

# Voting for women in nonpartisan and partisan elections

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## ABSTRACT

Evidence on whether there is a gender affinity effect in US elections is mixed. In this article, we develop a theory of when gender affinity effects will be present and when they will be absent. Crucial to our theory is electoral context. In nonpartisan contexts, we argue that candidate sex serves as a representational cue and will lead to gender affinity effects in vote choice. However, in partisan contexts, all voters will use partisanship as a cue and there will be no evidence of gender affinity effects. We test and find support for our theory using data on vote choice in the 2012 U.S. state supreme court elections and a set of conjoint experiments. Our results have implications for theories of descriptive representation and the design of electoral institutions.

The 2016 election was a historic moment in American politics, marking the first time that a woman was the presidential nominee of a major political party. Narratives surrounding Hillary Clinton's nomination quickly converged on discussions of the “women's vote,” and whether or not Clinton would be able to mobilize women as a cohesive voting bloc (Parton, 2016; Decker, 2016; Kollmeyer, 2016). Despite these narratives, the bloc of women voters envisioned by pundits and members of the media failed to emerge. Indeed, while Clinton won the majority of women voters overall, Donald Trump emerged victorious among white women.

The failure of Clinton to capture white women voters is in many respects unsurprising. While President Trump won the majority of white female voters, white women as a group had long been voting Republican in presidential elections, making white their of Trump part of a larger trend (Williams, 2017; Junn, 2017). The 2016 election highlights that while the notion of women voters preferring women candidates—referred to as gender affinity effects—are common in popular narratives, it is often traditional political factors that are more likely to drive political behavior and vote choice.

Evidence on the presence of gender affinity effects in U.S. elections is mixed. While some scholars suggest women are more likely to support women candidates in some contexts, others argue that political factors, such as partisanship, are more likely to determine vote choice, as appears to be the case in 2016. Yet, studies on gender affinity in the U.S. typically center on national-level elections and often fail to account for state and local contexts, where partisan cues may be lacking. While the focus on partisan elections is understandable in the study of American politics, many positions in state and local politics are elected through nonpartisan elections. While the literature speaks to the relationship between gender and vote choice in

low-information contexts to some extent, explicit comparisons of gender affinity effects across partisan and nonpartisan elections are uncommon.

We address this gap in the literature by examining how election type conditions whether or not a shared sex between candidates and voters influences vote choice. Drawing on the existing literature on partisanship and gender affinity effects, we predict that gender affinity effects will only be present in the absence of cues about a candidate's political party. To test our theory, we use data from state supreme court elections held in 2012 and a set of conjoint experiments. Judicial elections provide a compelling context in which to test our hypotheses. The responsibilities and authority of judges are consistent across states. Yet, the mechanisms by which judges obtain office vary widely from state to state. This variation provides a fruitful context in which to test our hypotheses. We find that in partisan elections shared partisanship between candidate and voter is the best predictor of vote choice and there is no evidence of gender affinity effects in these elections. In nonpartisan races however, we do find evidence of gender affinity effects, suggesting that shared sex can play an important role in vote choice in these elections. We conclude by discussing the implications our findings have for theories of descriptive representation, gender affinity effects, and the design of electoral institutions.

## 1. The influence of gender on voting behavior

Despite frequent discussions of gender affinity effects in political commentary and punditry, the literature on gender and vote choice is quite mixed. While some scholars have found support for the idea that women voters support women candidates at higher rates (Fox, 1997; Plutzer and Zipp, 1996; Seltzer et al., 1997; Cook, 1994), others have

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found no effect (King and Matland, 2003; Thompson and Steckenrider, 1997; McDermott, 1997), and still others have found effects in some elections but not others (Dolan, 2004; Brians, 2005). While the literature provides no clear consensus on the presence of gender affinity in voting, it does suggest that in *some* contexts women may be more inclined to vote for women candidates than men. Arguably the simplest explanation for gender affinity effects is that candidate sex serves as a quick heuristic for voters to make distinctions between candidates. Under this explanation, candidate gender provides an information cue and draws voters to candidates who are demographically similar (Popkin, 1991; Pomper, 1975; Cutler, 2002).

