

SOCIAL DESIRABILITY EFFECTS AND SUPPORT FOR A FEMALE AMERICAN PRESIDENT

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Abstract Public opinion polls show consistently that a substantial portion of the American public would vote for a qualified female presidential candidate. Because of the controversial nature of such questions, however, the responses may suffer from social desirability effects. In other words, respondents may be purposely giving false answers as not to violate societal norms. Using an unobtrusive measure called the “list experiment,” we find that public opinion polls are indeed exaggerating support for a female president. Roughly 26 percent of the public is “angry or upset” about the prospect of a female president. Moreover, this level of dissatisfaction is constant across several demographic groups.

As talk about the 2008 presidential election heats up, there is much speculation about whether the United States will elect its first female president; questions about the extent to which the public would support a woman for president have taken on more than hypothetical value. The White House Project has been established to research stereotypes about women as national leaders and to promote the idea of a woman as a president. Senator and former first lady Hillary Clinton leads in all polls to be the Democratic Party nominee in 2008, and the Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has been promoted within Republican circles as that party’s nominee, although she has declared she would not be a candidate.

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Public opinion polls consistently show that an overwhelming percentage of Americans say they would vote for a qualified female presidential candidate. These results would indicate that female candidates such as Clinton or Rice will not be at a disadvantage in a presidential election because of their sex. Or do they? There is a long line of research showing that survey respondents lie when they believe their true answer goes against perceived societal norms. In other words, people provide the socially desirable response to questions dealing with controversial issues. Traditional public opinion polls are not equipped to tease out whether people are hiding their true feelings on surveys.

Here, we employ an unobtrusive technique that is becoming increasingly popular among political scientists: the list experiment. We hypothesize that significant percentages of Americans are not giving truthful answers when asked whether they would support a female presidential candidate. We find that roughly 26 percent of the public is “angry or upset” by a female president. Moreover, this level of dissatisfaction is consistent across several demographic groups.

We begin by briefly examining the history of survey results regarding questions about support for a female president. Next, we look at the propensity of social desirability effects on surveys and lay out our research design. After reporting the findings, we discuss the implications of our results.

Support for Female Presidential Candidates

In 1937, seventeen years after women obtained the vote, and at a time when only a very few women had been elected to public office primarily to temporarily replace their husbands, George Gallup thought to ask a national sample of the American public if they would vote for a woman for president. Asked “would you vote for a woman for president if she were qualified in every other respect,” 33 percent responded affirmatively. Since the latter part of the 1940s, Gallup has periodically asked the public “if your party nominated a woman for president, would you vote for her if she were qualified for the job?” The General Social Survey also asked the same question in a series of polls between 1972 and 1998. As figure 1 illustrates, the number of people who state they would vote for a qualified female presidential candidate from their party has grown steadily. A 2005 Gallup poll finds that 92 percent of the public answered “yes.” Similar results exist in another Gallup question that does not specifically ask whether the respondent would support a female presidential candidate from *their* party. When asked, “would you, personally, vote for a qualified woman for president, or not?” 86 percent of the public said they would (Page 2005). However, not everyone is convinced that the playing field has been completely leveled for women in presidential politics (Kennedy 2003). A recent study by Lawless (2004) finds evidence that in the aftermath of the 9–11 attacks, voters now express less confidence in women to handle national defense issues which may

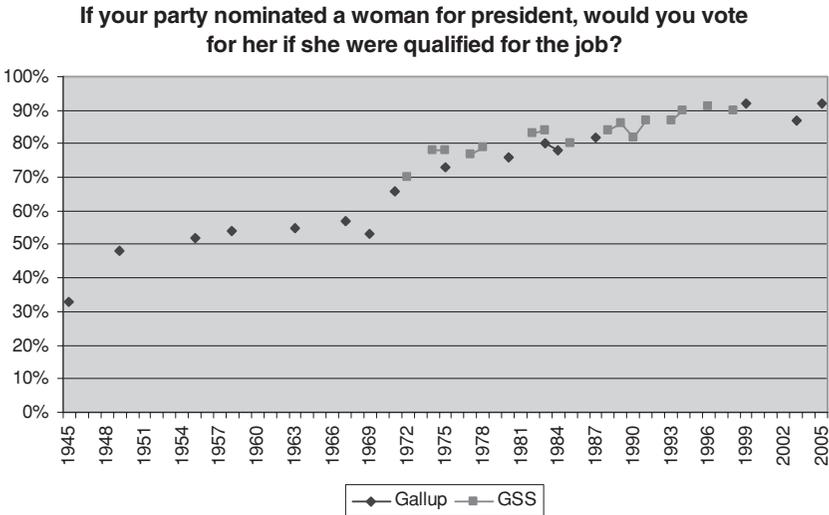


Figure 1. Public Support for a Woman President 1945–2005.

translate into less support for a female president. Nevertheless, the overriding trends in public opinion data point to greater receptivity on the part of the US public toward the idea of supporting a woman as president (Dolan 2004).

