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**Deposited in DRO:**

05 January 2021

**Version of attached file:**

Accepted Version

**Peer-review status of attached file:**

Peer-reviewed

**Citation for published item:**

Ditonto, Tessa and Andersen, David (2020) 'Beyond the presidency, 2016: women candidates in down-ballot races.', in *Politicking While Female: The Political Lives of Women.* , pp. 115-136.

**Further information on publisher's website:**

<https://lsupress.org/books/detail/politicking-while-female/>

**Publisher's copyright statement:****Additional information:**

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## 2016 Beyond the Presidency: Women Candidates in Concurrent Down-Ballot Races

Tessa Ditonto and David J. Andersen

Hillary Clinton's 2016 candidacy for the presidency was an important moment for women's political representation in the United States. Much has been written about the experiences of Clinton herself and about the significance of a woman running as a major party presidential nominee for the first time. However, far less attention has been paid to the experiences of the other women who ran for office across the country in the same year. 2016 saw more women running for office than any other previous year, which suggests important strides for women's representation. On the other hand, 2016 was one of the few election cycles since 1992 in which women gained no seats in Congress. Similarly, experimental research has found that down-ballot women may be disadvantaged when other women run for higher office simultaneously, as gender-based stereotypes and biases become more salient to voters when they are asked to consider supporting multiple women at once (Ditonto and Andersen 2018). In 2016, for the first time in the United States, every voter in the country saw a woman at the top of their ticket. While an important milestone in and of itself, it is also possible that this served to disadvantage women running down-ballot.

While Ditonto and Andersen (2018) suggests that Clinton's candidacy may have served as an obstacle to other women's electoral success, this hypothesis has only been tested in an experimental setting. Of course, experimental research is limited, since it trades elements of real-world generalizability for the ability to draw causal inferences. Finding experimental evidence that the presence of multiple women on the ballot can serve as an obstacle to

individual female candidates does not necessarily mean that those findings will translate to actual elections with all of their complexity.

In this paper, we seek to determine whether the pattern of experimental findings mentioned above emerges in a real election. Since Democrats saw the first female presidential candidate from a major party at the top of their ticket, 2016 provides an excellent opportunity to do just that. We utilize data from the 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study in order to examine whether the number of other women running for office simultaneously affected voters' willingness to support female House candidates. We find that, even in actual elections, female candidates in down-ballot races may be less likely to win when they run at the same time as other women further up the ballot. Democrats, in particular, follow the same general pattern as subjects in our experiments. When the only other in-party female candidate they saw was Hillary Clinton, Democrats were actually more likely to support a female in-party House candidate than a male in-party House candidate. However, when they saw another woman running for either Senate or governor, they became far less likely to support their female House candidate. Republicans, on the other hand, were less likely to support female candidates who ran in isolation, but were *more* likely to support female House candidates when other women also appeared on the ballot. Possible explanations for this unexpected finding are considered below.

## Candidate Sex and Voter Decision-Making

The under-representation of women in elected office in the United States is undeniable.<sup>1</sup> Political science research points to multiple causes for this phenomenon, including differences in the candidate emergence process (Lawless and Fox 2015) and various structural barriers to women's success (e.g. Palmer and Simon 2008; Sanbonmatsu 2006). On the other hand, the role of voter bias and stereotypes is unclear. Findings from aggregate vote totals (looking at one election at a time) have found that women are no less likely to win their races than men are (Burrell 1994; Seltzer, Newman and Leighton 1997; Darcy, et al 1994; Woods 2000; Dolan 2004). On the other hand, evidence suggests that voters may hold a number of gender-based stereotypes that they apply to female candidates, including that they are more feminine, communal, emotional, warm and gentle, but that they are less masculine, agentic, assertive, competent and strong (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; Kahn 1996; Leeper 1991; Alexander and Andersen 1993; Cook, Thomas and Wilcox 1994; Dolan 2004; Rosenwasser and Seale 1988, Leeper 1991).

