

## **WOMEN AS CANDIDATES IN CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS**

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In 2000, an intensely fought battle for the Republican nomination for an open seat in Arizona's second district found Susan Bitter Smith, the only woman in the race, finishing a distant third to Jeff Flake. At the start of the campaign Bitter Smith was the favorite. She had several years of experience on the local city council, the backing of the local newspaper and was seen as a rising star in the Republican Party. By the end of the race she was embroiled in a nasty shouting match over who was more willing to use dirty politics to win and she had faded badly. Flake went on to win the traditionally conservative district handily in the general election. In a distinctly different race and district, the Democratic Primary in the 4<sup>th</sup> Congressional District of Minnesota, Betty McCollum ran against three other candidates to succeed Congressman Bruce Vento who retired due to illness. McCollum was the favorite and despite a few rough spots she won the primary by a comfortable margin, with 50% of the vote. Her closest opponent (a man) had 23% of the vote. In the fall she won a comfortable victory in the traditionally Democratic district to become one of the five newly elected female members of the House of Representatives.

We know voters evaluate candidates based on their party, their stands on specific issues, and their perception of the candidate's ideology, character and competence. An issue that lies latent is whether a candidate's sex has an indirect effect on perceptions of issues, ideology, character or competence or whether a candidate's sex may directly affect the vote. This chapter considers whether a candidate's sex matters to a candidate's electoral chances. We believe that

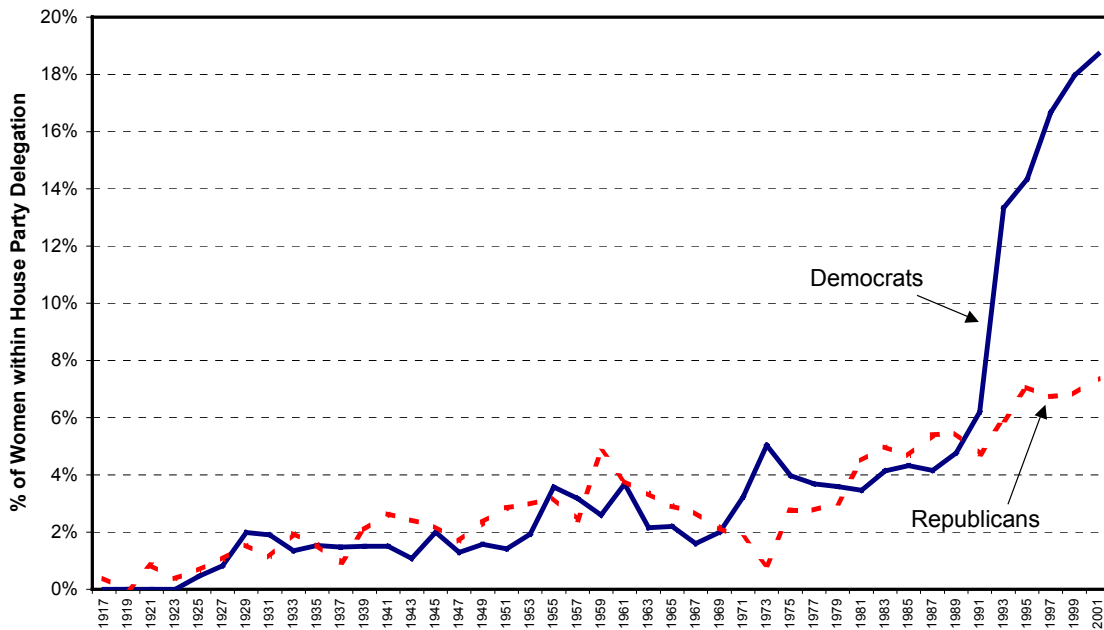
sex has a limited effect in general elections. The independent effect of sex appears to be limited by more salient characteristics of an election such as candidate's party label, incumbency, and the current dominant issues of the day. Party labels are likely to be especially relevant when considering low information elections, such as elections to the House of Representatives.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore the reality of Congressional elections in much of the country, including the suburban Phoenix, Arizona district that Susan Bitter Smith ran in and the urban St. Paul, Minnesota district Betty McCollum represents, is that certain districts lean heavily towards one party or the other. The true competition in these districts is in the party primaries, especially when a seat opens up because an incumbent retires, runs for higher office, or dies in office.

While primary and general elections differ on several central characteristics, relatively little work has been done considering how the possible effects of candidate sex may differ between general and primary elections. This is surprising since primaries are precisely the point at which we would expect descriptive characteristics such as sex to be most relevant. Since the most salient of all political cues, political party does not provide a useful manner in which to distinguish between candidates, there is a greater chance for other cues to influence voter's decisions. A further issue we consider, that has received virtually no consideration, is whether candidate sex affects voters differently in Republican and Democratic primaries.

The developing gender gaps in party identification and in female representation in the U.S. Congress, suggests the effect of candidate sex on voters may work differently in the two parties. As Figure 6.1 shows, historically there has been a relatively small difference in the proportion of Democratic and Republican Members of Congress who were female. The earliest period shows women tended to do slightly better in the Republican party. Women were a higher

percentage of the Republican delegation than the Democratic delegation in all but three Congresses from 1916-1954. From the mid-1950s to mid-1960s the parties traded in terms of which had a higher proportion of women, while from the mid-1960s until 1980 women were always a higher proportion of the Democratic delegation. For every Congress in the 1980s, however, there was a higher proportion of women in the Republican than in the Democratic delegation. This despite the developing gender gap in voting showing women favored the Democratic Party at this time. Finally in 1990 women started doing better in the Democratic

**Figure 6.1: Women in the U.S. Congress, 1917-2001**



delegation and the gap has grown markedly in the 1990s to the point that it is now quite striking. In the 107<sup>th</sup> Congress at the start of the new millennium we have the widest gap ever seen with women make up 19 percent of the Democratic delegation in Congress. Women in 2001 are just 8 percent of the Republican delegation.

This chapter outlines the existing research on women candidates in general elections, and then presents new evidence based on experimental and historical data on the possible effects of sex on candidate evaluations in primary elections. The results are hardly definitive, but they are suggestive. There is the distinct possibility that the effect of candidate sex functions differently in the two major parties. First, however, let us look at the existing evidence on the effect of candidate sex in general elections.