While some studies have found evidence of gender affinity voting among men (Giger et al., 2014; Fulton, 2014), most commonly literature on U.S. elections has focused on the degree to which women vote for women. Because women remain severely underrepresented in federal and state level office, gender is often argued to be more salient for women due to their marginalized status. Tolleson-Rinehart (1992) argues that women perceive their gender group to be disadvantaged due to systematic factors may form attitudes of “gender consciousness.” This feeling of group consciousness may lead women voters to develop preferences for women candidates, and to act in a manner that is thought to advance the group's interests, for example voting for fellow group members. Paolino (1995) argues that the gender affinity effects present in the 1992 “Year of the Woman” elections were the result of “group-salient interests” being featured heavily in the campaign. Women who felt that issues of sexual harassment and women's underrepresentation were important were likely more inclined to support women candidates because they viewed these candidates as uniquely able to address these issues (see also Dolan, 1998).

Research by Sanbonmatsu (2002) and Rosenthal (1995) both suggest that women are far more likely to have preferences for same-sex representation than men. Sanbonmatsu (2002) finds evidence of what she calls a “baseline preference.” Simply put, many Americans have underlying preferences to either be represented by men or women. In her study Sanbonmatsu found evidence that not only were women more likely to hold baseline preferences in the first place, but they were also more likely to prefer being represented by women. Though men displayed small levels of gender affinity, they were most likely to be neutral regarding candidate gender. Rosenthal (1995) likewise finds evidence that women voters hold preferences for same sex-representation but does not find similar evidence among men. Given these gendered differences in preference for same-sex representation, in the U.S. context to the degree that gender affinity emerges as an element of vote choice, it should be largely among women. Research by Burden and Ono (2018) provides evidence for this expectation. In their study of voter preferences and candidate gender in state-level offices, Burden and Ono uncover that while women are more likely to prefer women candidates, men are agnostic with regard to candidate gender.<sup>1</sup>

Other possible explanations of gender affinity effects center on issue-preferences and stereotypes. The literature on gender stereotypes suggests that many Americans view women as more competent to create policy on issues relating to childcare, healthcare, education, and welfare (Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993; Alexander and Andersen, 1991; Brown et al., 1993; Koch, 1999; Dolan, 2014a; Rosenwasser and Seale, 1988; Sapiro, 1981b). Beyond stereotypic attitudes regarding candidate competency, men and women voters hold different policy attitudes and weight the relative importance of issues differently (Kaufmann and Petrocik, 1999). The coupling of these attitudes with the belief that some candidates are more likely to act on these issues is what Goodyear-Grant and Croskill (2011) call the “social policy” explanation for gender

affinity effects. In this framework, women may be more inclined to vote for women not because their sex per se, but rather because it is assumed these candidates will be more adept at issues women voters view as important. Indeed, in some contexts women may gain an electoral advantage when they simultaneously highlight stereotypic strengths and target women voters (Herrnson et al., 2003; Dittmar 2015). Though voter sex plays a role in shaping baseline gender preferences, Sanbonmatsu (2002) notes that stereotypes also contribute to these baselines.

Beyond these potential explanations for gender affinity effects, Dolan (2008) notes that to the degree we observe women voting for women candidates at higher rates, this may be due to what she refers to as the “party-sex overlap.” Both women candidates and voters are more likely to belong to the Democratic Party than men (Dolan, 2008). Thus, when women voters are observed to vote for women candidates at higher rates than men, this phenomenon may be better characterized as Democrats voting for Democrats, rather than women voting for women. Indeed, as Dolan notes, in order to truly identify the presence of a gender affinity effect scholars must take into account the complexity that partisan and ideological considerations bring to bare in American electoral politics (see also Seltzer et al., 1997).

