

How A Voter's Gender Impacts Perceptions Of A Politician's Extramarital Affair

Lindsey Whitney

Faculty mentor: Karol Maybury

University of Maine at Farmington

Introduction

Previous research on this topic include, *The Impact of Scandal on Candidate Evaluations: An Experimental Test of the Role of Candidate Traits* by: Carolyn L. Funk. The question or hypothesis being researched was how voters view scandal in their opinion of politicians. The study surveyed 86 undergraduates from the University of California, including 42 males and 44 females. The method of research included students reading a passage that involved four different hypothetical congressmen. The students were then asked to write their impression of the congressmen based on their knowledge about them. The participants were also given questions about the level of trust towards the congressmen and their ability to do the job well. Two of the congressmen were seen to have been capable of their job but committed scandal, one being infidelity in marriage and the other being tax fraud. The other two congressmen were viewed as more admirable, but were less competent for the job. The results of the study stated that politicians involved in the tax scandal, were more negatively evaluated when compared to the congressmen with marital infidelity. Another result of the study showed that the highly competent but less friendly were favored more then the friendlier, less competent congressmen. The results supported the hypothesis that competence and ability to perform the job is more important in terms of voting for office than warm, friendly personalities. Overall, the study shows that college students are less concerned with marital infidelity and would rather a politician be prepared to perform their job.

Aside from scandals, there are other aspects that can interfere with a politician's campaign. In his article, *Has The Television Personalized Voting Behavior?* Danny Hayes discussed the topic of political advertisements on both television and radio and their effect on voters and why the vote for a candidate in an election. The study surveyed whether voters are more likely to maintain personal characteristics as reasons to vote for or against a candidate when presented with television ads. The method was conducted by having subjects provide a list of positive and negative aspects of the candidates provided. The questions were then placed into categories after the study was conducted to easily generalize them into broad sections. Overall, the study concluded that personalities mean less to voters than party labels. However, personality was an important aspect when voters considered a candidate, but this information has not changed over the years. The study informs people that personality has an impact in voting choices, which has been steady for the past sixty years or so and has not changed much.

In a study done by Pamela M. Hamer and Rajeev Batra, their hypothesis tested whether, "Negative political communications are more successful in damaging overall voter attitudes toward the targeted candidate than positive communications are in raising such attitudes." Their method included using a mayoral election and involved the subjects reading a newspaper editorial that described each candidate. Similar to the television study, this study also involved radio advertisements to promote the candidates. 187 Texas voters were the subjects and they were split into two groups. The control groups received a thought focus manipulation while the others received the radio advertisement. The results of the study concluded that negative political messages appeared to have more attitude changing power than the positive advertisements. This study explains that although negative advertisements are not always seen as appealing, they are effective

when it comes to campaigning. It also explains that people are indeed influenced by the media and can be persuaded to think differently.

Similar to the Hamra and Batra case, Jason J. Teven's study involved the examination of an actual political election. His study examined Hilary Clinton, Barack Obama, John Edwards, John McCain and Rudy Giuliani in the 2008 presidential election. The political figures were rated on perceived competence, trustworthiness, goodwill, believability, likeableness, and deceptiveness. The hypothesis of the study was to examine the perceptions of credibility of the front-runner candidates for the election. 342 undergraduates that were enrolled in communication classes participated in the study. This involved the subjects taking a questionnaire where they judged the likeability of the candidates on a scale provided. The researchers predicted that political candidates credibility would be positively related to perceptions of believability. This prediction was supported by the study as well as a few other predictions. The results also showed that political candidates credibility is positively related to perceptions of likeability. The conclusions of this research explain that likeability of a candidate is an important aspect when voting, which is congruent to the previous studies mentioned.

Another study was conducted that tested ten candidates over five elections. These candidates' traits were rated on a scale. This research, done by David A.M. Peterson, looked at perceptions of character traits, issue positions, and uncertainty directly. The hypothesis researched issue positions and their affect of perceptions of a candidate's character traits, and how this effect is moderated by how certain the citizen is about the candidate's position on the issues. The research found that the link between issue positions and candidate trait perceptions is moderated by the voter's certainty about issues. Overall the more certain a voter is about the candidate's policy positions, the more that voters use those positions to inform his or her perceptions of the candidate's character traits.

Overall, all five studies shared a common aspect of evaluating and researching the character traits of political candidates. All of the studies used different scales and ratings to code the traits, but were all similar with their hypotheses. In most of the studies, the candidate's character traits were an important factor when deciding who to vote for, even if it wasn't always the same trait.

