related to undervoting. Models 1 and 2 in Table 1 present the results from two logistic regressions in which the dependent variable is a binary indicator capturing whether respondents undervoted (i.e., skipped the race) or selected *either* of the two candidates. Undervoting is coded as 1, while selecting one of the candidates is coded as 0. Our primary independent variables of interest in these models are two binary indicators capturing whether respondents were in a mixed-gender or female-female race (male-male races being the omitted category). If mixed-gender races allow voters to more easily differentiate the candidates, the likelihood of undervoting should be smaller in these contests compared to contests in which candidates are of the same gender. Model 1 in Table 1 presents the results of a base model, while Model 2 includes an interaction between respondent gender and race type to test for possible differences between men and women.

Also included in our models are individual-level controls that are likely to be associated with respondents' awareness and knowledge of the candidates, including income, level of education, age, race, political interest, and political knowledge. We also include a number of controls aimed at capturing the information environment of each campaign, which should also be associated with respondents' ability to differentiate the candidates. These variables include whether the race was for a Senate seat, whether the election was for an open seat, logged total campaign spending, the competitiveness of the district/state, and whether

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Table 1. Predicting undervoting in same-party matchups

	Model 1	***Model 2***
Interactions	(.002)	(.002)
Female candidates	–.859***	–.376
	(.247)	(.300)
Mixed-gender candidates	–1.027***	–.593**
	(.202)	(.258)
Female	–.218**	.480**
	(.087)	(.241)
Female candidates * Female		–.816***
		(.272)
Mixed-gender candidates * Female		–.791***
		(.272)
Individual-level controls		
Political knowledge	.027	.029
	(.036)	(.036)
Political interest	–.038	–.039
	(.059)	(.059)
Education	–.079***	–.078***
	(.030)	(.030)
White	.017	.017
	(.093)	(.094)
Income	–.011	–.012
	(.014)	(.014)
Age	.005**	.005**
	(.003)	(.003)
Election-level controls		
California	.173	.155
	(.272)	(.274)
Senate	1.649***	1.617***
	(.419)	(.419)
Open seat	.175	.155
	(.204)	(.206)
Presidential year	–.299*	–.311*
	(.159)	(.160)
Total spending	–.449***	–.443***
	(.136)	(.136)
Competition	–.036***	–.035***
Constant	4.517**	4.042*
	(2.058)	(2.063)
Observations	7,648	7,648

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. Analysis includes survey weights.
* $p < .1$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

the election occurred in a presidential election year. These variables are common in studies of undervoting and turnout (Fisk 2020; Nagler 2015; Ondercin and Fulton 2020). Moreover, these variables should influence

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the intensity of the information environment for any given election, with individuals being able to better differentiate the candidates in information-rich environments.[8]

The results of Models 1 and 2 indicate that the gender composition of candidates on the ballot is associated with individual decisions of whether to select a candidate and that the nature of this relationship differs by respondent gender. To draw more substantive conclusions from these models, we generate the predicted probability of undervoting for male and female voters in each of our three race types. These probabilities are presented in Figure 1. If $\boldsymbol{H_1}$ is supported, we would expect to see both men and women undervoting at lower levels in mixed-gender contests compared to *both* female-female and male-male contests. While we do find that both male and female voters are less likely to undervote in a mixed-gender election compared to a male-male contest, we do not find evidence that undervoting occurs less frequently compared to female-female contests.

To further unpack these results, we conducted supplemental analyses examining whether — and how — race type is correlated with voters' evaluations of candidate ideology. We argued that one reason mixed-gender races might lead to lower levels of undervoting is that candidate gender provides ideological cues to voters, making it easier to differentiate the candidates and for voters to make inferences about which candidate is closer them ideologically. Thus, we would expect respondents in mixed-gender races to perceive a greater distance between the candidates if $\boldsymbol{H_1}$ is supported.