Social Desirability Effects on Surveys

The preceding evidence indicates that the United States might indeed be ready for a female president. However, the possibility of people hiding their true preferences on surveys is a constant worry for pollsters. It is not so much a concern that people are giving untruthful responses purposely to distort the findings of a survey (as newspaper columnist Mike Royko once suggested they do regarding exit polls), but that they are not giving honest answers to conform with societal norms and not be embarrassed by their responses. Indeed, there is a long line of research that indicates that participants provide socially acceptable responses to survey questions. For instance, studies find that people say they voted when in fact they did not (Katosh and Traugott 1981; Silver, Anderson, and Abramson 1986; Presser 1990) or say they voted for the winner when they did not (Wright 1990, 1993). It is also common for respondents to overreport church attendance. (Hadaway, Marler, and Chaves 1993; Smith 1998).

Nowhere is social desirability more of a problem than when respondents are asked their opinions on controversial issues, such as race and gender. Numerous studies note that the interviewer's race or ethnicity influences an interviewee's responses (see, for example, Schuman and Converse (1971); Cotter, Cohen, and Coulter (1982); Weeks and Moore (1981); Reese et al. (1986)). However,

evidence of social desirability goes far beyond interviewer effects. Berinsky (1999) finds that instead of expressing opposition to government efforts to integrate schools, people hide their true feelings and answer “don’t know.” In the 1970s, when it was more socially acceptable for people to say that they opposed government efforts at school integration, social desirability effects were not as present (Berinsky 2002). Krysan (1998) also finds support for the social desirability hypothesis. When privacy of the interview decreased (i.e., a face-to-face interview instead of a mail survey), white respondents provided significantly different answers regarding support for racial policies.

Furthermore, preelection survey questions on vote choice confirm the social desirability hypothesis. The 1989 Virginia governor’s race featured African-American Douglas Wilder and his white opponent Marshall Coleman. Wilder led Coleman by a wide margin for much of the campaign but only ended up winning narrowly. A week prior to the election the *Washington Post* released a poll indicating Wilder held a commanding 15 point lead, and two days before the vote was held a *Richmond Times Dispatch* poll showed Wilder ahead of Coleman 45 percent to 36 percent. Nevertheless, the actual results revealed that Wilder barely defeated Coleman, 50.1 percent to 49.8 percent, the closest margin ever in a Virginia gubernatorial election (Jeffries 2000). Many analysts suggested that some white voters may not have been truthful with survey interviewers about their feelings toward Wilder because they felt social pressure to support a black candidate. Finkel, Guterback, and Borg (1991) validate this claim empirically.

Berinsky (1999) comes to a similar conclusion regarding the 1989 New York City mayoral election between Democrat David Dinkins and Republican Rudolph Giuliani. Dinkins had a sizable lead over Giuliani just days before the election, but won by less than two percentage points. According to Berinsky, this shift in voting occurred because Giuliani voters did not express their support for the Republican candidate for fear of being perceived as anti-black (Dinkins is African American); instead, many respondents hid their true preferences in the preelection surveys and answered “don’t know.”¹

While issues of race may be the most susceptible to social desirability problems, evidence shows that issues related to gender are not immune. Interviewer effects also exist based on the sex of the interviewer (Kane and Macaulay 1993; Huddy et al. 1997). For example, male respondents offer significantly different answers to male and female interviewers on questions dealing with gender inequality in employment (Kane and Macaulay 1993). We contend that social desirability effects are found in questions about voting for a female presidential candidate. Because respondents will want to avoid appearing sexist, they will not express their true feelings about a female candidate, saying they would

1. The 1982 California gubernatorial election between Tom Bradley and George Deukmejian is another example where the black candidate had a significant lead in preelection polls. Unlike in the Wilder and Dinkins examples, however, Bradley lost the election.

support one when in fact they would not. Evidence indicates that this claim might be true. While 86 percent of respondents in a recent Gallup poll answered that they would vote for a “qualified woman for president,” 34 percent said that “most of my neighbors” would not vote for a female president (Page 2005). This result could be a sign that people are “hiding behind” their neighbors instead of stating their true preferences.

