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Is There a “Gender Affinity Effect” in American Politics?

Information, Affect, and Candidate Sex in U.S. House Elections

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A common assumption people make about American elections is that women voters will be the most likely source of support for female candidates, a phenomenon referred to as the “gender affinity effect.” Using National Election Study (NES) data from 1990 to 2000, this project expands our understanding of forms that this affinity effect can take by examining two underutilized measures of reactions to candidates: information and candidate affect scores. The author also considers the impact of political party on women’s and men’s attitudes toward female candidates and examines whether any gender affinity effect in reactions to female candidates is related to people’s voting decisions.

Keywords: *women candidates; gender gap; affinity effect*

As the number of women running for office in the United States has increased, so too has our examination of the factors that help predict their success. One rather common assumption people make is that women voters are the most likely source of support for female candidates, a phenomenon referred to as the “gender affinity effect” (King and Matland 2003; Sanbonmatsu 2002). Indeed, when Senator Hillary Clinton announced her intention to run for the 2008 Democratic nomination for president, one analysis of her potential immediately declared, “Far from a Hindrance, Gender Could be Key for Clinton” (Romano 2007).

Indeed, there may be legitimate reasons to assume that women would be more likely than men to support female candidates, but focusing foremost on voter and candidate sex does run the risk of neglecting the complexity that gendered considerations can bring to elections. Evidence suggests women voters are often more likely to support women candidates than are men but that this support is not automatic and is often based on additional considerations beyond candidate sex. At the same time, most of the work examining an affinity effect addresses people’s hypothetical or actual willingness to vote for female candidates. While voting for candidates is certainly important, we have few other observable implications of a gender affinity beyond this.

This project attempts to broaden our understanding of the ways in which women and men voters react to female candidates by employing two underutilized measures of reactions to candidates: information and

candidate affect scores. At the same time, I seek to move beyond a simple focus on voter and candidate sex to consider the impact of political party on women’s and men’s attitudes toward female candidates. Finally, I examine whether any gender affinity effect in reactions to female candidates is related to people’s voting decisions.

Why Expect a Gender Affinity Effect in American Elections?

There are myriad reasons why we might expect women to be a more likely source of support for female candidates than men. First, women might support women candidates because of feelings of group solidarity. Indeed, Pomper (1975) referred to the “dependent voter,” who bases his or her vote on a demographic identification with a particular candidate. Work by Plutzer and Zipp (1996) referred to this as a “gender identity” approach to voting.

Women may also support female candidates because they seek descriptive representation. Here I mean that women voters who are mindful of the underrepresentation of women in elected office may be drawn to female candidates because they want to change the status quo. That women would be more

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likely to act on an interest in descriptive representation than would men is obvious from the current figures on women's presence in elected office in the United States. In 2007, women held 16 percent of the seats in Congress, 24 percent of statewide elected offices, and 23.5 percent of the seats in state legislatures (Center for American Women and Politics [CAWP] 2007). Indeed, Rosenthal (1995) and Sanbonmatsu (2002) found that women have a stronger preference for same-sex representation than do men. Other research suggests that a sense of shared gender identity may move women in the public toward female candidates. Here these positive feelings toward female candidates "as women" are shaped, perhaps, by a sense that women's political fortunes are bound up with other women (Tolleson-Rinehart 1992). Beyond feelings of gender affinity, a desire for representation on certain political issues can play an important role in the relationship between women voters and female candidates. Past work demonstrates that issues like sexual harassment, abortion, or child care tend to be of greater importance to women voters, and they may see female candidates as uniquely suited to dealing with these issues (Herrnson, Lay, and Stokes 2003; Paolino 1995; Plutzer and Zipp 1996).

Finally, greater levels of women's support for female candidates may be based not so much on a shared gender identity or desire for descriptive or substantive representation, but instead on the interaction of sex and a set of ideological or partisan sympathies. In the contemporary period, women in the United States are more likely to identify with the Democratic Party than the Republican Party, and more female candidates run for office as Democrats than as Republicans. Since 1990, 65 percent of the women who have run for Congress have done so as Democrats (CAWP 2006). During that same period, about 55 percent of women in the public identify themselves as Democrats (American National Election Studies [ANES] 2006). It may be the case, then, that women are supporting candidates of their party, many of whom happen to be female. Indeed, some argue that the key to identifying a true gender affinity effect requires us to see if women prefer female candidates even after considering political party (Seltzer, Newman, and Leighton 1997). The reality of the party/sex overlap in contemporary U.S. elections requires us to address the complexity that party influences introduce into the relationship, something that this research attempts.

