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To cite this article: Maya A. Godbole, Noelle A. Malvar & Virginia V. Valian (2019): Gender, Modern Sexism, and the 2016 election, *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, DOI: [10.1080/21565503.2019.1633934](https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2019.1633934)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2019.1633934>



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Published online: 26 Jun 2019.



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Gender, Modern Sexism, and the 2016 election

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ABSTRACT

In the summer and fall of 2016, we examined how gender norms relate to perceptions of the ideal president as well as favorability toward Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. Participants listed living examples of the “ideal” president and rated how typical masculine and feminine traits were of the ideal president (*Studies 1a and 1b*). Male exemplars and masculine traits were seen as more typical of the ideal president. Participants also rated the average man or woman, Trump, or Clinton on the same traits, completed the Modern Sexism scale, and rated how favorably they viewed each candidate (*Study 2*). Although Clinton matched the ideal better than Trump did, she did not represent her gender as well as Trump represented his. Our data suggest that Clinton’s “likability problem” stemmed from her lacking sufficient feminine traits rather than possessing masculine traits. Modern Sexism predicted lower favorability for Clinton and higher favorability for Trump above and beyond demographic variables, including political affiliation. Gender stereotypes and beliefs about gender equity (e.g., Modern Sexism) influenced attitudes toward the candidates in the 2016 election.

ARTICLE HISTORY



Received 4 November 2018


Accepted 16 June 2019

The 2016 U.S. election was remarkable for several reasons, perhaps most notably because the Democratic candidate, Hillary Clinton, was the first woman to be nominated by a major party for president. Clinton received sexist comments (e.g., “Trump that bitch” on campaign buttons) and criticisms: while competent, she lacked feminine warmth (Hobbs 2015). Negativity toward Clinton could have arisen from her being overly “masculine,” insufficiently “feminine,” or both.

Conversely, the Republican nominee, Donald Trump, adopted a rhetoric of hyper-masculinity (e.g., “locker room banter”) to galvanize potential voters and disparage primary opponents (Hamblin 2016). The issues he prioritized, such as tightening border security and increasing military funding, were traditional men’s issues (Lawless 2004). In essence, he told voters that he, as a masculine man, was well-equipped for the role. We suggest, following others (e.g., Smith 2017, who refers to “Trump’s hegemonic masculinity”), that part of Trump’s popularity (and eventual win) was due to his exaggerated masculinity.

We address the role that gender played in the 2016 election from a social psychological perspective by (a) investigating the role of gendered beliefs and Modern Sexism (Swim et al.

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 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed at <https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2019.1633934>.

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1995) in people's perceptions of the President of the United States (henceforth president) and (b) establishing how gender stereotypes and Modern Sexism were related to people's favorability of Clinton and Trump. We hope that our perspective will be a useful addition to political scientists who are interested in the underlying psychological constructs that are relevant to voters' decisions about candidates.

Gender stereotypes and leadership

Men and women candidates who do not conform to traditional gender norms may be seen negatively by voters. Gender stereotypes shape evaluations of men and women by serving *descriptive* and *prescriptive* functions: they *describe* how men and women are and they *prescribe* normative traits, behaviors, and roles (Heilman 2001; Prentice and Carranza 2002). In American society, agentic traits (e.g., *decisive*) are descriptive and prescriptive for men and masculinity while communal traits (e.g., *kind*) are descriptive and prescriptive for women and femininity (Bem 1974; Spence and Buckner 2000; Spence, Helmreich, and Stapp 1974). Masculinity implies professional competence while femininity implies warmth and caring about others. Deviation from traditional gender norms is costly.

Therefore, candidates must “fit” their gender in order to be likable. One way to determine whether gender stereotypes influenced voters' evaluations of the candidates is to examine the relation between favorable attitudes toward a candidate and how well they represent the average man or woman.