The List Experiment

We cannot know for sure whether the neighbor question is evidence of social desirability. After all, it is certainly plausible that 34 percent of people really do believe that their neighbors would not vote for a female president regardless of what their own views are on the subject. Fortunately, there is a much better measure to tease out whether people are telling the truth when asked if they would support a female president. We employ an unobtrusive measure called the “list experiment,” which allows us to get a more accurate picture of Americans’ true feelings about the prospect of a female president. The list experiment is certainly not new to political science. Scholars have used the list experiment to determine whether social desirability effects exist regarding race (Kuklinski, Cobb, and Gilens 1997; Kuklinski et al. 1997; Sniderman and Carmines 1997; Gilens, Sniderman, and Kuklinski 1998) and religion (Kane, Craig, and Wald 2004).

To conduct the list experiment we obtain two random samples of people. The first group (the baseline group) is asked *how many* of the following four statements make them “angry or upset.”²

1. The way gasoline prices keep going up.
2. Professional athletes getting million dollar-plus salaries.
3. Requiring seat belts to be used when driving.
4. Large corporations polluting the environment.³

The second group (the test group) is given a fifth statement:

5. A woman serving as president.

2. The statements were rotated.

3. These statements were taken from Kane, Craig, and Wald (2004). They are similar to the statements that Kuklinski and his colleagues employed in their studies (Kuklinski, Cobb, and Gilens 1997; Kuklinski et al 1997; Gilens, Sniderman, and Kuklinski 1998). Kuklinski and his colleagues used the statement “The federal government increasing taxes on gasoline” instead of “The way gasoline prices keep going up.” Also, Kane, Craig, and Wald added the statement “Requiring seat belts to be used when driving” to lessen the probability of a ceiling effect. If respondents felt “angry or upset” by all of the statements, the problem of social desirability is not combated because the interviewer would know exactly which statements made the person “angry or upset.” The greater number of statements provided lessens the probability that all of the statements will make the person upset, which lowers the probability of a ceiling effect.

Again, notice that respondents are asked to tell us only *how many* of the statements make them “angry or upset,” not *which ones*. This eliminates the respondent’s concern about giving the socially desirable answer and allows the person to reply more honestly.

Because the two groups are randomly distributed, the mean number of “angry” responses to the first four statements should be the same for both the baseline and test groups; therefore, any increase in the mean number of angry items in the test group must be attributed to the “woman serving as president” statement. We then determine the percent angry by subtracting the average number of items in the baseline condition from the average number of items in the test condition and multiplying by 100. In other words, if the mean number of angry items in the baseline group is 2.5 and the mean number of angry items in the test group is 3.0, then half of the experimental group is angered by a woman serving as president ($3.0 - 2.5 \times 100$).

To implement the study, we added the list experiment question to an Opinion Research Corporation CARAVAN poll.⁴ The telephone poll was a national survey of Americans conducted on March 23–27, 2006. There were a total of 2056 respondents in the survey, roughly half of whom were assigned to the baseline group (1019) and half of whom were assigned to the test group (1037). While the two samples were randomly selected, we conducted an analysis to determine whether there were any statistically significant differences in the demographic characteristics of the groups. Tests based on sex, age, education, income, race and ethnicity, and region of the country showed no significant differences between the two groups.⁵

The Findings

Table 1 presents the mean number of angry responses in the baseline and test groups as well as the percent “angry or upset” about a female president. The results clearly show evidence of social desirability. Traditional polls find anywhere from about 5 percent to 15 percent of the public who say they will not vote for a female presidential candidate, but our results indicate that a significant percentage of people are hiding their true feelings on women

4. Opinion Research Corporation is a commercial research and consulting firm. In addition to the list experiment questions, the survey contained basic demographic information of the respondents. The minimum response rate for the survey was 5 percent; the cooperation rate was 22.8 percent. Regarding sampling, “Opinion Research Corporation utilizes an unrestricted random sampling procedure that controls the amount of serial bias found in systematic sampling to generate its random-digit-dial sample. The sample is fully replicated and stratified by region. Only one interview is conducted per household. All sample numbers selected are subject to up to four attempts to complete an interview” (Opinion Research Corporation 2006).