While some scholars have found that these stereotypes may not affect election outcomes (Dolan 2014; Brooks 2013; Hayes 2011), others have found that their influence may be contingent upon multiple aspects of the overall electoral environment, such as whether feminine or masculine issues are salient (Cook, Thomas and Wilcox 1994; Dolan 2004; Holman, Merolla and Zechmeister 2011; Lawless 2004), which office is being sought (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993b; Ono and Burden 2018), whether feminine stereotypes are activated by

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<sup>1</sup> See The Center for American Women in Politics for the latest numbers: [www.cawp.rutgers.edu](http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu)

campaign messages (Bauer 2015a), and which voters one looks at (Bauer 2015b). Further, evidence suggests that women in leadership roles are subject to stereotypes and biases that women, in general, may not be. Specifically, assumptions that women are higher in communal traits like compassion, sensitivity and nurturing are seen as incongruent with expectations that leaders are agentic, strong and assertive (Eagly 1987; Eagly and Karau 2002). Schneider and Bos (2014) similarly find that female candidates are perceived as a subtype of women and subject to unique stereotypes related to masculine and leadership characteristics. Finally, Ditonto, et al (2014), and Ditonto (2017; 2018) find that female candidates are evaluated more heavily on the “masculine” trait of competence than male candidates and that this can pose problems for them if they are portrayed as lacking in competence.

Importantly, almost all of this literature considers female candidates running only in single races, as if each election were contested in isolation. The United States’ electoral system requires voters to learn about and evaluate candidates for multiple races simultaneously, however, and this may have implications for individual candidates. While it is obvious that a candidate running for a seat in Congress will be judged in relation to their opponent for the same seat, for example, it is also likely that voters’ evaluations of that candidate will be influenced by the candidates running for Senate, governor, or president at the same time, as well. To better understand candidate evaluation in the American context, then, it may be helpful to consider who is running in other concurrent races, too.

### **Female Candidates and Concurrent Elections**

For this reason, we posit that if we want to understand how voters’ attitudes and behavior affect individual female candidates, then it is important to examine the gender

composition of all of the races being contested simultaneously in one election cycle. The number of campaigns being waged at the same time will drastically alter the information environment in which a vote decision must be made. The more offices on the ballot, the more total information a voter must gather in order to make an informed set of vote decisions. Though Americans are a notoriously politically uninformed and inattentive population, in general (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996), political psychologists have demonstrated that voters are often able to use information shortcuts as a means of making relatively high-quality decisions without having to gather all relevant information (Lau and Redlawsk 1997, Lupia 2000). Presumably, as a campaign environment becomes more crowded, these heuristics become more and more useful, because voters learn less information about each set of candidates and must rely upon short-cuts (Wolak 2009, Andersen 2009).

If choosing a Senator were our only life task, for example, we would certainly have the time and energy necessary to learn all there was to know about the candidates for that office. In reality however, the US is unique in the sheer number of elections that are often contested at the same time. Americans typically have multiple high-level offices to learn about in any given campaign season, and these tasks are on top of other state and local races as well, not to mention more pertinent concerns like family and work.

We posit that the total number of women running in all of these races is consequential for female candidates thanks to a combination of the negative content of many gender stereotypes and the still-novel context of seeing multiple women on the same ballot. Even if voters still harbor doubts about women as political leaders, other politically relevant information (like partisanship) may override those doubts in individual races, especially races

in which the candidates are well known. However, the negative content of many gender-based stereotypes—specifically the underlying assumption that feminine gender roles and leadership roles are incongruent, and that women are less qualified, strong and competent (e.g. Eagly and Karau 2002, Schneider and Bos 2014)—means that they may disadvantage female candidates if and when they are applied by voters. Election cycles that include women running for multiple offices simultaneously may “activate” gender stereotypes for voters (e.g. Sinclair and Kunda 1999; Kunda and Spencer 2003; Bauer 2015) in ways that seeing one woman in a field otherwise comprised of men may not.