Voters also, of course, evaluate candidates according to how well they instantiate the traits required of a president. If there is a perceived “lack of fit” between a person's traits and the traits required to successfully perform a job, that person will be evaluated negatively (The Lack of Fit Model; Heilman 1983; Heilman 2001).

Candidates must thus fit two requirements. They must display the traits that a professional position requires and they must fit their gender role. For men, the two go hand in hand, because the schema for men and the schema for leader are congruent (Eagly and Karau 2002; Heldman, Conroy, and Ackerman 2018; Valian 1998). If men fit the stereotype for men – having more masculine than feminine qualities – they simultaneously have many of the qualities necessary for a leadership role, which is seen as more masculine than feminine. For women, however, the stereotype for women and the stereotype for president are incongruent. If women are more masculine than feminine, which a leadership role requires, they are incongruent with the schema for women. Women candidates face a dilemma: they must be masculine enough to appear competent and “leaderly,” but feminine enough to be likable (Heilman and Okimoto 2007).

Clinton and Trump, we suggest, were evaluated both on how well they fit their gender role and on how well they fit the presidential role. Because leadership roles are inherently masculine, Trump could simultaneously exemplify masculinity and leadership. Clinton was in a bind: she had to embody both what it means to be president and what it means to be a woman – two roles society sees as incompatible.

Modern sexism

Modern Sexism might exacerbate demands to fit gender roles. Modern Sexism (Swim et al. 1995; Swim and Cohen 1997) encompasses: (1) denial of continued discrimination

(e.g., “On average, people in our society treat husbands and wives equally”); (2) negative attitudes toward women’s demands for equality (e.g., “It is easy to understand the anger of women’s groups in America” (reverse scored)) and (3) resentment about perceived special treatment of women (e.g., “Over the past few years, the government and news media have been showing more concern about the treatment of women that is warranted by women’s actual experiences”). The Modern Sexism scale thus indirectly reflects people’s perceptions of men and women through their beliefs about whether gender equity has been achieved.

Modern Sexism predicts political attitudes and voting behavior better than old-fashioned or overt sexism does. Voters high in Modern Sexism were more likely to support a male over a female senatorial candidate (Swim et al. 1995), and men who endorsed Modern Sexist beliefs were more likely to vote for Mitt Romney in 2012 (Simas and Bumgardner 2017). Though Modern Sexism and party affiliation are associated, we argue that Modern Sexism plays an independent explanatory role in political attitudes and decision-making.

Present research

In Study 1, we ask whether people think that men and masculine traits “fit” the presidential role better than women and feminine traits do. In Study 2, we examine the connections among gender traits, Modern Sexism, and judgments of favorability toward Clinton and Trump in the 2016 election. In all studies, U.S.-born participants were recruited from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (Mturk) and compensated appropriately. Mturk participants have a wider age range and are more representative of the population than typical college-student samples, while also being more liberal and better-educated than the general population (Huff and Tingley 2015).

Study 1a

Participants listed qualities of the ideal president and identified a living person who came closest to possessing those traits. Because only men have occupied the role of president, we predicted that people’s exemplars would be predominantly male.

Methods

Participants

Data were included from 311 participants (51% female, 76% White, $M_{age}=41$, $SD_{age}=15$). Data were collected 25 June–16 July 2016 (pre-nomination of Trump or Clinton).

Measures

Ideal president. Participants listed five characteristics an ideal President of the United States should have, reported if they were thinking of anyone in particular when listing those characteristics, and if so, who. They also identified the living person who came closest to having those characteristics. We coded participants’ responses for each question into the following categories: (a) male (e.g., Barack Obama), (b) female (e.g., Oprah

Winfrey) (c) groups of people (e.g., Buddhist monks), (d) oneself (e.g., myself), (e) ambiguous (e.g., my friend), and (f) no one or unsure. Eighty-six participants said they were thinking of someone in particular and 285 participants identified a living person; therefore, we used the latter question in the analyses.

