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A risk venture? Investigating the "electability" challenge for women candidates in US elections

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Abstract

"Electability" has been of great interest in media coverage and popular conceptions of recent elections, but there is little scholarly consensus on what electability is, and whether and how it influences voter behavior. This study seeks to fill that gap in the literature by analyzing polling data from the 2020 Democratic presidential primary to investigate whether voters make decisions in primaries based upon whom they believe can win a general election. Furthermore, this paper analyzes whether such decisions systematically disadvantage women candidates, which would suggest that gender bias plays a role in which candidates are viewed as electable. Using a series of regression analyses, this paper concludes that voters do in fact believe women are less likely than men to win general elections, and therefore voters are less likely to vote for women in primary elections even when they would ultimately prefer a woman to hold the contested office. This pattern of behavior suggests the possibility for an increased role of political and media elites to change the narrative around electability in order to reduce the gender gap in elective office, allowing women to run the most effective campaigns possible without having to prove to voters that they are electable.

Introduction

In recent high-salience elections in the United States, the topic of "electability" has received a significant amount of scrutiny. Electability is defined as "the voter's perceptions of the candidates' chances of winning the [general] election" (Abramowitz 1989, 978), so it would seem that any candidate who has ever won an election is electable; however, the public discourse about electability has disproportionately been directed towards women and people of color running for office, and has played out particularly pointedly in Democratic primary contexts

(Golshan 2019; Dittmar 2019). Electability is of particular importance with regard to party nominating contests, or elections in which the winner will be their respective party's nominee in the general election. Allowing voters to choose their party's nominee in the presidential context is a relatively recent phenomenon, and has resulted in a situation wherein voters must consider their own self-interest along with that of their party. In this scenario, voters may have a preferred candidate based on issue positions or personal characteristics, but they also are incentivized to help their party win, and the party wins by nominating a candidate who will win the general election. Therefore, voters may feel obligated in a primary to consider both which candidate they would most prefer to win and which candidate they believe would be most likely to win the general election if nominated. The calculation of which candidate can win a general election is complex, particularly because it involves making assumptions about how individual candidates would fare in a future election against an opponent whose identity may be unknown.

Anecdotally, women and people of color are often discouraged from running by party leaders because the elites believe that these candidates won't be able to win a general election, as happened to Stacey Abrams before launching her 2018 campaign for Governor of Georgia (Bacon 2018). Then, less than a week after Elizabeth Warren announced her candidacy for the Democratic nomination for President in the 2020 election, the *New York Times* published an article suggesting that Democratic primary voters were unsure that a woman could win in the 2020 general election (Lerer & Chira 2019).

In the 2020 Democratic primary in particular, the number one factor voters expressed that influenced their vote choice was which candidate could beat incumbent President Donald Trump in a general election (Page 2020). This concern has manifested in voters as a sort of "sexism by

proxy," where voters express hesitancy to vote for a woman candidate in a primary election because they believe that other, supposedly less enlightened, voters won't vote for her in a general election (Donegan 2019). For example, when asked for her opinion on Elizabeth Warren in January of 2020, one New Hampshire voter said "I think she would make an amazing President. I'm worried about whether she can win. I worry that she's being pulled even further to the left and that concerns me. Because we need to win" (Donegan 2019). The type of thinking these voters exemplify makes voting for a woman seem like a risk. Adora Jenkins, the spokeswoman for Supermajority, an organization aimed at advocating for women in electoral politics, summarized the issue succinctly: "when do we no longer portray voting for women as a risk venture?" (Haines 2020).

Scholars have argued that women candidates in American politics are forced to run "dual campaigns," wherein they "have to oversee a traditional campaign in addition to a second one to convince skeptics of their 'electability'" (Dittmar 2019), but there is no consensus in popular or academic discourse regarding how voters conceptualize electability. Therefore, this paper sets out to answer the question of what electability means to voters, and specifically investigates whether voters believe that women candidates are less likely than men to win a general election. Moreover, this paper seeks to illuminate the ways in which voter conceptions of electability impact vote choice in primary elections.

This study is important not just for its contribution to American politics scholarship but for its implications regarding the practice of American politics. The gender gap in elected office in the United States is a significant issue which has been studied extensively by a range of scholars. It's widely recognized as a normative problem in need of solutions (Carroll 1985,

Mandel 1981), and one that cannot be explained without attending to voter bias (Ashworth et. al. 2021). Given the structure of the American electoral system, decreasing the gender gap in elected office must occur through the electoral process, and this study illuminates a novel mechanism within the electoral process that may provide one solution to the problem of the gender gap. Whether women candidates are actually more or less likely than men to win a general election is not agreed upon within the literature, but electability effects may be present in a primary election even without any actual general election penalties for women candidates, and may even impact the emergence of women candidates. Hopefully, an understanding of how this electability mechanism operates will allow women candidates to free themselves from the constraints of running a "dual campaign" (Dittmar 2019) and emphasize the importance of steering media coverage away from the discussion of electability regarding women running for office.

A note on language: throughout this paper, I will use the terms "women" and "men" to describe candidates with the corresponding gender identities. I recognize that this distinction is not entirely reflective of gender in the real world, and do not intend to exclude the experiences of candidates who identify outside of the gender binary. Unfortunately, there have not been sufficient candidates who hold such identities to study the topic of candidates who identify outside the gender binary, but I hope that work can be done in the future. Additionally, I avoid using the terms "female" and "male" in order to emphasize the distinction between biological sex and socially constructed gender, and acknowledge that sex and gender do not always correspond to one another.

Voter behavior and strategic voting

In order to understand how voters make decisions with regard to choosing a candidate to vote for, I turn first to the literature on the calculus of voting. The classical economic model of voter behavior posits the voter as a rational actor. This rational voter derives a particular utility income from voting for each candidate based on that candidate's predicted policy contributions if elected, and will choose to vote for the candidate from whom they would stand to derive the highest utility income should that candidate win (Downs 1957). To account for voter and candidate ideology, the rational voter framework has been expanded to a spatial model of voting, which essentially posits that each voter's ideal policy position can be represented by some fixed point on a number line, and the positions of each candidate can be represented by different points on the same line. A rational voter, looking to maximize their utility in terms of their policy preferences, would then vote for the candidate whose ideal point is the closest to the voter's own (Davis, Hinich, & Ordeshook 1970).