Evidence of a Gender Affinity Effect

In examining the relationship between women voters and female candidates over the past thirty years or

so, researchers have uncovered evidence in support of the idea that women are more supportive of women candidates than are men. At the same time, results have been mixed, and most of this work demonstrates that the relationship between women voters and female candidates is often conditioned by forces beyond a shared sex identity. For example, Seltzer, Newman, and Leighton (1997) highlighted the importance of political party in finding that women were more likely to support female statewide candidates (governor and U.S. Senate) than were men and that the size of this gender gap was larger when the female candidate was a Democrat than when she was a Republican. Fox (1997) found greater support for female candidates from women voters regardless of party, while Briens (2005) found that Republican women, but not Democratic women, are willing to cross party lines to support a female candidate.

Beyond party, gendered issues have been shown to be important to gendered effects in voting. Plutzer and Zipp (1996) found significant gender identity effects in voting for female candidates for statewide office in 1992. However, they further found that this impact is magnified for female Democratic candidates who ran as feminists. This gender gap in support for women who run "as women" is also visible at the local and state legislative levels (Herrnson, Lay, and Stokes 2003). Paolino (1995) found no evidence that women voters supported women simply because of their sex but did find that the interplay of issues such as the underrepresentation of women in elected office and sexual harassment drew women voters to female U.S. Senate candidates in 1992.

At the same time, other work has found no direct gender effects in support for female candidates. In experimental settings, King and Matland (2003) and Thompson and Steckenrider (1997) found voter sex to be unrelated to supporting a female candidate. Examining NES data from 1986 to 1994, Monika McDermott (1997) found no gender effect in voting for female candidates for the U.S. House. These findings, combined with those that do demonstrate a gender effect in support for female candidates, suggest that we should acknowledge the ways in which sex and gender are complex influences in American elections.

Information about Candidates

While much attention has been paid to examining the efforts by which voters process candidate information once they acquire it (see Redlawsk [2002] for review), it is also important to simply examine whether

people have information about candidates, how much, and to what use they put it. Whether people have sufficient levels of information about candidates can be important to potential support. Even in relatively low-information settings like U.S. House races (which will be analyzed here), in which people do not possess significant knowledge about the candidates, it is unlikely that many people would vote for a candidate about whom they know nothing. In races involving female candidates, there is some evidence that women in the public will be most likely to be aware of these candidates and, potentially, most knowledgeable about them (Burns, Scholzman, and Verba 2001; Koch 1997; Sapiro and Conover 1997). Determining whether women are indeed more likely than men to hold information about female candidates will help us understand whether there is some sort of affinity effect at work and will also allow for an examination of whether information is important to vote choice in races involving female candidates.

Affect toward Political Candidates

Positive feelings of affect, or a favorable opinion, toward political candidates has long been thought to have an important role in shaping the relationship between voters and candidates. Indeed, there is evidence that political judgments often have a significant emotional component, one that may or may not be built on a base of cognition (Granberg and Brown 1989). This emotional reaction to candidates is important for shaping a myriad of political attitudes and behaviors, including beliefs about a candidate's electability (Dolan and Holbrook 2001; Stone and Rapoport 1994), vote choice (Hinkley 1980), and political activity on behalf of a candidate (McCann 1995). Indeed, affect is seen as a central influence on vote choice, sometimes the primary determinant (Abramowitz 1987; Hinkley 1980). As candidates have become more salient in American elections and party somewhat less so, candidate affect has been shown to be more closely related to vote choice than party identification (Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk 1986).

From the perspective of a candidate, members of the public who hold high levels of affect for that candidate are those most likely to be predisposed to evaluate him or her positively and may become an immediate potential source of support in elections. This is, in some way, the implicit assumption behind the gender affinity effect—that women will be the people most likely to feel positively toward female candidates and will provide a potential pool of support for them. However,

whether women do feel more positively toward female candidates is a question that has not received any direct testing in the literature to date, separate from the positive support that might be expressed through vote choice or a stated intention to vote for a female candidate. As a way to address whether a "natural" base of support for women candidates exists among women in the public, this research will more directly examine affective feelings toward these candidates.

