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Gendered Biases in Foreign Policy

We know from existing research that women are less likely to be considered for positions, based solely on the gender of their name.¹ Studies have also pointed to the gendering of expertise—how women’s work is discounted in what are considered to be traditionally masculine subjects. From my own research, I have found that female politicians face significant scrutiny, particularly in the arena of security policy. Women are frequently left out of important academic and policy discussions—and even when they are present, their voices are often given less weight than those of their male counterparts.²

At the same time, research on foreign policy decision-making has increasingly highlighted the importance of expert advice and “elite cues” in shaping the minds of both leaders and mass publics on matters of foreign policy.³ Researchers have found that voters and policy-makers alike, who often lack the time or information to construct clear and stable preferences on many issues of foreign policy, will follow the cues provided by experts or partisan authorities on those topics. This research has not, however, explored to what extent other characteristics of the individuals giving those cues—in particular their gender identity—affects the effectiveness of their input. In other words, do publics and other elites listen to women as much as they listen to men? The aforementioned work regarding manifestations of conscious and unconscious gendered bias suggest that the answer is likely negative, but may also vary depending on the specific context, the nature of the issues being discussed (e.g. security vs. human rights), and other characteristics (e.g. ideological, partisan, racial) of the policy expert and their audience.

To explore these questions, I plan to conduct a series of survey experiments that measure how voters and policymakers respond to policy advice from male and female experts. In addition to varying the gender of the policy expert, I will also vary their respective political affiliation and the issue area under consideration. This will allow me to examine how the gendering of expertise may be moderated by political affiliation—e.g. if the respondent’s party affiliation is aligned with that of the policy expert, are the effects of gendered minimized? Alternatively, if the respondent’s party affiliation is distinct from the policy expert’s will we see a larger effect of gender? The demographic questionnaire will capture the political affiliation of respondents for comparison. In an era of increasing polarization, in which women’s rights writ large, and the participation of women in politics and policy in particular have become intimately partisan, this question is particularly timely.

My plan is to run the survey experiment in both the U.S. and the UK. This would allow me to hold a number of variables (mostly) constant, and would offer an interesting contrast, by examining a country with its now second female head of government. Through my dissertation research, I have developed extensive experience designing and running experiments online through Qualtrics and Mechanical Turk and in person with respondents in universities in both countries.

I also plan to share this research in forums that bridge the academic-policy divide like Foreign Policy, Foreign Affairs, War on the Rocks, and H-Diplo.