There is a paradox in the literature on vote choice, though, because voters are generally uninformed about politics and do not have or even wish to have sufficient information to make a completely rational choice of whom to vote for (Converse 1964). Of course, electoral persuasion campaigns would not even be necessary if every voter was completely informed and entirely rational. On the other hand, voters turn out to vote despite their lack of information, so the role of heuristics and other information shortcuts is crucial in subsidizing the cost of information for voters to make a rational voting decision (Lau & Sears, 1986). Partisanship is one of the strongest heuristics, and an extremely reliable predictor of vote choice in two-party elections (Green, Palmquist, & Schickler 2002). Voters also use candidate gender as a heuristic when

choosing a candidate, so stereotypes of women candidates can play a significant role in vote choice for low-information voters (Schneider & Bos 2016, and others).

There are also, of course, differing considerations for voters in primary elections as opposed to general elections. In elections where partisan cues are present, these tend to overwhelm any other potential factors in vote choice, so when partisan cues are not present it makes sense that voters would turn to other heuristics, such a candidate's identity characteristics. For instance, in non-partisan elections, women in particular have been shown to be more likely to vote for other women in the absence of a party heuristic (Badas & Stauffer 2019). Party primaries inherently lack a party cue to help voters choose a candidate, so these elections are especially fruitful sites to investigate the effects of candidate characteristics such as gender or race in isolation from effects of partisanship. Few studies have focused exclusively on voter decision making in primary elections, so this paper makes a valuable contribution to the literature by adopting just this focus. There is, however, literature suggesting that which candidate wins a primary can impact a party's general election turnout (Hall & Thompson 2018), further emphasizing the importance of understanding voters' calculus of "electability" in primary vote choice.

If voters think that a woman winning a primary means less support for her party in the general, it follows that (whether or not general election turnout will actually be lowered by a woman candidate) a rational voter motivated strongly by their party's success may choose not to vote for a woman in a primary even if that voter would prefer the woman candidate to hold the contested office over other candidates running in the primary. While the question of whether it is true that women candidates in the general election decrease turnout or are less likely than men to

win is outside of the scope of this paper, the answer to that question may not actually be particularly important for its impact on voter behavior. This study contributes to the literature by exploring the unanswered question of how anticipated general election success based on candidate gender impacts voter behavior in primaries due to a perceived decrease in general election party support resulting from the nomination of a woman candidate.

Because the economic model of voter behavior suggests that a voter will choose the candidate from whose election they would derive the most utility and/or the candidate with whom the voter is most closely aligned ideologically, any vote that is taken in favor of a different candidate with the goal of impacting the election outcome is considered a tactical, or strategic, vote (Cherry & Kroll 2003). Research suggests that a candidate's "electability" impacts their favorability ratings among copartisan voters (Rickershauser & Aldrich 2007), and voters tend to vote strategically so as not to "waste votes" on candidates who are not considered electable (Hall & Snyder 2015). In spite of its evident importance, no one has yet studied empirically what factors influence voter perceptions of electability, and whether gender is one of these factors, which is the main contribution of this study.

Another factor that may influence voter considerations of electability in a primary election is a candidate's momentum. Returning to the contention that voters generally want to support the winning candidate, voters may indicate support for the candidate they expect to win (Bartels 1985) regardless of that candidate's policy preferences, especially in primaries. At the same time, however, voters may also expect their preferred candidate to win, so the effects of momentum are bidirectional: preferences influence expectations, and expectations influence preferences. When considering momentum, voters are likely inclined to vote for candidates who

seem to be gaining momentum, as measured by increased public support in things like polls and media coverage, and there are many gender-based reasons why male candidates may be seen by voters as having greater momentum, including a belief that men are more "electable."

Because nomination by voters for presidential elections is a relatively new process, it seems to have given rise to the very concept of electability by creating a situation wherein partisan voters are incentivized to think about their primary vote choice not just with respect to the primary itself, but with an eye towards the general election. There is no available literature from before the advent of popular nomination discussing electability in the way the concept seems to be understood currently as a consideration in primary elections. The current understanding of who is electable appears to have come about through a process like dynamic nominalism, taking shape concurrently with the concept of electability itself (Hacking 1986). It is likely also not a coincidence that discussions of electability seem to have arisen alongside rising levels of women's representation in all levels of office.

Questions about "electability" tend to plague women candidates far more than men (Dittmar 2019), and if such doubts foster public uncertainty regarding women's chances of winning, then voters may strategically prefer male candidates and drive an increase in those candidates' poll numbers. Voters are highly responsive to information about a candidate's electability when it comes to their vote choice and strategy, so gendered media coverage such as that in the 2020 election suggesting that women aren't electable could have a major influence on election outcomes by exacerbating fears of sexism by proxy.

The gender-gap in elected office

The literature on women's underrepresentation in American elections and elected office is divided into two threads: supply-side explanations and demand-side explanations. The former emphasizes the role of candidate emergence and institutional factors, while the latter suggests that the lack of women relative to men in American politics is the result of factors relating to voter preferences, behavior, and biases. Although these points of view are not mutually exclusive, they are often treated as such in the literature; however, here I draw them together to provide a foundation for the importance of studying the electability question and demonstrate that they in fact work together with the calculus of voting to bring about the very concept of electability.

The supply-side factors that influence women's participation in seeking elected office can also be broadly divided into two categories: intrinsic factors specific to individual women that impact their emergence as candidates, and extrinsic institutional factors impacting women's recruitment as candidates. Stereotypes regarding women candidates are one of the most prominent focuses of scholarship on women in American politics, and for good reason: they play a large role in both the candidate emergence and candidate recruitment processes, as well as voter behavior. Stereotypes regarding women running for office have been well-established in the literature (Huddy & Terkildsen 1993, Bauer 2018, Winter 2010), and women making the decision of whether or not to run for office are likely aware of these stereotypes, whether consciously or subconsciously. Therefore, an individual woman's decision to run at all can be traced back to anticipated voter behavior, and decisions made by elites and party leaders can also be traced to voter behavior. As discussed above, parties exist for the purposes of winning

elections, and therefore their leaders are incentivized to run the party in the way that they believe will maximize their chances of winning. Doing so naturally entails making assumptions about how voters will behave, so "supply-side" and "demand-side" explanations for the gender gap are inextricably linked to one another, and essentially constitute two sides of the same coin.

For example, with regard to candidate emergence, leadership is a trait typically conceptualized as masculine, so potential women candidates are aware that they will be working against this stereotype from the start. The simple fact that voters will likely question their leadership skills from the very beginning may deter many women from even running for office in the first place (Cassese & Holman 2018). It is also broadly accepted that women underestimate their qualifications for office in general relative to men (Lawless & Fox 2004), and believe that voters will be similarly skeptical of their qualifications. There is evidence supporting the assertion that voters judge women more harshly than men both as candidates (Ditonto et. al. 2013) and as office-holders (Kaslovsky & Rogowski 2020), so the dearth of women in office may exist because these patterns encourage only a few of the bravest and most qualified women to believe they are "electable" enough to run (Anzia & Berry 2011).

