Mothers on the ballot: gender and partisan dynamics in the evaluation of maternal political candidates

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Abstract

While scholarly research on the interaction between gender and political candidacy has grown in recent years, there is limited research on the way mothers are perceived in politics when they choose to run for office. The goal of this paper is to answer the following research question: How do partisanship and gender influence the public perception of mothers running for political office? The following question attempts to provide more insight into the underlying drivers of these perceptions: To what extent does social desirability shape these attitudes? Using a list experiment, this paper surveyed individuals in the United States to capture their beliefs toward mothers running for political office. It also examined survey participants' attitudes toward mothers running for public office, focusing on the candidate's party affiliation (Republican or Democratic) and level of office (federal or local). Furthermore, this study analyzed how the survey respondents' party affiliation and gender affected their perspective on mothers running for office. The findings revealed that, without the social desirability bias, almost one-third of participants reported feeling angry or upset toward mothers running for office. However, a much smaller number of participants revealed such feelings when asked directly. This finding suggested potential bias against mothers pursuing political careers and highlights the limitations of surveys in capturing accurate attitudes.

Keywords: mothers in politics, social desirability bias, list experiment, gender stereotypes, partisan perceptions, voter bias

1 INTRODUCTION

In early 2025, an image quickly gained public attention: Elon Musk, appointed co-leader of the U.S. Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), carrying his son on his shoulders while in a meeting with President Donald Trump in the Oval Office, blending paternal imagery with political authority. CNN described this moment as "humanizing" because it allowed the public to learn more about his private life[1]. As a man holding a high-level political office in the U.S., he received very little pushback for showcasing his fatherhood. Instead, he was praised for being a father as well as a leader. In addition, the public responded positively to former President Barack Obama's journey as a father and as president. Obama would consistently discuss the important role of fathers, and people would engage with and respond to his remarks[2]. The public celebration of men as political figures and fathers stands in contrast to the challenges faced by mothers in politics.

When women in politics showcase their motherhood, they are oftentimes criticized for attempting to balance leadership and caregiving. For example, Anna Paulina Luna, U.S. representative for Florida's 13th Congressional District, received backlash when she advocated for proxy voting accommodations for new parents in Congress. Marjorie Taylor Greene, former U.S. Representative, said, "Being in Congress is a privilege. You don't have to be here, and there are plenty of people in her district that could serve in Congress if she chose time to be home and be a mother"[3]. This expresses the sentiment that mothers should give up their congressional jobs to stay home and take care of their children. Beyond this example, mothers in political spaces are frequently questioned about their qualifications, priorities, and overall ability to do the work that holding public office requires. There is a double standard that exists for who is able to hold public office. This double standard comes from the long history of biases that people have exerted on women and mothers. Fatherhood enhances the image of male politicians, establishing caring public persona. In contrast, motherhood can complicate the perception of female politicians because voters may question whether family responsibilities will interfere

with their ability to fulfill the demands of public office.

This paper examined the beliefs of the public toward mothers running for political office to develop a clearer understanding of what the public perceptions look like. In the literature review, the paper discussed the gender effect in terms of gender stereotypes, voter perceptions, gender socialization, and political ambition. The analysis of gender and partisanship treated both variables as equally important, focusing on both their individual and combined effects on public perceptions. The term gender effect refers to the influence that gender stereotypes have on how voters perceive political candidates. Furthermore, the premise of the gender effect is the extent to which female candidates are judged more harshly than their male counterparts. The paper also explored the partisanship effect along with identity politics, party values, conservative traditions, gender roles, the Democratic Party, and inclusivity. In this case, the partisanship effect refers to the influence that being a Democrat or a Republican has on an individual and how this may change their views toward mothers holding political office. Moreover, this study also considers the concept of gendered offices and gender norms through local offices and election dynamics.

The findings revealed that, without the social desirability bias, almost one-third of participants demonstrated feeling angry or upset toward mothers running for office. However, a much smaller number of participants revealed such feelings when asked directly. Not only does this provide insight into the gender biases, but it also shows the willingness of people to hide their true opinions in public discourse.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Gender Effect

2.1.1 Gender Stereotypes and Voter Perceptions

Masculinity is the hegemonic gender role. Okimoto[4] asserted that, "Power and power seeking, in particular, are central to the constructs of agency and masculinity. Thus, these gender stereotypes make women appear less suited to powerful roles, as they are assumed to lack agency required for leadership"[4]. The idea of power is the focal point of politics, so when a candidate does not fit within the power-seeking description, it is less likely that the public will support them. Since this trait is at the center of masculinity, it is difficult for women to acquire these characteristics.