5. Analysis available from authors upon request. While we could not test for partisan differences between the two groups, we think that differences are unlikely given the balance of the other demographics between the groups.

Table 1. Estimated Mean Level of Anger Over a Female President of the United States

	Baseline condition	Test condition	Percent "angry"
	2.16 (.03)	2.42 (.04)	26.0 (4.9)***
<i>N</i> =	1019	1037	

Numbers in parentheses are the standard errors of the estimates. "Percent 'Angry'" may not be the same as the difference between the baseline condition and the test condition due to rounding.

*** <.001.

president questions. Roughly 26 percent of the respondents expressed anger over a female president (difference of means p -value <.001), about a 10 percent to 20 percent difference between what traditional public opinion polls indicate.

While the difference of means for the entire sample is of interest, equally interesting is whether certain groups of people are more or less angry about a female president. We might think, for example, that men would be angrier about a female president than women. It is plausible that the prospect of a female president will be less problematic for people who are younger, more educated, or who have higher incomes because they are likely to be in situations where traditional gender roles are challenged. Perhaps a difference exists between those who live in the South compared to those who live in the North. Or, maybe a state's political culture matters; people who live in states with traditionalistic cultures will be more upset about a female president than those who live in individualistic or moralistic states (Elazar 1984). Past research has established that women are less likely to be elected in states with a traditionalistic political culture, while female candidates typically find greater success in moralistic states (Hill 1981; Nechemias 1987; Rule 1990).

As table 2 indicates, anger toward a female president is consistent across several groups, although no statistically significant differences exist between demographics within those groups (e.g., men versus women, south versus nonsouth).⁶ Equal percentages of males and females are upset about a female president, a result that should be disturbing to people who believe that females should be more supportive of female candidates. Regarding education, more than 23 percent of those without a bachelor's degree and more than 26 percent with at least a bachelor's degree are angered by a female president.⁷

6. We also looked at mean levels of anger by race and ethnicity. Roughly 12 percent of African Americans and 24 percent of Latinos are upset by a female president. However, neither difference of means is statistically significant. This may be attributed to the small number of cases in both instances. There are 81 African Americans in the baseline group and 86 in the test group. There are 60 Latinos in the baseline group and 56 in the test group.

7. We also tested the difference of means for just those people with post-graduate degrees, the rationale being that the most educated people might be less upset by a female president because they are most likely to encounter situations that reject sexist thought. Even among those peo-

Table 2. Estimated Mean Level of Anger over a Female President of the United States, by Various Demographics

Demographic	Baseline condition	Test condition	Percent "angry"
Female	2.25 (.05) 506 ^a	2.50 (.05) 525	25.6 (6.6) ^{***}
Male	2.08 (.05) 513	2.34 (.05) 512	26.0 (7.2) ^{***}
No BA Degree	2.29 (.04) 610	2.52 (.05) 643	23.2 (6.3) ^{***}
BA or above	1.99 (.05) 369	2.25 (.06) 375	26.4 (7.8) ^{***}
18–29 years old	2.04 (.08) 157	2.29 (.09) 150	24.9 (12.1)*
30–50 years old	2.05 (.05) 376	2.40 (.06) 334	35.9 (8.1) ^{***}
51–65 years old	2.27 (.08) 201	2.50 (.07) 228	22.2 (10.7)*
> 65 years old	2.34 (.07) 274	2.46 (.07) 312	12.3 (9.5)
Income <\$25,000	2.27 (.09) 157	2.54 (.09) 168	26.8 (12.2)*
\$25,000–\$49,999	2.43 (.06) 246	2.49 (.07) 238	6.5 (9.6)
\$50,000–\$99,999	2.11 (.06) 258	2.40 (.07) 267	28.8 (9.1)**
>\$100,000	2.02 (.10) 127	2.31 (.10) 136	29.3 (14.3)*
South	2.14 (.06) 290	2.46 (.07) 303	31.8 (9.3) ^{***}
Nonsouth	2.17 (.04) 729	2.41 (.04) 734	23.6 (5.8) ^{***}
Moralistic	2.18 (.06) 315	2.45 (.06) 319	26.7 (8.3)**
Individualistic	2.16 (.06) 336	2.40 (.07) 333	20.9 (8.8)*
Traditionalistic	2.15 (.06) 367	2.45 (.06) 383	30.2 (8.3) ^{***}

Numbers in parentheses are the standard errors of the estimates. "Percent 'Angry'" may not be the same as the difference between the baseline condition and the test condition due to rounding.