Turning towards the extrinsic factors impacting women's recruitment for office, it must be noted that women are simply not asked by party leaders, elected officials, or activists to run for office as often as men, and have to be asked many more times than men before deciding to run (Lawless & Fox 2004). There is also an infrastructure within the electoral system encouraging women candidates to run for office, though this infrastructure exists mostly on the Democratic side with organizations such as EMILY's List. In fact, EMILY stands for "early money is like yeast," because "it helps the dough rise," meaning that early fundraising results in

greater overall fundraising because it is a signal of electability that indicates a broad base of support. Early fundraising, therefore, may influence voter behavior by signaling electability.

Women also tend to have less party support in building their donor networks than men, meaning that they have to work harder to fundraise for a successful campaign. Among Democrats, donors display an affinity for women candidates, but this affinity is not present among Republican women, putting those candidates at a particular disadvantage (Thomsen & Swers 2017). As far as the question of electability, a belief that voters think women are not "electable" may explain the behavior of party elites and donors toward women candidates outlined in this section. Women candidates themselves, as well as institutional elites, may fear the very sexism by proxy that potentially results in the underrepresentation of women in office, so this study's focus on whether such an electability bias is at play among the primary electorate will likely be salient to women running for office from the very first stages at which they emerge (or are recruited) as candidates.

The literature on demand-side explanations for women's underrepresentation is more unsettled and open to contestation. Voters very likely do employ stereotypes when evaluating women candidates in addition to her objective quality as a candidate. Most commonly, the stereotypes voters use to evaluate women candidates are either trait stereotypes—assumptions voters make regarding a candidate's personality based on their gender—or belief stereotypes—assumptions that voters make regarding a candidate's issue positions based on their gender (Huddy & Terkildsen 1993). Trait stereotyping assigns "feminine" traits such as warmth, compassion, and willingness to compromise to women candidates and "masculine" traits such as toughness, decisiveness, and assertiveness to men. Conversely, belief stereotyping results in the

assumption that women are better at handling humanistic issues such as welfare, education, or childcare, while men are better at handling the more "masculine" economic and security issues. Both stereotypes may be at play in voters' decision-making processes, though the question of whether stereotypes actually play a role in vote choice is still the subject of debate within the literature. Still, just the belief that other voters might hold stereotypic views could influence voter behavior through sexism-by-proxy.

Some scholarship on women as political candidates in the United States has found that women tend to win elections at the same rate as men when controlling for incumbency (Dolan 2014, Sanbonmatsu & Dolan 2009), the reason probably being that partisanship is a stronger cue than gender in voter evaluations of candidates in a general election. This is further complicated by the fact that gender stereotypes code women as more liberal and Democratic and men as more conservative and Republican, making it quite messy to untangle the interaction between partisanship and gender in elections. In any case, the robust results indicating that "when women run, women win" has been taken as evidence that there is no anti-woman bias on the part of voters.

Recent research has shed more light on how biases might come into play when voting for women. For Democratic women candidates, partisanship and gender can interact to increase feminine stereotyping and work to women candidates' advantage by tying them more closely to the Democratic Party (Bauer 2018). Meanwhile, for Republican women, their gender identity and partisan identity may seem at odds with one another, increasing voter confusion regarding how Republican women will behave in office (Winter 2010). Importantly, Ashworth et. al. (2021) developed a model of women's representation wherein the gender gap in office cannot be

explained without some mechanism of voter bias. In other words, supply-side factors alone cannot account for the lack of women in elected office, but the points in the electoral process at which bias comes into play on the demand side of the campaign process have not yet been determined.

Again, the importance of studying the primary election context is evident given these findings. In a closed primary election, the party cue is not available to help voters choose a candidate, and this study takes advantage of that fact to examine whether factors such as anticipated stereotyping in general elections may play a role in voter's primary voting choices and examine a previously under-analyzed locus for potential voter bias within the electoral process.

It may be true that, in general elections, women candidates win at equal rates to men, and this may be the result of partisanship. However, the determination of which candidates make it from a closed primary election to a general election is made by voters who choose from among the candidates put forth by each party. If, according to the supply and demand framework laid out above, women are usually better, more qualified candidates than their male counterparts, then these women should win primaries at least as often as men and should be even more "electable" than men, but there is not yet any research examining whether that is the case. This article fills this gap in the literature by focusing its investigation on the mechanism through which candidates get to the general election in the first place. Closed primary elections are highly unique sites for analyzing voter behavior precisely because the party heuristic is not available to voters in the primary setting, so any systematic differences in voting behavior based on candidate characteristics in a primary would have to be the result of mechanisms other than partisanship.

Given that women are stereotyped in ways that often disadvantage them as candidates, and the consequent lower emergence of women candidates than men candidates, it follows that voters may believe women are less likely than men to win general elections because they will decrease party support. Given the discussion above, women are stereotyped such that even when they are exactly the same as their male counterparts ideologically, they are viewed as being more liberal and less capable of leadership. Though this paper will not test directly for such a belief, it will build on the strategic voting literature suggesting that voters are averse to voting for candidates they do not see as electable. Thus, I arrive at my hypothesis:

> ***Hypothesis 1:*** *Because they believe women are less "electable" in general elections, voters may choose not to vote for a woman candidate in a primary even if the candidate they most want to win the election is a woman.*

Methodology

This study will analyze existing survey data to explore whether there is a systematic difference among Democratic primary voters between an individual's preferred candidate and the candidate they choose to vote for. If there is a disjuncture between preferred candidate and vote choice that disproportionately impacts women candidates, this would indicate a gender-based mechanism causing voters to vote for non-women candidates in primaries. The large number of polls conducted regarding the 2020 Democratic presidential primary combined with the presence of multiple women candidates with diverse identities and experiences running in that election makes it a convenient case study for this research. The Voter Study Group has collected longitudinal data on American voters since 2016 through their Views of the Electorate Research (VOTER) Survey. I analyzed data from the 2019 VOTER Survey, because that particular survey

wave asked several relevant questions relating to candidates running in the 2020 Democratic presidential primary. For this survey, 5,900 adults were interviewed between November 22, 2019, and December 2, 2019. The VOTER Survey utilizes a stratified sampling methodology, with strata being sampled proportional to the general population (Democracy Fund Voter Study Group, 2019). Only registered voters who planned to vote in the 2020 Democratic primary were considered in the analysis.