This analysis, available in Table 2, regresses perceived distance between the candidates on the same set of covariates included in Table 1. For each of the years included in our data, respondents were asked to place each candidate for House and/or Senate on a 7-point ideological scale (1

8. The individual-level variables are coded as follows: income (16-point continuous scale; 1 = less than $10,000 to 16 = $500,000 or more), education (6-point continuous scale; 1 = no high school degree to 6 = postgraduate degree), race (binary; 1 = white, 0 = not white), political interest by following public affairs (4-point scale; 1 = low interest to 4 = high interest), political knowledge battery on party control of Congress and state legislature (5-point scale; 0 = low knowledge, 4 = high knowledge). The contextual variables are coded as follows: Senate race (binary; 1 = yes, 0 = no), open seat (binary; 1 = no, 0 = yes), total campaign spending (continuous; logged values), competition is derived from the value of Cook Partisan Voting Index scores for congressional districts and relative to each respondent (continuous; negative values indicate the district favors respondent's out-party, positive values indicate the district favors respondent's in-party), presidential election year (binary; 1 = yes, 0 = no). Because competition is relative to each respondent's party, to provide a stricter measure of the personal partisan nature of each district, independents are excluded because they have no party affiliation.

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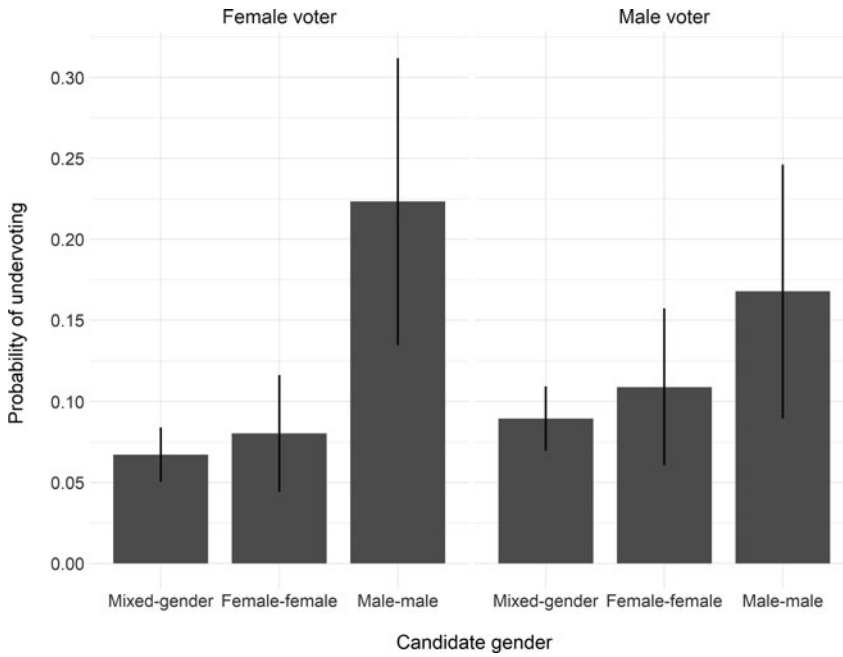

FIGURE 1. Undervoting in same-party matchups. Bars represent predicted probabilities and 95% confidence intervals based on Model 2 in Table 1.

indicates very liberal, 7 indicates very conservative). Our measure of perceived distance is created by taking the absolute value of the difference between respondents' placements of Candidate 1 subtracted from their placement of Candidate 2. Based on this analysis, we do not find evidence that race type is associated with perceptions of ideological distance between the candidates for either male or female voters. These findings, coupled with those in Table 1, run counter to $\boldsymbol{H_1}$, indicating that the relationship between candidate gender composition and undervoting is not due to ideological or informational cues.

While we fail to find strong support for $\boldsymbol{H_1}$, our analysis does offer support for our expectations regarding symbolic representation ($\boldsymbol{H_{2a}}$ and $\boldsymbol{H_{2b}}$). Though we do find evidence that male voters were slightly less likely to vote in mixed-gender contests compared to male-male matchups by about .08, this effect is far more pronounced among women. For women, moving from a male-male contest to a mixed-gender contest results in a nearly .15 reduction in the predicted probability of undervoting. This provides strong support for $\boldsymbol{H_{2a}}$. Moreover, we see

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Table 2. Predicting perceptions of ideological differences in same-party matchups

	Model 1	*Model 2*
Interactions		
Female candidates	–.092	–.103
	(.133)	(.139)
Mixed-gender candidates	–.006	–.042
	(.073)	(.084)
Female	–.047*	–.091
	(.025)	(.085)
Female candidates * Female		.023
		(.092)
Mixed-gender candidates * Female		.077
		(.093)
Individual-level controls		
Political knowledge	–.017	–.017
	(.011)	(.011)
Political interest	.093***	.094***
	(.018)	(.018)
Education	.033***	.033***
	(.009)	(.009)
White	.040	.042
	(.026)	(.026)
Income	–.007*	–.007*
	(.004)	(.004)
Age	.0001	.0001
	(.001)	(.001)
Election-level controls		
California	–.235**	–.233**
	(.100)	(.100)
Senate	–.331**	–.332**
	(.145)	(.145)
Open seat	–.152*	–.152*
	(.082)	(.082)
Presidential year	–.186***	–.188***
	(.065)	(.065)
Total spending	.131***	.133***
	(.046)	(.046)
Competition	.003***	.003***
	(.0004)	(.0004)
Constant	–1.104	–1.110
	(.680)	(.680)
Observations	5,664	5,664