## **1. The Effect of Candidate Gender: Previous Research**

Cook notes three ways to assess the effect of candidate sex on voter's decision making: actual election results, public opinion surveying, and experiments.<sup>3</sup> Each of these research methods has strengths and weaknesses. We consider the election results and survey data quickly, but as we will be presenting the results of an experiment we will spend slightly more time presenting a review of the experimental results.

### **1.1 Election Results Evidence.**

An obvious place to start is to look at actual election results. Selzer, Newman and Voorhees Leighton sum up how female candidates fared in general elections from 1972-1994 by stating "When women run, women win... as often as men do."<sup>4</sup> One small proviso needs to be added to that statement, women win as often as men do *when we compare similar candidate types*. If one merely compares male and female candidates running for the U.S. Congress, men do win more often than women. This occurs, however, not because they are men, but because

they are incumbents. Table 6.1 shows when we compare similarly situated candidates there is little difference in how men and women do.<sup>5</sup>

**Table 6. 1**  
**Success Rates, 1972-2000, U.S. House, General Elections**

| U.S. House           | Men           | Women       |
|----------------------|---------------|-------------|
| Incumbents           | 95.2% (5,289) | 95.7% (376) |
| Open Seat Candidates | 51.6% (1,206) | 43.6% (163) |
| Challengers          | 5.6% (4,364)  | 4.0% (569)  |

Candidates for the U.S. House are of three types. They are (1) sitting incumbents, (2) running for an open seat, i.e. a seat where there is no incumbent running, or they are (3) challengers. Looking at Table 6.1 we see there are no significant differences in success rates for incumbents and challengers. The gap between male and female House candidates for open seats meets the standard of statistical significance. Upon further inspection the 8 percent gap in winning percentage is largely driven by a significant difference in how women have done in winning open seats in the mid-1990s and onward, where they have done much worse than men. From 1972-1994 the rates of victory were statistically equivalent. Since then women's victory rates have dropped dramatically (47.9% of women won from 1972-1994, from 1996-2000 only 32.6% of women won).<sup>6</sup> Clearly victory rates in open seat elections is a trend that needs to be watched carefully to see whether the last three elections were a minor blip or they are an indication of a broader trend against women. Far more significant to explaining the overall difference in representation levels is the difference in success rates across classes of candidates. Incumbents, whether they are male or female, have an extremely good chance of winning re-election. These numbers make clear why the very low legislative turnover in the U.S. Congress has been emphasized as a significant reason for the low levels of women's representation.<sup>7</sup>

The rough numbers are just a first cut at these issues. Table 6.1 merely indicates those women who make it through to the general elections tend to do as well as the men who make it through to the general election. If there are serious barriers to entry, however, it may be that many women never make it to the general election ballot. Perhaps the few women that receive a major party nomination are phenomenally talented. If superior women are merely doing as well as average men that isn't equality. Furthermore, these data do not help us in understanding whether candidate sex affects voting calculus. We need additional tools to get a handle on these questions and therefore we turn to the survey evidence.

### **1.2 Survey Evidence.**

A battery of questions measuring beliefs in gender equality in politics has been included in the General Social Survey from the early 1970s to the present. Bennett and Bennett developed an Index of Political Gender Roles that measures traditional versus modern attitudes toward women in politics.<sup>8</sup> As a cohort replacement effect has occurred, with older generations disappearing and being replaced by newer voters, we have seen a drop in the proportion of voters who cling to a traditional perspective on women's role in politics. Thirty years ago the ratio of modern to traditional voters was approximately 2 to 1 (65% to 33%); today that ratio has expanded to 7 to 1 (86% to 12%). The overall trend is clearly in the direction of accepting women in politics.

To look at women as candidates more concretely, several researchers have used national election surveys of voters to assess how female candidates have done when they have run as candidates. While the results are not unanimous in terms of the effectiveness of women candidates, the consensus is that women candidates do at least as well and perhaps slightly better

than male candidates. What is clear is that “On average, women have been slightly more likely than men to vote for women candidates.”<sup>9</sup> While this is true, it can have several explanations. The most obvious is that most female candidates in the past decade have been Democrats and most of the Democratic voters in the past decade have been women. The more technically sophisticated vote analyses seem to indicate that, although not uniformly, women voters will cross over and support women from the other party.<sup>10</sup> The same is not true of male voters who show no evidence of crossing party lines simply to support their sex.

Thompson and Steckenrider, use a quasi-experimental design to test for an effect of candidate sex.<sup>11</sup> They ran hypothetical elections, collected from a mail survey, where the amount of information about candidates provided varied from one election to the next. They included (or consciously withheld) information on gender, party, and position on one issue (abortion). They found that party and issue cues were overwhelmingly used as the most relevant cue to voting. There were a subsection of voters, however, who did vote for women candidates based on gender and contrary to their party affiliation. The number of respondents voting this way was not large, but in a tight congressional race the ability to attract independent and crossover votes is crucial.

### **1.3 Experimental Evidence**

Both actual election results and survey analyses are “over-identified.” So many factors occur simultaneously that may plausibly affect the vote that it is exceedingly hard to determine whether being female or male had a direct effect on people’s voting decision. Experiments allow for precise estimates of how candidate sex affects the vote. The general format of experiments designed to study the effects of candidate sex is that a candidate is described -- or a speech is read -- and respondents are asked to rate the candidate on several issue dimensions and/or say whether

the candidate would get their vote. What makes the process an experiment is that while everyone reads the same description or speech, half of the sample, chosen at random, is told the candidate is a woman while the other half is told the candidate is a man. Since all other stimuli are exactly the same, and given that respondents are randomly placed into treatment and control groups, any statistically significant differences between the two subsamples must be because the candidate's sex affects the way respondents assess the candidates.

Since 1975, fourteen experiments aimed at understanding how gender affects the perceptions of political candidates have been reported in political science and social psychology journals. These experiments are summarized in the Appendix. The experiments can be sorted into two categories. The first set tests whether "changing" a candidate's gender affects the votes for the candidate. The second set focuses on whether male or female candidates are thought to be more competent in dealing with specific policy areas.

The most common approach for assessing whether gender directly effects voting is to present respondents with descriptions of two candidates in a hypothetical election situation. Respondents are then asked to mark a ballot.<sup>12</sup> The results of these studies are quite consistent, only one study found differences in levels of support depending on the candidate's gender, all other studies (8 of 9) fail to find any direct effects at the ballot box.<sup>13</sup>

A second approach, focusing on whether female or male candidates are seen as better at handling issues in specific policy areas, has found much stronger gender effects. Respondents evaluate a candidate, based either on a short description or a speech, with the candidate's sex manipulated.<sup>14</sup> These studies show there are general categories of public policies (such as "nurturing" and "compassion" issues) in which female candidates are deemed better.<sup>15</sup> "Education," "helping the poor," "supporting the arts," and "health", are all issues where in one



experiment or the other voters have been shown to believe female candidates are better at handling the issue.