Huddy and Terkildsen[5] discussed the impact of the public's perceptions of candidates' gender on candidate electability. The paper highlighted that voters interpreted female candidates to have traits such as warmth and expressivity and male candidates to have traits of competency and rationality. The traits that voters assign to candidates based on their ideas about gender are very likely to impact the issues that they believe the candidates can solve. In addition, these beliefs are connected to partisanship, as traits stereotypically associated with women, such as compassion, are often perceived as aligning more closely with liberal and democratic identities. However, this phenomena extends beyond the traits voters think candidates have based on their gender. For example, a study conducted in 1993 showed how the Democratic Party has been more adept at dealing with domestic and social welfare issues, while the GOP has been more willing to handle inflation and economic issues. This illustrates how the Democratic Party is more accepting of female candidates as they embrace the traits that are typically associated with females. These ideas ultimately impact the type of offices and platforms that female politicians are perceived as qualified to pursue across parties.

2.1.2 Gender Socialization and Political Ambition

While the public perception of candidates is highly important, especially in a democratic electoral system, the perceptions that men and women have about themselves when running for office also impact their political outcomes. Gender socialization is a lifelong process that teaches individuals to behave in ways that align with their gender. Coffé[6] explained that "This socialization may contribute to women's lower levels of political engagement with differences in political attitudes and participation beginning early in life and continuing over the life course"[6]. Political outcomes are not only influenced by how the public views candidates, but also how the candidates view themselves. Lawless and Fox[7] wrote that women are underrepresented in politics because they are less likely to consider running for office, less likely to run for office, less likely to believe they are qualified for office, less likely to be encouraged by others to run for office, and more likely to view the political world as competitive and biased. Socially constructed gender norms, such as expectations that women should be nurturing and risk-averse, have shaped how women are evaluated and how they evaluate themselves. These norms persist in modern-day politics, where they not only discourage women from viewing themselves as qualified candidates but also shape how voters assess female candidates.

Political ambition is a personal trait that is affected by the process of gender socialization and is often reflected in an individual's willingness to seek elected office. Bledsoe[8] discussed the paradox that exists between ambitious men and women. Among men, those who are ambitious are high-achieving and more likely to run for office, pursue more competitive races, and seek advancement to higher-level positions than men who are not as ambitious. On the other hand, ambitious women are not more likely to seek higher office, and in some cases are even less likely to do so than women

with lower levels of ambition. This counterintuitive pattern reflects a gendered paradox in political ambition. One explanation for this occurrence is that "Women may be socialized to disavow ambition because ambitious women are seen as 'pushy' even though this trait may be admired in males. Hence, women deny that pursuit of elected office is to further their careers and claim they desire only to serve the community"[8]. Consistent with this, Lawless and Fox[7] found that men were almost twice as likely as women to have thought about running for office multiple times. Together, this suggests that women's political ambition is inhibited by structural, cultural, and sociological barriers that not only discourage them but also shape how their ambition is expressed and acted upon.

2.2 The Partisanship Effect

2.2.1 Identity Politics and Party Values

The perceptions of women's participation in politics are also impacted by the partisanship factor. In this paper, the partisanship factor refers to the way that a candidate's alignment with a certain political party impacts public perception of the candidate. The two major political parties in the U.S., the Republicans and Democrats, have their own values and beliefs that influence perceptions of women within their own party lines. Shutt[9] explained how a party's willingness to engage in identity politics is an important factor that provides insight into how the party operates on an internal level. In this case, identity politics refers to the party's adoption of specific gender ideologies. By analyzing the ways that the political parties choose to interact with gender-related identity politics, their values can be better perceived. To begin with, the Republican Party is one of conserving its customs. Republicans' traditionalism extends into the issues they vote on and into the way they structure their party. The GOP uses identity politics to unite around its conservative ideals. For example, as of November 2024, data showed that almost half of Republican men and almost 40% of Republican women believe that women should return to their traditional roles in society[10]. Despite the GOP's recent diversification of its constituent base, its identity politics have, for the most part, connected mainly to white identity politics and religion. During the 2018, 2020, and 2022 elections, there was a clear group of voters for the Republican Party: white evangelical protestants. Hartig[11] illustrated the following numbers for white evangelical Protestants who voted for Republican candidates in the 2018, 2020, and 2022 elections: 81%, 83%, and 86%, respectively.

