



THE “CHANGE” GENERATION: HOW COLLEGE-AGED VOTERS PERCEIVE GENDER IN POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

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Introduction

Men dominate American politics. However, this may not be true forever or even for long. Women are not only winning more elections but taking on more prominent political roles. In fact, research shows that when women run, they are as likely as their male counterparts to win. With this trend toward greater equality of representation, there is a particular hope that younger voters are blind or less adhering to gender stereotypes--but is this the case? Overall, popular media and voters both depict and criticize male and female leaders differently. Research suggests, too, that there are different standards and expectations of leaders based on sex. We believe that while younger voters may not hold as strongly to stereotypes as older generations, the same stereotypes do exist and affect these voters' perceptions. Furthermore, gender of the participants themselves changes how they look at leadership.

Research Question

We wanted to test to what extent the group of voters in college now followed the same patterns and relied upon the same stereotypes as voters generally. What do college-aged voters find important to leadership? Do they assume one gender to be better suited than another at leading? Do voters devalue stereotypically “feminine traits” and value “masculine” ones? Do they evaluate male and female candidates and politicians differently?

Methodology

We surveyed 105 Georgetown Undergraduate students, between the ages of 18-24. We split the respondents into two groups. Group A (45 respondents) answered a survey on the perceptions of male leadership and Group B (60 respondents) answered a survey on the perceptions of female leadership. The phrasing for the questions was the same except for the change in the leaders' genders.

The themes of our questions:

- 1) What qualities are needed for leadership, and how often they are seen in leaders of both genders.
- 2) Which traits were seen as masculine or feminine, and whether having these traits made leaders stronger or weaker.
- 3) Whether people judged leaders' actions in particular situations (corruption, recessions, family connections) based on their gender.

Our findings:

Gender stereotypes are still prevalent in our respondents' perceptions of leadership. Considering gender, our male and female respondents demonstrated differing perceptions of masculinity and

femininity, standards of candidacy and leadership strength, expectations of leaders as parents, and justification for the criticism of leaders.

1) Leadership Qualities

- **Female politicians are more likely to be seen as being ambitious than male politicians.** This means either that their ambition is more visible or that our respondents assume that women in politics must be more ambitious than the norm.
- **Men and women judged differently the masculinity of traits and how they correspond to leadership strength.** In the female leader survey, most women found ambition to be not masculine while in the male survey most found it to be more masculine. This shows that while female leaders are ambitious, younger women do not find that ambition to be masculine.
- **Female politicians are seen as honest more often than male politicians.** This is one of the positive gender stereotypes which younger voters ascribe to.

2) Masculine and Feminine Traits

- **Aggression is seen as the most typically masculine trait. If a female or male politician displays masculine traits (aggression), he or she is viewed as a stronger candidate.** While all respondents found that leaders with masculine traits were stronger, more women than men perceived that masculinity caused no change in female leaders' strength. In fact, women were also more likely than men to find that it makes female leaders weaker. Thus, while aggression (or other masculine traits) may strengthen a male leaders' perceived ability across the board, young women voters may not hold female leaders to the same expectation.
- **“Capacity for nurturing” and Emotional Expressiveness are seen as the most typically feminine trait.** Femininity, too, was judged differently by the two sexes. In both surveys, men ranked compassion as being less feminine than women did while ranking passivity and subjectivity as being more feminine than women did.
- Overall, respondents found that **a male politician displaying feminine traits did not change his perceived leadership ability, but some respondents did find that it made him somewhat stronger.** In both surveys, it was a higher percentage of men, rather than women, that found that having feminine characteristics strengthened a leader's perceived ability. Most women perceived no change.

3) The Impact of Children and the Corruption of a Leader's Spouse on Perceptions of Leadership

- In both surveys, the general consensus was that **having a child changed a governor's ability to lead only somewhat or not at all, regardless of the governor's gender.** However, accounting for the gender of the respondents, more men found that a female governor's leadership ability would be somewhat to very much changed by having a new child. Evidently, young male voters hold different expectations for mothers as political leaders than for fathers.
- We also asked respondents to consider how justified criticism of a leader would be if he or she was criticized for the actions of his or her spouse. In the male leader's case, both genders found

the criticism to be unjustified. In the female leader's case, however, more men found the criticism somewhat to very justified while women found it unjustified. Thus, **male respondents were more willing to hold female leaders accountable for the actions of their spouse than they were to hold male leaders to the same standards.**