Though more women are running for office with each election cycle, the reality of American elections is that most candidates are still men, so voters likely still expect (either consciously or unconsciously) to see mainly men on their ballots. The presence of multiple women in one election cycle may draw voters’ attention to gender in a number of ways. First, the sheer novelty of many women running at once may be enough to trigger gender-based stereotypes and/or prejudices in voters. Second, as more women run at the same time, gender and gendered policy issues may become more salient in that election cycle, with the media and candidates themselves spending more time addressing these things in their communication with the public. As gender becomes more salient in an election cycle, gender-based stereotypes may become more accessible and, therefore, a more readily-used heuristic by voters.

Additionally, we also expect that gender may matter more for the candidates that voters know the least about. Gender cues serve as proxies for other information. Because stereotypic information is more salient when less individuating information is incorporated into a person judgment (Locksley, Borgida, Brekke, and Hepburn 1980; Locksley, Hepburn and Ortiz 1982;

Ashmore 1981; Eagly and Wood 1982), our best chance to observe the effect of such cues may be in offices where voters are least likely to learn much specific information about the candidates (and thus are less likely to counteract stereotypes/prejudices). Assuming that voters have a fixed amount of time and energy that they are able and willing to devote to an election, as the number of offices on the ballot increases, voters can either learn an equal amount of information about the candidates for each office —thereby decreasing the amount they learn about each candidate equally—or they can slim their information demands by learning relatively less about some offices and more about others. Either way, candidates in offices that receive less attention are likely subject to stereotypes and other heuristics to a greater extent than candidates in races to which voters devote a lot of time and attention. If heuristics become more important to voters as their information environments become more crowded, then, voters should rely more heavily on cues like a candidate’s sex as more offices are added to the ballot.

Congressional candidates have the lowest average campaign spending and lowest recognition among the major offices and voters tend to spend less effort and attention in learning about congressional candidates than higher-office candidates. Therefore, it may be that the effects of multiple concurrent female candidates will be stronger for congressional candidates, relative to candidates for president, governor or Senate. In fact, both Wolak (2009) and Andersen (2009) find that concurrent elections disadvantage House members, in particular, because voters tend to devote more of their attention and information search to higher offices.

Women running for Congress, then, should be more subject to gender stereotypes than women in higher offices, since voters will presumably devote less time and energy to learning about them and apply stereotypes to them more readily (though see Ono and Burden 2018 for

evidence that gender stereotypes may affect women in presidential races more than lower races). When only one office is on the ballot, voters may be more willing to spend time gathering information about the candidates in the race, thereby learning enough total information to counteract gender-based or other stereotypes they may have. Similarly, when a campaign environment is crowded and a higher-level office like the presidency is contested alongside a House race, voters may take the time to learn about the presidential candidates while relying on stereotypes, like those based on gender, to a greater degree when it comes to the House.

This is precisely what we find in our 2018 experimental study.<sup>2</sup> Women who ran on their own did well—and even better than male candidates in some instances—but the story for women who ran alongside other women was more complicated. This was especially true for women who ran for lower office while another woman also sought election to an office further up the ballot. Female House candidates were both liked less and received participants' votes less often when another woman ran for higher office in the same party. What we still don't know is whether this pattern will be visible in a "real-world" election cycle, with all its complexity and nuance.

### **The role of Partisanship**

Part of the complexity of real-world elections is the influence of partisanship and, of course, we expect partisanship to play an important role in this story. Because partisan cues—when they are present—are almost always the most important consideration for voters in a US

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<sup>2</sup> Hennings and Urbatsch (2015) find a similar result in which women at the top of a ticket are much more likely to have a running mate of the opposite sex than men are.

election (e.g. Campbell et al 1960; Zaller 1992; Bartels 2000; Goren, Federico and Kittilson 2009), we expect that partisan voters will generally only consider candidates in their own political party, or at least that it will take quite a lot to get them to consider the other party's candidate. Some evidence suggests that party cues are so important that gender stereotypes simply do not affect voter decision-making in a partisan election (e.g. Hayes 2011; Dolan 2014). There is also evidence that independents are the most likely to use gender stereotypes and/or discriminate against female candidates. This is presumably due to the fact that while partisans are often willing to vote for their own party's candidate regardless of that candidate's individual characteristics, independents are relying on other considerations. This may leave more "space" for gender-based stereotypes and biases to have an effect (Ono and Burden 2018; Andersen and Ditonto *forthcoming*).