Results

We limited the analyses to people who indicated either a male or female exemplar when choosing the person who came closest to having the characteristics of the ideal president ($N = 228$). Overall, as [Figure 1](#) shows, participants named many more males ($N = 209$) than females ($N = 19$), binomial $Z = 12.52$, $p < .001$. More women (14 out of 116) than men (5 out of 112) named a female exemplar, ($\chi^2(1) = 4.31$, $p = .038$, $\phi = .138$).

Discussion

As expected, both men and women see male exemplars as more prototypical of the president. The data highlight a potential barrier for women presidential candidates: men are more strongly associated with the job of president (Eagly and Karau 2002; Lyness and Heilman 2006). Although men and women participants showed the same pattern, men were somewhat more likely to name a man (96%) than women were (88%).

Study 1b

Study 1b examines whether masculine traits are seen as more characteristic of the ideal president than feminine traits. We use *composite* measures consisting of stereotypically masculine and feminine traits and *explicit* measures (the words “masculine” and “feminine”). We also examine whether endorsement of Modern Sexism items influences trait preferences for the ideal president.

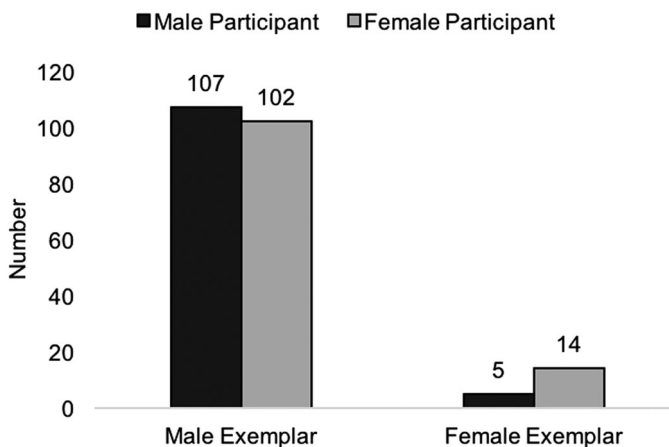


Figure 1. Number of male and female exemplars offered by male and female participants. Male participants $N = 112$, female participants $N = 116$.

Methods

Participants

Data from 112 participants (51% female, 79% White, $M_{age}=36$, $SD_{age}=9$) were collected post-nominations (15 August–7 September 2016).

Procedure

Participants rated the ideal president on stereotypically masculine and feminine traits using a slider scale ranging from “not at all typical” (coded 0) to “very typical” (coded 100). (Participants provided other data, such as responses on other scales, not reported here.)

Measures

Masculine and feminine traits. We used socially desirable traits from the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ; Spence, Helmreich, and Stapp 1974, 1975) and the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI; Bem 1974). The masculine traits ($N = 18$) included qualities such as *self-reliant*, *ambitious*, and *analytic*. Those 18 traits were averaged to create a *composite masculine* measure. The feminine traits ($N = 16$) included qualities such as *warm*, *helpful to others*, and *loyal*; those traits were similarly averaged to create a *composite feminine* measure. Trait order was randomized. Participants also rated the typicality of the words *masculine* and *feminine*, our explicit measures. The explicit measures always appeared as the final two traits in counterbalanced order.

Modern Sexism. Participants rated their endorsement of the eight items in the Modern Sexism scale on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” (Swim et al. 1995; Swim and Cohen 1997). Items requiring reverse coding were so coded; higher scores indicated greater Modern Sexism.

Results

Composite masculine and feminine traits. As shown in the first two bars of Figure 2, participants rated composite masculine traits as more typical of the ideal president than composite feminine traits ($F(1,108) = 80.15$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2=0.43$). There was neither a main effect of participant gender nor a significant participant gender \times trait type interaction. Both genders see masculine traits as more typical of the ideal president than feminine traits.

