



How Election Campaigns That Include Male and Female Candidates Boost Voter Turnout and Engagement

Rebekah L. Herrick, Oklahoma State University

It has been almost 100 years since the 19th Amendment was passed and U.S. women were guaranteed the right to vote. Since then, American women have become steadily more likely to vote – and by now they vote at somewhat higher rates than men. But the ranks of women deciding to run for office have increased much more slowly.

Does that matter? Although considerable research shows that the presence of women in elective offices has an impact on policy decisions and on the working of government institutions, little research has been done about the impact of female candidates on elections. Specifically, scholars have so far learned very little about differences among campaigns based on the gender mix of the candidates. To help fill this research gap, Jeanette Morehouse Mendez and I explore the effects of mixed gender races for congressional, gubernatorial and state legislative offices. Our findings suggest that elections involving competition between male and female candidates tend to energize voters.

Why Mixed Gender Elections Matter

Our work hypothesized at the outset that elections with diverse candidates would see greater voter turnout because fewer potential voters would be alienated – not have a preferred candidate – and fewer voters would feel indifferent – that is, see no difference between the candidates. Such reductions might occur because of media coverage of campaigns or because voters might rely on gender stereotypes. Viewing campaigns through such stereotypes, voters might assume that gender differences between candidates really mattered, and some would prefer a man while others preferred a woman. We further expected that the effects of mixed gender races would be greatest when a Democratic woman runs against a Republican man, since in such races party and gender stereotypes would reinforce each other. For example, both Democrats and women tend to be stereotyped as liberal, while Republicans and men tend to be stereotyped as conservative.

To test our hypotheses, we examined the gender mixes of candidates running for governor, Senate or U.S. House between 1992 and 2010, as well as the mixes running for state legislative elections in three states in 2012. In addition, we conducted two experiments: one using college students and the other using a national internet panel sample.

Key Research Findings

Once gathered and analyzed, the data offer much support for many of our hypotheses:

- Data from the elections revealed that voter turnout was about 1.5 points higher when a Republican man ran against a Democratic woman, compared to elections involving two male candidates. When two

female candidates competed, turnout was also higher. Although a 1.5% turnout increase would not correct for the fact that the United States lags internationally, it would have increased the number of 2012 voters by about two million (based on about 129 million cast in that presidential race).

- In our experiments, subjects were presented different hypothetical congressional races, varying the gender and partisanship of the competitors. In one of the experiments, subjects who reacted to the scenario of a Democratic woman running against the Republican man were the most likely to report they would vote in the election. Subjects who received this version of the election report that they would vote at a 72 percent rate, compared to 61 percent for other subjects considering other scenarios.
- Experiments were also used to test whether voter alienation and indifference would decline for mixed gender races, with largely positive results. In one experiment, for example, the probability of subjects reporting alienation was 53 percent for mixed gender races involving a Democratic woman candidate, compared to 67 percent for other races. Similarly, rates of indifference were 51 percent compared to 66 percent.

Overall, our analysis found that the higher turnout rates found in mixed gender races seem to be due to reductions in voter alienation and indifference. Voters simply become more engaged when male and female candidates take to the field to compete against one another for public offices.

Broader Implications

Our findings raise further important questions about why mixed gender races are associated with lower levels of voter alienation and indifference. We originally theorized that such reductions could be caused by the ways the media cover such elections. But that possibility did not pan out, because the only significant difference we found in media coverage of various kinds of campaigns was that mixed gender races received more media coverage.

This has led us to speculate that voter perceptions may matter more. Stereotypes about male and female candidates may exaggerate differences voters see between the candidates in mixed gender races and increase voters' desire to have their preferred candidates win.

More generally, our findings suggest that the presence of women candidates in elections, regardless of whether they win, can be good for democracy. When women run we can expect a more engaged electorate. Voters will rely on gender stereotypes or preferences, prompting many of them to see sharper differences between candidates and care more about who wins. Such voters will be more likely to vote, ensuring that whoever wins the race will have the backing of more citizens than might happen if only men competed for office.

In short, in addition to existing research showing that more women in public office matters – ensuring that issues of concern to women get more attention and promoting possibilities for compromise – it turns out that female candidates also make a difference. As more and more American women decide to mount campaigns for offices in governing institutions ranging from city council and state legislatures to Congress and the U.S. presidency, we can expect a more fully engaged citizenry. Gender stereotypes may still affect voter perceptions for good or ill, but voters will feel a stronger stake in election outcomes.

Read more in Jeanette Morehouse Mendez and Rebekah Herrick, *Descriptive Elections: Empowering the American Electorate*, (Lexington Books, 2016).