2.2.2 Conservative Tradition and Gender Roles

Bjork-James[12] argued that "the main theological emphasis in post-civil rights era white evangelicalism is on the supremacy of the heterosexual, male-headed nuclear family"[12]. This framework was reinforced by famous singer and entertainer Anita Bryant's anti-LGBTQ activism in the 1970s, and has contributed to a robust historical connection between evangelical values and the modern Republican Party[13]. These values promote traditional gender roles that position men as leaders and women as primary caregivers at home. As a result, women who pursue political office may face both cultural and ideological barriers within these communities because their candidacy can be seen as conflicting with expectations of family-centered and subordinate roles. Religiously-rooted norms continue to shape voter perceptions and women's political ambition in modern-day Republican politics.

Although these norms may discourage women from pursuing political office, they do not prevent women from running or holding positions within the Republican Party. For example, prominent figures such as Nikki Haley and Sarah Palin exhibit that women can and do succeed in conservative politics. However, their experiences do not negate the broader cultural expectations that shape women's roles within these communities.

2.2.3 The Democratic Party, Inclusivity, and Intersectionality

On the other hand, the Democratic Party is generally associated with support for structural policy reforms. For example, a study conducted in 2023 showed that over 80% of Democrats supported the idea of changing the American electoral system, compared to only 47% of Republicans (Pew Research Center 2023). An example of these changes includes how eight in ten Democrats think the U.S. should replace the Electoral College with a popular vote system, compared to only 46% of Republicans[14].

Unlike the conservative values that are present in the GOP, the liberal values in the Democratic Party tend to emphasize inclusivity. In this context, intersectionality refers to how overlapping identities, such as race and gender, shape individuals' political experiences and preferences. The effect of intersectionality within the Democratic Party is much more pronounced than within the GOP. For example, Kim and Junn[15] mentioned, "Thus, overwhelming support for candidates of the Democratic Party among women of color should be understood as their collective expressions to fight against racial and gender inequality in the US"[15]. Along the same lines, Barnes[16] noted that, "The Democratic Party is known as a coalition party with many diverse internal constituencies, whereas Republicans are governed by a culture that values singular identi-

fication with the party and conformity with the party platform and eschews special-interest claims"[16]. The internal constituencies are groups that allow individuals to express their concerns while attempting to find policy-driven solutions.

Meanwhile, the GOP is more unified in its ideological approaches, making it less about special interests and more about strong loyalty to the party. Barnes[16] also emphasized that "Women in the Democratic Party have played a more active role in shaping policy and the party platform given its greater acceptance of special-interest claims, and male Democrats at the national level have largely embraced this women's rights policy agenda"[16]. For example, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) has played a visible role in shaping the contemporary Democratic Party. AOC's advocacy for progressive initiatives, such as the Green New Deal and the expansion of social welfare policies, illustrates how women in the Democratic Party can emphasize specific policy priorities. Women's political participation being higher in the Democratic Party than the GOP is not a matter of respect for women, but about the institutional space for women to advance their policy agendas.

2.3 Gendered Offices

2.3.1 Gender Norms and Local Office Stereotypes

Brechenmacher[17] revealed that in 2018, women only held 19.8% of the seats in U.S. Congress and that this was also a pattern at the state and local levels. However, Bernick and Heidbreder[18] discussed how women are overrepresented in county clerk positions. The responsibilities in these roles, such as recordkeeping, filing, and completing paperwork before elections, closely align with broader gender norms that associate women with organization and detail-oriented work. These expectations are rooted in the same socialization processes that frame women as caretakers, extending beyond the home into the workplace with roles that emphasize assistance rather than leadership. As a result, positions like county clerk may be viewed as more acceptable for women because they mirror longstanding stereotypes which portray women as suited for administrative tasks. The U.S. Census[19] reported that in 2019, 97% of secretary and administrative assistant jobs were held by women. The presence of women in local offices fits the rigid stereotypes that society has developed over time and these roles are positively reinforced through promotions within the same local offices.

Offices on the federal and local levels both have agendas that they are trying to achieve. However, higher-level offices tend to enact their agendas and make their decisions much more deliberately. The legislative process tends to include a lot more internal deliberations, analysis, and legal considerations[20]. However, on a more local level, the agendas that need to be accomplished are a lot more task-driven. Fox and Schuhmann[21] mentioned that "women committee chairs in state legislatures were much more task oriented than their male counterparts"[21].Even in higher-level offices, women are still undertaking the minute tasks that form the bigger picture. This reflects the existing gender norms that continue to push more women to be assigned roles that require skills tied to administrative tasks. Even in federal offices, where the decision-making processes are more analytical, women continue to take on tasks that reflect secretarial roles.