While scholars have spent a great deal of time exploring gender affinity effects in the U.S., increasingly the literature suggests that when both candidate gender and party are known to voters, partisan considerations will ultimately trump gender in the decision making process employed by voters. The authors of *The American Voter* referred to partisanship as a perceptual screen through which voters evaluate political phenomena, and a quick heuristic that can be employed to inform vote choice (Campbell et al., 1966). Studies since *The American Voter* have continued to point to the primacy of partisanship in voter decision making, and party continues to be the most common heuristic and consistent predictor of vote choice in American elections (Miller and Shanks, 1996; Lewis-Beck, 1990; Lau and Redlawsk, 2001; Rahn, 1993). Literature on gender stereotypes has increasingly focused on the ways in which partisanship shapes the use of gender-stereotypes in the electorate (Dolan, 2004; Huddy and Capelos, 2002; Koch, 2002; McDermott, 1997, 1998). In his study, Hayes (2011) finds that partisan stereotypes are much stronger predictors of voter evaluations of candidates, and that the relevance of gender stereotypes is limited by the prevalence of partisan factors. Other work similarly emphasizes that traditional political cues—particularly partisanship—play a far greater role in voter decision making than the descriptive characteristics of candidates (Dolan, 2010; Hayes and Hibbing, 2016; Huddy and Capelos, 2002; Philpot and Walton, 2007; Dolan, 2014a, b; Kam, 2007). King and Matland (2003) conclude that, “voters see candidates first and foremost as partisans.”

These findings have important implications for our expectations regarding the presence of gender affinity effects in U.S. elections. As Dolan (2006) notes, women are no less likely than men to be partisans and there is no reason to suspect that women would not similarly rely on partisan cues when deciding between candidates. This, coupled with the salience of partisanship in American elections, suggests that after accounting for party, we should expect to see no sex differences in voter support for women candidates among partisans. Recent research in American electoral politics supports this expectation. In her 2014 study, Fulton finds no differences between partisan men's and women's support for women candidates. Dolan (2004) finds that traditional factors such as incumbency and partisanship are just as important for female candidates as male candidates. Experimental research by Burden and Ono (2018) finds that women candidates are neither advantaged nor disadvantaged among partisan voters when competing against out-partisans for state level office. These findings all suggest that the potential for gender affinity effects to manifest in American elections is severely limited in the context of contested partisan races.

Of course, this is not to suggest that gender affinity based voting can never emerge in partisan races. Indeed, scholars have noted that there are contexts in which gender may be so salient that it serves as the dominant cue to inform vote choice. The most common example of this effect are the 1992 congressional elections—dubbed the “Year of the

<sup>1</sup> In their analysis, Burden and Ono provide respondents with pairs of candidates from opposing parties (mimicking general elections) and pairs of candidates from the same party (mimicking primary elections). The gender affinity effects identified by the authors come from pooling across election types, thus it is not possible to determine whether the effect is more or less prominent in one setting or the other.

Woman” after a record number of female candidates were elected to the U.S. Congress. Coming on the heels of the confirmation of Clarence Thomas, which highlighted the low number of women in the Senate, gender-salient issues featured prominently in the 1992 elections. The salience of these issues in this electoral context helped to link women voters to candidates (Dolan, 1998; Paolino, 1995). Plutzer and Zipp (1996) find evidence of gender affinity effects in 1992 among both Democrats and Republicans, and find that these effects were especially prominent when the woman candidate was easily identifiable as a feminist. Herrnson et al. (2003) likewise find that women candidates in House and state-level races can receive an electoral advantage when they run “as women” and target women voters. Thus, while partisanship is often the dominant heuristic employed by voters, there can be instances where candidate gender is especially salient. In these cases we may expect to see gender affinity based voting in spite of partisan factors. However, these instances represent the exception, rather than the rule for voting behavior in American politics.