Candidate sex and partisanship have been shown to interact in other ways, as well. For example, there is evidence that women who run as Republicans are evaluated less favorably by their own partisans than women who run as Democrats (Bauer 2017; Sanbonmatsu and Dolan 2009; King and Matland 2003) and women are more likely to run and be successful in Democratic primaries than Republican, as well (Gaddie and Bullock 1995; Palmer and Simon 2006; Lawless and Pearson 2008). Finally, candidates who seek to counter gender-based stereotypes may be successful with co-partisans but face backlash from out-party subjects (Krupnikov and Bauer 2014; Bauer 2017).

Taken together, this evidence suggests that the partisanship of both voters and candidates will have an important effect on the fates of individual female candidates, as well. For this reason, we look separately at whether voters see women running in their own political party or in the opposing party, and we control for voters' strength of partisanship, as well. We expect that candidate sex will matter differently depending upon whether women are running in a voter's preferred party (their "in-party" or their non-preferred "out-party"), and that Republicans and Democrats may also react differently to seeing multiple women on their ballot. We discuss our specific hypotheses below, but evidence suggests

that seeing women in one's in-party will make voters more likely to consider voting for out-party (male) candidates, while seeing women in one's out-party should make voters even more likely to vote for their in-party candidates. Further, we expect that Republican women be particularly disadvantaged, in general.

## **Hypotheses**

To sum up our main hypotheses, we expect to see that the number of women running concurrently in different elections will affect the electoral fates of those women. We believe that most Americans care predominantly about political party and other politically relevant characteristics when evaluating candidates, and that the effects of gender may or may not be visible in any single race considered in isolation. However, as more women run for office at the same time, we expect that gender cues will begin to have a larger effect on evaluations of women candidates, and that the effects of gender will become more pronounced. Thus:

H1: When one female candidate runs within a voter's preferred party, and no other female candidates appear on the ballot, any negative effects of gender should be small or nonexistent, mirroring findings from other recent studies that political party cues will drown out concerns about gender.

H2: When a female candidate runs within a voter's preferred party, and other in-party women appear elsewhere on the ballot, she will be evaluated more negatively and will have a lower likelihood of obtaining a subject's vote. The greater the number of in-party women appearing in other races, the worse she will do.

Importantly, these hypotheses will apply to Democrats and Republicans slightly differently in 2016, since all Democrats saw a female in-party candidate at the top of their ticket,

while Republicans did not. As stated in H1, we expect that female House candidates will do worse as more women appear elsewhere on the ballot, which means that Republicans who only see a female House candidate in their party should be just as likely to vote for her as those who see male House candidates. However, if they see a Republican woman running for either Senate or governor, they should be less likely to support their female House candidate.

The 2016 Democratic ballot adds some complexity to our hypotheses, since every Democrat saw a woman in the presidential race. It is impossible to know whether Democratic female House candidates would have done better without Hillary Clinton at the top of the ticket, so all we can do is determine whether they do worse when other women, over and above Clinton, appear on the ballot. Therefore, we adjust our hypothesis such that we expect Democrats who see only a female in-party House Candidate and Hillary Clinton should be more likely to support their female House candidate than those who also see a woman running for Senate or governor in their own party

## **Method**

To test our hypotheses, we used data from the 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES)<sup>3</sup>, which is a large, nationally representative, two-wave survey (pre- and post-election), stratified by state and type of district. The 2016 study included 64,600 respondents, with state level sub-samples ranging from 99 (in Wyoming) to 6,021 (in California). The survey was conducted via YouGov in October and November 2016. To the CCES data, we added data

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<sup>3</sup> Ansolabehere, Stephen and Brian F. Schaffner, COOPERATIVE CONGRESSIONAL ELECTION STUDY, 2016: COMMON CONTENT. [Computer File] Release 2: August 4, 2017. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University [producer] <http://cces.gov.harvard.edu>

on the gender composition of each race taken from the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP).