There are two questions in particular that I will be analyzing from this poll. The first of these questions asked voters "if you had to choose today, which candidate would you vote for in the 2020 Democratic presidential primary or caucus in your state?" The second question asked voters to "imagine that you have a magic wand that could make any of the candidates President. That candidate would not have to compete in the general election, and would automatically become the President. If you could use that magic wand to make any one candidate President, who would you choose?" I chose to focus on these two specific questions to address my hypotheses because the wording of the "magic wand" question in particular makes it possible to isolate the variable of electability and differentiate the voter's ideal candidate from the candidate they plan to vote for. If a pattern emerges wherein voters systematically choose to vote for a candidate who is different from their "magic wand" candidate more often when their magic wand candidate is a woman than a man, this would suggest a belief that women cannot win general elections, even if voters express no outright sexism and in fact believe a woman would make the best President.

I also analyzed data from the 2008 American National Election Survey (ANES) Panel Study, which contains data collected during the only other presidential primary cycle in which a

prominent female candidate ran a viable campaign but did not win the party's nomination

(DeBell, Krosnick, and Lupia 2010). In particular, the data from the questions I analyzed was

collected in January and February 2008, and utilized random-digit dialing to identify a random

sample of participants. I added this analysis to strengthen my findings and add an additional

mechanism for isolating electability in terms of voters' perception of general election success

and the effects of this perception on primary vote choice.

Results and analysis

Check of assumptions

     The VOTER survey had 5900 respondents. Of these, 3406 respondents indicated that

they were planning to vote in the Democratic presidential primary in 2020, so these were the

respondents analyzed for the purposes of this paper. In order to test the hypotheses presented

above, it must be determined whether voters are voting strategically, and if they are, what

personal and candidate characteristics predict strategic voting behavior. The VOTER dataset did

not provide measures of candidate or voter ideology, so it was not possible to determine whether

voters' "magic wand" candidate choice was consistent with a spatial voting model; however, I

used favorability ratings as a proxy for this, and checked my assumption that voters' "magic

wand" candidates were towards whom they had the most positive feelings. A logistic regression

confirmed this assumption: Table 1 shows the results of this regression, indicating that rating a

one's attitudes toward a given candidate as "Very favorable" significantly increases the log odds

of identifying that candidate as one's "magic wand" candidate as compared to those candidates

who were not rated "Very favorable" ($p < .01$). The variables "Magic wand choice" and

"Favored candidate" are binary variables where 0 means the candidate was not chosen as the

"magic wand" candidate or most favored candidate, respectively, while 1 represents the

candidate who was chosen as the "magic wand" candidate or most favored candidate.

Table 1: Effect of favorability on magic wand candidate choice

	Estimates
Candidate rated "Very favorable"	2.542*** (0.108)
Constant	-2.802*** (0.088)
Observations	3406

Standard errors in parentheses, * p < 0.10, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01. Explanatory variable is a binary variable indicating whether a candidate was rated "Very favorable" on a feeling thermometer or not, and outcome variable is a binary variable indicating whether that candidate was identified as the "magic wand" candidate.

As a check of assumptions for the impact of momentum on vote choice, I used data from

the 2008 ANES to analyze how voters' perceptions of Hillary Clinton's chances of winning the

general election influenced their choice to vote for her. This survey asked voters to select all

candidates from the 2008 presidential primary for whom they would consider voting (regardless

of party affiliation), and then asked who actually voted for in their state's primary or caucus.

Table 2 shows how the likelihood of a voter who said they would consider voting for Hillary

Clinton to actually vote for a different candidate is affected by the voter's perception of Hillary

Clinton's chances of winning the general election. The results of an ordinary least-squares

regression show with 99.9% confidence that a 1% increase in a voter's perception of Hillary

Clinton's chances of general election success results in a 1.1% lower likelihood of voting for

someone else in the primary, assuming they would consider voting for Clinton in the first place.

This finding confirms conventional wisdom in the literature on momentum, which is that voters

support the candidate they believe will win (Bartels 1985), and that this is true for women

candidates in presidential primaries as well as men.

Table 2: Effect of Hillary Clinton's perceived chances of winning the general election on voting for her

	Estimates
Predicted chance of winning the general election	-0.011*** (0.004)
Constant	2.321*** (0.231)
Observations	1426

Standard errors in parentheses, * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. Explanatory variable is the percent chance the respondent believed Hillary Clinton had to win the general election, conditional on saying they would consider supporting her, and outcome variable is a binary variable indicating whether that respondent actually planned to vote for Hillary Clinton.

Investigating the "magic wand" candidate

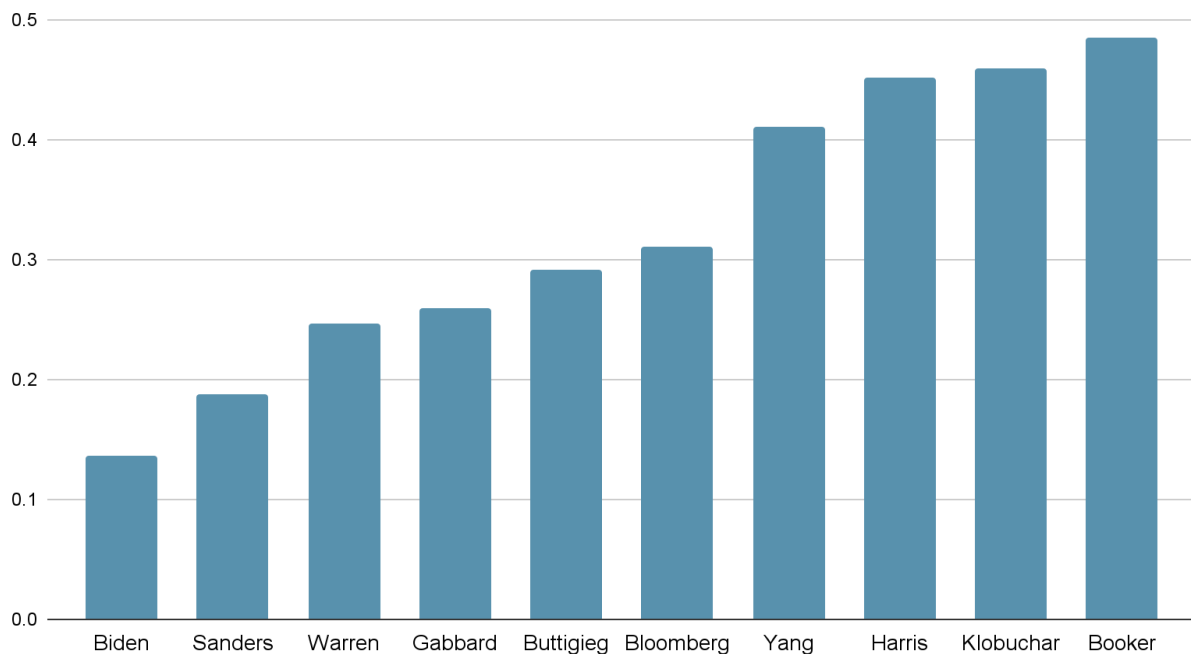*Figure 1: Percent of respondents who defected from their "magic wand" candidate*