Concerning issues that male candidates are superior at handling, the experimental results are ambiguous. Neither Leeper nor Kahn report any issue areas in which male candidates have an assumed advantage in terms of competence.<sup>16</sup> Sapiro found males were considered better on farm issues while both Sapiro and Huddy and Terkildsen find that being male provides a positive effect for presumed competence on military issues.<sup>17</sup> The studies done by Rosenwasser and her colleagues find that male candidates are seen as stronger than female candidates on a “masculine task” scale that is dominated by military issues.<sup>18</sup> Significantly, both male and female advantages in competence only appear for issues that are not directly discussed in the speech.

Several experiments have explored the effect of gender on how voters view a candidate’s character. Sapiro, Leeper, and Kahn all report female candidates are seen as more honest or better able to maintain integrity in public office.<sup>19</sup> Scholars have also tested whether traditionally male or female traits affect evaluations of candidates or legislative effectiveness.<sup>20</sup> These experiments show that male traits are generally seen as more desirable and are associated with being a more effective legislator. What these studies fail to do, however, is prove that male candidates automatically have higher levels of these “male traits” -- such as being articulate. Regardless of sex, we expect most candidates to be articulate. We are therefore reluctant to ascribe stereotypical male and female “traits” among the general public to the highly selective group of people who run for Congress.

We have a couple of concerns with these experiments. First, thirteen of the fourteen experiments we review use students as subjects, almost all college undergraduates.<sup>21</sup> University students are atypical of the national population on a host of factors and therefore it can be difficult

to generalize results to the voting public. University student's political values are less clearly established. They are also less likely to vote and be actively engaged in politics. They tend to be more liberal on social issues, including the proper role for women in society. These characteristics may leave us with a weaker effect for a candidate's gender in college based laboratory experiments than in the population as a whole.

Our second concern is that several of the experiments have given respondents very little information with which to evaluate candidates, and this calls into question the generalizability of previous results. Most importantly, thirteen of the fourteen published experiments fail to include any information about a candidate's partisanship as a possible cue to voters, even though a candidate's political party is the best predictor of how what voters will mark their ballots. In general elections it is entirely possible that party identification, both the voter's and the candidate's, will overwhelm any gender effects, making gender virtually irrelevant. For primaries we could assume the experimental results, where party was not defined, holds, but it is at least as plausible that gender interacts with party so that perceptions of female candidates will differ across the two parties. Unfortunately, because previous experiments have failed to build information on political party into their design, we can only speculate.

The impoverishment of information in previous experiments has also led to contradictory results when scholars have tested for affinity effects.<sup>22</sup> A gender affinity effect is present when voters support candidates who are similar to themselves: men are more likely to vote for male candidates or women are more likely to vote for female candidates. One might expect to find an affinity effect in answers to statements such as "This candidate shares my concerns" or "This candidate cares about people like me." When those sentiments are turned into a vote for a specific candidate, however, male-male and female-female affinity effects may cancel each other

out, leaving no real impact on who is elected. Five previous experiments explicitly tested for affinity effects. The two studies reporting pervasive affinity effects, however, not only failed to provide respondents with information on the candidate's party, they provided very little substantive information of any kind to use in evaluating the candidates.<sup>23</sup> The three other studies provided respondents with considerably more background on the candidates, and affinity effects disappeared under most model specifications.<sup>24</sup>

Previous experiments have provided political scientists with several valuable insights. Gender differences do not lead directly to significant differences in male and female candidates vote getting abilities. Voters, however, view male and female candidates differently. There are indications that male and female candidates competencies across issues differ, and depending on what issues are engaged in an election campaign women may be helped or hurt. Experiments have come to these conclusions while giving respondents sketchy candidate descriptions. We do not take issue with this except to note that affinity effects and differential evaluations of expertise may fade as voters learn more about candidates. The relevance of these experiments is, however, strengthened by the fact that most studies of Congressional elections show voters know relatively little about the political candidates they vote for. They do, however, know the partisan affiliations of these candidates, and the failure of earlier experiments to include partisanship is a serious omission.

## **2. Including Partisanship in a Voting Experiment**

The experiment described below presents results from a national survey sponsored by the Republican Network to Elect Women (RENEW). A random sample of 820 adults from throughout the United States were polled December 6 - 8, 1993. Public Opinion Research, one of the country's leading political polling firms, conducted the survey and designed it to conform to

an experimental methodology. Each respondent was read the same candidate description and in the descriptions, half of the respondents were told the candidate was a male, the other half were told that the candidate was a female. Each respondent heard the following:

I am going to read you a brief description of a potential candidate for Congress in this area. After I read this, I will ask you to evaluate [him/her]. The candidate is a Republican [man/woman] who has never run for office before, but has been active in the community. [She/He] is a businessperson who is running because [he/she] says that Congress "just doesn't get it" and wants to bring a common sense business approach to government. [His/Her] first priority is to work to reduce government spending and waste.

After the candidate was described, respondents evaluated the candidate on a number of traits and on the likelihood they would support the candidate. Ideally, we would also have results where we compare male and female Democrats, but this experiment was only designed to evaluate Republican candidates. Nevertheless, as one of only two experiments to include information on candidate sex and the crucial party label this experiment presents important information. It allows us to present preliminary evidence of what the consequences of candidate sex might be both in the Republican primary and in terms of the feasibility of getting cross-party votes.

What do we expect? Our first concern is whether a candidate's gender affects the likelihood voters will support or oppose the candidate. We have argued that gender-based affinity effects and issue differences probably diminish in information-rich elections. We expect that once a party label is added to a candidate that the candidate's gender will not affect how our respondents evaluate the candidate. Our presumption is that party is a much more powerful cue when evaluating candidates.