Vote Choice

The presence of a gender affinity effect in American politics could be a positive thing for female candidates. Certainly, any candidate, regardless of sex, race, age, or other consideration, would be happy to have a built-in "fan base," so to speak, in the public. Members of the public who hold more information and more positive feelings about a candidate might turn into people who donate money, work on campaigns, or try to convince their friends to support a favored candidate. But in American elections, the most important measure of "affect" is a vote. So positive reactions to female candidates do not mean as much if they do not translate into votes at the ballot box. Therefore, this project will also examine whether information and affective feelings are related to people's likelihood of choosing a female candidate. While it might seem intuitive that people with more information about, and more affect toward, a particular candidate are more likely to vote for that candidate, these considerations are not necessary conditions for vote support. Indeed, the assumption that gender gaps in information and affect toward female candidates can influence vote choice has not been directly tested.

Goals of this Research

Previous research on a gender affinity effect, whether based on hypotheticals or election results, has tended to focus on a gender gap in voting for female candidates. This research seeks to expand our understanding of the ways in which there may be gendered aspects of the relationship between the public and female candidates by examining two additional empirical observations of this affinity: levels of information about candidates and affective evaluations. In doing so, I consider whether any gender affinity difference in evaluations of female candidates is shaped by political party. Finally, given that information about, and affect for, female candidates might

point to a potential base of support for these candidates, I examine whether any gender affinity effect in information or affect is related to people's voting decisions.

Data and Methods

Key to understanding public reactions and decisions about female candidates are data that come from voters who have had the opportunity to evaluate female candidates in real-world election situations. National Election Study (NES) data provide such an opportunity to examine levels of information and affect in elections involving female and male candidates. NES data are well suited to such an investigation since they comprise the only nationally representative, large-scale data set that evaluates the attitudes and behaviors of citizens who live in election districts that include female candidates. Readers will, of course, note that the NES is not a representative sample of congressional districts and does not include respondents from every state or congressional district. However, since this project examines people's reactions to female candidates, it is the NES respondents who are most important, not the districts themselves. Furthermore, from 1990 to 2000, the time period included in this analysis, almost half of all major-party female candidates for the U.S. House ran in districts included in the NES sampling frame. For these reasons, these data provide the best available way to examine how the public reacts to female candidates.

Information and Affect

For many years, the NES has included a series of questions that ask respondents to list their likes and dislikes about the major-party candidates for the House of Representatives in their district.¹ Respondents are asked if there is anything they like or dislike about the House candidates in their district and are given up to five opportunities to respond in each category. This series of questions is asked separately for Democratic and Republican candidates. These questions are particularly well suited to the task at hand—getting a sense of whether and how people evaluate the specific House candidates running in their district. But in a more general sense, these questions have become widely recognized as among the most valid and reliable measures of people's levels of information and positive and negative candidate evaluations available to scholars interested in public opinion (Burns, Scholzman, and Verba 2001; Smith 1989; Zaller 1992).

To create a measure of the amount of information people have about each candidate, the number of likes and dislikes are added together, regardless of the content of the comments. The assumption at the heart of this measure is that people with more information about candidates will be able to offer more responses to the likes and dislikes series (Smith 1989). Since people are asked about the Democratic and Republican candidates separately, this results in two variables, one that measures the amount of information respondents have about the Democratic candidate and one that measures information about the Republican. Each variable can take a value between 0 and 10. If women are more predisposed than men to be aware of female candidates, we would expect women respondents to hold more information about female candidates than men do. (See the appendix for variable construction.)

The second dependent variable in this analysis is a measure of affect for candidates constructed from the "likes and dislikes" series mentioned above (Granberg and Brown 1989; Mann and Wolfinger 1980). This measure gauges the level of positive or negative considerations of the candidates by subtracting the number of dislikes mentioned about each candidate from the number of likes, resulting in a net affect rating that can take a value ranging from -5 (strongest *dislike*) to $+5$ (strongest *like*) (Zaller 1992). The focus of this measure is not the specific content of the evaluations but instead the general sense of whether those evaluations of candidates are, on balance, more positive than negative. As with information, this results in two variables, one that measures affect toward the Democratic candidate and one that measures affect toward the Republican. An affinity affect between women respondents and female candidates would be expected to reveal itself in women holding higher levels of affect for female candidates than men do.