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. Analysis includes survey weights.
* $p < .1$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X20000677 Published online by Cambridge University Press

similar effects for female voters when moving from male-male to female-female contests, again with women voters being more likely to undervote in these contests. While men appear to be slightly less likely to undervote in female-female contests compared to male-male contests, this difference is relatively small and is not statistically significant. Taken together, this provides strong support for H_{2b}. This in conjunction with our conclusions related to H_{2a} indicate that to the extent that a relationship exists between candidate gender and undervoting, it is more in line with a symbolic explanation.

We now turn our attention to the relationship between candidate gender and the decision of who to vote for in mixed-gender contests, assuming that voters have opted to select a candidate. To test H_3, which states that in mixed-gender contests Democrats will be more likely than Republicans to vote for the female candidate, and H_4, which states that women will be more likely than men to vote for the female candidate, we restrict our next set of analyses to the subset of races in our data that included a male and female candidate (as opposed to a female-female or male-male matchup). This leaves us with 15 races overall, all of which were between two Democrats. We further restrict this portion of our analysis to include only those respondents who selected one of the two candidates. Thus, our results should be understood to be conditional on respondents having made the decision to vote in these races as opposed to skipping over them (i.e., undervoting). Our dependent variable for this portion of the analysis is a binary indicator that takes a value of 1 if respondents reported voting for the female candidate and a value of 0 if respondents reported voting for the male candidate.

Table 3 presents a series of logistic regression models predicting vote choice. Our first model presents a base, additive model, which allows us to evaluate whether there is an overall preference for the female candidate among women voters and Democratic voters. Our second model includes an interaction between voter gender and partisanship to examine potential partisan differences among women, and our third and fourth models provide split-sample results for Democratic and Republican voters, respectively.[9] We include the same individual-level

9. We also repeat the analysis using a multinomial logistic regression with a categorical dependent variable for vote choice, including undervoting as a third outcome. These results are presented in Table A2 in the appendix and are consistent with our findings in the logistic regression models. The number of observations differs since undervoters are included in the model. These models indicate that Republicans are more likely to undervote compared to Democrats. This is in line with Fisk (2020), who found that orphaned voters are more likely to undervote in same-party matchups.

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Table 3. Predicting vote choice for female candidates in mixed-gender matchups

	Baseline	*Interactive*	*Democrats*	*Republicans*
Interactions				
Democrat	.704***	.575***		
	(.150)	(.172)		
Female	.525***	.315**	.552***	.628***
	(.080)	(.160)	(.095)	(.173)
Democrat * Female		.278		
		(.184)		
Individual-level controls				
Political knowledge	.024	.025	.060	–.003
	(.036)	(.036)	(.042)	(.083)
Political interest	–.138**	–.141**	–.367***	.594***
	(.057)	(.057)	(.069)	(.141)
Strong partisan	.232***	.224***	.424***	–.374**
	(.080)	(.081)	(.095)	(.170)
Education	.099***	.097***	.097***	.143**
	(.028)	(.028)	(.034)	(.058)
White	–.153*	–.153*	–.204**	.259
	(.086)	(.086)	(.102)	(.185)
Income	.004	.004	–.017	.082***
	(.012)	(.012)	(.014)	(.028)
Age	.015***	.015***	.024***	–.011**
	(.002)	(.002)	(.003)	(.005)
Election-level controls				
California	1.019***	1.012***	.893	4.414***
	(.390)	(.390)	(.621)	(1.553)
Senate	–.816***	–.818***	5.002*	6.998
	(.225)	(.225)	(2.625)	(4.550)
Incumbent woman	.840*	.827*	2.596***	–1.321
	(.458)	(.458)	(.672)	(.993)
Open seat	1.338***	1.322***	1.263*	–1.673
	(.450)	(.450)	(.733)	(1.759)
Presidential year	–.815***	–.823***	–.795*	.905
	(.307)	(.307)	(.417)	(.793)
Spending difference	.033	.034	–.016	.052
	(.029)	(.029)	(.040)	(.067)
Competition	.007***	.007***	–.120**	.155
	(.002)	(.002)	(.056)	(.097)
Women Friendly District	5.292*	5.438*	–10.390	–16.788
	(3.152)	(3.157)	(8.891)	(14.699)
Constant	–4.527***	–4.464***	–1.691	–4.855
	(1.137)	(1.139)	(1.727)	(3.412)
Observations	3,074	3,074	2,340	734