A second set of expectations involves perceived candidate characteristics. Social psychologists have shown there are consistent gender stereotypes subscribed to by both men and women.<sup>25</sup> Women are generally seen as more nurturing, more supportive, less confrontational, and in some cases more honest. Men, on the other hand, are seen as more decisive, stronger, and better able to deal with crises. Based on findings from previous experiments, we assume the more masculine factors -- such as being well qualified and a strong leader -- would favor the male candidate, while being able to "share my concerns" (which suggests an ability to empathize) and being "trustworthy" would favor the female candidate.<sup>26</sup>

Our first analyses consider the effects of gender affinity and partisan affiliation. If there is a gender affinity effect, males should be more likely to vote for male candidates, and females should be more likely to vote for female candidates. The data indicate a slight, though not statistically significant ( $p=.32$ ) affinity effect among male voters (Table 6.2 below). 42.3 percent of male respondents who were told the candidate was male said they were very likely to vote for him, while 35.7 percent of males who were told the candidate was female were very likely to vote for her. The results show candidate sex has no such effect for female voters: 32.4 percent of female respondents would be very likely to vote for the male candidate, and 31.2 percent were very likely to vote for the female candidate. At the other end of the scale female respondents were somewhat less likely to dismiss the possibility of supporting a female candidate (17.8%) versus male candidates (25.4%), although for neither male or female respondents did any of these effects reach statistically significant levels.

**Table 6.2**  
**Tests for Affinity Effects: Respondents' Likelihood of Voting for Candidate**

|  |      |          |                   |
|--|------|----------|-------------------|
|  | Very | Somewhat | Not Very Likely / |
|--|------|----------|-------------------|

|   | Likely         | Likely         | Not Likely at All |
|---|----------------|----------------|-------------------|
| Male R's/Male candidate   | 42.3 %<br>(66) | 34.0%<br>(53)  | 23.7%<br>(37)     |
| Male R's/Female Candidate   | 35.3%<br>(60)  | 44.1%<br>(75)  | 20.6%<br>(35)     |
| Female R's/ Male Candidate  | 32.4%<br>(69)  | 42.3%<br>(90)  | 25.4%<br>(54)     |
| Female R's/ Female Candidate  | 31.2%<br>(72)  | 51.1%<br>(118) | 17.8%<br>(41)     |
| $\chi^2 = 3.5$ $p=.32$ (Male R's), $\gamma = .05$<br>$\chi^2 = 6.0$ $p=.11$ (Female R's), $\gamma = -.07$ |                |                |                   |

Source: Public Opinion Research, for RENEW, December 1993, N=820. Sample size in the table is 770 because "don't know" and "refused to answer" responses are dropped.

Table 6.3 shows the effects of partisanship as responses to the question asking if respondents were likely to support the candidate are broken down by party identification. Not surprisingly, party identification has a dramatic effect. Among Republican identifiers, 47.1 percent said they were very likely to support the candidate, while only 9.2 percent saw it as not very likely or not likely at all. On the other hand, only 19.6 percent of the Democrats said they were very likely to support the candidate while 36.1 percent saw it as not very likely or not likely at all. Independents held opinions between the two parties.

**Table 6.3**  
**Party-Id and Respondents' Likelihood of Voting for Candidate**

|                         | Very Likely    | Somewhat Likely | Not Very Likely /<br>Not Likely at All |
|-------------------------|----------------|-----------------|--|
| Republicans             | 47.1 % (n=144) | 43.8% (n=134)   | 9.2% (n=28)                            |
| Independents            | 35.1% (60)     | 44.4% (76)      | 20.5% (35)                             |
| Democrats               | 19.6% (52)     | 44.2% (117)     | 36.2% (96)                             |
| $\chi^2 = 79.7, p=.000$ |                |                 |  |

Source: Public Opinion Research, for RENEW, December 1993, N=820. Sample size in the table is 770 because “don’t know” and “refused to answer” responses are dropped.

While we found strong evidence of a party affiliation effect and little evidence of a direct affinity effect, we are especially interested in how a respondent’s party identification and a candidate’s gender interact. For example, do Democrats view female Republican candidates more favorably than otherwise identical male Republican candidates? In the first four rows of Table 6.4, we report the difference, based on gender, in the percentage of respondents who state the candidate is “very well” or “somewhat well” described by the indicated characteristics (as opposed to “not very well” or “not very well at all”). A positive percentage difference indicates the female candidate is advantaged over an otherwise identical male candidate.

**Table 6.4**  
**Percent Evaluating Female Candidate More Favorably**

| Question   | All Respondents<br>N=781 | Republican Respondents<br>N=319 | Independent Respondents<br>N=184 | Democrat Respondents<br>N=278 |
|--|--------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <b>This candidate...</b>   |                          |                                 |                                  |                               |
| <b>... can be Trusted<sup>27</sup></b>                                     | 8.61% ***                | 3.15%                           | 7.82%                            | 19.14% ***                    |
| <b>... shares My Concerns</b>  | 6.38% **                 | 1.60%                           | 11.87% *                         | 9.89% *                       |
| <b>... is a strong Leader</b>  | 1.26%                    | -7.24% *                        | 8.44%                            | 5.41%                         |
| <b>... is Qualified</b>  | 0.02%                    | -5.73%                          | 1.28%                            | 4.79%                         |
| <b>Respondent Very Likely or Somewhat Likely to Vote for the Candidate</b> | 5.42% *                  | -0.11%                          | 10.53% *                         | 9.63% *                       |

\* P < .10, \*\* P < .05, and \*\*\* P < .01 on a two-tailed test

Source: Public Opinion Research, for RENEW, December 1993, N=820. Sample size in the table is varies because “don’t know” and “refused to answer” responses are

For the full sample, all respondents consider the female Republican more trustworthy and more likely to share their concerns than a similarly described male Republican. The bottom row of Table 6.4 shows that on the crucial aspect of voting, the sample as a whole is more likely to vote for the female candidate. The percentage differences on these three questions are statistically significant, but what is especially noteworthy is how the differences break down across party groups. For example, among Democratic voters, the advantage for the female candidate on "trustworthiness" tops nineteen percent. Her advantage among Democratic and Independent voters on empathy ("shares my concerns") hovers near ten percent. The female candidate's advantage in terms of likely support is ten percent among Independent and Democratic voters. A ten percent swing to the Republican candidate from Independents and Democrats could easily be the difference between winning and losing in a competitive House race.

### **3. Implications for General Elections**

The analysis above provides us with several useful and interesting results. First, there are no significant gender affinity effects. To confirm these results, we tested for affinity effects on multiple subsets of the population, including working women, black women, wealthy and poor women, and so on. We also looked for affinity effects among male respondents. We found none. The experimental evidence purporting to show a gender affinity effect has always been problematic, and it has disappeared in previous experiments that provided relatively rich cues about candidates. It does so in this case also. Voters are not automatically drawn to candidates simply because they are of the same sex; party and political positions are of greater concern when choosing a candidate to vote for.