The first step in the analysis is to conduct difference-of-means tests to see if there is support for the hypothesis that women will have more information and higher levels of affect for female candidates than will men. After that, ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis will be used to account for whether any bivariate differences hold up once appropriate control variables are introduced. Separate models estimating information and affect are run and include variables that account for the sex of the candidate; the presence of an incumbent in the race; whether the incumbent is female; the party identification, education, and sex of the respondent; and dummy variables for each of the

Table 1
Candidate Information Scores—House of Representatives, 1990-2000 (Difference-of-Means Test)

	Women	Men	Row Difference
All Democratic candidates	1.13 (<i>N</i> = 3,377)	1.29 (<i>N</i> = 2,995)	.16 ^a
All Republican candidates	0.98 (<i>N</i> = 3,155)	1.20 (<i>N</i> = 2,882)	.22 ^a
Democratic female candidates	1.47 (<i>N</i> = 576)	1.37 (<i>N</i> = 484)	.10
Democratic male candidates	1.06 (<i>N</i> = 2,801)	1.27 ^b (<i>N</i> = 2,511)	.21 ^b
Column difference	.41 ^b	.10	
Republican female candidates	1.14 (<i>N</i> = 239)	1.39 (<i>N</i> = 234)	.25
Republican male candidates	0.96 (<i>N</i> = 2,916)	1.18 ^b (<i>N</i> = 2,648)	.22 ^b
Column difference	.18 ^b	.21 ^b	

a. Indicates a significant difference ($p < .05$) between the candidate information scores of women and men in that row.

b. Indicates a significant difference ($p < .05$) in the candidate information scores among women or men in that column.

election years in the analysis (1992 is the excluded year). To determine whether women respondents are more likely to have greater affect for, and more information about, female candidates, the model also includes an interaction term accounting for the sex of the respondent and candidate. Because the NES asks respondents to evaluate candidates by party, the analysis is conducted separately for Democratic and Republican candidates.

Vote Choice

In addition, to determine whether information and affect are important in shaping people's vote choice in races with female candidates, I construct a dependent variable that measures whether respondents voted for a female candidate (1) or her male opponent (0). I then run a logistic regression that estimates the likelihood of voting for the female candidate as a function of the incumbency status of the female; whether the female candidate and the respondent share a party identification; the party identification, ideology, age, education, sex, and race of the respondent; information and affect for the female and male candidates; and a series of dummy variables that account for the election years in the data set (1992 is the excluded year). To determine whether differences between women's and men's levels of information and affect for female candidates is related to their vote choice, four interaction terms account for women respondents and their levels of information and affect for female and male candidates.

Results

Information and Affect

The first step in the analysis is to determine whether women and men hold different levels of candidate

information and affect depending on the sex of the candidate. Table 1 presents the results of a difference of means test for the dependent variables measuring information about Democratic and Republican candidates.² Past research has consistently shown that women in the general public tend to have slightly lower levels of overall political information than do men (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Burns, Scholzman, and Verba 2001). This is demonstrated again at the top of Table 1, which indicates that women have slightly less information about both Republican and Democratic candidates than do men and that these differences are statistically significant. However, there is evidence that the sex of the candidate can have an important impact on gender differences in information. Taking Democratic candidates first, we see that women have less information about male Democratic candidates than do men. But women's information levels rise considerably when the Democratic candidate is female, and the significant differences in information-holding between women and men disappears. Furthermore, when we examine the column differences, we see that women hold significantly more information about female Democratic candidates than about male Democrats. The same pattern is true for men respondents, but the gap is much smaller and not significant.

Information-holding is one variable that appears to be more dependent on gender affinity than partisanship. Here when we examine how much information people have about Republican candidates, we see the same general pattern that was on display for Democratic candidates. Women have slightly, but significantly, less information about male Republican candidates than do men. But the gender differences wash out when the Republican candidate is female. And here again, the column differences indicate that women hold slightly, but significantly, more information about

Table 2
Candidate Affect Scores—House of Representatives, 1990-2000 (Difference-of-Means Test)

	Women	Men	Row Difference
All Democratic candidates	.62 (<i>N</i> = 3,377)	.43 (<i>N</i> = 2,995)	.19 ^a
All Republican candidates	.40 (<i>N</i> = 3,155)	.43 (<i>N</i> = 2,882)	.03
Democratic female candidates	.72 (<i>N</i> = 576)	.26 (<i>N</i> = 484)	.46 ^a
Democratic male candidates	.61 (<i>N</i> = 2,801)	.46 (<i>N</i> = 2,511)	.15 ^a
Column difference	.11 ^b	.20 ^b	
Republican female candidates	.49 (<i>N</i> = 239)	.54 (<i>N</i> = 234)	.05
Republican male candidates	.40 (<i>N</i> = 2,916)	.42 (<i>N</i> = 2,648)	.02
Column difference	.09	.12	

a. Indicates a significant difference ($p < .05$) between the candidate affect scores of women and men in that row.

b. Indicates a significant difference ($p < .05$) in the candidate affect scores among women or men in that column.

female Republican candidates than they do about male Republicans. The same is true for men. It is interesting to note that both women and men hold more information about female candidates than they do about male candidates, regardless of party. This might suggest that female candidates, perhaps because of their relative novelty, may have a somewhat easier time making an impression on voters than male candidates do (Burns, Scholzman, and Verba 2001).