We conduct a binomial logistic regression in which our dependent variable is whether or not respondents voted for their in-party House candidate. We cluster standard errors on congressional district in order to account for non-independence among respondents from the same district. Independent variables include sex of in-party House candidate, sex of out-party House candidate, and indicators as to whether any other women ran concurrently in either the in-party or out-party. We then use interaction terms to examine vote choice for different combinations of these gender compositions. Control variables include strength of party ID, respondent sex, respondent race, respondent education, and whether there was a gubernatorial or Senate race in a respondent's state.

In 2016, respondents in 151 Congressional districts saw multiple women running for office (in either party), with respondents in 69 districts seeing more than two women (again, in either party). Four districts saw multiple Republican women running simultaneously (when at least one also ran for the House) and 132 districts saw multiple Democratic women (also when at least one was running in the House). Importantly, all Democrats saw Hillary Clinton at the top of the ticket, but 45 districts saw multiple Democratic women running, over and above Clinton, which means they either also saw a woman run for Senate or governor.

## **Results**

[Table 1 about here]

Table 1 shows the results of our analysis of vote choice for in-party House candidate. Column 1 displays the results for the entire sample, Column 2 looks at Republicans, only, and

Column 3 lists results for Democrats, only. Looking first at Column 1, we find significant effects for many of our covariates. Looking at our variables of interest, we find that when respondents see a female in-party House candidate but no other female candidates (except, again, that all Democrats saw Hillary Clinton at the top of the ticket), they are actually slightly more likely to vote for the in-party candidate compared to the baseline scenario of all male candidates ( $b=.113$ , significant at  $p<.1$ ). However, respondents are also more likely to vote for their in-party candidate when the *out-party* candidate is female, and all others are male ( $b=.189$ , significant at  $.001$ ).

We also find that respondents are *less* likely to vote for their in-party House candidate when he is a man, but other women appear simultaneously elsewhere on the ballot. Seeing the same configuration (of a male House candidate but women elsewhere) in one's out-party has no effect. Most importantly, our crucial variable of interest has the expected sign ( $b=-.153$ ,  $p<.1$ ), suggesting that respondents are less likely to vote for a female in-party House candidate when other in-party women appear on the ballot.

Of course, combining Democrats and Republicans in the same analysis is somewhat problematic, especially in 2016 when all Democrats saw a woman at the top of their party's ticket. For that reason, we break our sample down by party and look first at results for Republicans (Column 2). Interestingly, we see that Republicans are far less likely to vote for their in-party House candidate when she is female and the only woman on the ballot than when he is a man (and the only man;  $b=-.558$ ,  $p<.001$ ). However, they are actually *more* likely to vote for a female in-party candidate when other women appear on the party's ticket ( $b=.285$ ,  $p<.1$ ). This pattern is the opposite of what we expected to find and we can only speculate as to the

reason, but we posit that it likely has to do with the nature of a district in which two Republican women would run simultaneously. It is likely that Republicans in those districts are more liberal/moderate than the average Republican district (e.g. Palmer and Simon 2006), which may make them more open to supporting a female candidate in any office. We say more about this in the Discussion section.

Finally, we look at Democrats in Column 3 and we see that it is Democrats who are driving the results that match our hypotheses, as well as our previous experimental findings. Democrats are significantly more likely to support their in-party House candidate when she is female and the only woman on the ballot other than Clinton, than when he is male (and the only man). However, when other women appear on the ballot, they are far less likely to support her ( $b = -.464$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This suggests that our experimental evidence is holding up in the real world (among Democrats, anyway).