2.3.2 Election Dynamics

Patterns in electoral outcomes vary across levels of office and election contexts. Anzia[22] mentions the advantages that women and men have in local elections, specifically in mayoral, city council, and school board elections. In mayoral elections, women are slightly disadvantaged when the elections happen during the off-cycle, midterm, and presidential elections. However, for city council and school board elections, women are advantaged in the previously mentioned three types of election timing sessions[22]. However, an important limitation is that women do not run for office at the same rate as men, meaning that electoral outcomes may partly reflect candidate emergence rather than solely voter preference. Deckman[23] explained, "Locally elected women place greater emphasis on cooperation and communication, and, as a result, spend more time with their constituents"[23]. This reinforces the perception of women as compassionate and people-centered leaders.

Women on school boards is an especially interesting phenomenon. Deckman[23] mentioned that female and male candidates did not differ much when it came to the rates at which they won their elections. However, she also explained that these elections set women up for success. The main goal of running for a school board is to help implement policies that address the needs and concerns of children[23]. Therefore, having children, as most school board candidates do, is an asset that can help an individual's election prospects due to their knowledge about children's needs. An interesting point made by Sparks[24] is that women's positions on school boards are oftentimes quiet, non-aggressive, and focused on building a consensus rather than being a stern leader.

3 THEORY

3.1 The Intersection of Partisanship, Gender and Gendered Offices

Women candidates still face significant barriers to success, especially among Republicans, male voters, and when seeking leadership roles in high-level political offices. Throughout the literature review, three main parts were discussed: the gender effect, the partisanship effect, and gendered offices. These concepts combine to explain how the political participation of mothers is affected by their own gender and political party affiliation, as well as the gender and political party affiliation of voters. The theory section contextualizes three hypotheses in the next section.

The first hypothesis that is derived from the literature review and analyzed in the experiment is the following: Republicans are more likely to be angry or upset at mothers running for office because of the traditional values that the political party embodies. Conservatism includes traditional gender roles where women are solely caretakers and men are the main breadwinners in their families. These restricting gender expectations can create resistance to the idea of women working and especially seeking positions in public office, because when this happens, the woman is challenging their "primary responsibility" of being at home taking care of the children. Therefore, when mothers announce that they are going to run for office, many conservative voters see this as a challenge to their traditional values.

The second hypothesis is: male voters are more likely to be angry or upset at mothers running for office. These reactions could be associated with broader attitudes about gender and leadership. The identities of being a woman and a mother are concepts that have always been intertwined due to biological and sociological influences; therefore, women are automatically assumed to have feminine traits and an ethic of care. These perceptions of women lead to the conclusion that they should solely focus on being caregivers.

The third hypothesis is: political offices on a higher level are viewed as spaces that should be filled by male leadership; meanwhile, offices on a more local level are viewed by the public as ones that can potentially be led by women. Positions in office, such as governor or president, are perceived as ones that need stereotypically masculine traits, such as authority and strength. Meanwhile, school board and municipal-level offices are perceived to need leaders with qualities of compassion and attentiveness; therefore, women are seen as more fit candidates for these roles.

4 RESEARCH DESIGN

4.1 Social Desirability Bias

Social expectations inadvertently lead individuals to adapt their beliefs about certain topics to fit in with the "socially acceptable" answer; this phenomenon is called the social desirability bias. This concept does not pertain to one area of life, but rather can be observed everywhere. People tend to present themselves in a way that makes them seem favorable to other people. This concept means that voters will underreport their levels of stereotypes against women candidates.

The paper used a list experiment to determine what people's beliefs about mothers in politics are without the social desirability bias skewing the results. A list experiment measures participants' true attitudes while attempting not to activate their social desirability biases. Through a list experiment, the control group receives a list of four non-sensitive statements, and they are asked to say how many make them angry. Then, a treatment group receives the same four non-sensitive statements with an additional sensitive statement and is asked the same question. By doing this, the social desirability bias is minimized since participants do not have to directly mention whether the sensitive statement makes them angry. The following section illustrates the research design of the experiment and presents five hypotheses based on previous understanding of the topic.

4.2 Hypotheses

Based on the previous literature, five hypotheses, as seen in Table 1, were created about the relationship between voter preconceived notions and candidates running for office.