Table 2 presents an interesting set of findings with regard to sex differences in affect toward female and male candidates.³ At first glance, it would appear that the hypothesis of an affinity effect between women voters and candidates has some support. However, this relationship is clearly conditioned by political party. Taking Democratic candidates first, we see confirmation of the relatively long-standing gender gap in affect for Democrats. Women's mean affect score for Democratic House candidates is .62, while men's score for these candidates is .43, a statistically significant difference. This gap in support for Democrats grows even larger when we consider the sex of the candidate. Female Democratic candidates have an enormous affect advantage among women voters compared to men. Women's mean affect score for female Democratic candidates is .72, while men's mean for these same candidates is .26. The same pattern is seen in women's higher affect for male Democratic candidates, although the size of the gap, while still significant, is smaller (women's mean = .61, men's mean = .46).

Another way to look at these relationships is to examine possible within-party differences in evaluations made by women and men. Here, looking at the column differences, we see that when evaluating Democratic candidates, women voice significantly higher levels of affect when those Democrats are female (.72 for female candidates, .61 for male candidates). Men, on the other

hand, exhibit the reverse relationship, having significantly greater affect for male Democrats (.46) than female Democrats (.26). Also, the gap in men's affect toward female and male Democratic candidates is larger (.20) than the gap between women's (.11). These findings would appear to support the notion that female Democratic candidates have an advantage in their appeal to women voters. But this also illustrates the potential disadvantage these female candidates may experience among some men in the public.

Examining levels of affect toward Republican candidates reveals how important political party can be to a discussion of gender differences in politics. Here we see no significant difference in the affect women and men express for Republican candidates (women's mean = .40, men's mean = .43). Considering the sex of the candidate does not change this relationship. Women and men respondents express very similar levels of affect toward female Republican candidates (women's mean = .49, men's mean = .54). The same is true for affect toward male Republicans (women's mean = .40, men's mean = .42). While men in the sample are more positively disposed toward both female and male Republicans than are women, the differences are not significant. The column differences reveal no gender advantage for female Republican candidates among women in the public. While women hold more affect toward female Republican candidates than they do for male Republicans, this difference is not statistically significant. Interestingly, while men have higher levels of affect toward female Republican candidates than they do toward male Republicans (a reverse of the trend seen for Democratic candidates), these differences are not statistically significant either.

What the analysis of candidate affect scores reveals, then, is that what often appears to be a gender-based affinity effect linking women voters to women candidates may be more likely a relationship conditioned by

party. Female Democratic candidates are more positively evaluated by women than by men. On the other hand, female Republican candidates earn no gender advantage among women and are actually slightly, but not significantly, favored by men. This finding is consistent with research that suggests that the cue provided by candidate sex is most successful when it is in the "expected" partisan direction (McDermott 1997).

In looking at the bivariate analysis of information and affect, we see a couple of interesting patterns. First, the presence of a female candidate appears to help women overcome the information deficit they generally exhibit vis-à-vis men. This pattern, perhaps based on a shared gender identity, holds regardless of whether the female candidate was a Republican or a Democrat. Women have less information about candidates of both parties than do men, and they have less information than men about *male* candidates of both parties. But women respondents have more information about female Democrats than men and are not significantly different from men in the information they hold about female Republicans. Second, while there are obvious patterns of difference between women and men with regard to their affect toward female candidates, these feelings are clearly shaped by political party considerations. Women in this sample had high levels of positive feelings about female Democratic candidates but did not exhibit the same affective connection to female Republicans. When evaluating female candidates, it is clear that women are considering more than just their sex. For female Democratic candidates, this complex consideration can lead to a double "boost" based on shared gender and party identities. At the same time, female Republican candidates do not appear to have the same potential relationship to women voters.