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Beyond confirming our experimental results, this analysis also provides some interesting insights into the differences between Republicans and Democrats in terms of their willingness to support female candidates. In fact, Democrats who saw only one female candidate (over and above Hillary Clinton) were more likely to support her than a male candidate in the same scenario, but Republicans were less likely to support a lone female candidate. Panel 1 of Figure 1 plots the predicted probabilities of voting for one's in-party House candidate by party and candidate sex. For Republicans, the likelihood of voting for their in-party House candidate was 92% when he was male, but only 87% when she was female. Democrats, on the other hand had

an 85% chance of voting for their in-party House candidate when he was a man, but a 90% chance of doing so when she was a woman.

Finally, while Democrats are more likely to support a woman running for Congress than a man when she is the only one running (along with Clinton), they are less likely to support a female House candidate when they also see a woman running for either Senate or governor. Democrats who saw a woman running for House along with Hillary Clinton and one other woman had an 87% chance of voting for her. Democrats who only saw a female House candidate and Clinton had a 91% chance of voting for her. It seems that Democrats may indeed have a “ceiling” on the number of women they are willing to support at once.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Our analysis suggests that the number of women running in concurrent elections has implications for the individual women in those races, and particularly for those running down-ballot. Specifically, Democratic women running for Congress seem to be disadvantaged as more women simultaneously run for higher office. We expect that the effects seen here would not be limited to Congress, but may well continue even further down the ballot, serving as a barrier to women running for all types of lower offices. A future test of this broader hypothesis would involve analyzing state legislative races, or other statewide executive offices.

The story for Republicans is quite different, however. While Democratic female House candidates actually do better than male candidates when they are the only woman on the ballot (aside from Hillary Clinton), Republican female House candidates do *worst* when they are the only woman on the Republican ballot. Further, while Democratic female House candidates do worse when another woman runs for a higher office, Republican female House candidates

actually do *better* when other women appear on the ballot. This was a completely unexpected finding and the opposite of what we see for Democrats in this analysis or the subjects in our experimental study. We can only speculate as to why this might be the case, but it is possible that it has something to do with the nature of the districts in which multiple women run as Republicans. These are likely more moderate districts, and though our analysis is at the individual level and controls for strength of partisanship, there may be district-level differences that lead to this trend. Additionally, there are far fewer districts in which Republican voters saw multiple women than Democratic districts where voters saw multiple women, so the positive coefficient for Republicans could be driven entirely by the nuances of a very small number of candidacies (see Cooperman’s chapter in this volume for more on the challenges facing Republican women). This peculiar finding requires further research.

In general, given that 2016 gave us our first presidential major-party run for a female candidate and that 2018 was another record-breaking year for women’s candidacies, these findings are potentially troubling for female candidates. While both the 2016 and 2018 election cycles resulted in significant progress for women’s representation in American politics, our findings suggest that such an increase in women’s candidacies may not always have a universally-positive effect on other female candidates. As we see more and more women running—particularly for higher offices—our findings suggest that lower-office female candidates may be negatively impacted at the ballot box. That this is especially true for Democrats is also problematic, since most women who run do so as Democrats.

Importantly, though, the story we find here is not entirely negative, and is not as consistently negative as the findings from our experimental study. Our results here do suggest

that Democratic women who appear on the ballot with only one other woman (at the very top of the ticket, no less) actually have an advantage over their male counterparts. Further respondents who live in Republican districts in which multiple women run also tend to support female candidates. Women are running and receiving support in both parties, even in the presence of other female candidates. Clearly, the dynamics that determine when the presence of multiple women is a help or hindrance to individual female candidates are nuanced and deserving of further examination.