“Masculine” and “feminine.” As shown in the first two bars of Figure 3, participants rated the word *masculine* as more typical of the ideal president than *feminine* ($F(1,108) = 39.57$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2=0.27$). There was no main effect for participant gender but an interaction revealed the effect was more pronounced for male participants ($F(1,108) = 7.04$, $p = .009$, $\eta_p^2=.061$).

Modern Sexism. Male participants were significantly higher than female participants on Modern Sexism ($M_{males}=3.40$, $SD_{males}=1.34$; $M_{females}=2.76$, $SD_{females}=1.23$), a moderate effect size ($t(108) = 2.59$, $p = .011$, $d = 0.50$). For men, higher Modern Sexism scores predicted lower composite feminine ratings for the ideal president ($F(1,51) = 9.33$, $R_{adj}^2=.14$, $p = .004$; $\beta=-4.50$) and marginally higher ratings of the word *masculine* ($F(1,51) = 4.19$, $R_{adj}^2 = .06$, $p = .046$; $\beta=7.45$). For women, Modern Sexism scores were unrelated to either composite or explicit gender trait ratings for the ideal president.

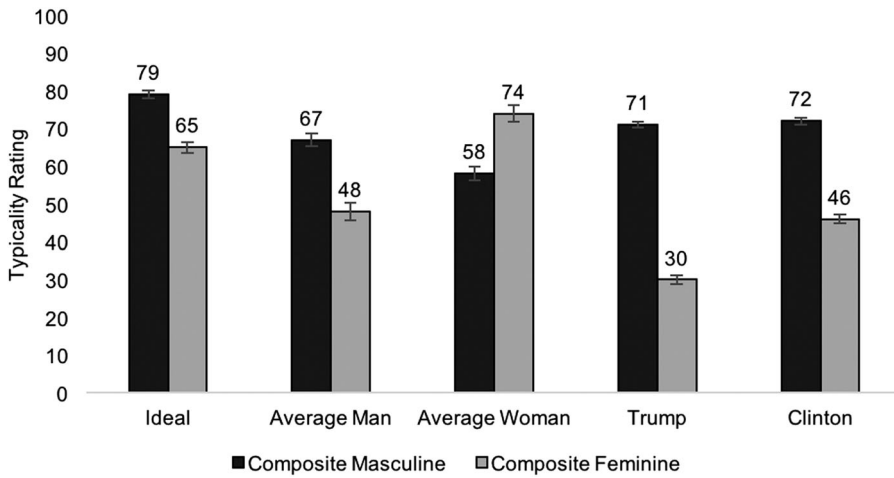


Figure 2. Composite gender trait ratings for the ideal president, average man, average woman, Trump, and Clinton. Average man $N = 106$, average woman $N = 105$, Clinton $N = 445$, Trump $N = 443$.