Moving beyond the bivariate analysis, we should consider whether these general patterns hold when we consider other political variables central to voter information and attitudes. Tables 3 and 4 report the results of OLS regression analysis of a simple model that predicts the amount of information and affect people have about House candidates as a function of the sex and incumbency status of the candidate and the sex, party identification, and education of the respondent. Dummy variables account for the years included in the pooled data set. An interaction term accounting for the sex of the respondent and the candidate examines whether women respondents have higher levels of affect and information about female candidates than do men.

Table 3
Candidate Information Scores—House
of Representatives, 1990-2000 (Ordinary Least
Squares [OLS] Regression Analysis)

	Democratic Candidates	Republican Candidates
Female candidate	.204* (.081)	.322** (.100)
Incumbent candidate	.631** (.045)	.630** (.041)
Female incumbent	.052 (.077)	-.082 (.106)
Party identification	-.077** (.009)	.063** (.009)
Education	.173** (.012)	.172** (.012)
Sex	-.183** (.042)	-.135** (.040)
Woman Voter × Women Candidate	.279** (.103)	-.058 (.139)
1990	.047 (.070)	-.050 (.094)
1994	.056 (.058)	.118* (.058)
1996	.117* (.059)	.159* (.058)
1998	.157* (.069)	.162* (.067)
2000	-.008 (.063)	.026 (.062)
Constant	.510** (.098)	-.015 (.091)
<i>N</i>	6,056	5,596
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	.09	.11

p* < .05. *p* < .01.

Table 3 reveals that gender and party are again relevant to determining information levels about candidates. Taking Democratic candidates first, we see that respondents generally have more information about Democratic candidates when those candidates are female. And as expected, we see that men generally have more information about Democratic candidates than do women. But the interaction term indicates that women respondents are more likely than men to have more information about female Democratic candidates. This reinforces the finding in Table 1 that suggests the presence of female candidates can boost information levels among women respondents. However, this information boost does appear to be tied to party, as the same gender gap in women's information about female candidates does not hold for Republican candidates. As with Democratic candidates, respondents generally have more information about Republican candidates when those candidates are female, and men respondents have more information about Republican candidates than do women. The interaction term for women respondents and female Republican candidates is not significant, indicating that the sex of Republican candidates has no impact on women's levels of information.

Table 4 demonstrates that the bivariate relationships regarding a gender gap in affect for female candidates hold when we consider the relevant controls. Taking Democratic candidates first, the analysis

Table 4
Candidate Affect Scores—House
of Representatives, 1990-2000 (Ordinary Least
Squares [OLS] Regression Analysis)

	Democratic Candidates	Republican Candidates
Female candidate	-.052 (.080)	.243* (.098)
Incumbent candidate	.436** (.044)	.446** (.040)
Female incumbent	.020 (.076)	-.170 (.104)
Party identification	-.208** (.009)	.212** (.009)
Education	.048** (.012)	-.021 (.011)
Sex	.070 (.041)	.061 (.039)
Woman Voter ×		
Woman Candidate	.262* (.102)	.025 (.136)
1990	.110 (.069)	-.096 (.092)
1994	-.074 (.058)	.090 (.057)
1996	-.097 (.058)	.146* (.057)
1998	.129 (.068)	.012 (.066)
2000	.052 (.062)	.068 (.061)
Constant	.497** (.097)	-.493* (.090)
<i>N</i>	6,056	5,596
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	.112	.124

p* < .05. *p* < .01.

reveals that there is no general increase in affect for a Democratic candidate when that candidate is female. But the variable measuring the interaction between respondent and candidate sex reveals that women respondents voice higher levels of affect for *female* Democratic candidates than do men. However, the pattern is somewhat different for Republican candidates. The variable measuring the presence of a female candidate suggests that affect scores for Republican candidates are higher when those candidates are female. Yet the interaction term demonstrates that this higher level of affect is not coming from women respondents. Indeed, this echoes the finding regarding men's higher levels of affect for female Republican candidates outlined in Table 2. This analysis suggests that party is at least as important as sex to evaluations of female candidates. Women respondents are more favorably disposed toward female Democratic candidates, but not female Republicans. This suggests that at least some of the potential gender gap in affect may be due to general party compatibility between women in the public and female Democratic candidates.