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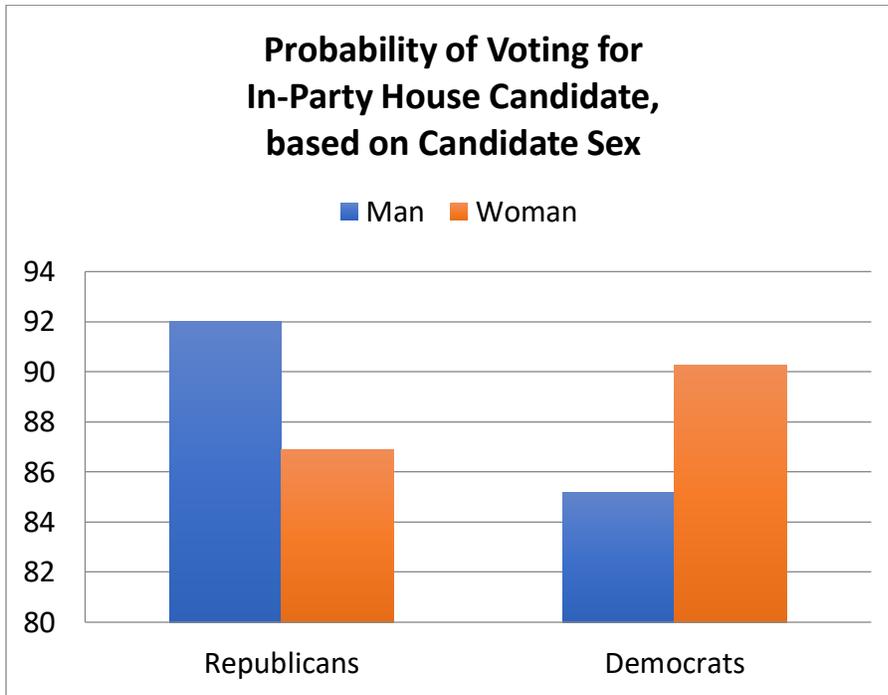
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Table 6.1 Effects of Number of Female Candidates on Likelihood of In-Party House Vote Choice

	Variable	All Respondents (35,370)	Republicans (15,157)	Democrats (20,213)
<i>Voter Characteristics</i>	<b>Constant</b>	1.171*** (.079)	1.843 *** (.123)	.594*** (.107)
	<b>Strength of Partisanship</b>	.433*** (.022)	.438*** (.036)	.422*** (.029)
	<b>Female</b>	-.097** (.037)	-.265*** (.059)	.030 (.049)
	<b>Black</b>	.230*** (.070)	- 1.529*** (.163)	.604*** (.081)
	<b>Education</b>	.062*** (.013)	-.059 ** (.020)	.158*** (.017)
<i>Presence of Other Campaigns</i>	<b>Gov Race</b>	.147** (.054)	.233 ** (.089)	.167* (.071)
	<b>Sen Race</b>	-.122** (.047)	.210** (.073)	-.352*** (.063)
<i>Sex of Individual Candidates</i>	<b>IP House Woman, Others are Men</b>	.113+ (.062)	-.558*** (.065)	.480*** (.077)
	<b>OP House Woman, Others are Men</b>	.189*** (.050)	.055 (.065)	.376*** (.085)
	<b>IP House Man, but Other IP Women</b>	-.088* (.037)	-.715*** (.104)	.142*** (.043)
	<b>OP House Man, but Other OP Women</b>	.014 (.042)	-.255*** (.051)	.314*** (.091)

<i>Multiple Women Candidates</i>	IP House Woman + Other Women (Any)	-.153 <sup>†</sup> (.089)	.285 <sup>†</sup> (.167)	-.464 <sup>***</sup> (.108)
	Pseudo-R <sup>2</sup>	.021	.037	.038

Figure 1



Can you add confidence intervals? And, clarify that Man and Woman refer to male and female candidates.

### Probability of Voting for In-Party House Candidate, based on All Candidates' Sex

- IP House Woman Only Woman
- IP House Woman and other women on ballot