In interpreting Table 6.4 it is important to remember that Democrats and Independents are consistently less likely to believe the Republican candidate (regardless of the candidate's gender) "shares my concerns," "is qualified," "can be trusted," or "is a strong leader" than Republicans. Republican candidates begin with a big disadvantage, among Democrats and Independents. What Table 6.4 shows, however, is that the Republican female candidate can make up for some of the skepticism engendered by their Republicanism because of being female. Women are consistently advantaged by their gender, when being evaluated from the perspective of Democrats and Independents. Most importantly – from the perspective of the Republican leadership – Democrats and Independents are more likely to vote for the female Republican.

What characteristics are important for a candidate to have when running for office? The political science literature suggests several features associated with successful candidates. The characteristics measured in Table 6.4 -- such as trust, empathy, and leadership skills -- figure prominently in evaluations of which candidates voters think are "qualified" (Canon 1990, Fenno 1978). Among Independent and Democrats, a Republican woman rates more highly on these quality than the Republican man does. Trust in government and politicians have been steadily declining in the United States and most Western democracies (Nye, Zelikow & King 1997). Republican female candidates are less likely to be seen as professional politicians. In the RENEW experiment, asked how well the term "typical politician" described the candidate, Independents and Democrats made a clear distinction, based on gender.<sup>28</sup> A candidate who looks physically different from those who are now in power is more convincing as an agent of change. Women candidates have that advantage.

While trustworthiness, qualifications, and leadership skills are important, votes are paramount. Regardless of a candidate's gender, partisan predispositions are barriers that may

block crossover votes. The "bottom line" in Table 6.4 is that female Republican candidates are more likely than male Republican candidates to get votes from Democrats and Independents. Strategically running more women candidates would advantage the Republican Party. As Figure 6.1 shows, however, the greatest gains for women have been largely occurring in the Democratic delegation and not the Republican delegation.

#### **4. Implications for Primary Elections**

To this point our analysis has concentrated on the impression Republican male and female candidates might make on Democrats and Independents in a general election. Before a Republican woman can get that opportunity, however, she must face a Republican primary electorate. It would matter little if a female Republican candidate were able to win crossover votes in the general election if she is unable to win her primary.

The results when we concentrate on Republican voters and consider what the dynamics of a primary race might be are not encouraging for a Republican female candidate. Looking at Table 6.4 we see that the Republican respondent's, unlike the Democratic respondents, do not see the female Republican candidate as someone who is more likely to share the characteristic of "can be trusted". While both the Democratic and Independent respondents saw the Republican female as being stronger in terms of "sharing my concerns" Republican respondents did not give such an advantage to the Republican female. Strikingly when it comes to seeing the candidate as a "strong Leader" the Democrats and Independents perceive the female candidate as stronger (albeit the effect is not significant), while the Republicans see the male candidate as stronger. We see a similar, although non-significant effect in terms of being well qualified. On every one of these characteristics the Republican respondents, when compared to the Democratic and

Independent respondents, are more sympathetic to the male candidate. The one saving grace appears to be there is no less of a hesitancy to support the female candidate. Let us, however, take a second look at the question of willingness to support a candidate.

Table 6.5 shows the percent of respondents “very likely” to vote for the male and female candidate across the standard seven point party identification scale.<sup>29</sup> The results are unmistakable. While strong Democrats are much more supportive of a female Republican than a male Republican, strong Republicans are much less supportive of the female candidate. The Republican female candidate is at her biggest disadvantage among respondents who consider themselves "strong Republicans"; there is a 15 percent gap among these respondents. This is especially problematic since "strong" partisans are far more likely to contribute time and money to a campaign, and they are much more likely to vote in primaries. Given that strong party identifiers are the most active slice of voters in primaries, our experimental data suggest that female Republicans will have a more difficult time getting nominated.

**Table 6.5**

**Percent of Respondents “Very Likely” to Vote for the Candidate**

| Voter’s Party-ID          | Female Republican Candidate | Male Republican Candidate | Female Candidate’s Advantage (+) or Disadvantage (-) |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|--|
| Strong Republican (n=143) | 50.68%                      | 65.71%                    | <b>-15.03%*</b>                                      |
| Republican (n=94)         | 34.09%                      | 36.00%                    | -1.91%   |
| Leans Republican (n=80)   | 29.78%                      | 42.42%                    | -12.64%  |
| Independent (n=183)       | 35.42%                      | 29.89%                    | +5.53%   |
| Leans Democrat (n=91)     | 18.37%                      | 21.43%                    | -3.06%   |
| Democrat (n=75)           | 16.33%                      | 15.38%                    | -0.94%   |
| Strong Democrat (n=109)   | 26.42%                      | 14.29%                    | <b>+12.13%*</b>                                      |

\* P < .10 on a two-tail test

Source: Public Opinion Research, for RENEW, December 1993, N=820. Sample size in the table is varies because “don’t know” and “refused to answer” responses are dropped.

Why should staunch Republicans be more skeptical of a female candidate? McDermott (1997) suggests that gender provides a low cost social information cue as to the ideological bent of a candidate. She provides some evidence that voters perceive female candidates as more liberal. We test for a similar effect. Our respondents were asked how well the term “conservative” described the candidate being evaluated.<sup>30</sup> The results are instructive. For Democrats and Independents there was very little difference in evaluations. 32.3 percent of those evaluating the male candidate and 34.1 percent of those evaluating the female candidate said the label “conservative” described the candidate “very well”, a trivial difference. For Republicans, however, while 42.4 percent of those who evaluated the female candidate said the label described her “very well”, the equivalent response for the male candidate was more than 15 percent higher at 57.7 percent. In addition, for Republicans the evaluation of how “conservative” the candidate is directly affected the vote. 71 percent of those who said the conservative label described the

candidate “very well“ said they were “very likely” to vote for the candidate, while only 27 percent of those who did not believe the conservative label fit “very well” were “very likely” to vote for the candidate. Apparently, being a woman sends a cue to Republican voters, but not to Democratic or Independent voters, that the candidate is less conservative than the men she may have to compete against in a party primary. To the extent that conservatives are active in primaries, the impression that female Republicans are more liberal than otherwise identical male candidates works against women trying to win votes in the Republican primaries.