4.3 Variables

The independent variables in this list experiment include whether the candidate is presented as a mother, the political party with which the mother is affiliated (Republican or Democratic), and the level of political office sought (local school board). These conditions were included to assess whether a participant's emotional reactions vary based on motherhood status, partisan affiliation, and office context. The dependent variable is the number of statements that participants reported as making them angry or upset. Additionally, the analysis considers moderating variables, including participants' partisanship and gender, to examine how these characteristics shape responses to the experimental conditions.

4.4 Procedure

First, the participants were recruited through Cint Theorem, a system that provides respondents who are quota-

Hypothesis	Title	Statement
H1	Overall Public Sentiment	Overall, the public is not highly angry about the concept of mothers running for political office.
H2	Social Desirability Bias	Participants will exhibit social desirability bias in their responses.
H3	Participant Gender	Female participants will report lower levels of anger toward mothers running for political office than male participants.
H4	Participant Partisanship	Republican participants will report higher levels of anger toward mothers running for political office than Democratic participants.
H5	Gendered Offices Hypothesis	Participants will report lower levels of anger toward a mother running for a school board position than toward a mother running for a higher-level political office.

Table 1 Research Hypotheses.

matched to census data on gender, age, ethnicity, and geographic region. This service provided a representative sample that could be extrapolated from. To better understand the sample that was obtained, the data was divided based on gender and party affiliation. When the data is divided by gender, 544 individuals identified as female. Meanwhile, 391 individuals identified as male. When the data was analyzed by party affiliation, 208 individuals identified as Republican, 201 identified as Democratic, 181 individuals said they were Independent, and 345 individuals said that they identified with another political party. Then, the individuals were randomly assigned to a control group or one of the four treatment groups. The individuals in the control group were asked to read the statements to see which ones made them angry or upset (Appendix 1, Question 1). Next, they were asked to read the treatment statements (Appendix 1, Question 2) and then rank their feelings of anger on a scale (Appendix 1, Question 3). It is important to note that, as Table 2 shows, if a participant said anything other than "Not angry/upset at all," they would be considered angry/upset. The individuals in the first treatment group were assigned the set of statements containing "mothers running for political office" (Appendix 1, Question 4). Meanwhile, the second treatment group was assigned the set of statements including, "Mothers running for the Republican presidential nomination" (Appendix 1, Question 5). On the other hand, the third treatment group was assigned the set of statements, including the statement, "Mothers running to be the Democratic presidential nominee" (Appendix 1, Question 6). Conversely, the fourth treatment group was assigned the statement group containing "Mothers running for positions on the local school board" (Appendix 1, Question 7).

5 RESULTS

To successfully conduct the analysis described in the previous paragraph, the study asked those in the control group to say how many of the statements in Appendix 1, Question 2 made them angry/upset. Figure 1 shows the scale that the participants could use to express how angry or upset the statements made them feel.

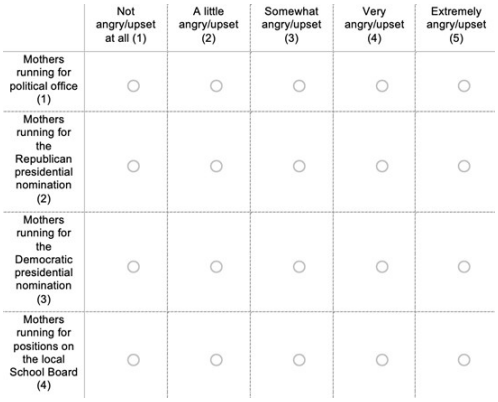

Figure 1. Scale for Emotions Regarding Statements

The study analyzes responses from 935 participants to see how many people reacted to statements about mothers running for political office with feelings of anger or being upset. By using unpaired t-tests, the analysis measured the differences between the control group and various treatment groups (with results considered significant if $p < 0.05$). In this context, the "mean" refers to the average number of statements that made participants feel upset within each group.