Vote Choice

To this point, the analysis suggests that patterns of information and affect regarding female candidates can be shaped by sex/gender and party considerations. Yet while examining the information and attitudes people hold about candidates is important in its own

right and gives us a new way to think about gender affinity, any advantage or disadvantage that female candidates might experience because of these attitudes would be felt most directly at the ballot box. For example, women and men clearly hold different levels of affect toward female Democratic candidates. But these widely divergent evaluations might not be terribly important if they do not shape people's vote choice in a race with a female candidate. All respondents had more information about female candidates than they did about male candidates. But again, the net impact of these information differences may not help (female) or hurt (male) candidates if they are not relevant to electoral decisions. To determine whether and how these considerations might be related to vote choice, I estimate a model of vote choice in races involving a female candidate for the House running against a male opponent. The dependent variable here measures voting for the female candidate. This model includes several important control variables that are known to influence vote choice as well as measures of candidate affect and information and a series of interaction terms that account for respondent sex and levels of candidate affect and information. Table 5 reports the results of this analysis.

While they are not the main focus of the analysis, we can note the impact of a couple of key control variables: respondents who share the party of the female candidate are most likely to vote for her, and voters are more likely to choose the female candidate when she is the incumbent. As other work has shown, this suggests that traditional political variables are important to female candidates in the same way that they matter to male candidates (Dolan 2004). Turning to the primary variables of interest, information and affect, we see an interesting pattern. As we might expect, holding higher levels of affect for the female candidate and lower levels for the male opponent leads people to be more likely to vote for the female candidate, regardless of party. At the same time, it would appear that the higher levels of information people have about female candidates fails to translate into any widespread, consistent electoral advantage for these women. Information appears to be less central to vote choice in this analysis, as it is only significantly related to voting for female Democratic candidates under conditions in which people have lower levels of information about their male opponents. This finding that information is not a major determinant of vote choice in races involving female candidates is certainly in line with other work about the secondary place that information takes in American political decisions (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996).

Table 5
The Impact of Candidate Information and Affect on Vote Choice—House of Representatives, 1990-2000 (Logistic Regression Analysis; Dependent Variable = Vote for the Woman Candidate)

	Women Democrats	Women Republicans
Female incumbent	0.647**	1.403*
Party identification	-0.507**	1.552**
Shared party	0.172	-3.369*
Ideology	-0.336**	0.653**
Age	-0.007	-0.011
Education	-0.066	-0.025
Race	-0.270	-0.547
Sex	0.465	-0.112
Affect for female candidate	1.222**	2.044**
Affect for male candidate	-0.645**	-1.674**
Information for female candidate	-0.047	-0.559
Information for male candidate	-0.405*	0.253
Woman × Female Affect	-0.456	-0.546
Woman × Male Affect	-0.451	0.404
Woman × Female Information	0.232	1.617**
Woman × Male Information	0.165	-0.909
1990	-1.231	3.590
1994	-0.911*	0.024
1996	-1.056*	-0.257
1998	-2.336*	-1.233
2000	-0.601	-0.626
Constant	3.905*	-4.388*
<i>N</i>	639	242
Chi-square	530.922	233.339

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

The impact of any gender gap in affect and information in voting for female candidates also appears to be somewhat limited. Taking female Democratic candidates first, we see that neither of the interaction terms that would demonstrate affect or information being more important to women's vote choice than men's are significant. However, given that women respondents did have significantly higher levels of affect for female Democrats than did men, and that affect for the female candidate is related to voting for the female Democratic candidate, we can say that there is an indirect influence of this gender gap in affect on vote support.

At the same time, information does appear to be an important influence on women respondents' decision to vote for female Republican candidates. The interaction term for women and information about female candidates is positive and significant, indicating that women are more likely to vote for female Republicans when they have more information about them. It may be that women voters, who are more likely to be Democrats, need more information about female Republicans to overcome the party divide and consider voting for these candidates.

Conclusions

As the number of women who seek elective office increases, we have increased our understanding of the sometimes complex dynamics that their candidacies raise. The findings of this research continue the demonstration of that complexity. From the analysis presented here, we can conclude that women voters do feel positively toward female candidates, but that these warm feelings are often based on considerations beyond a shared sex identity. Indeed, it appears that women often evaluate female candidates through the lens of political party. That women respondents feel more positively toward female Democratic candidates than do men, but do not have the same affective feelings for female Republican candidates, suggests that any gender gap in evaluations of female candidates should take into account partisan differences as well as sex-based identity. Women who are drawn to female Democratic candidates are being pulled by two forces simultaneously—candidate sex and political party. When faced with a female Republican, many women may experience cross-pressures, with gender considerations taking them in the opposite directions from the candidate's political party.