The experimental results described above are thought provoking. They suggest there are systematic differences across the two major parties in the manner sex interacts with candidacies. Before we extrapolate too far, however, realize this suggestion is at least initially built on the slender reed of evidence from one experiment. It deserves careful consideration, but more evidence must be gathered and considered. A full-blown investigation of public opinion data and historical election results in primaries is well beyond the scope of this chapter. Nevertheless, we can take a look at some pieces of evidence and see what additional information this brings to light.

First, when we consider public opinion we can look at the Political Gender Roles Index and see if the results systematically vary by party identification. The differences are modest (Table/Figure not shown). There are minor differences that indicate Republican voters are somewhat more traditional. While the more traditional values of the Republican identifiers may be a small part of the explanation, we believe it is wrong to interpret the experimental results as indicating that Republican voters are anti-women; rather, they are pro-conservative, and respondents take gender as a cue to ideology. When little other information is provided to these conservative voters they impute from the candidate’s sex political stands, which they are reluctant

to support.<sup>31</sup>

As a second piece of independent data on how candidate sex affects candidate evaluations in primary elections we can take a preliminary look at how women actually do in primary campaigns. Table 6.1 showed there were dramatic differences in victory rates across seat types. Incumbents overwhelmingly win and challengers overwhelmingly lose. As Gaddie and Bullock (2000) note the “open seats are where the action is” and so we concentrate on the open seats. There are only a couple of previous studies that have looked at whether there are differences in the likelihood of women winning open seat primaries. Barbara Burrell (1994) looks at differences in the likelihood that a woman running for an open seat nomination will win in the Democratic and Republican Party for the 1970s and the 1980s. Gaddie and Bullock (2000: 137) test for differences in success rates among women running for a nomination in the Democratic or Republican Party in the 1980s, through 1992. Neither find significant differences in the likelihood a woman will win

Despite these findings, we believe the data for the 1990s merits a careful look. There are at least a couple reasons. First, we use a slightly different measure of female success than Burrell and Gaddie/Bullock. They measure the percentage of all female candidates who succeed at winning nominations. We believe a better measure is the proportion of districts where women are running where a woman ultimately wins the nomination.<sup>32</sup> The second reason for considering success rates in primaries is there are legitimate reasons to believe that as increasing attention has been focused on the gender gap in voting and there has been an increasing message that women are more liberal than men. Voters may have become more sensitized to the possible implications of sex in a way that has not occurred in the past.<sup>33</sup>

Table 6.6 shows the number of districts where a woman ran and won the nomination for

the two major parties in the 1990s and for 2000. We see there are far more districts where women are running in open seat primaries on the Democratic side than on the Republican side (by definition the opportunities are equal since an open seat is always open for both parties). Furthermore Democratic voters have shown a higher propensity to choose a female candidate. In 53.5% of Democratic primaries in open seat districts, where a woman has run, the party's voters have selected a female candidate. While for the Republicans, women have won in 37.5 percent of the districts where there was a woman running. The 16 point difference in win rates is statistically significant ( $p < .02$ , two-tailed test). For the 1990s at least we see a significant difference in how women fare in the Democratic and Republican primaries.

**Table 6.6**

**Women's Success in Winning Primaries for OPEN SEATS to the House of Representatives: Democratic and Republican Women**

|      | Districts w/<br>Female Dem.<br>Candidates | Wins | Percent<br>Victorious | Districts w/<br>Female Rep.<br>Candidates | Wins | Percent<br>Victorious |
|------|---|------|-----------------------|---|------|-----------------------|
| 1990 | 11  | 7    | 63.6%                 | 6   | 2    | 33.3%                 |
| 1992 | 40  | 23   | 57.5%                 | 19  | 11   | 57.9%                 |
| 1994 | 21  | 10   | 47.6%                 | 19  | 5    | 26.3%                 |
| 1996 | 20  | 7    | 35.0%                 | 12  | 4    | 33.3%                 |
| 1998 | 19  | 12   | 63.2%                 | 11  | 4    | 36.4%                 |
| 2000 | 16  | 9    | 56.3%                 | 13  | 4    | 30.7%                 |
| SUM  | 127                                       | 68   | 53.5%                 | 80  | 30   | 37.5%                 |

**5. Conclusions**

There is no such thing as a non-partisan election for the U.S. Congress. Candidates are partisan creatures, born of party primaries, vying for jobs in an intensely partisan institution. One implication of our results is clear. Partisan identification must be included in future experiments

that consider how voters evaluate candidates, even if the primary interest is on questions of gender. Unlike previous experiments, we have tried to take account of the central role party plays in elections. Our results find that even when including party labels enrich the information in the environment, gender effects still appear.

While the assertion of female advantage in congressional races is relatively new among political scientists, it infected professional political consultants a decade earlier and is now conventional wisdom on the campaign trail. "Voters trust women more than men, believe that women listen better than men, and look to women for new ideas," argues Cathy Allen, a Seattle political strategist.<sup>34</sup> The experimental results reported here support this view and as such they are part of a growing experimental literature suggesting that female candidates have some distinct advantages in congressional campaigns. Those advantages are mediated by partisanship. For Republicans evaluating a female Republican, gender appears to send a signal that the candidate is more liberal than a comparable Republican male. This leads to Republican women having a harder time winning the party's nomination. For Independent and Democrats, on the other hand, being female does not send a strong ideological signal;<sup>35</sup> rather, it provides signals on a different set of characteristics. Specifically, Democratic and Independent voters are predisposed to view female Republicans as more likely to share their concerns, more trustworthy, and better leaders. Entire political campaigns can be built around such positive traits.

In 1986, 52 percent of the women in Congress were Republicans. Fifteen years later, only 31 percent of the women in Congress are Republicans. While there has been a significant increase in the number of women running and winning under the Democratic label, the increase among Republican women has been much more modest. The reason does not appear to lie with



the voting public as a whole. Our results show that Republican women are likely to have some distinct advantages over Republican men as general election candidates. Representative Nancy Pelosi (D-Ca), citing women candidates' ability to "identify" with voter concerns, said, "in marginal districts, women candidates have an advantage" (Cohen 1998). Most of the turnover in House elections occurs in these marginal districts, so the potential for change can be exploited by turning to female candidates.

Republican women, however, appear to have significant problems within their own party and especially with the most activist elements in their party. There is some danger the differences in intra-party success may exacerbate the growing gender gap in the House. The relatively high success rates of women in winning nominations in the Democratic party is likely to affect the calculus of possible Democratic women and make it more tempting to run for their party's nomination for Congress. The relatively low rates of success in winning nominations in the Republican Party may make it less likely that possible female Republican candidates will run.