Figure 2: Percent of respondents who identified each candidate as their "magic wand" candidate
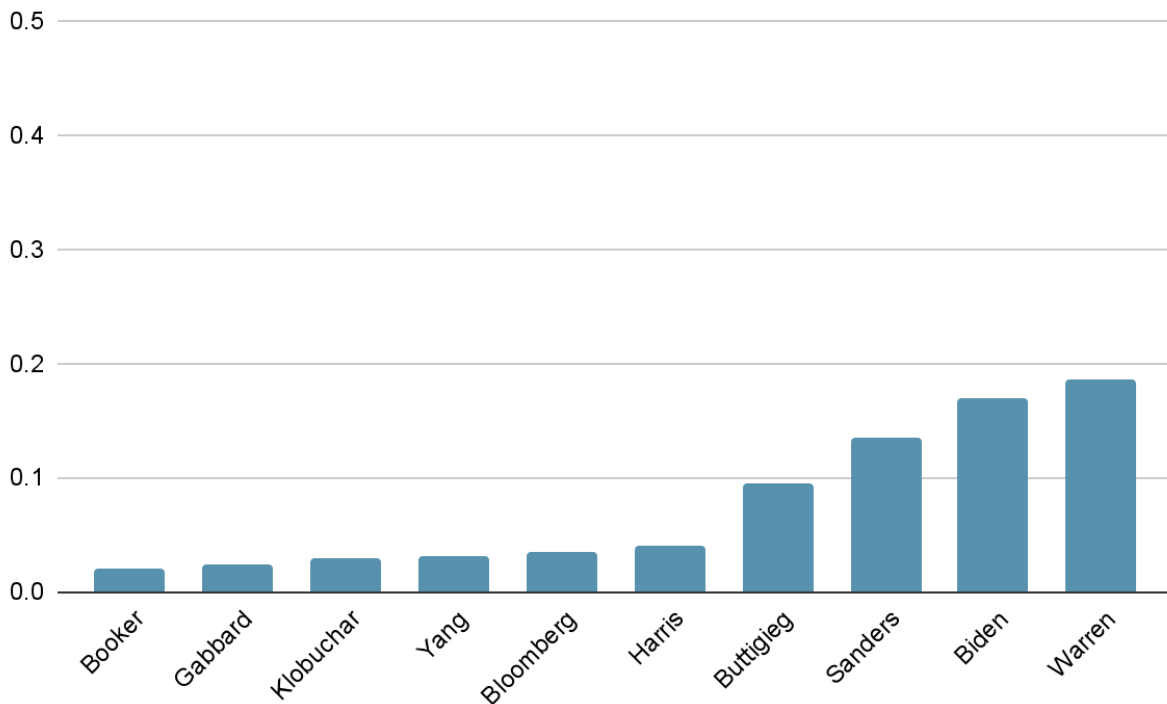

Figure 1 displays the percentage of voters who selected each candidate as their "magic wand" candidate but then said that they planned to vote for a different candidate, and Figure 2 displays the overall percentage of respondents who identified each candidate as their "magic wand" candidate in the first place. For both figures, only candidates whom at least 1% of respondents chose as their "magic wand" candidate were included. The importance of voter loyalty is clear from Figure 1, given that Biden and Sanders, the eventual nominee and the last candidate to exit the race, had the lowest levels of voter defection, despite having the second- and third-highest levels of support overall. There does seem to be some negative correlation between overall support and defection rates, since the three candidates who had the highest levels of support also had the lowest levels of defection, so it seems likely that momentum is an

important predictor of support overall. Additionally, of the three candidates with the highest

defection rates, two are women, indicating that even when voters have a favorable opinion of a

female candidate, they may be hesitant to actually vote for her.

Figure 3: Percent of respondents who defected from their "magic wand" candidate by candidate gender
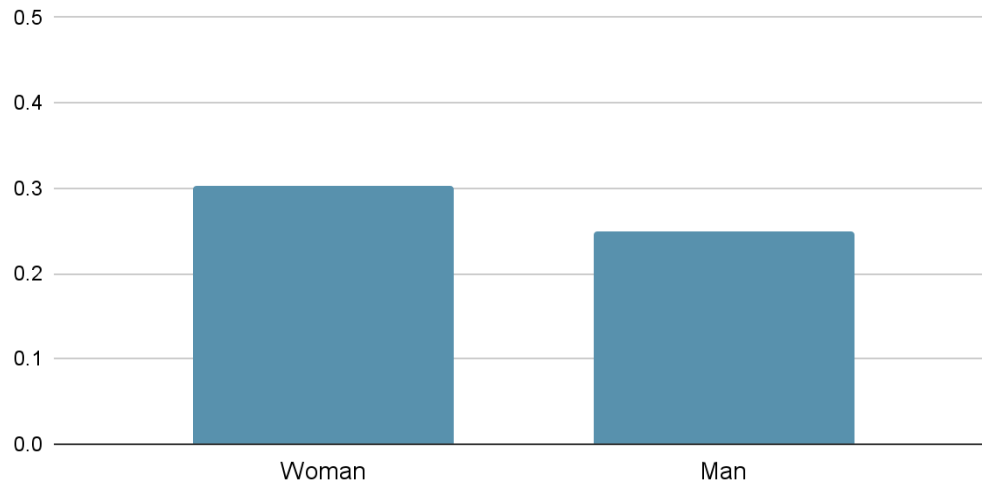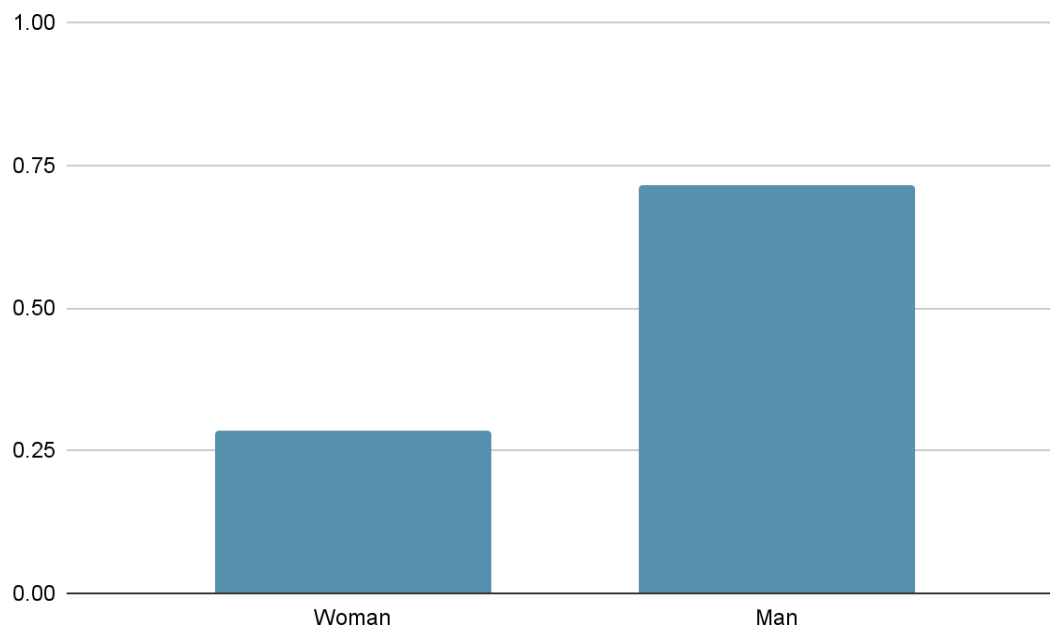