5.1 Overall Public Sentiment

The mean for the control group was 1.68, and the means of the treatment groups varied; however, there were mean differences among all four groups and the control group. For the statement found in Appendix 1, Question 4 ("Mothers running for political office"), the mean was 1.98, which indicates that, without the social desirability bias, 30% of the sample are angry or upset with mothers running for political office. For the statement in Appendix 1, Question 5 ("Mothers running for

the Republican presidential nomination"), the mean for this condition was 2.03, which means that 35% of the sample are angered or upset by this statement. For the statement in Appendix 1, Question 6 ("Mothers running to be the Democratic presidential nominee"), the mean was 1.88; therefore, 20% of the sample are angry or upset with the idea of a mother running for the Democratic presidential nomination. For the statement found in Appendix 1, Question 7 ("Mothers running for positions on the local school board"), the mean was 1.90, which means that 22% of the sample are angry or upset with the idea of mothers running for positions on the local school board. The social desirability bias was evident for all four statements (Table 2). For the statement in Appendix 1, Question 4 ("Mothers running for political office"), only 12.03% of the control sample reported feeling angry/upset, compared to 30% in the list experiment. Moreover, for Appendix 1, Question 5 ("Mothers running for the Republican presidential nomination"), 19.02% of the control sample expressed sentiments of anger or upset toward the statement, compared to the list experiment where 35% of the sample reported feeling angry/upset. In addition, for the statement in Appendix 1, Question 6 ("Mothers running for the Democratic presidential nomination"), only 14.76% of participants reported feeling angry/upset at the statement, compared to the list experiment where 20% of the sample were angry/upset with the statement. Furthermore, for Appendix 1, Question 7 ("Mothers running for positions on the local school board"), only 9.3% of the participants reported feeling upset or angry, compared to the 22% of the list experiment sample that were angry/upset with the statement.

5.2 Participant Gender

This section is a subgroup analysis that examines participant gender to determine if self-assigned females or males have lower or higher levels of anger toward the four different sensitive statements (Table 3).

5.2.1 Participant gender: Female

The mean value for female participants in the control group was 1.79. For female participants who were assigned to the statement in Appendix 1, Question 4, the mean was 1.82 Without the social desirability bias, 3% of female participants were angry/upset at this statement. In addition, the mean for female participants in the statement in Appendix 1, Question 5, was 2.20, which means that 41% of participants in this group were angry/upset at the statement. Furthermore, the mean for female participants in the statement in Appendix 1, Question 6 was 2.02, which means that 23% of the participants were angry/upset at the statement. Moreover, the mean for female participants assigned to the statement in Appendix 1, Question 7 was 2.10, showing that 31% of the participants in this group were upset at the statement.

5.2.2 Participant gender: Male

The mean value for male participants in the control group was 1.65. For male participants who were assigned the statement in Appendix 1, Question 4, the mean was 2.30; therefore, 65% of participants in this group were angry/upset at the statement. Additionally, the male participant mean for the statement in Appendix 1, Question 5 was 1.96, which means that 31% of participants in this group were angry/upset at the statement. Moreover, the mean for male participants in the statement in Appendix 1, Question 6 was 1.90, which means that 25% of participants in the group were angry/upset at the statement. Furthermore, the mean for male participants in the statement in Appendix 1, Question 7 was 1.76, and therefore, 11% of participants were angry/upset at the statement.

5.3 Participant Partisanship

This section is a subgroup analysis looking into the participant partisanship. This section analyzes whether self-assigned Democrats or Republicans have lower or higher levels of anger toward the four different sensitive statements (Table 4).

5.3.1 Participant partisanship: Republican

The mean value for Republicans in the control group is 1.61. Meanwhile, the mean of those who identified as Republicans and were assigned the statement in Appendix 1, Question 4 was 1.86, meaning that, without the social desirability bias, 25% of Republican participants were angry/upset at this statement. In addition, the mean value for Republicans in the statement in Appendix 1, Question 5 was 1.81, so 20% of the participants were angry/upset at the statement. Moreover, the mean value for Republicans in the statement in Appendix 1, Question 6 was 1.99, which means that 38% of Republican respondents were angry/upset at this statement. Additionally, the mean value for the Republicans' statement in Appendix 1, Question 7 was 1.76, which means that about 15% of Republicans were angry/upset at this statement.

5.3.2 Participant partisanship: Democratic

The mean value for Democrats in the control group was 1.98. Meanwhile, the mean value for Democrats assigned to the statement in Appendix 1, Question 4 was 2.15, so 17% of participants were angry/upset at the statement. In addition, the mean value for Democrats in the statement in Appendix 1, Question 5 was 2.40; therefore, 42% of the participants were angry/upset at the statement. Additionally, the mean value for Democrats in the statement in Appendix 1, Question 6 was 1.94,

Group	Implicit Anger	Explicit Anger	Little Angry	Somewhat Angry	Very Angry	Extremely Angry
Mothers	30%	12.03%	3.83%	4.92%	1.64%	1.64%
Republican Nominee	35%	19.02%	7.07%	6.52%	1.63%	3.80%
Democratic Nominee	21%	14.76%	3.83%	5.46%	1.09%	2.19%
School Board	22%	9.3%	3.83%	3.28%	2.19%	—

Table 2 Summary of Anger Levels by Group.