Women are in the process of transforming how Congress works. To this point, however, that transformation has very much occurred only on one side of the aisle. If the Republican Party were more willing to turn to women as candidates we would see a significant increase in women's representation and possibly also an increase in Republican victories.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> We thank Barbara Burrell, Debra Dodson, Anna Greenberg, Paul Gronke, Christine Matthews, Pippa Norris, Adrian Shepherd and Karen Jones Roberts for contributing to our thinking about this paper. Data were made available by RENEW, the Republican Network to Elect Women, and by the Center for the American Woman and Politics. Questions regarding the data should be directed to [David\\_King@harvard.edu](mailto:David_King@harvard.edu).
- <sup>2</sup> See Alan I. Abramowitz. 1980. "A Comparison of Voting for U.S. Senator and Representative in 1978" American Political Science Review 74:633-640; Barbara Hinckley. 1980. "The American Voter in Congressional Elections" American Political Science Review 74:641-650; Monika L McDermott. 1997. "Voting Cues in Low-Information Elections: Candidate Gender as a Social Information Variable in Contemporary United States Elections." American Journal of Political Science 41(1):270-283; J. Merrill Shanks and Warren Miller. 1996. The New American Voter Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- <sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Adell Cook "Voter Reactions to Women Candidates" in Sue Thomas and Clyde Wilcox. (1998) Women and Elective Office: Past, Present and Future. New York: Oxford University Press.
- <sup>4</sup> Richard Selzer, Jody Newman and Melissa Voorhees Leighton (1997) Sex as A Political Variable: Women as Candidates and Voters in U.S. Elections Lynne Reiner Publishers, page 79.
- <sup>5</sup> The data for Table 6.1 for 1972-1994 are taken from Seltzer, Newman, and Voorhees Leighton (1997) Sex as a Political Variable page 83. The data for 1996, 1998 and 2000 were collected by the authors from Congressional Quarterly Weekly reports.
- <sup>6</sup> Men's victory rates for the same two periods remained relatively stable at: 51.2% and 53.6% respectively.
- <sup>7</sup> Robert Darcy, Susan Welch, & Janet Clark. 1994. Women, Elections, and Representation. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- <sup>8</sup> Stephen E. Bennett and Linda M. Bennett, 1992. "From Traditional to Modern Conceptions of Gender Equality in Politics - Graduate Change and Lingering Doubts" Western Political Quarterly 45(1):93-111.
- <sup>9</sup> Seltzer, Newman, and Voorhees Leighton "Sex as A Political Variable" , page 102.
- <sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Adell Cook. 1994. "Voter Response to Women Senate Candidates." In Elizabeth Adell Cook, Sue Thomas, Clyde Wilcox, eds. The Year of the Woman: Myths and Realities. Boulder, CO: Westview ; Elizabeth Adell Cook & Clyde Wilcox. 1995. "Women Voters in the 'Year of the Woman'." in Herbert F. Weisberg (ed.), Democracy's Feast: Elections in America. Chatham, New Jersey: Chatham House; Kathleen Dolan. 1998. "Voting for Women in the 'Year of the Woman.'" American Journal of Political Science 42(1):272-293; Phillip Paolino. 1995. "Group Salient Issues and Group Representation: Support for Women Candidates in the 1992 Senate Elections." American Journal of Political Science 39:295-313.; Smith & Fox. 2001. "The electoral fortunes of women candidates for Congress" Political Research Quarterly 54(1):205-221.

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- <sup>11</sup> Thompson, Seth and Janie Steckenrider. 1997. "The Relative Irrelevance of Candidate Sex." Women and Politics 17(4): 71-92.
- <sup>12</sup> William C. Adams. 1975. "Candidate Characteristics, Office of Election, and Voter Responses." Experimental Study of Politics. 4:79-91; Laurie E. Ekstrand & William A. Eckert. 1981. "The Impact of Candidate's Sex on Voter Choice." Western Political Quarterly. 34:78-87; John C. Garrett & Charles I. Brooks. 1987. "Effect of Ballot Color, Sex of Candidate, and Sex of College Students of Voting Age on Their Voting Behavior." Psychological Reports. 60:39-44; Leonie Huddy & Nayda Terkildsen. 1993a. "The Consequences of Gender Stereotypes for Women Candidates at Different Levels and Types of Office." Political Research Quarterly. 46:503-25; Mark S. Leeper. 1991. "The Impact of Prejudice on Female Candidates: An Experimental Look at Voter Inference." American Politics Quarterly. 19:248-61; Ellen D.B. Riggle, Penny M. Miller, Todd G. Shields, Mitzi M. S. Johnson. 1997. "Gender Stereotypes and Decision Context in the Evaluation of Political Candidates." Women and Politics. 17 (3): 69-88, Virginia Sapiro. 1981-1982. "If US Senator Baker Were a Woman: An Experimental Study of Candidate Images." Political Psychology. 2:61-83; Lee Sigelman & Carol K. Sigelman. 1982. "Sexism, Racism, and Ageism in Voting Behavior: An Experimental Analysis." Social Psychology Quarterly. 45:263-9, Cassia Spohn & Diane Gillespie. 1987. "Adolescents' Willingness to Vote for a Woman for President: The Effect of Gender and Race." Women and Politics. 7:31-49 The most recent experiment published (Riggle et al. 1997) alters this slightly by providing information via computer screen on several candidates and asking the respondents to select one.
- <sup>13</sup> The one exception is the first of these experiments done by Adams "Candidate Characteristics, Office of Election, and Voter Response". Adams found an interaction effect between sex and level of office sought. Being female hurt candidates for the presidency in terms of votes, but helped city council candidates. The gender effects among U.S. Senate and mayoral candidates were mixed.
- <sup>14</sup> Leonie Huddy & Nayda Terkildsen. 1993. "Gender Stereotypes and the Perception of Male and Female Candidates." American Journal of Political Science. 37:119-47, used a description of the candidates while Sapiro "If US Senator Baker Were a Woman" and Leeper "The Impact of Prejudice on Female Candidates" used a speech given by the candidate.
- <sup>15</sup> Huddy and Terkildsen "Gender Stereotypes and the Perception of Male and Female Candidates".
- <sup>16</sup> Leeper "The Impact of Prejudice" and Kim Fridkin Kahn. 1992. "Does Being Male Help? An Investigation of the Effects of Candidate Gender and Campaign Coverage on Evaluations of U.S. Senate Candidates." The Journal of Politics. 54:497-517.
- <sup>17</sup> Sapiro "If US Senator Baker were a Woman" and Huddy and Terkildsen "Gender Stereotypes and the Perception of Male.."
- <sup>18</sup> Shirley M. Rosenwasser, Robyn R. Rogers, Sheila Fling, Kayla Silvers-Pickens, John Butemeyer. 1987. "Attitudes Toward Women and Men in Politics: Perceived Male and Female Candidate Competencies and Participant Personality Characteristics," Political Psychology. 8:191-200; Shirley M. Rosenwasser & Jana Seale. 1988. "Attitudes Toward a Hypothetical Male or Female Presidential Candidate -- A Research Note." Political Psychology. 9:591-9; Shirley M. Rosenwasser & Norma G. Dean. 1989. "Gender Role and Political Office: Effects of Perceived Masculinity / Femininity of Candidate and Political Office." Psychology of