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. Analysis includes survey weights.
* $p < .1$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

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controls as in our previous analysis as well as a binary variable for strength of partisanship (1 = strong partisan, 0 = not strong partisan) and controls that account for the relative strength of the female candidate, including whether the female candidate was an incumbent, logged amount of money spent by the female candidate minus spending by the male candidate, and district/state competitiveness.[10] As in our previous analysis, these factors should influence the information environment that respondents navigate in a given election. Specifically, these variables should help account for the amount of information respondents held about women candidates, which should have downstream effects on willingness to support them. Finally, to account for the possibility that female candidates strategically emerge in contests in which they perceive a higher likelihood of winning, we include a control for the degree to which the race was "women friendly," using the measure designed by Palmer and Simon (2010).[11] Our two main explanatory variables are binary measures capturing respondent gender (0 = male, 1 = female) and whether respondents identified as Democrats (Republicans being the omitted category).[12]

We begin by focusing our attention on our first model. Consistent with our expectations in $\boldsymbol{H_3}$, we find evidence that Democratic voters overall are more likely to vote for the woman candidate in same-party, mixed-gender matchups. The predicted probability of voting for the female candidates is .64 for all Democrats compared to .46 for all Republicans. We also find evidence that, on average, women voters are more likely to vote for the female candidate than men in the electorate, which supports $\boldsymbol{H_4}$. The predicted probability of voting for the female candidate is .64 for all women and .51 for all men. To examine whether this average effect is being driven primarily by Democratic women, we turn to our interactive

10. The variables are coded as follows: female incumbent (binary; 1 = yes, 0 = no), spending difference (continuous; logged values).

11. Palmer and Simon (2010) create their measure using a number of district characteristics to determine the probability of a woman representing each of the 435 House Districts in a given 10-year redistricting cycle. Among the variables used to construct this measure are Republican share of presidential vote, district size, whether the district is in the South, district median income, percentage of urban residents, percentage of black residents, percentage of Hispanic residents, percentage of foreign born residents, percentage of blue-collar workers, percentage of residents with a college degree, and the percentage of residents that are married women with school age children (see Palmer and Simon 2010, chap. 7). For Senate races, we calculate the "woman-friendliness" of the race by averaging the scores of all districts in the state.

12. Independents are excluded from this analysis as we are primarily interested in the differences between Democratic and Republican voters. Moreover, because our analysis is restricted to a small number of congressional races, the number of independents in the sample is quite small, making it difficult to generate reliable estimates.

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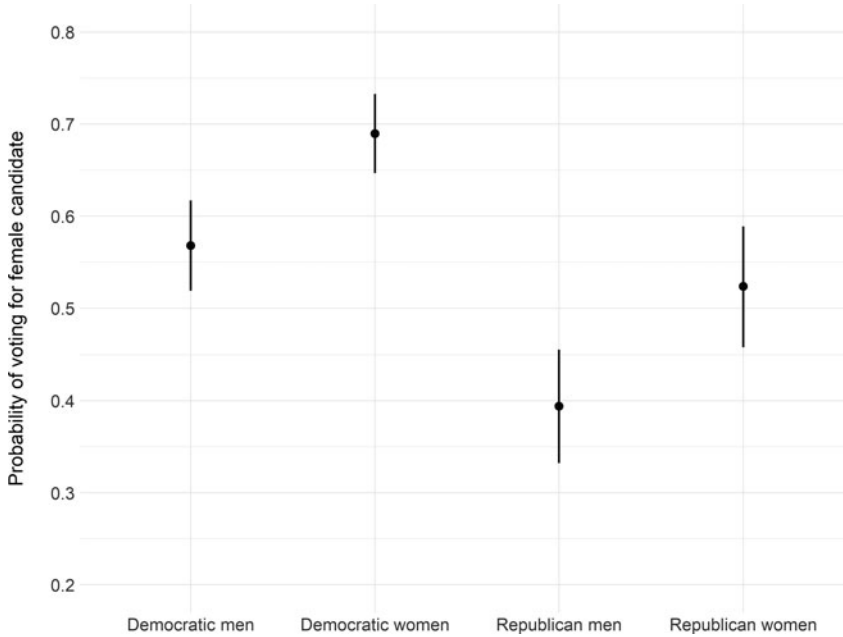