	Total Percentage	Percentage (Men)	Percentage (Women)
Mothers	30%*	65%*	3%
Republican Nominee	35%*	31%	41%*
Democratic Nominee	20%$^{+}$	25%	23%
School Board	22%$^{+}$	11%	31%$^{+}$

Table 3 Summary of the Results by Gender. *$p<0.05$ $^{+}p<0.10$

which means that 4% less Democrats were angry/upset at the statement than reported in the control group. Moreover, the mean value for Democrats in the statement in Appendix 1, Question 7 was 2.11, which means that 13% of Democrats in this group were angry or upset at the statement.

6 DISCUSSION

The results yield interesting values in terms of the social desirability bias that was clearly present in the list experiment. In response to H1 ("Overall, the public is not very angry with the concept of mothers running for office"), 30% of participants were angry or upset with the concept of mothers running for office. Therefore, this hypothesis is accepted because this means that approximately 70% of the sample, the majority, is not angry or upset at mothers running for office. This finding reveals that there are still biases against mothers running for political office. These feelings of anger reflect the systemic barriers that prevent mothers from successfully running for office.

Regarding H2 ("There will be social desirability bias among most of the participants of the experiment"), the social desirability bias is present across the four sensitive statements (Appendix 1, Questions 4 – 7). Therefore, this hypothesis is accepted because when the social desirability bias was removed, it was revealed that 30%, 35%, 21%, and 22% of participants, respectively, were angry at the sensitive statement they were assigned. In contrast, when the control group was asked explicitly whether these statements made them angry or upset, the explicit levels of anger of the participants were 12.03%, 19.02%, 14.76%, and 9.3%. These results exhibit much lower levels of anger, which point toward the presence of the social desirability bias across all treatment groups.

H3 ("If a participant identifies as a female, then they will be less angry with a mother running for political office than a male participant), provided results that were mixed and led this hypothesis to be rejected. Table 3 shows that in the Republican Nominee group, 41% of women were angry with the idea of mothers running for the Republican presidential nominee, compared to only 31% of men being angry. However, for the other conditions, such as the statement in Appendix 1, Group 4, women were less angry than men about the respective statements. These mixed results provide the insight that gender might not be a stable factor to look at when analyzing negative feelings toward these statements.

H4 ("If a participant identifies as a Republican, then they will be angrier with a mother running for political office than a Democratic participant") provided a mixture of findings and led this hypothesis to be rejected. According to Table 4, when participants looked at the statement in Appendix 1, Question 5, 42% of Democrats said this statement made them angry/upset compared to 20% of the Republicans sharing this feeling. However, for the other groups in this analysis, Republicans had higher levels of anger when compared to the Democrats. This could be because Republicans feel the need to be loyal to members of their political party.

Finally, H5 ("Participants will be less angry about a mother running for a school board position compared to their anger levels with mothers running for a higher-level political office") was rejected because this anger level was the third lowest among the four conditions. Only 22% of participants were angry or upset at mothers running for the local school board. Meanwhile, this value for the groups in Appendix 1, Questions 4 – 6 were 30%, 35%, and 21%, respectively. Clearly, there are fewer people feeling angry or upset when it comes to mothers running for a school board position when compared to other office levels.

	Total Percentage	Percentage (Republicans)	Percentage (Democrats)
Mothers	30%*	25%	17%
Republican Nominee	35%*	20%	42%$^{+}$
Democratic Nominee	21%$^{+}$	38%$^{+}$	-4%
School Board	22%$^{+}$	15%	13%

Table 4 Summary of the Results by Political Affiliation. *p<0.05 $^{+}$p<0.10

7 LIMITATIONS

While the list experiment offers a creative way to test for the social desirability biases that may impact how the public feels about mothers running for office, the approach has limitations. The main limitations for this list experiment were design effects and survey respondent attentiveness.