Figure 4: Percent of respondents who selected each gender as their "magic wand" candidate

Figures 3 and 4 display the defection rates for candidates by gender and the overall rates of support for candidates by gender, respectively. These figures make it clear that women candidates had much higher rates of defection than men relative to their overall rates of support, providing further evidence for my hypothesis that even voters who prefer a woman candidate may choose not to vote for her. Tables 3 and 4 elaborate statistically on these findings.

Table 3: When respondents vote for someone other than their "magic wand" candidate

	Estimates with momentum	Estimates without momentum
Magic wand candidate is a woman	0.374*** (0.111)	0.090 (0.087)
Age	0.003 (0.004)	0.002 (0.002)
Gender	-0.138 (0.109)	-0.109 (0.079)
POC	0.083 (0.116)	0.049 (0.082)
Political ideology	0.043 (0.052)	0.105*** (0.033)
Highest level of education completed	0.051 (0.038)	0.036 (0.027)
Interest in government and public affairs news	-0.126* (0.070)	-0.184*** (0.044)
Momentum	0.108** (0.044)	—
Constant	-1.738*** (0.349)	-1.029*** (0.246)
Observations	2325	3406

Standard errors in parentheses, * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. Outcome variable is a binary variable indicating whether a voter chose to vote for someone other than their "magic wand" candidate. Voting for the "magic wand" candidate is coded as 0, changing candidates is coded as 1.

Table 3 illustrates the results of logit regressions on a dummy variable representing whether an individual respondent planned to vote for a candidate other than their "magic wand" candidate, controlling for several potential covariates. I also included a variable in the analysis to represent momentum. The momentum variable was simply the raw total change in each candidate's polling average from August 22, 2019 to November 22, 2019 (i.e., the three months immediately preceding the first day of polling for the VOTER Survey) according to RealClearPolitics (RealClearPolitics 2020). This variable was used as a proxy to indicate which candidates may have been seen by the public as viable in a general election at the time of the poll. I then generated an additional variable to represent the difference in momentum between the candidate each respondent planned to vote for and the "magic wand" candidate, which is the variable included in the regressions below. Because this variable depends on the respondent having chosen a candidate to vote for and a "magic wand" candidate, respondents for whom values of those variables were missing (including respondents who answered "Don't know") were excluded from analyses containing the momentum variable.

Controlling for demographic variables including race, age, gender, education, and interest in politics, as well as candidate momentum, it appears that voters whose "magic wand" candidate is a woman were significantly more likely than other voters to choose to vote for someone who is not their magic wand candidate ($p < .01$) based on the results of the logistic regression displayed in Table 3. Momentum is also a significant predictor of voting for a candidate besides the "magic wand" candidate, meaning that voters whose "magic wand" candidates had relatively low levels of momentum were more likely than others to defect from their "magic wand" candidate in the actual primary. Interest in politics and news about government is also a slightly significant

predictor of whether respondents will switch their vote away from their magic wand candidate: voters who have greater interest in government are actually less likely than those with less interest to switch their vote ($p < .10$).

When momentum is removed from the model, interestingly, the significant effect of choosing a female "magic wand" candidate disappears. Conversely, removing momentum from the model reveals a significant effect of ideology on changing vote, with increasingly conservative voters being more likely to remain loyal to their "magic wand" candidate with their actual vote. Interest in government and public affairs news remains significant, and the effect has a slightly larger magnitude and higher confidence level ($p < .01$) than with momentum included in the model.

Additional analysis

I also wanted to investigate what factors may cause a voter to choose a woman as a "magic wand" candidate or to actually vote for a woman, since conventional wisdom in political science literature suggests that women voters are more likely than men to prefer to vote for women candidates (Sanbonmatsu 2002, Dolan 2004) and that the same is true for liberals (Winter 2010, Thomsen & Swers 2017). Scholars have also posited that Democrats value descriptive representation as an end in itself to a greater extent than Republicans do. Anecdotal evidence, however, indicates that due to the unique nature of presidential elections some Democratic voters may value general election victory over descriptive representation. Thus, these voters will strategically vote for a candidate other than the one whom they would most desire to hold the contested office, even if they would prefer some level of descriptive representation in general. Such a scenario could result in a different relationship between voter

identity traits and "magic wand" candidate choice as compared to actual vote choice, and Table 4 aims to investigate these relationships through logistic regressions, potentially shedding light on what attributes of voters make them more or less likely to vote strategically.

Fascinatingly, voter age, gender, and race are not significant predictors of choosing a woman as the "magic wand" candidate, but ideology, education level, and interest in politics are all very significant predictors. More conservative voters appear less likely to choose a woman as their "magic wand" candidate ($p < .01$), while more educated voters are more likely to choose a woman as their magic wand candidate ($p < .01$). Meanwhile, a greater interest in government and public affairs news predicts a lower likelihood of choosing a female "magic wand" candidate ($p < .01$).

