



The Trouble with (Republican) Women

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This is a weather report and a whether report. The climate for women hoping to win major public offices in the United States has never been better. We enter 1999 with a record number of women in Congress (65) and a record number of women elected to statewide executive posts (91). Over 40 percent of the new Washington state legislature is female, and in Arizona, all five statewide elective positions – in order of constitutional succession – are held by women.

Then again, Washington and Arizona are notable exceptions. The total number of women in state legislatures has fallen since 1992. Only three governors are female. Women comprise less than 13 percent of the Congress, and the possible presidential candidacies of women, such as Elizabeth Dole, are noted most for their novelty.

Stormy weather, but better than ever.

What looms on the horizon? It depends a little on the other kind of "whether." Do Democrats and Republicans evaluate congressional candidates differently depending on whether those candidates are female?

It is no surprise that elected Democratic women outnumber Republicans 45 to 20 in Congress, but one should not infer that Republican women are somehow disadvantaged at the polls (The problem partly stems from a paucity of Republican women running for office). Indeed, Democrats and independents are willing – maybe even eager – to cross party lines and vote for female Republicans.

In late 1993, RENEW, the Republican Network to Elect Women, hired a polling firm to conduct an experiment on a national random sample of adults, both male and female. The University of Houston's Rick Matland and I examine the survey in a recent paper, "Partisanship and the Impact of Candidate Gender in Congressional Elections," available on the Kennedy School's "Politics Research Group" [web site](#).

Whether matters.

Using a classic experimental design, RENEW asked 820 adults to evaluate a possible congressional candidate. Each respondent was read the same description. Half of the respondents were told that the candidate was a male; the other half were told that the candidate was a female. Everyone 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 were asked to evaluate the likelihood they would support the candidate. Respondents also evaluated the degree to which the (male or female) candidate possessed different traits (such as leadership qualities).

The findings *should* gladden the hearts of women considering running as Republicans. Compared with the otherwise-identical male Republican, the female candidate was imputed to be far more trustworthy, far more likely to share one's own concerns, and far more likely to garner one's vote. The female candidate's advantage in terms of likely support is ten percent among Independent and Democratic voters. In competitive elections, holding everything else constant, a ten-point swing from Independents and Democrats is something Republican party leaders should savor.

Republican respondents – of both genders – judge their own female candidates more harshly, however. Among Republicans, the female candidate is thought to be a weaker leader, while Independents and Democrats hold the reverse view. Why? We can only speculate. Perhaps the various party groups have different definitions of what it means to be a strong leader. Or perhaps Independents and Democrats assume that any woman slugging it out in the Republican party must have moxie. Whatever the reason, in terms of empathy, trust, and leadership, a connection to voters' partisanship is unmistakable.

The Republican party, if it is interested in maximizing its votes and seats, should run female candidates. This is especially true in traditionally strong Democrat districts. Within the American system, however, decisions on whom to nominate are not made by a rational vote-maximizing unitary actor. Candidates have to survive the messy and chaotic world of primaries. The support that prospective female Republicans get from Democrats and Independents will matter little if the candidates run into trouble in their own party primaries.

Another whether report is needed, this one exploring whether a respondent is likely to vote in the primaries. Within both parties, primary voters are almost exclusively drawn from the ranks of self-identified "strong Democrats" and "strong Republicans."

Furthermore, campaign contributions and volunteers are almost always among this select lot.

For the strong partisans, does it matter whether a Republican candidate is male or female?

The findings should *sadden* the hearts of the hearts of women considering running as Republicans. Compared with the otherwise-identical male Republican, strong Republicans are significantly less likely to support the female candidate. This is true of men and women Republican voters, and it survives multivariate tests controlling for age, income and race.

Why would staunch Republicans be more skeptical of a female candidate? For Republicans evaluating a female candidate, gender appears to send a signal that she is more liberal than a comparable Republican male. This may lead to Republican women having a harder time winning their party's nomination.

In 1985, 54 percent of the women in Congress were Republicans. Today, less than 31 percent are. While there has been a significant increase in the number of women running and winning (the weather report), those gains have been visited primarily on Democratic women (the whether report).

Whether matters. Republican women have some distinct advantages over Republican men as general election candidates, yet these women apparently have significant problems within their own party and especially with the most activist elements in their party. For Republican women interested in entering elective office, here is one piece of advice: The whether can be nasty during the primary season. Bring an umbrella.