Design effects are an important limitation of the list experiment. The statements in the list experiment are all politically charged, which makes it very likely that the responses of individuals to the question of how many statements make them angry or upset were inflated. This means that there could potentially be a misinterpretation of the results where respondents' feelings of anger are more influenced by the other statements and are therefore not a true reflection of how they feel about mothers in politics. Blair and Imai[25] discuss the problems that this misrepresentation of data has on statistical analysis, and they offer checks that can be implemented through statistical software. For future iterations, it would be interesting to enact these checks to see if the list experiment yields different results. Moreover, survey respondent attentiveness is another limitation. The nature of online surveys paired with possible respondent fatigue leads to overreporting or underreporting of the answers since the respondent might not be taking their time to answer carefully and accurately. Since there are no attention checks implemented throughout the survey, it becomes difficult to understand how accurate the responses are and if they are based on true preferences or if they are simply inattentive responses.

8 FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Future research should explore how other intricacies, such as ethnicity, impact voters' emotions toward mothers running for office. By examining how ethnicity shapes perceptions of mothers in politics across different levels of office, this research would aim to identify variation in public attitudes and bias. In addition, it may be important to further investigate how these responses compare to feelings of anger when the statements are about "fathers in politics." As suggested earlier in the paper, fathers are not as scrutinized as mothers when it comes to having a public life outside of their private one. It would be interesting to run a similar experiment to this one but instead focus on whether fathers in politics produce negative emotions.

9 CONCLUSION

Politics is primarily viewed as a male-dominated arena because the skills that are associated with the field are masculine-coded, with traits such as authoritarianism, strength, and decisiveness. To further explore this idea, this study presented a list experiment to examine the beliefs of the public toward mothers running for political office. The goal of this paper was to answer the research question: How do partisanship and gender influence the public perception of mothers running for political office? To provide more insight into the underlying drivers of the perceptions, the extent of social desirability bias and how it shapes these attitudes was analyzed. Based on the findings of the analysis, when the social desirability bias was removed, 30% of the sample felt angry or upset toward mothers running for political office. Mothers also received negative feelings from the sample when they chose to run for presidential nominations across the two main party lines; negative feelings existed for the Republican Party (35%) and the Democratic Party (21%), signifying that this is not only a one-party issue. Other significant patterns arose when analyzing the participants' gender and the level of political office a mother chooses to run for. The findings in this paper revealed the gendered and partisan biases that mothers face in political life. Although this study explored important topics such as gender biases and social desirability bias, the research is impacted by design effects and respondent attentiveness to the survey. Future research should focus on addressing these limitations and consider how participant identities beyond gender and partisanship impact similar research about mothers and fathers in politics. By better understanding public perception of mothers running for political office, it will become easier to dismantle the barriers that are hindering mothers from being positively perceived by the public in relation to their political participation.

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APPENDIX 1

Survey Questions

Question 1

Please read the following statements and tell me how many of these make you angry or upset:

1. The high prices of groceries
2. Access to free public education
3. The lack of abortion clinics
4. States placing restrictions on gun ownership

Question 2

Women, and in particular, mothers, have increasingly been running for political offices in America. Some people think this is a good thing for American democracy and others aren't so sure. Please read the following statements and report how angry or upset they make you:

- Mothers running for political office
- Mothers running for the Republican presidential nomination
- Mothers running for the Democratic presidential nomination
- Mothers running for positions on the local school board

Question 3

Participants were asked to rank their feelings of anger or being upset through the following scale:

- Not angry/upset at all
- A little angry/upset
- Somewhat angry/upset
- Very angry/upset
- Extremely angry/upset

Question 4

The first treatment group (Mothers group) was asked the following:
Please read the following statements and tell me how many of these make you angry or upset:

1. The high prices of groceries
2. Access to free public education
3. The lack of abortion clinics
4. Mothers running for political office
5. States placing restrictions on gun ownership

Question 5

The second treatment group (Republican nominee group) was asked the following:
Please read the following wide-ranging statements and tell me how many of these make you angry:

1. The high prices of groceries
2. Access to free public education
3. The lack of abortion clinics
4. Mothers running for the Republican presidential nomination
5. States placing restrictions on gun ownership

Question 6

The third treatment group (Democratic nominee group) was asked the following:
Please read the following wide-ranging statements and tell me how many of these make you angry:

1. The high prices of groceries
2. Access to free public education
3. The lack of abortion clinics
4. Mothers running to be the Democratic presidential nominee
5. States placing restrictions on gun ownership

Question 7

The fourth treatment group (gendered offices group) was asked the following:
Please read the following wide-ranging statements and tell me how many of these make you angry:

1. The high prices of groceries
2. Access to free public education
3. The lack of abortion clinics
4. Mothers running for positions on the local school board
5. States placing restrictions on gun ownership