The current study examines whether or not there is a gender difference when perceiving a candidate that had an affair. The hypothesis was created from an interest in politics and what causes people to vote for a candidate. Being a political science minor, the interest in gender and politics came from many psychology and political classes and seeing the similarities between them. Previous research on gender in politics includes the gender schema theory and whether gender stereotypes are based on the issues faced in office (Sanbonmatsu, 2002). The results from this study explained that when given hypothetical questions about gender and political issues, women would be more likely to vote for women that supported issues they agreed with and vice versa for men.

Another study done by Sanbonmatsu and Dolan, looked at gender and party affiliation. The results explained that when issues on education were discussed, women Democrats and Republicans were seen as more capable to handle the job than men of either party (Sanbonmatsu, Dolan, 2009). For crime related issues, male Republicans and Democrats were seen as more capable for the job than women (Sanbonmatsu, Dolan,

2009). When looking at the current study and the previous research, gender is shown as being a complex subject in terms of politics. Although gender may be a factor when it comes to voting, factors such as political issues and party affiliation also play a role in voting as well.

Method

The current study conducted included subjects from the University of Maine at Farmington. The subjects were undergraduate students and the study surveyed 17 males and 31 females. One of the components of the research was to see if there were gender differences of their opinions of the politician's infidelity, which is why the research called for a close to equal number of males and females.

The research conducted in this experiment tested the hypothesis; when given a scenario that the candidate of their party and/or belief has just admitted to having an affair, women will rate the candidate as less admirable than men. They will report being less enthusiastic about the candidate and will be less likely to vote for them. The subjects were given a survey that contained a scenario describing a political candidate that was desirable to both parties. The scenario then explained that news of his marital infidelity that was recently released to the public during the primary elections. Following the scenario was a questionnaire that asked the subjects opinions on statements regarding; if they would vote for the candidate, if the candidate should be judged based on their personal lives, whether or not the gender of the candidate mattered, and so on. The questions were all based on the Likert Scale with the participants having six options for their answers. The scale is as follows: strongly agree, somewhat agree, agree, somewhat disagree, disagree, and strongly disagree. The data was calculated and placed into a statistical database and into categories to show the relationship between the genders, as well as whether or not the subjects supported the candidate.

Results

The current study involved undergraduate students taking an online survey with a scenario (describing a presidential candidate who had an affair) followed by eight statements that were rated on a scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The survey contained four independent variables and four filler questions. The dependent variables tested were whether the candidate should be judged negatively based on the affair, whether the affair should matter, if participants would continue to vote for the candidate, or if they would vote for the other party. The data was then placed into a statistical program and an independent sample t-test was performed that tested the difference between genders and their opinions of the presidential candidate. In all cases, women were more likely to judge the candidate negatively based on the affair than men ($t(46)=-2.324, p<.02$). The results also showed that women viewed that the affair did matter to them in terms of voting in comparison to men ($t(46)=-2.61, p<.01$). An ANOVA was conducted to see if there was any difference between the political party affiliations of the participants and their responses, but the results were not significant.

Significant Independent Samples T-Test:

Variable	Gender	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
AFFAIRDOESNTMATTER	Male	17.00 0	4.588	1.326
	Female	31.00 0	3.452	1.502

t (46)=-2.61, p<.01

Variable	Gender	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
JUDGENEGATIVELY	Male	17.00 0	2.471	1.463
	Female	31.00 0	3.484	1.435

t (46)=-2.324, p<.02

Not Significant Independent Samples T-Test:

Variable	Gender	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
CONTINUE TO VOTE	Male	17.00 0	4.529	1.463
	Female	31.00 0	3.806	1.352

t (46)=1.721, p<0.092, ns

Variable	Gender	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
OTHER PARTY	Male	17.00 0	2.529	1.772
	Female	31.00 0	3.290	1.677

t (46)=-1.474, p<0.147, ns

Anova: Not Significant

Political Party	Mean	Standard Deviation
Democrat/Liberal	3.7	1.6
Republican/Conservative	3.8	1.7
Independent	4.2	1.6

Other	3.8	1.5
-------	-----	-----

Discussion

The current study examines the gender differences in how people perceived a presidential candidate after they reported having an affair. The hypothesis tested was supported by the results of the independent samples t-test. The hypothesis stated that when presented with a scenario (that the presidential candidate of their party was confirmed having an affair), women would rate a philandering candidate more negatively than men. The results supported the hypothesis in saying that women would judge a candidate more negatively based on the affair and that the affair should matter.