## 2. Gender affinity in partisan and nonpartisan elections

As the previous discussion illustrated, by and large partisan considerations should play a much more dominant role in voter decision making than gender. Scholarly accounts of gender and vote choice have largely abandoned the notion of a general gender affinity effect that will automatically manifest in U.S. elections. Instead, the focus has become understanding the contexts in which a shared sex between candidate and voter will influence vote choice. Literature in this vein has focused on the characteristics associated with candidates, such as the degree to which the candidate is viewed as a feminist (Plutzer and Zipp, 1996), or characteristics about the campaign, such as the salience of particular issues (Paolino, 1995; Dolan 1998, 2008; Herrnson et al., 2003).

Observational research on gender affinity effects in the U.S. have often focused on gubernatorial and congressional elections. While this emphasis is understandable, it means that much of the literature on gender and vote choice in American elections has been confined to partisan electoral contexts. When accounting for state and local level office, roughly 50% of elections are nonpartisan elections in which the partisanship of candidates is not displayed on the ballot (Wright, 2008). Thus, while voters may rely heavily on partisanship in many electoral contexts, in a significant number of elections this information is not available. The presence of partisan information is likely to play a significant role in conditioning whether or not gender affinity effects emerge in elections. Experimental evidence on low-information elections suggests that in the absence of a partisan cue voters may instead rely on other factors, including demographic characteristics of candidates (Anderson et al., 2011; Kam, 2007). Yet, examinations of voting behavior in “real world” nonpartisan elections are uncommon in the literature on U.S. elections. In this article, we examine how the structure of an election—specifically whether it is partisan or nonpartisan—shapes gender affinity effects when holding level and type of office constant.

Research outside the U.S. context, suggests that the structure of elections does matter for gender-based voting. Goodyear-Grant and Croskill (2011) examine gender affinity effects in Westminster style systems, where institutional features tend to discourage candidate based voting. Here the authors find little evidence of gender affinity effects, even among what they term “flexible voters,” or those most likely to use candidate based considerations. Though McElroy and Marsh (2010) find no evidence of gender affinity voting in the Irish context, they argue that single transferable vote systems give “an unusual degree of freedom to the voter to choose between candidates, both within and across parties.” This freedom may lead to situations where voters are better able to accommodate both political and gender preferences in their vote choice. Though they do not examine same-sex voting, Schwindt-Bayer et al. (2010) find in their study of single-transferable vote systems that “gender can affect vote choice in some national contexts and that the effect of being a woman can be positive

or negative depending on the context.” Research on the Finnish case, which uses an open-list proportional representation system and requires preferential voting, suggests that this electoral setup may induce same-sex voting, but among men. The degree to which this occurs, however, can be mitigated by district magnitude and the ratio of women included on party lists (Holli and Wass, 2010; Giger et al., 2014).

The overarching finding from this literature is the design of electoral institutions can produce different incentive structures for voting for women candidates, and that partisan and gender preferences are more easily accommodated in some systems than others. Variations in U.S. elections likewise produce different incentives to vote based on gendered considerations. As we have already discussed, ample evidence suggests that in most contexts where information about candidate partisanship is available, this information dominates information about candidate gender. Based on this literature we formulate our first hypothesis.