^a Number of cases.

*** <.001, ** <.01, * <.05.

Regarding age, a statistically significant difference of means exists between the baseline and test conditions for those 18–29 years old (24.87 percent angry, p -value < .05), 30–50 years old (35.90 percent angry, p -value < .001), and 51–65 (22.20 percent angry, p -value < .05). Only about 12 percent of those older than 65 express anger toward a female president, and the difference of means between the baseline and test groups is not statistically significant.

There are also significant percentages of people upset about a female president based on different household income levels. Only for those respondents whose household family income is in the \$25,000–\$49,999 category did we not find a statistically significant difference between the means of the baseline and test groups.⁸ For all other income groups large percentages of people are upset by the prospect of a female president (between 26.78 percent and 29.31 percent; p -values for all three groups < .05).

Finally, both southern and nonsouthern states express a statistically significant amount of anger at the thought of a female president (31.75 percent and 23.59 percent, respectively; p -values < .001). Likewise, there is a statistically significant amount of anger in states with traditionalistic (30.17 percent, p -value < .001), moralistic (26.74 percent, p -value < .01) and individualistic (20.87 percent, p -value < .05) political cultures.⁹

Some Caveats

While the preceding results are convincing, we must be cautious about how they are interpreted. Given the likelihood of at least one (and perhaps more than one) female candidate running for president in 2008, it is possible that the findings spell trouble for a female candidacy. However, we cannot make any conclusive claims about how the results will affect a female candidate's presidential bid because we did not ask a question about frequency or likelihood of voting. Perhaps the roughly 25 percent of the public who are angered by a female president are nonvoters, which would then have little impact on a female's candidacy. It is highly unlikely that this is the case, though, given the fact that we see anger across different demographics including those groups who are more likely to vote (e.g., the educated, those with higher incomes). It is

ple with post-graduate degrees roughly 24 percent of people are upset by a female president (p -value < .1)

8. We have no plausible explanation for this result (or for the previous result of people 65 years and older). One reviewer pointed out these results are most likely due to random error.

9. There is one notable omission from the above analysis. Unfortunately the CARAVAN poll does not ask a party identification question. We cannot rule out the possibility that those respondents who express anger are more likely to be Republican, but we think that this result is probably unlikely. We find consistently strong levels of anger among many groups, some of whom are more likely to be Republicans and some of whom are more likely to be Democrats. Still, we cannot rule out the possibility that party identification has an effect on the percentages of people expressing anger.

also plausible that if people are angered by the potential for a female president, they might mobilize to vote for the first time. Some may question whether being “angry or upset” about a female candidate is the same thing as not voting for a female candidate, but even skeptics of rational choice theory would find it hard to believe that people would purposely do something they know will make them mad! Furthermore, Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen (2000) find that anxiety often influences vote choice. Finally, even if we cannot say anything about the prospects of a female presidential candidate’s success in 2008, at a minimum our findings indicate that the results of survey questions asking about a female presidential candidate overreport support for such a candidacy.

Also, some readers may be worried about the “Hillary effect” (or, for that matter, the “Condi effect”). Twenty years ago, a generic question about voting for a female presidential candidate was faceless; there were no legitimate female presidential candidates. Today, the political landscape is much different. While Clinton has yet to formally announce that she is running for president as of this writing, it is clear that she is considering the possibility. Moreover, people believe she is considering it. If that is the case, then when we ask about a female president, people might think of Clinton. In other words, they might not be angered by a female president, but they would be angered by *that specific female candidate*. Given that we do not have a party identification variable, it is difficult to test whether a “Hillary effect” is occurring. However, at least one recent poll asked a generic question about whether a person would vote for a “qualified woman for president” and find high levels of support (Page 2005). If a “Hillary effect” were present, this poll would suffer from it as well.¹⁰

Likewise, some may have reservations about our findings because the Gallup question asks whether people would vote for a female candidate if their party nominated one. Prior research shows that partisanship and ideology are much stronger predictors of vote choice than is the gender of the candidate (Dolan 2004). Someone might say, for example, “I don’t really want a female president, but I’d rather a female Democratic president than a male Republican president.” This is certainly plausible, but negative emotions are often associated with greater defections from party voting (Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000). Furthermore, questions that make no mention of party and just ask whether people would support a “qualified woman for president” indicate that people would. In other words, the fact that most questions ask about a female candidate from a respondent’s political party and we fail to do so should not be a major concern.