With regard to information, there are two interesting findings. First, all respondents, both women and men, have more information about female candidates than male candidates, regardless of the party of the female candidate. This suggests that female candidates, whether because of their distinctness or higher media profile, are successful in making their presence known in the minds of voters (Burns, Scholzman, and Verba 2001). Also, the presence of female candidates helps women respondents overcome the traditional gender gap in political knowledge. While women in this sample hold less information about male candidates than men do, gender differences in information-holding disappear in the presence of a female

candidate. From this perspective, there does seem to be some evidence that women pay more attention to female candidates in their environment. This finding is in line with other recent work that has demonstrated that the presence of female candidates can help raise women's political engagement, particularly regarding levels of knowledge, efficacy, and interest (Atkeson 2003; Hansen 1997; Koch 1997; Sapiro and Conover 1997; although see Dolan [2006] for counterevidence).

Finally, with regard to shaping vote choice, levels of candidate affect can have an important impact. Affect toward a female candidate was significantly related to voting for that female candidate, regardless of her party. However, affect was no more significant an influence on vote choice for women than it was for men. As a result, any gender gap in affect for female Democratic candidates may not necessarily result in a significant electoral advantage for these women, and the absence of a gender gap in affect for female Republican candidates may not disadvantage them among women voters. Also, the analysis here indicates that while all respondents had more information about female candidates than they did about male candidates, the impact of this information on vote choice is rather limited. Female Republican candidates are more likely to win votes among women who know more about them. This may point to an opportunity for female Republican candidates to target their appeals to women voters and attempt to capitalize on the impact of information on vote choice. However, beyond this, information advantages in favor of women candidates appear to be of limited utility to them in securing votes.

When female candidates first started to appear in large numbers on the American political scene, observers assumed that their sex would rally women to their sides. Clearly, years of observation have demonstrated that this is sometimes, but not necessarily, the case. Just as no "women's vote" appeared when women gained suffrage, we have not seen the appearance of an overwhelming or consistent gender gap in support for female candidates. Given that female candidates do not always make specific appeals for women's votes based on a shared sex identity, perhaps this should not be surprising. And certainly women support female candidates, but the evidence suggests that this support can be shaped by party loyalties as much as any gender loyalty. Women in the public evaluate female candidates in the same way that they evaluate all candidates, through the lens of personal and political considerations that take many forms. Sometimes

this leads to situations in which women are more likely to support female candidates than are men, but even in these situations, candidate sex may be only one of several important considerations.

Appendix Variable Construction

Dependent Variables:

Information—Indicates the amount of information respondent had about Democratic and Republican House candidates. (range = 0 to 10)

Candidate affect—Indicates amount of affect respondent had toward Democratic and Republican House candidates. (range = -5 to +5)

Vote choice—Indicates a vote for the female candidate or her male opponent. (0, 1)

Independent Variables:

Female Candidate—Indicates whether the candidate was male or female. (0, 1)

Incumbent candidate—Indicates a nonincumbent or incumbent House candidate. (0, 1)

Female incumbent—Indicates whether the female candidate was a nonincumbent or incumbent candidate. (0, 1)

Party identification—Indicates the party identification of the respondent. (0 = *strong Democrat*, 6 = *strong Republican*)

Party congruence—Indicates whether respondent and woman candidate are of the same political party. (0, 1)

Ideology—Indicates the ideology of the respondent. (0 = *strong liberal*, 6 = *strong conservative*)

Race—Indicates race of respondent (0 = nonwhite, 1 = white)

Education—Respondent level of education. (1 = *eight years or less*, 7 = *advanced degree*)

Age—Indicates respondent age in years.

Sex—Indicates sex of respondent (male = 0, female = 1)

Year dummies—Indicates the individual election years included in the pooled data set.

Notes

1. The National Election Study (NES) discontinued the use of the question measuring likes and dislikes about House candidates in 2002. For this reason, the time period analyzed here ends with the elections of 2000.

2. While not central to the analysis here, readers should note the relatively low levels of information respondents hold about candidates. On a scale ranging from 0 to 10, the mean information score for Democratic candidates is 1.21 and for Republican candidates is 1.08. This is consistent with our general understanding of people's information about politics and political candidates (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996).

3. As with information, readers should note that affect scores are low and only mildly positive. With 0 being neutral, the mean affect score for Democratic candidates is .53 and for Republican candidates is .42.

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