FIGURE 2. Predicted probabilities of voting for female candidate in mixed-gender matchups Bars represent predicted probabilities and 95% confidence intervals based on baseline model in **Table 3**.

model. The interaction between respondent gender and partisanship does not reach statistical significance, indicating that differences between men and women are not contingent on party identification. Our conclusion is further corroborated by the split-sample models in which we see the effect of being a female increases the likelihood of selecting the woman candidate (as opposed to the male candidate) among both Democrats and Republicans.

To provide more substantive meaning to our findings, Figure 2 plots the predicted probabilities (based on the baseline model) of vote choice by respondent gender and party, with all other variables held at their mean or modal values. On the far-left side, we present the results for male Democratic voters. These voters have a predicted probability of .56 of voting for the female candidate; Republican men, in contrast, have just a .39 probability. Within both parties women are more likely to support the female candidate than their male co-partisans. Democratic women have a .69 predicted probability of voting for the woman candidate, while Republican women have a probability of .52. Together, these

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findings provide strong support for H_3 and H_4. Both Democratic men and women are more likely to vote for female candidates compared to their Republican counterparts. At the same time, we see gender exerting an effect within each party, with women voters being more likely to support women candidates compared to their male co-partisans. While past research in partisan contexts has found minimal evidence of an association between candidate gender and vote choice (Badas and Stauffer 2019b; Dolan 2008; King and Matland 2003), our results indicate that in races in which information about partisanship does not serve as a useful heuristic, there is a meaningful relationship between candidate gender and voter decision-making.

DISCUSSION

The vast majority of the literature on American elections focuses on partisan elections, highlighting the important role that party plays as both an informational cue and a political identity. While this emphasis is justified, in reality, Americans face many elections in which information about candidate partisanship either is unavailable or does not meaningfully differentiate the candidates. Though some research has examined voter decision-making in these contexts (Badas and Stauffer 2019b; Crowder-Meyer, Gadarian, and Trounstine 2020; Kirkland and Coppock 2018; Schaffner, Streb, and Wright 2001; Sen 2017), our understanding of these types of elections remains relatively limited compared to partisan elections. In this study, we contribute to the literature on nonpartisan and low-information elections by examining the relationship between candidate gender and voter decision-making in same-party general election contests. We leverage same-party matchups resulting from top-two primaries in California and Washington between 2012 and 2018. In doing so, we contribute to recent scholarship on candidate demographics and low-information elections (Badas and Stauffer 2019b; Crowder-Meyer, Gadarian, and Trounstine 2020; Kirkland and Coppock 2018; McDermott 1997; Sen 2017).

We began our analysis by examining candidate gender and voters' decisions to skip over races on the ballot (undervoting). For men, we found minimal evidence that the gender composition of candidates played a role in this decision. While men were slightly less likely to undervote in mixed-gender matchups compared to male-male matchups, this effect was relatively small. Moreover, there were no significant

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differences in men's propensity to undervote in mixed-gender matchups compared to female-female races. For women, in contrast, we found evidence suggesting that the presence of at least one female candidate significantly reduced the probability of undervoting and offered evidence in support of a symbolic relationship. While past research has found minimal evidence that women candidates mobilize women voters to turn out (Broockman 2014; Dolan 2006; Wolak 2015), our findings suggest that symbolic effects may manifest in the context of undervoting, offering important insights into when and where women candidates elicit these effects from women in the electorate.

Our results also provide important insights into the role that candidate gender plays in vote choice. Previous research on the relationship between candidate gender and vote choice has provided mixed results, with many scholars arguing that factors such as partisanship play a more central role in the decision-making process (Dolan 2008). Yet many of the elections in which Americans select candidates are contexts in which partisanship *does not* meaningfully differentiate the candidates. Using same-party matchups resulting from top-two primaries, we are able to address the interplay between candidate and voter gender in vote choice. Despite all of the races in our mixed-gender sample including races with two Democrats, our analysis still allows us to compare voters who share party affiliation with both candidates, compared to voters who have no co-partisans on the ballot. While we find evidence that Democratic voters were more likely to select the female candidate compared to Republicans, we also find evidence that women — of both parties — were more likely to cast their ballot for the female candidate compared to their male co-partisans. This finding has important implications for the literatures on women as candidates and candidate emergence.

