

“Deflection in the 2016 Election: Gender, Perceptions, and Voting Intentions”

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Women are unequally represented in American electoral politics at multiple levels, including at its highest levels in Washington, D.C. Political scientists offer various explanations for this under-representation, including the fact that women are less likely to be recruited or told to run for political office. The 2016 Presidential election is unique in that it is the first Presidential election in the United States where a woman won the candidacy for a major political party. Hillary Clinton faced a man, Donald Trump, in the race to the White House. While noting that these individuals are demographically similar in a number of ways—race, class, sexual orientation—their difference in gender provides a unique opportunity to explore some of the mechanisms that prevent women from breaking the highest of glass ceilings.

THEORY. Sociology also offers a number of lenses through which we can view gender inequality in organizations, institutions, and leadership. Research has highlighted structural, cultural, and social psychological factors that bar women from earning equal pay, entering high status occupations, and promotion. Affect control theory, in particular, provides a multi-level approach to understanding one reason why Clinton—and other women seeking high status, powerful positions in the United States—seemed to face unique, gender-based challenges that male counterparts are less vulnerable to. Primarily, does Hillary Clinton have the “stamina” for the job, or the “presidential look?” Trump’s quotes about Clinton are identity-based attacks on her ability to lead based on her strength and liveliness—she is also, according to Trump, a “bad, bad person.”

THE CURRENT STUDY. For affect control theorists, these quotes may evoke considerations of the evaluation, potency, and activity profiles for “President,” “woman,” and “man”—how they diverge and how deflection may affect voting patterns. Furthermore, given deep regional and demographic differences in voting patterns, we also explore factors that may influence EPA ratings of these identities and voting intentions in a nationally-representative sample of 1,400 participants in an online MTurk study conducted in October 2016.

HYPOTHESES AND RESULTS. We hypothesized (H1) that “man” will be closer than “woman” to “President” in EPA space—essentially, expecting that a female taking on the role of the President would be more deflecting than a male taking on that role. We also hypothesized (H2) that *woman-President deflection* would affect whether participants intended to vote for Clinton in the 2016 election. Both hypotheses are supported while controlling for participants’ demographic characteristics, party affiliation, and political ideology. Furthermore, we explore factors that influence *woman-President deflection*, and thus, voting intentions. We predicted *woman-President deflection* using a number of state-level indicators of women’s status and political power. We find that participants living in states where women hold more political offices (and in the Senate in particular) find a woman President less deflecting (H3), and they are more likely to indicate support for Clinton (H4). *Woman-President deflection* partially mediates the effect of the number of women Senators on participants’ inclination to vote for Clinton.

CONCLUSION. Participants are more likely to find a woman President deflecting if they live in states where women hold fewer political offices; in turn, they are less likely to indicate they would vote for Clinton. This effect persists while controlling for important factors that influence

voting behavior, and woman-President deflection is actually *more predictive* of voting than participants' gender or age. This study highlights how structural barriers to equality in important institutions (in this case, the political arena), translate into sentiments about women leaders that decrease their likelihood of being elected, furthering still the problem of under-representation.