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What? Me Sexist?

by Cecilia Mo on Friday, January 28, 2011 - 5:49am

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In a 1936 Gallup poll only 30 percent of Americans said they would vote for a woman for president if she were qualified for the job. In contrast, by the late '90s nearly 100 percent of Americans expressed a willingness to have a woman in the highest office in the country.

With Hillary Clinton making a viable run for President and Nancy Pelosi elected as the 60th Speaker of the House of Representatives, is it safe to say, then, that sexism is a thing of the past? Not quite. While Gallup polls and high profile female political leaders give the perception that men and women have reached parity in society, other measures raise questions about how far women have really come. For example, women make up only 16.6 percent of congress but they comprise half of the population. Such contradictions may suggest that what we think are big changes in attitudes toward women's leadership may instead be manifestations of political correctness. In other words, gender bias may have gone underground: taken out of daily conversation but remaining prevalent. These

contradictions may also be manifestations of an unconscious and automatic preference for male leaders. Many voters may not even be aware that they possess these kinds of gendered preferences. The key, then, to understanding these persistent contradictions is going beyond what people say they believe to understanding their uncensored, and even unconscious, thoughts. Psychologists argue they can. With my colleague at Stanford University's [Department of Communications](#), we used a measure designed to tap into hidden biases – the [Implicit Association Test](#) or IAT – to assess whether gender biases affect vote choice. The IAT is a test to see how quickly a person can pair two concepts (e.g., *woman* and *leadership*, or *man* and *leadership*). [Mahzarin Banaji](#) (Harvard) and [Anthony Greenwald](#) (U. Washington) designed this measure to test people's conscious and unconscious attitudes on topics like race, age and sex. So we tailored the measure to pick up gender bias with respect to political leadership and looked at whether it affected vote choice. And we conducted this study in the critical swing state of Florida.

The study yielded an intriguing finding: in following instructions to sort images rapidly, the average person found it easier to pair words like "President", "Governor", and "Executive" with male names and words like "Secretary", "Assistant", and "Aide" with female names. In other words, many people had a lot more difficulty associating women with leadership. These results matter since they reflect not just how people think but, importantly, how they vote. The *more* difficulty a person had in classifying a woman as a leader, the *less* likely the person was to vote for a woman. Those who were found to be the most biased against women leaders, according to the implicit IAT measures, were 12 percent more likely to vote for a male candidate over an equally qualified female candidate. This result was found even when explicit gender biases, like those measured by Gallup polls, were held constant. Despite a society in which gender equity is politically correct and socially desirable, bias exists, and you can see it in how people vote. Even when we consider only those who explicitly say that they would support a female candidate, we found that many have difficulty associating women with leadership attributes. And as a result, they are less likely to vote for a woman candidate. So there appears to be a gulf between our conscious ideals of equality and our unconscious tendency to discriminate at the ballot box. Yet the presence of bias does not mean a woman can't ever win at the ballot box. To win, however, she has to be *more* qualified than her male opponent. Indeed, our study found that even the most sexist people among us were willing to vote for the female if she were deemed to have more experience, better education credentials, and/or greater community involvement than her male counterpart. These results do not suggest that people intend to be biased against women. Instead, negative



Hillary_Clinton_3 By Marc Nozell from Merrimack, New Hampshire, USA ([Flickr.com](#)) [CC-BY-2.0 (www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0)], via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Hillary Clinton in Concord, New Hampshire

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gender stereotypes, traditional beliefs regarding gender roles, and/or authority beliefs that favor men appear to unconsciously influence the decisions and choices many people make. These unconscious thought patterns remain real obstacles for the advancement of women in male dominated fields like politics. Given these findings, it is safe to say that sexism is not a thing of the past. Measures like the one used in the Gallup polls understate the effect gendered stereotypes and beliefs still have on the way people think about leadership. A more careful exploration of the linkage between gender attitudes and voting behavior shows that gender bias continues to exist among many voters in ways that bring advantages to male candidates and disadvantages to female candidates. To test for your own unconscious biases look at: <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/index.jsp>

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CeciliaMo

Hyunjung Mo is a doctoral candidate in Political Economics at the Stanford Graduate School of Business and a 2010-11 Graduate Dissertation Fellow of the Clayman Institute for Gender Research.

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Responses to What? Me Sexist?



16 February, 2011
Holycow (not verified)
reply

Even I prefer women when it comes to decision making power. They rock. They also know how to be politically correct in the times of emergency.



19 February, 2011
Steve Drake (not verified)
reply

Political "correctness" is one of the most damaging forces in our country. The U.S. is under siege by it and at the sacrifice of common sense.



07 February, 2011
Paul (not verified)
reply

Is it too much to expect a "doctoral candidate in Political Economics" to spell "Gallup" correctly? Or to mention Palin in an article about gender and politics?



07 February, 2011
Natira Johnson (not verified)
reply

I think that women make better decisions than men. Men don't really know how to multi - task like women. We are great thinkers and we can work under pressure. Men let their ego get in the way.



07 February, 2011
Dustin (not verified)
reply

Interesting.
I think Cecilia has some valid points here. What isn't mentioned, and I think would be an interesting study, is sexism in women AGAINST women. I'm often surprised how frequently I hear women say that they would never vote for a female President—I hear this far less often from men.
This goes the other direction as well. How often do we hear a man say, either directly or indirectly, that men that stay home (e.g., to care for a child) are clearly "whipped" by their wives or are not equal to other men.
Sometimes I wonder if inter-gender negative biases are lessening while intra-gender negative biases remain or even grow stronger.



10 February, 2011
Steve Drake (not verified)
reply

What I find interesting is how the term "sexism" is always associated with men, even when in many cases such allegations don't legitimately apply. Yet I have rarely, if ever, known of this term being applied to women (or men who support feminism).
I offer the following illustration as an alternative to the common feminist assumption that sexism is the culprit for more men not voting for female candidates:
Name one female candidate who's promised to prosecute the next woman who falsely accuses a man of rape. You can't. Remember Crystal Gail Mangum, who feloniously accused three Duke University lacrosse athletes of rape? They were completely innocent (and exonerated) but their lives have