10. Ideally we would have been able to control for the “Hillary or Condi effects” by including feeling thermometer questions for both in the model. Unfortunately, feeling thermometers for Clinton and Rice did not exist on the CARAVAN survey. However, the fact that surveys conducted at the same time as ours find strong support for a “qualified female president” lessens the concern about the effects of Clinton and Rice.

Discussion and Conclusion

We find significant evidence of social desirability when it comes to answering questions about support for a female president, and it may be the case that the results are even stronger than they appear. We purposely set the bar high to test for social desirability effects by using the same phrase (“angry or upset”) as previous research that used the list experiment (Kuklinski, Cobb, and Gilens 1997; Kuklinski et al. 1997; Sniderman and Carmines 1997; Gilens, Sniderman, and Kuklinski 1998; Kane, Craig, and Wald 2004). We could have used the phrases “concerned” or “opposed” and found even larger differences in the means between the baseline and test groups. As Kuklinski et al. (1998) write in their study examining racial prejudice and opposition to a black family moving next door:

To oppose the idea of a black family moving in next door is surely a sign of prejudice, and presumably more respondents will oppose it than actually become angry over it. In other words, in focusing on reactions of anger, we have selected a test-criterion that sets a high threshold and thus underestimates the prevalence of prejudice among whites (413).

The same can be said regarding feelings about a female president.¹¹

Furthermore, while we used five statements in the test group to help combat ceiling effects, it is possible that they still exist to an extent. Roughly 12 percent of the respondents in the test group answered “four” when asked how many of the statements made them angry or upset. By answering “five,” they would not be able to conceal their feelings about a female president.¹² Therefore, it is likely that the number of people who are angry about a female president is actually a few percentage points higher than what our findings suggest.

We believe the findings in this paper have implications both regarding the future of women in political office and the accuracy of public opinion polls. First, while women candidates seem to be making some strides in races for many offices including executive positions like governor, the office of the presidency still may be out of reach. Even as other countries, including Germany and Chile, have elected their first female heads of government, the United States may not do so any time soon. It may be a positive that societal norms regarding a female president seem to be changing. The fact that people apparently no longer feel comfortable giving their true preferences about a female president could be seen as a sign of progress; unfortunately that progress is occurring slowly. On the other hand, simply because citizens are more hesitant to express hostility toward a woman president does not mean this sentiment will translate as readily when they privately cast their ballots. Previous assertions that if qualified women were

11. See Kuklinski et al (1997) for more on the defense of using the phrase “angry or upset.”

12. Because of concern over ceiling effects, Kuklinski and his colleagues created statements in the baseline condition that make it unlikely that a respondent will be upset by all of them (see Sniderman and Grob 1996). Nonetheless, it is unlikely that ceiling effects have been completely eliminated.

to emerge as viable presidential candidates they would not face large pockets of discrimination among the electorate need to be reassessed. Moreover, as Kennedy (2003) points out, even if a small fraction of the population is resistant to the idea of voting for a woman president this fact could still tip the balance against the female candidate in a close election. Given that the number is much higher than the traditional surveys indicate, there is reason to think that aspiring female presidential contenders have a steeper hill to climb many observers believe.

Equally disturbing is that this opposition is consistent across numerous groups of people. Some of the demographic groups that have been documented as most supportive of women candidates in public opinion polls appear to be concealing their unease toward a woman in the White House. Just as liberals are less likely to support affirmative action than they claim in traditional surveys (Sniderman and Carmines 1997), women, younger people and the highly educated are less sympathetic to the idea of a female president when the pressure to conform to social norms is not heightened.

Second, we certainly are not implying that polls are always wrong and that they cannot measure people's true opinions. On most issues most of the time, scientifically conducted polls are extremely accurate. But this paper is another in a long line of research that suggests that when the question deals with a sensitive issue, those findings must be approached with caution. There is a natural tendency for individuals to express opinions that are congruent with the norm of gender equality. Polls asking whether a respondent is willing to vote for a woman president are likely to produce artificially high levels of support simply because many persons do not wish to be seen as possessing attitudes that are discriminatory toward women. Traditional approaches to survey research are simply ill equipped to unearth this reality. This study further illustrates the value of employing the list experiment to explore research questions that involve the domains of race and gender.

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