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Women Quarterly. 13:77-85.

- <sup>19</sup> Sapiro “If US Senator Baker were a Woman”, Leeper. “The Impact of Prejudice on Female Candidates” and Kahn “Does Being Male Help?”.
- <sup>20</sup> Rosenwasser & Dean “Gender Roles and Political Office”, Huddy & Terkildsen “Gender Stereotypes and the Perception of Male and Female Candidates.”; Huddy & Terkildsen. “The Consequences of Gender Stereotypes.”
- <sup>21</sup> The exception is Kahn's (1992) work “Does Being Male Help?” on U.S. Senate races, and she uses adults from a single city, Ann Arbor, Michigan.
- <sup>22</sup> Ekstrand & Eckert “The Impact of Candidate’s Sex”, Sapiro “If US Senator Baker were a Woman”, Sigelman & Sigelman “Sexism, Racism, and Ageism in Voting”, Garrett & Brooks “Effect of Ballot Color, Sex of Candidate”; Spohn & Gillespie “Adolescents’ Willingness to Vote for a Woman for President”; Riggle et al. “Gender Stereotypes and Decision Context”.
- <sup>23</sup> Sigelman & Sigelman “Sexism, Racism, and Ageism in Voting”, Garrett & Brooks “Effect of Ballot Color, Sex of Candidate.”
- <sup>24</sup> Ekstrand & Eckert “The Impact of Candidate’s Sex”, Sapiro “If US Senator Baker were a Woman”, Riggle et al. “Gender Stereotypes and Decision Context”.
- <sup>25</sup> Williams, John E. & Deborah L. Best. 1990. Measuring Sex Stereotypes: A Multination Study. Newbury Park, California: Sage.
- <sup>26</sup> Sapiro “If US Senator Baker Were a Woman”; Rosenwasser & Dean “Gender Roles and Political Office”; Leeper “The Impact of Prejudice on Female Candidates”; Kahn “Does Being Male Help?”, Huddy & Terkildsen “Gender Stereotypes and the Perception of Male and Female Candidates”.
- <sup>27</sup> The differences presented in the table are based on answers to the following question: “Now, based *just* upon what you have heard in the brief description I read, please tell me how well you believe each of the following descriptions fit this candidate.”
- <sup>28</sup> The ratings are 2.12 vs. 2.29 on a four point scale,  $p=.04$  for a 1-tailed test .The question format is the same as that presented in Table 2. Interestingly, Republican voters did not perceive a difference on this candidate characteristic (male=2.36, female=2.42).
- <sup>29</sup> While the voter variable in Table 6.4 includes voters who are very likely and somewhat likely to vote for the candidate, Table 6.5 only looks at those who are very likely to vote for the candidate. Since we are interested in the effects of sex on primary voters, it is wise to limit the evaluation to those who are most intense in their feelings.
- <sup>30</sup> The format of the question is the same as those presented in Table 6.3.
- <sup>31</sup> It is perhaps worth nothing, that this belief is not without some evidence, although it is clearly subject to the problem of being an ecological fallacy. As a group ADA scores measuring how liberal is a representative’s voting record shows that Republican women in the House are more liberal than Republican men.
- <sup>32</sup> The following example explains the dilemma. Assume there are ten open seats. For the Democrats assume there are five female candidates in each district; assume further that in

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every one of these open seats a woman wins the nomination. If we consider each individual female candidate as a case, as Gaddie and Bullock do, then we report only 20 percent of Democratic women win a nomination (10 of 50). The Matland/King measure would register this as 10 districts where 10 women won all the nominations or 100 percent success for women. Now assume at the same time there is exactly one woman who runs for the Republican nomination in each of these districts. Assume of the Republican women candidates, three of ten win. For both the Gaddie-Bullock measure and Matland/King measures this would be registered as 30 percent of women victorious (3 of 10). When we compare success among Republicans and Democrats, Gaddie-Bullock measure would find success was greater on the Republican side where 30% of the women running won a nomination, while on the Democratic side only 20% of the women running won a nomination. The Matland/King measure on the other hand would find women had greater success on the Democratic side where women won 100% of the possible nominations and on the Republican side they only won 30%. We believe individual measures don't as accurately present the reality of how well women as a whole are doing in the party. Therefore in the chart we measure the proportion of seats in which women are running where a woman wins the nomination.

<sup>33</sup> In fact the perception of women as becoming more and more Democratic in their voting is a total misreading of the data. Historical data shows that the gender gap has largely been created by men, especially in the South, moving away from the Democratic party and towards the Republican party (Karen M. Kaufmann and John R. Petrocik. 1999. "The Changing Politics of American Men: Understanding the Sources of the Gender Gap" American Journal of Political Science 43(3):864-887., Barbara Norrander. 1999. "The Evolution of the Gender Gap" Public Opinion Quarterly 63(4): 566-576). Despite women being relatively stable in their political views over the last 50 years the press time and again refers to the movement of women towards the Democratic party. That simply hasn't happened. What has happened is that men have increasingly moved towards the Republican party.

<sup>34</sup> Guy Gugliotta. 1996. "At Yale, Women Give Campaigning the New College Try." The Washington Post. June 13, 1996, C1.

<sup>35</sup> It is worth noting that the failure of a Republican woman to send a strong ideological signal is consistent with McDermott's work using the NES, where she found that being female sent a clear ideological signal for Democratic women, but failed to send a clear ideological signal for Republican women.