**Hypothesis 1.** There will be no gender differences in propensity to support women candidates in partisan elections.

While partisanship is the dominant lens through which most Americans select candidates, nonpartisan races provide a context where the incentive to vote based on gender is higher because by design voters are not given easy access to partisan labels. Because this dominant cue is lacking, voters must rely on other informational cues and heuristics. Schaffner et al. (2001), for example, argue that in nonpartisan contexts, voters will rely on cues related to fitness for office, such as incumbency. Lim and Snyder (2015) find that voters rely on candidate quality cues, such as previously holding elected office, and Kirkland and Coppock (2017) find that voters use information about work and political experiences when selecting candidates. This research demonstrates that when partisan cues are lacking voters search for other informational cues to make their decision. In these low-information settings may be precisely the contexts where baseline gender preferences (i.e. Sanbonmatsu, 2002), gender stereotyping (Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993; Alexander and Andersen, 1991; Brown et al., 1993; Koch, 1999; Dolan, 2014a; Rosenwasser and Seale, 1988; Sapiro, 1981a), and voting for demographically similar candidates (i.e. Pomper, 1975 and Cutler, 2002) may be most likely to manifest. Again, we expect that because women remain underrepresented in U.S. politics, candidate gender is more likely to be salient for women voters than for men.

To the degree that gender affinity effects are present in U.S. elections, we expect they will largely be limited to nonpartisan races, where due to the lack of partisan cue voters are effectively forced to use other factors to make their decision. Previous experimental studies on gender in low information settings finds that when information about candidate partisanship is not included in experimental prompts gender often motivates respondent evaluations (Anderson et al., 2011; McDermott, 1998; Sigelman and Sigelman, 1982). In other cases, information about partisanship may be present, but this cue may not serve as a differentiating factor between candidates. Fulton (2014), for example, finds no gender differences in vote choice among partisans, but does find evidence of gendered voting among independents, though her findings suggest men have a preference for male candidates while women are relatively neutral on candidate gender. This is similar to previous work by Zipp and Plutzer (1985) which also found that gender affinity voting was most likely to occur among independents, though in contrast to Fulton, in this research women were more likely to support women. Recent research by Burden and Ono (2018) uses a conjoint experiment to analyze how candidate gender influences voter decision making. Though the authors do not explore sex differences within party, they do find evidence that candidate gender generally induces support from Democrats, but diminishes support among Republicans. Importantly, this finding is only present in contexts where respondents were asked to pick between two candidates of the same party (mimicking a primary election). In other words, gender effects only manifested when the party heuristic was functionally meaningless. Badas and Stauffer (2018) similarly find that in contexts where Americans do not have the option of supporting a co-ideologue—such as Supreme Court nominations—shared demographic characteristics—such as race,

ethnicity, and gender—can result in higher levels of public support. Based on this research, we formulate our second hypothesis.

**Hypothesis 2.** Women will be more likely to vote for women candidates in nonpartisan elections than men.

### 3. The opportunity of judicial elections

Judicial elections provide a compelling context to test [Hypothesis 1](#) and [Hypothesis 2](#). Judicial selection mechanisms vary from state to state, yet the responsibilities and authority of state level judges are largely similar. This variation allows us to determine whether voters' willingness to vote for women candidates varies across electoral context while holding the elected position constant. This opportunity is not available in congressional or gubernatorial elections, which are contested uniformly under a partisan format and are generally the context under which previous researchers have analyzed gender affinity effects. [Table 1](#) provides a summary of the selection system used by each state to select the judges for their supreme courts. In total 21 states elect their supreme court judges. Fifteen states do so in nonpartisan elections, while six states use partisan elections. The remaining states select judges through either gubernatorial or legislative appointment; in nineteen states these appointed judges face retention elections. For the purposes of this research, we limit our analysis to elections with multiple candidates, and exclude retention elections.

The expectation of [Hypothesis 1](#) is that there will be no gender differences in the propensity to support women candidates in partisan elections. This is because the partisan cue is available and voters do not need to rely on secondary cues. Even in the presence of secondary cues, the value of partisan representation should be higher than the value of gender representation. According to [Hypothesis 2](#), we expect that women who are voting in nonpartisan elections will be more likely to vote for women candidates for judge than men in nonpartisan elections. This is because in the absence of a partisan cue, women voters will look to other cues to inform their vote choice.

