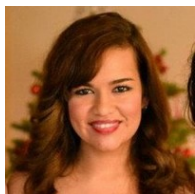


Shifting norms on gender and leadership: are ambitious women punished in politics?



[Sparsha Saha](#) and [Ana Weeks](#) show that while ambitious women are not penalised by voters overall, the aggregate results hide differences in taste for ambitious women across parties. They find that in the US, left-wing voters are more likely to support women with progressive ambition than right-wing ones, while in the UK parties are not as divided.

In a major milestone for women, the US Democratic party recently nominated Kamala Harris as the first Black and Asian-American woman for vice president, making her the party's second female VP pick in nearly 200 years of history. But the run-up to her nomination was fraught with claims that she was disloyal and somehow '[too ambitious](#)' for the role. It's a story we've heard before. In 2016, Hillary Clinton was criticised for her '[unbridled ambition](#)'. Way back in 1975, Margaret Thatcher faced similar claims that she was '[ruthlessly ambitious](#)'. All politicians must be ambitious in order to run for office, so why do we see, again and again, women criticised for a quality that seems to be prized in men?

In our recent [study](#), we investigate the notion that ambitious female political candidates are punished by voters in a way that similarly ambitious male political candidates are not. Building on [role congruity theory](#) and studies from [negotiation](#) and [dominance](#), we hypothesized that "ambitious" women might be punished for transgressing gender stereotypes. We conducted five survey experiments over the course of three years in both the US and the UK, asking almost 4000 people to vote in hypothetical elections involving made-up resumes of male and female candidates with varying levels of ambition. We were surprised to find that, overall, voters are just as likely to vote for an ambitious female candidate as they are an ambitious male candidate. We looked at several types of ambition – from ambitious personality traits like "determined" and "assertive" to ambitious political agendas and ambitious office-seeking – and combinations of these traits. Across all the surveys, we did not find evidence that ambitious women are any less preferred than ambitious men.

While, overall, ambitious women aren't punished, we found differences in preferences for ambitious women across parties. In the US, Democrats are more supportive of women candidates with presidential aspirations than Republicans are (a difference of 7 percentage points). Democrats are particularly enthusiastic about women with office-seeking ambition, but Republicans are not. This finding is in line with previous [work](#), which finds that bias against a potential woman president is concentrated among Republicans, and that women candidates on the right face greater challenges in the [political pipeline](#) and [during elections](#). In the UK, however, it is Conservative voters who appear most favourable towards ambitious female candidates (although differences across parties were not statistically significant). Our interpretation of these cross-national differences is that context – the history of women in leadership – matters. The UK has had two female Prime Ministers, both of them Conservatives. Even far right voters (respondents who said they had voted for UKIP) did not penalise ambitious women, although they especially favoured "assertive" men. UKIP and the newer Brexit party have also both had women leaders.

The findings reflect [shifting norms](#) on women and leadership. This is good news. Our work is one of many recent studies which suggest that explicit voter discrimination is not the cause of women's underrepresentation in politics. In fact, voters actually [prefer women](#) by about 2 percentage points, on average. So then, what can explain the persistent narrative that ambition is bad for women candidates? One of the reasons could be that women [perceive](#) that they will face additional discrimination. Another reason may be that political gatekeepers (who tend to be older male politicians) are [oversensitive](#) to the idea that women candidates might not do as well. For example, in the case of Kamala Harris, it was reportedly [Chris Dodd](#) who was concerned that Harris was "too ambitious". Likewise, Elizabeth Warren shared that [Bernie Sanders told her](#) in a private meeting that he didn't think the US was ready for a female president. Finally, by reporting on stories about women's ambition, the media itself [perpetuates stereotypes](#).

There are some important caveats to our work. First, we need more research on the role of race. Minority candidates themselves [have noted the potential role of race](#), and it is possible that voters are more accepting of ambitious *white* female candidates since we did not include race as a factor in our experiments. Second, our study provides experimental evidence. It is possible that in real life, when voters are exposed to high-profile “ambitious” women over weeks and months, attitudes might be different. If women are portrayed as having overtly negative “power-hungry” or [unethical](#) types of ambition, we might be particularly likely to see gender-based discrimination emerge. Interviewing candidates themselves, to see if their experiences and perceptions of voter bias match what we find, would be a great next step. Still, the findings reflect a great deal of “real world” data that [when women run, they win](#). The finding that ambitious women are not punished is important for both men and women to know so that women are not discouraged from running, and male gatekeepers are not afraid to let them in.

About the Authors



[Sparsha Saha](#) is Preceptor in Expository Writing at Harvard University.



[Ana Weeks](#) is Lecturer in Comparative Politics at the University of Bath.

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