Distinct from its influence on "magic wand" candidate choice, increasing age is significantly negatively associated with voting for a woman ($p < .01$). Conversely, in line with the results regarding "magic wand" candidate choice are the significant negative effects of increasing conservatism ($p < .01$) and increasing interest in politics ($p < .01$) on voting for a woman, as are the significant positive effects of increasing levels of education with likelihood of voting for a woman ($p < .01$), though all of these effects are of a slightly different magnitude in relation to voting for a woman as compared to choosing a woman "magic wand" candidate. One other distinct and interesting result here is that being a person of color predicts a slightly lower likelihood of voting for a woman, which is surprising given previous findings that people of color tend to value descriptive representation at greater rates than whites (Gay 2002).

Table 4: When respondents vote for someone other than their "magic wand" candidate

	Magic wand candidate is a woman	Voted for a woman
Age	-0.003	-0.012***
	(0.003)	(0.003)
Gender	0.096	0.014
	(0.082)	(0.083)
POC	-0.044	-0.206**
	(0.086)	(0.088)
Political ideology	-0.309***	-0.218***
	(0.039)	(0.038)
Highest level of education completed	0.166***	0.165***
	(0.028)	(0.028)
Interest in government and public affairs news	-0.360***	-0.323***
	(0.051)	(0.051)
Constant	-0.149	0.034
	(0.252)	(0.255)
Observations	3406	3406

Standard errors in parentheses, * p < 0.10, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01. For middle column, outcome variable is a binary variable indicating whether that respondent's "magic wand" candidate was a woman. For right column, outcome variable is a binary variable indicating whether the respondent planned to actually vote for a woman.

Discussion

Overall, the models outlined above provide support for my hypothesis, which predicted that voters may choose not to vote for a woman candidate in a primary election if they believe she cannot win a general election, even if the candidate they would most prefer to hold the office is a woman. The "magic wand" question was the best way to determine whom voters would prefer to ultimately hold the office, while the actual vote choice question could be used to determine whether voters actually chose to vote for their most preferred candidate. Table 1 shows

that magic wand vote is an effective proxy for most preferred candidate in the absence of any

measures to compare candidate and voter ideology in this particular survey, confirming that my

choice of the "magic wand" question for this analysis was appropriate.

Table 3 illustrates the main finding in support of my hypothesis: controlling for all

covariates available in this dataset, voters for whom the candidate they would most prefer to hold

the contested office is a woman are more likely to defect from their most preferred candidates in

the actual primary election than voters for whom the candidate they would most prefer to hold

the office is a man. Importantly, this finding holds true when controlling for momentum,

meaning that among candidates with the same level of momentum, voters with female "magic

wand" candidates are still more likely than voters with male "magic wand" candidates to actually

vote for someone else. This point is crucial because momentum is likely one of the most

powerful potential counterarguments to my central claim, as strategic voters may very well

choose to defect from a candidate who seems to have decreasing momentum.

In fact, without controlling for momentum, the significant effect of having a woman

"magic wand" candidate disappears from the model, indicating that momentum and candidate

gender seem to be correlated to one another. It's possible that women candidates generally have

less momentum relative to men because of the persistently doubtful media coverage and the

nature of the "dual campaign" that women must wage to begin with. This also makes sense given

that the model in Table 3 demonstrates that when momentum is included in the model "magic

wand" candidate gender and momentum are the only highly significant predictors of defecting

from the "magic wand" candidate.

Without controlling for momentum, ideology and interest in government also become significant predictors of voter defection. One explanation for this is that highly engaged and knowledgeable voters are actually considering momentum in their own calculations of vote choice, so the effect that appears to be caused by interest in political news is actually caused by momentum itself. In other words, knowledgeable voters choose their magic wand candidate based on who they believe has momentum and therefore can win a general election, in line with the findings of Bartels (1985) on momentum and voting behavior, and therefore are less likely to switch their vote because they already based their choice on electability in some way. More conservative voters, however, are more likely to switch their vote when momentum is excluded from the model. This finding is somewhat puzzling but could also be explained by momentum if relatively conservative voters are less concerned about descriptive representation and more concerned about winning, and therefore more likely to have malleable opinions in terms of whom to vote for.

Ultimately, these findings all suggest that voters who would prefer a woman to hold the contested office are more likely than others not to actually vote for their preferred candidate. While my analysis did not test directly for the cause of this behavior, the data indicate support for general election considerations in primary voter behavior. Based on existing literature suggesting that voters tend to prefer candidates they believe are most likely to win (Bartels 1985) and don't want to waste votes on candidates who will not win (Hall & Snyder 2015), and given that many other covariates that have been studied as influences on vote choice were controlled for, it is a logical deduction that the reason for voters to defect from their "magic wand" candidate was skepticism of that candidate's general election chances. The role of momentum in

voter behavior was also confirmed by the analysis shown in Table 2, which demonstrates that voters are more likely to vote for candidates who have higher aggregate levels of support nationally, further supporting the interpretation that voters who defected from their "magic wand" candidate did so because of general election considerations.

Contrary to much of the existing scholarship on descriptive representation, voter gender and race were not significant predictors of support for a woman "magic wand" candidate, suggesting that issue positions or other factors may have played a more important role than simple descriptive representation in "magic wand" candidate choice. However, liberal ideology was a significant predictor of choosing a woman "magic wand" candidate, which is consistent with findings by authors such as Thomsen & Swers (2017) that liberal voters see descriptive representation as valuable more than other voters. Interest in government also correlated with a lower likelihood of choosing a woman "magic wand" candidate, which I believe indicates a media and public awareness effect. Popular depictions of women as less electable than men and less capable of holding office do seem to impact voters, so voters who have more exposure to messages like these are in fact less likely to support women candidates, even in theory, supporting the model of sexism by proxy proposed in this paper's introduction. The same patterns hold true for which voters choose in reality to vote for a woman candidate, providing even further evidence for an electability effect disproportionately impacting women in primary elections.

Implications

Essentially, Democratic primary voters seem to be making a Downsian rational choice-based calculation that combines considerations of the potential utility to be gained by

success for each particular candidate with the general utility to be gained by success of any

copartisan candidate. In this way, strategic voters are still rational, but not in a simply ideological

utilitarian sense. The question remains to be answered, then, whether these rational strategic

voters are acting correctly; that is to say, whether it is strategic to increase your party's general

election chances by nominating a male candidate. That question is not addressed by the analysis

of this paper, but what does seem to be true based on the analysis presented here is that, simply

by assuming that women are less likely to win a general election, voters make that fact true

through strategically nominating male candidates.