Although two out of four of the dependent variables were significant and supported the hypothesis, there were some confounds and limitations to the study. The study observed the effect of gender on perceptions of politicians, yet there was not an even number of males and females. More male participants would have validated the study and may have affected the results. The questionnaire only provided two options for political parties and left a blank space for “write in” options. This cause many participants to write in “other” as the party they affiliated with. This provided the political party category with few options and therefore insignificant results. The scenario for the study was hypothetical so it might have been difficult for participants to take the questionnaire seriously. Previous research on this topic by Hardy and Jamieson used the 2004 presidential election to test if the polls affect perception of candidate traits (Hardy, Jamieson, 2004). This study as well as Charles Prysby study, *Perceptions of Candidate Character Traits and the Presidential Vote in 2004*, had more honest results because they could use the results of the election to either support or defy their hypothesis (Prysby, 2004).

This study continues the research on gender and the different ways people view political figures. This research could potentially help candidates know which voters they need to spend time trying to campaign with. This also could explain voting and why people vote the way that they do. Previous research on gender and voting behavior explains that men and women vote differently and have different views, but political issues are also a factor when voting (Hatemi, McDermott, Baily, Martin, 2009). In addition to providing new information, the current study also continues the research of similar studies in the past such as a study done by Danny Hayes in 2009 entitled, *Has The Television Personalized Voting Behavior?* He explained that in terms of television advertisements, people were less concerned with personality and more concerned with party affiliation. This would be consistent with some of the research because a number of the participants agreed that party views were more important. Both of these studies could potentially help advertisers know what is the best way to present a candidate based on what the viewers find important.

Based on the results of the current study, this information could be used to help politicians in their campaigns. The results could help strategists provide effective ‘damage control’ to politicians’ personal scandals. The politician could also focus their attention on male supporters/voters who may be more inclined to vote for them. Future research could be performed to figure out what women voters want when it comes to

response of the philandering politician. In a future study, a between subjects design with different independent variables could help show what helps save women's votes, such as the presence and demeanor or wife in a press conference, the way the voters learn about the affair either through media or the politician themselves, if the affair is with a younger woman or woman under his command, as well as the length of the affair and seriousness of the relationship. There are many other studies that could be performed as well and in the field of politics there will always be different ways in which to study why people vote the way that they do.

Sources

Batra, Rajeev and Hamer, Pamela. *Attitudinal Effects of Character-Based versus Competence-Based Negative Political Communications*. Journal of Consumer Psychology, Vol. 3, No. 2 (1994), pp. 163-185. Jstor.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1480670>

Funk, Carolyn, *The Impact of Scandal on Candidate Evaluations: An Experimental Test of the Role of Candidate Traits*. Political Behavior, Vol. 18, No.1 (Mar.1996), pp.1-24. Springer. Jstor. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/586509>

Hardy, Bruce and Jamieson, Kathleen, *Can a Poll Affect Perception of Candidate Traits?* The Public Opinion Quarterly, Vol. 69, No. 5, Polling Politics, Media, and Election Campaigns (2005), pp. 725-743. Oxford University Press on behalf of the American Association for Public Opinion Research. Jstor.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3521571>

Hatemi, Peter, McDermott, Rose, Bailey, J, and Martin, Nicholas. *The Different Effects of Gender and Sex on Vote Choice*. Political Research Quarterly, Vol. 65, No. 1 (March 2012), pp. 76-92. Sage Publications, Inc. on behalf of the University of Utah. Jstor.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/23209561>

Hayes, Danny, *Has The Television Personalized Voting Behavior?* Political Behavior, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Jun. 2009), pp. 231-260. Springer. Jstor.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40213346>

Peterson, David, *Heterogeneity and Certainty on Candidate Evaluations*. Political Behavior, Vol. 27, No. 1 (Mar. 2005), pp. 1-24. Springer. Jstor.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4500182>

Prysbly, Charles, *Perceptions of Candidate Character Traits and the Presidential Vote in 2004*. Political Science and Politics, Vol. 41, No.1 (Jan. 2008), pp. 115-122

American Political Science Association. Jstor.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20452119>

Sanbonmatsu, Kira, *Gender Stereotypes and Vote Choice*. American Journal of Political Science, Vol. 46, No. 1 (Jan. 2002), pp. 20-34. Midwest Political Science Association.

Jstor. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3088412>

Sanbonmatsu, Kira and Dolan, Kathleen, *Do Gender Stereotypes Transcend Party?* Political Research Quarterly, Vol. 62, No. 3 (Sept. 2009), pp. 485-494. Sage Publications, Inc. on behalf of the University of Utah. Jstor.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40232395>

Teven, Jason, *An Examination of Perceived Credibility of the 2008 Presidential Candidates: Relationships with Believability, Likeability, and Deceptiveness*. Human

Communication. A Publication of the Pacific and Asian Communication Association.
Vol. 11, No. 4, pp.383-400. Jstor.