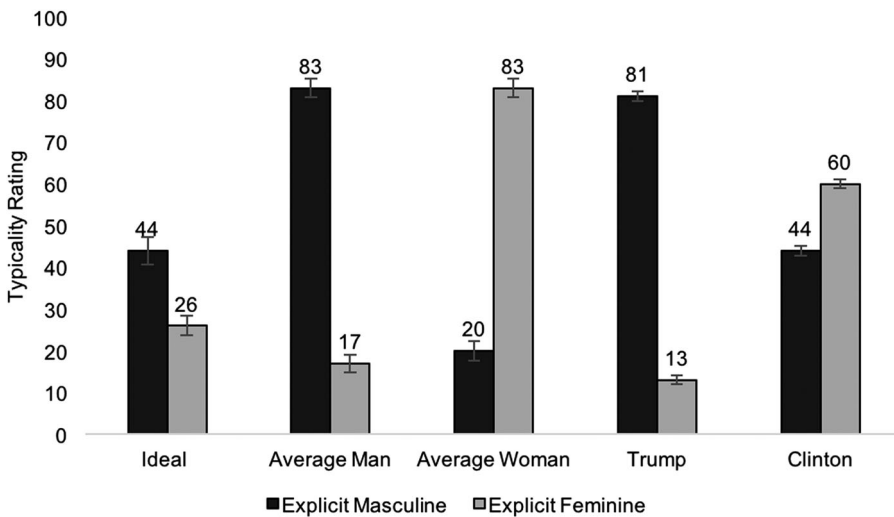


Figure 3. Explicit gender ratings ("masculine" and "feminine") for the ideal president, average man, average woman, Trump, and Clinton. Average man $N = 106$, average woman $N = 105$, Clinton $N = 445$, Trump $N = 443$.

Discussion

Both men and women rated composite masculine traits as more typical of the ideal president than feminine traits, indicating that both genders will view people who display stereotypically masculine traits as a better fit for president. This supports the finding from Study 1a, where more people listed a man than a woman as coming closest to the ideal president.

Ratings for the typicality of the words *masculine* and *feminine* were substantially lower than the ratings for the composite gender traits. At least two factors might account for the

difference between composite and explicit ratings. First, the individual traits that comprise the composites are all positive, while the explicit labels may connote both positive and negative qualities. Second, the explicitness of the terms *masculine* and *feminine* may make participants unwilling to acknowledge a gendered preference in considering the ideal president. Supporting that possibility is the fact that women, who theoretically have a bigger stake in the appropriateness of women as president, showed a smaller preference for *masculine* over *feminine* than men did. Similarly, in Study 1a, women were slightly more likely than men to propose a woman as coming closest to the ideal president.

Both sexes were near the mid-point on the Modern Sexism scale, but men scored higher than women did. Further, men's, but not women's, Modern Sexism scores predicted a higher rating of the word *masculine* and lower rating of composite femininity as typical of the ideal president – a finding similar to previous results (Simas and Bumgardner 2017) in which Modern Sexism predicted support for Romney *only* among men. To sum up, while people generally think president = male, that tendency is pronounced for men higher in Modern Sexism.

Study 2

Recall that Hillary Clinton was criticized as not *feminine* enough (Hobbs 2015). As in our introduction, we propose that women presidential candidates have the difficult problem of fitting two roles with different requirements: competence – required for the presidential role, and femininity – required for the female gender role. For men, in contrast, competence and masculinity are so linked that demonstrating either implies the other.

Here we examine the degree to which people attributed composite and explicit gender traits to Trump and Clinton and how those ratings related to Modern Sexism scores and favorability toward the candidates.

Methods

Participants

Data from 1,099 participants were included (55% female, 78% White, $M_{age}=37$, $SD_{age}=12$). Each participant rated a single target: the average man ($N=106$), average woman ($N=105$), Donald Trump ($N=443$), or Hillary Clinton ($N=445$). The average man and average woman were assessed post-conventions and pre-debates (15 August–7 September 2016). Trump and Clinton were assessed: (1) post-conventions and pre-debates (10–26 September 2016), (2) post-debates and pre-election (1–6 November 2016), and (3) post-election (20 November–9 December 2016). No participant ever rated more than one target. Because neither trait ratings nor favorability scores for Trump and Clinton differed significantly across the three time points, data were combined and aggregate results are reported.

Procedure

Procedures were identical to those used in Study 1b with different targets. Candidate favorability was measured on a Likert-type scale (1 = *Strongly Unfavorable*, 4 = *Strongly Favorable*), following Quinnipiac poll measures. To determine participants' political

affiliation, we took the average of three Likert scale (1 = *Very Conservative*, 3 = *Moderate*, 5 = *Very Liberal*) items assessing participants' views on social, economic, and foreign affairs.