A common finding in the women and politics literature is that "when women run, women win" (Burrell 1994; Fox and Lawless 2004; Lawless and Fox 2010; Seltzer, Newman, and Leighton 1997). Our findings are in line with this trend and, indeed, suggest that in same-party matchups, women candidates may actually hold an advantage over their male competitors. While popular commentary often evokes stereotypical concerns about the "electability" of women candidates, our study indicates that in same-party matchups, women candidates enjoy an advantage among many voters. Indeed, in our analysis, only Republican men were more likely to select the male candidate. Republican women, Democratic men and Democratic women were all more likely to vote for the female candidate over her opponent. These findings indicate that

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same-party matchups may help lower the barriers for women's descriptive representation, suggesting that systems such as the top-two primary, which lead to these types of matchups, may help enhance women's numeric presence in political office. Further, the findings presented here may have important implications for women's emergence as candidates. Like all candidates, women consider the likelihood of success when weighting a potential candidacy (Fox and Lawless 2011; Fulton et al. 2006; Williams 2008). Given our findings regarding vote choice, women candidates may perceive a higher likelihood of success in same-party matchups (or electoral systems that could result in these matchups) and thus more frequently emerge in these contexts, which would have broad implications for the candidate pool as well as women's representation in office.

While we view our research as an important contribution to the study of low-information and nonpartisan elections, we note a few limitations in the present study. First, the top-two primary is still a relatively recent development. As a result, we are necessarily limited to a few election cycles by our research design. We are further limited because even with the top-two primary, same-party matchups do not represent the majority of outcomes. Furthermore, we are constrained geographically — only two states so far have a top-two primary system. Fourth, every mixed-gender contest included in our analysis was between two Democratic candidates. Thus, we are unable to discern whether the results presented here are dependent on candidate partisanship. It could be the case, for example, that while Republican women are willing to support a female Democratic candidate, Democratic women may not be as willing to support a Republican woman on the ballot (see Brians 2005). Future research is needed to fully evaluate this possibility.

Finally, we note the trade-offs associated with our use of observational data. Although our data are voter validated for turnout, we rely on respondent reporting for vote choice. While our analysis has the advantage of using survey data from real elections, our ability to isolate causal effects is necessarily limited. At the same time, however, the present analysis accounts for a number of individual- and context-level characteristics that should help allay readers' concerns about potential confounding. Moreover, we note that our study provides results that are consistent with many experimental analyses related to the role of candidate gender in voter decision-making (Badas and Stauffer 2019b; Crowder-Meyer, Gadarian, and Trounstine 2020; Kirkland and Coppock 2018; Sen 2017). Putting our results in dialogue with this recent research helps us be more

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confident in our conclusions. We encourage readers to consider our results in conjunction with these experimental results.

These limitations notwithstanding, the races included in our sample also come with a few advantages. Most notably, we rely on congressional races in our analysis. Though for many voters these races are low-information affairs, these races are more salient and highly visible than many lower-level state or local races. Thus, we expect that the effects we find in our study would be even stronger in lower-level, same-party, or nonpartisan matchups in which voters have even less information about the candidates.

The findings presented in this research have important implications for the understanding of electoral politics, partisanship, and gender and politics. While partisanship is the predominant driver of American political behavior, our findings show that in the absence of this information, candidate demographics (specifically gender) are meaningfully associated with both voter turnout and candidate selection. This highlights the critical need to understand the dynamics of gender not only in partisan contests, but also in nonpartisan or same-party matchups. Though we focus on the case of same-party matchups in the wake of top-two primaries, our results have important implications for the study of primaries, nonpartisan elections, and state and local elections. Indeed, because Americans are unable to rely on party as a cue in so many elections, understanding the role of institutional structures and ballot features represents an important advance in our understanding of *whether* and *how* gender structures elections. Though top-two primaries are a relatively recent development in American elections, the number of states using this type of system is likely to increase in the future. A total of 12 states since 2017 have introduced bills in their legislatures that would implement a top-two primary. Our findings thus offer critical and timely insights into the consequences that these systems may have for women candidates (and voters) and offer insights into the ongoing debate related to the design of primary elections.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X20000677

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