The analysis in this paper supports the model put forth by Ashworth et. al. (2021) in that

there does seem to be some role for demand-side explanations in women's underrepresentation in

elected office, namely voter bias, and identifies a previously unexplored locus within the

electoral process where this bias comes into play. Importantly, these findings are actually in line

with other findings (Dolan 2014, Sanbonmatsu & Dolan 2009) suggesting that women win at the

same rates as men in general elections, since the role of gender bias on the part of voters only

matters in primary elections, where there is no partisan heuristic available. Still, the source of

this bias remains to be uncovered, and cannot be disentangled from stereotypes affecting women

candidates, which very likely play a role in why voters think women are less likely to win

general elections. Again, the effect of electability is bidirectional: voters doubt women's

capabilities, so women are less likely to run anyway, and institutional elites are less likely to

support them when they do.

There is reason to be optimistic, though, given the findings of this paper. Though there is

no one obvious solution to the problem of the electability narrative regarding women candidates,

a reframing of electability by the sources from which voters derive information used in their decision-making processes seems like a natural place to start (Downs 1957, Chapter 12). If voters are dubious about the electability of women candidates, there is a major opportunity for political party elites and institutions to provide support for women candidates, giving them ample resources to run successful campaigns so less time and money must be devoted to proving their electability. Perhaps even more importantly is the opportunity for the media to play a role in increasing voter faith in women candidates by avoiding "electability" coverage and instead focusing on women's achievements and successes.

Conclusion

Of course, the present study is not without its limitations. Previous work on strategic voting and electoral behavior has utilized laboratory experiments, natural experiments, and surveys. This study utilizes a cross-sectional survey because it's all but impossible to simulate the conditions of a real election in a lab experiment. However, a lab experiment examining electability may be a useful direction for future research since the sample size of real life elections with multiple women running in a closed party primary is quite small, and such studies could truly isolate the effect of perceived general election chances on primary vote choice.

Additionally, due to the limitations on available data to answer the specific research question posed here, there are several other relationships between voter characteristics and electability considerations I would have liked to analyze, but could not. For one, the data did not provide any way to align voter ideology to candidate ideology, and based on spatial voting models such a measure would likely provide the best evidence for whether voters are behaving strategically, and therefore could have strengthened the claims of this paper. Ideally, I would

have hoped to be able to address whether voters defect from their "magic wand" candidate to another candidate who does not represent their policy views as closely, since that would be the strongest evidence for an electability effect independent from spatial voting. Moreover, previous studies have shown that both old-fashioned and modern sexist attitudes are significant predictors of preferring men over women in senatorial campaigns (Maxwell & Shields 2018), so future studies investigating this relationship would contribute meaningfully to the literature on electability.

Future research could also investigate the question of electability with respect to candidates for offices besides the presidency, including legislative offices at all levels and lower-level executive offices. No such data is currently available to my knowledge that would allow for an analysis of electability like the one here, as there is relatively little attention paid to non-presidential primary races. I hope that future surveys and experiments can be conducted to collect data on voter behavior in elections for other types of office, so that scholars and practitioners may better understand the implications of electability as it relates to candidate gender as we all work towards gender parity at every level of government. Non-presidential races also tend to have significantly less media coverage than presidential elections, and voters are often very poorly informed about elections (Downs 1957, Converse 1964, and many others) to begin with, so it may actually be the case that in lower-information voting environments voters display less electability bias if it is less obvious which candidates may be the best strategic choice for their party.

Even in a real-time survey, though, it's impossible to measure candidate favorability without random noise interfering with responses. Perhaps the 2020 Democratic primary

candidates were not particularly high-quality candidates, or were not "electable" for reasons besides gender. It is possible that individuals would not vote for their most preferred candidate for reasons besides explicit gender bias as well; voters may have just been tired of hearing media coverage about candidate gender for an entire general election cycle, or may have been worried about the specific situation of a woman candidate running against Donald Trump, and may have been more worried than usual about a woman general election candidate in 2020 following Hillary Clinton's loss in 2016.

Additionally, the data I analyzed were collected in November and December 2019, which was relatively early in the 2020 primary cycle, meaning that many of the candidates at the time probably had relatively low name recognition. Several of the higher profile candidates in that election were men, so at that early point in the cycle voters may have had more favorable views of those men simply due to name recognition. The 2020 presidential election was unique in many ways, and is also the only presidential primary election in which there have been multiple women candidates running, so the sample size of this study is small and external validity is difficult to verify.

It's also possible, and even likely, that the primary vote choice considerations are different for Republicans than they are for Democrats, but there are far fewer high-salience Republican primaries with multiple women candidates to study. This study necessarily only analyzed primary voting behavior among Democrats, but it is my hope that there will be more multi-woman primary elections for both parties in the future, and such elections provide a very compelling possibility for future research.

Furthermore, there is an assumption implicit in this research design that sincere voters will always choose to vote for their preferred candidate. This may not be the case in real electoral settings, but the rational choice voting model is still heavily relied upon and generally accepted as valid in studies of voting behavior (Downs 1957, Cherry & Kroll 2003). Though it's certainly not possible to completely isolate gender as a factor in vote choice, the systematic difference between preferred/"magic wand" candidate and primary vote choice that disproportionately disadvantages women candidates observed in this study reasonably suggests some mechanism having to do with candidate gender.

On another note, it is extremely important not to ignore the role of candidate race in this context. Of the six women who ran in the 2020 Democratic presidential primary, four of them identify as white, while one of them (Tulsi Gabbard) is of Polynesian heritage and one (Kamala Harris) identifies as Black and South Asian. Women of color are doubly marginalized due to their intersecting gender and racial identities (Crenshaw 1990), and that marginalization could play a role in vote choice and "electability" concerns regarding women of color candidates among those who hold implicit biases or stereotypes regarding people of color (Mansbridge 1999), as well as among those who hold outright racist beliefs (Tesler 2012). Unfortunately, there have never been enough women of color running in a presidential primary to study how electability affects them, but electability effects towards women of color and people of color of all genders is another interesting avenue for future research.

The analysis presented in this paper suggests that voters do think strategically in primary elections, and to some extent base their vote choice on which candidates they believe can win a general election. It also suggests that women are disproportionately disadvantaged by this

strategy, as they are seen by voters as less electable. It is my hope that this research and its contribution to the literature will begin a discussion of how candidates of all marginalized identities, including but not limited to women, can mitigate the impacts of an electability bias and no longer be forced to run a "dual campaign." Voters do indeed make decisions in primary elections based on predicted general election success according to candidate gender, but such strategic voting behavior is not necessarily normatively positive or negative. What is almost certainly a normative problem is that strategic voting in primaries disadvantages women, and I am hopeful that this research presents a useful first step towards solving this problem.

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