Results

Attribution of gendered traits. Figure 2 shows that, as expected, the average man was seen as having more masculine than feminine traits and the average woman was seen as having more feminine than masculine traits ($ps < .001$). Trump was rated as even more masculine ($p = .027$) and less feminine ($p < .001$) than the average man. Clinton was rated as more masculine as ($p < .001$) and less feminine than ($p < .001$) the average woman. Trump was an exaggeration of the average man in his high masculinity and low femininity ratings. Clinton, in contrast, looked nothing like the average woman and instead was very similar to the average man. (We evaluated the differences in targets' ratings with a mixed measures ANOVA that showed a significant target individual \times trait type interaction ($F(3,1095) = 250.41, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .407$), a main effect of target individual ($F(3,1095) = 25.40, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .065$), and a main effect of composite trait type ($F(1,1095) = 532.45, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .327$.)

Figure 3 shows that Trump and the average man were rated as more explicitly *masculine* than *feminine*, while Clinton and the average woman were rated more explicitly *feminine* than *masculine* (all $ps < .001$). Trump was rated similarly to the average man: as *masculine* and as *feminine*. Clinton, in contrast, was rated dissimilarly to the average woman: significantly more *masculine* ($p < .001$) and less *feminine* ($p < .001$) than the average woman. (A mixed measures ANOVA showed a significant target individual \times word interaction ($F(3,1095) = 526.05, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .590$), a main effect for target individual ($F(3,1095) = 16.68, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .044$), and a main effect for word ($F(1,1095) = 77.16, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .066$.)

Comparison with the ideal president. As shown in Figure 2, Trump and Clinton were rated lower than the ideal president in both masculine ($ps < .001$) and feminine traits ($ps < .001$), but Clinton fit better with the presidential ideal than did Trump. (A mixed measures ANOVA revealed an individual \times trait type interaction ($F(2,997) = 103.80, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .172$), a main effect of individual ($F(2,997) = 61.87, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .110$), and a main effect of trait type ($F(1,997) = 1217.97, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .550$.)

As shown in Figure 3, by explicit measures, Trump was rated as significantly more *masculine* and significantly less *feminine* than the ideal ($ps < .001$). Clinton was rated as *masculine* as the ideal president, but significantly more *feminine* than the ideal ($p < .001$). Overall, Clinton reflected the ideal better than did Trump. (A mixed measures ANOVA revealed an individual \times word interaction ($F(2,997) = 458.25, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .479$), a main effect of individual ($F(2,997) = 63.76, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .113$), and a main effect of word ($F(1,997) = 208.44, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .173$.)

Gender trait ratings and favorability. As shown in Table 1, higher composite masculine and composite feminine ratings were positively correlated with favorability for both candidates, but explicit measures were related differently. Higher *masculine* ratings were positively correlated with favorability for Trump and negatively correlated with favorability for Clinton; higher *feminine* ratings were negatively correlated with favorability for Trump and positively correlated with favorability for Clinton.

Table 1. Correlations among modern sexism, gender trait ratings, and favorability toward Clinton (bold) and Trump.

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Modern Sexism		-.41**	-.35**	.05	-.24**	-.44**
2. Composite masculine	.35**		.61**	-.06	.33**	.58**
3. Composite feminine	.51**	.60**		-.27**	.55*	.81**
4. "Masculine"	.15**	.53**	.32**		-.56**	-.18**
5. "Feminine"	-.07	-.24**	-.04	-.46**		.43**
6. Favorability	.55**	.61**	.82**	.33**	-.12**	

Notes: ** $p \leq .01$ (2-tailed). Clinton (bold) $N = 435$ and Trump $N = 443$. Trump Favorability $M = 1.83$, $SD = 1.10$; Clinton favorability $M = 2.20$, $SD = 1.13$; Modern Sexism $M = 3.09$, $SD = 1.43$. Pearson's correlations are presented.

Modern Sexism, gender trait ratings, and favorability. Modern Sexism was related to a similar extent, but in opposite directions, for Trump and Clinton. For Trump, as shown in Table 1, Modern Sexism was significantly *positively* correlated with composite masculine ($r = .35$, $p < .001$) and feminine scores ($r = .51$, $p < .001$), with *masculine* ratings ($r = .15$, $p = .001$), and with favorability ($r = .55$, $p < .001$). For Clinton, Modern Sexism was significantly *negatively* correlated with composite masculine ($r = -.41$, $p < .001$) and feminine scores ($r = -.35$, $p < .001$), *feminine* ratings ($r = -.24$, $p < .001$), and with favorability ($r = -.44$, $p < .001$).

Modern sexism and favorability. A hierarchical regression showed that Modern Sexism is a significant predictor of favorability above and beyond age, gender, and political affiliation for both Trump ($\beta = .34$, $t(423) = 7.67$, $p < .001$; $F(4,423) = 76.90$, $\Delta R^2 = .08$, $p < .001$) and Clinton ($\beta = -.23$, $t(429) = -4.32$, $p < .001$; $F(4,429) = 43.08$, $\Delta R^2 = .03$, $p < .001$). This suggests that Modern Sexism played a significant and unique role in predicting favorability for Clinton and Trump that was independent from demographic predictors.

Discussion

Trump was an excellent representative of his gender: he was an exaggerated man on composite traits and very closely matched the average man on explicit traits. He matched the presidential role moderately well. Clinton, in contrast, was a poor exemplar of her gender. Not only was she seen as relatively more masculine and less feminine than the average woman but as absolutely more masculine than feminine. Clinton came much closer to the ideal president than Trump did on both composite and explicit measures, but, we suggest, her lack of feminine traits was costly.

The correlation matrix in Table 1 shows both the importance of having the socially desirable composite masculine and feminine traits and the importance of being an explicitly good gender exemplar. Favorability was positively correlated with being explicitly like one's gender and negatively correlated with being explicitly unlike one's gender. Favorability was even more strongly related to composite judgments of masculinity and femininity. Both sets of traits were important for favorability judgments about both candidates, presumably because both sets of traits are highly positive and socially desirable. We note that favorability toward a candidate could positively affect one's ratings of the candidate's socially desirable traits, as much as the reverse.

The correlations also show that Modern Sexism was related to perceptions of the candidates being good representatives of their respective genders: higher Modern Sexism

scores were positively correlated with Trump's being rated as *masculine* and negatively correlated with Clinton's being rated as *feminine*; higher Modern Sexism scores did not, however, correlate either with Trump's explicit *femininity* or Clinton's explicit *masculinity*. High Modern Sexism scores are correlated with ratings of how well candidates fits their (designated) gender.

Recall that we aggregated the ratings for Trump and Clinton across three periods because they did not differ significantly from one another. Observers were remarkably consistent in their views over time, apparently unmoved by the campaign strategies of either candidate.

Taken together, the results suggest Trump fared well because of his exaggerated masculinity and sufficient alignment with the ideal president. Clinton fared badly because, even though she aligned better with the ideal president's traits, she was a poor representative of her gender. Modern Sexism independently led to higher favorability toward Trump and lower favorability toward Clinton.

General discussion

Our results demonstrate that Americans construe the role of president in masculine terms and that Modern Sexism is related to how favorably candidates are viewed, above and beyond political ideology. That president = male was seen in three results. First, when naming examples of real-life individuals who embody the traits of an ideal president, both men and women cited men more often, and men showed that imbalance more strongly. Second, composite masculine traits were rated as more typical of the ideal president compared to composite feminine traits. Third, although explicit masculinity and femininity were less descriptive of the ideal than were our composite traits, the word *masculine* was seen as more typical of the ideal than the word *feminine*. These findings are not surprising, given that all U.S. presidents have been male and popular culture frequently reflects a patriarchal representation of the U.S. president (Vaughn and Michaelson 2013). Thus, masculine traits are more descriptive *and* more prescriptive of a president than are feminine traits.

The role of Modern Sexism is also apparent from both studies. In Study 1, men higher in Modern Sexism rated explicit masculinity as more typical of, and composite femininity as less typical of, the ideal president. In Study 2, Modern Sexism was positively related to desirable gender traits for Trump and negatively related to desirable traits for Clinton. Further, beliefs that there is little or no gender-equity problem predicted higher favorability of Trump and lower favorability of Clinton.

In 2016, Trump embodied the trait pattern of the average man to a greater degree than he matched the profile of the ideal president. Clinton fit the qualities of the ideal president better than Trump did. But Clinton markedly contradicted the norms for the average woman: she had more masculine than feminine composite traits and she was described as substantially less *feminine* than the average woman. We infer that Clinton was not penalized for possessing masculine traits, but for not simultaneously being a good representative of femininity. She lacked sufficient composite feminine traits and appeared insufficiently explicitly feminine. She matched the presidential ideal, but failed to display the traits people expect of a woman.

Limitations and future directions

We did not examine race (Major, Blodorn, and Major Blascovich 2016), economic status (Inglehart and Norris 2016), or campaign factors, such as skill in presenting candidates as authentic and personable. All of those factors, and others, may have influenced ratings.

Correlational analyses do not allow us to specify cause and effect. For example, gender trait ratings of a candidate influence, and are influenced by, one's favorability toward them, and favorable attitudes toward a candidate are at least in part determined by political ideology. Nevertheless, the significant regression in which Modern Sexism predicted favorability, even after political party and other demographic variables were controlled for, shows that those scoring higher in Modern Sexism tended to rate Trump more favorably and Clinton less favorably. Both gender stereotypes (i.e., ideas about desirable gender roles and behavior) and Modern Sexism were related to people's evaluation of the first female presidential candidate nominated by a major party (Corrington and Hebl 2018).

The 2016 election pitted two white candidates against each other, limiting the generalizations we can draw. Further, it is likely that the participants who rated the "ideal" president or "average" man or woman were thinking of someone white (Devos and Banaji 2005). Intersectionality research demonstrates that agentic behaviors are evaluated differently when displayed by women of color compared to white women (Rosette et al. 2016). Women of color may have distinct advantages or disadvantages due to stereotypes attached to their dual minority status (Brown 2014). Race plays a key factor in forming impressions of leaders and should be considered in future studies.

Conclusion

Our research extends the existing literature on gender and leadership by providing empirical evidence that the U.S. president is seen as male. Attitudes about the state of gender equity in current society shaped perceptions of the candidates of the 2016 presidential election. Our findings have two implications for those with the goal of increasing gender parity in political representation.

First, women candidates will be perceived more negatively by individuals who believe gender equity has been achieved. Our data are reminiscent of moral licensing – the phenomenon in which people behave in a more prejudiced manner if they believe they or their group have demonstrated that they are not prejudiced (Kouchaki 2011; Merritt, Effron, and Monin 2010). In this study, belief in a gender-fair world (i.e., higher scores on the Modern Sexism scale) was linked to negative attitudes toward a female presidential candidate. Presenting people with factual data about gender inequities may reduce negative reactions to female candidates.

Second, and most important, voters want women candidates to display classic "feminine" traits like warmth and kindness. Voters will accept "masculine" traits like assertiveness in women as long as those traits are buffered by "feminine" traits (Heilman and Okimoto 2007). Voters demand more from women than men. Matching the profile for the ideal president will not help women candidates, unless voters think that they authentically care about others.

Acknowledgements

We thank the Roosevelt House Public Policy Institute at Hunter College for its support of this research. M. Chajewski, M. Chodorow, and J. Rendina provided helpful discussions about data analysis. We are grateful to helpful comments on earlier drafts and presentations from P. Rozin and from audience members at the University of Pennsylvania, Eastern Psychological Association, and the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues. Questionnaire items and additional data analyses are in supplemental information available online.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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