### 4. Evidence from 2012 judicial elections

To test [Hypothesis 1](#) and [Hypothesis 2](#) we use data from the 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). The CCES is a nationally stratified matched sample of likely voters that is administered through an internet-based platform. [Ansolahehere and Schaffner \(2014\)](#)

**Table 2**  
Elections included in analysis.

Electoral Context	
Partisan	Nonpartisan
Illinois (327)	Kentucky (40)
Texas (790)	Michigan (353)
	Montana (136)
	Washington (628)
Total 1117	Total 1157

Note: Number of respondents from each state in parenthesis.

demonstrate that the stratified matched sampling technique approximates a nationally representative sample similar to those achieved through random sampling.

The 2012 CCES asked each participant living in a state with a contested state supreme court election about their vote choice in the election. Judicial elections in the states take many forms. Most important for our analysis are the partisan and nonpartisan formats. In partisan formats, judicial candidates' partisanship appears on the ballot and voters are able to use this as a cue when making their vote choice. In nonpartisan formats, information about candidate partisanship is absent from the ballot and voters will need to rely on other cues when making their vote choice. The CCES includes validation of voter turnout, so we can be assured that those who say they voted actually did vote. Because our research question examines the context under which women voters will prefer women candidates, we exclude elections in which no woman appears on the ballot and contests in which two women run against each other. Once the relevant elections are selected, we are left with six cases (2274 respondents), which include four nonpartisan and two partisan elections. [Table 2](#) details the relevant elections and the number of survey respondents included from each election.<sup>2</sup>

Our dependent variable is binary and is scored 1 if the survey participant voted for the female candidate and 0 if they voted for the male candidate. Our key independent variables of interest are respondent gender, election type, and the interaction between the two. Respondent gender was coded 1 if respondents identified as female and 0 otherwise. Electoral context is similarly a binary variable, with 1 representing nonpartisan elections and 0 representing partisan elections. The expectation of [Hypothesis 1](#) and [Hypothesis 2](#) is that in nonpartisan contests, women voters will be more likely to vote women candidates and that in partisan races there will be no gender differences in the propensity to vote for women candidates. To capture this effect, we interact voter gender with electoral context.

In addition to these variables we also include two indicator variables for respondent partisanship, one capturing whether a respondent is a Democrat and the other capturing whether the respondent is a Republican. This results in independents being the omitted category in our models. We then interacted our partisan variables with our electoral context variable. This interaction is important for several reasons. In addition to holding stereotypes about female candidate traits and issue competencies, many voters hold stereotypes about the ideologies of women in politics, typically viewing women as more liberal than

**Table 1**  
Selection methods for state supreme courts 2015.

Partisan Election	Nonpartisan Election	Retention Election	Appointment System
Alabama	Arkansas	Alaska	Connecticut
Illinois	Georgia	Arizona	Delaware
Louisiana	Idaho	California	Hawaii
New Mexico <sup>a</sup>	Kentucky	Colorado	Maine
Pennsylvania	Michigan <sup>b</sup>	Florida	Massachusetts
Texas	Minnesota	Indiana	New Hampshire
	Mississippi	Iowa	New Jersey
	Montana <sup>c</sup>	Kansas	New York
	Nevada	Maryland	Rhode Island
	North Carolina	Missouri	South Carolina
	North Dakota	Nebraska	Vermont
	Ohio <sup>b</sup>	Oklahoma	Virginia
	West Virginia	Oregon	South Dakota
	Washington	Tennessee	
	Wisconsin	Utah	
		Wyoming	

<sup>a</sup> Justices initially are selected in partisan elections but run in retention elections for subsequent terms.

<sup>b</sup> Partisan affiliations are not listed on general election ballots, but partisan methods are used to nominate candidates.

<sup>c</sup> Retention elections are used if the incumbent is unopposed.

<sup>2</sup> Candidates for the Michigan Supreme Court are nominated by political parties and then compete in a nonpartisan election. [Nelson, Caufield and Martin \(2013\)](#) demonstrate that these nonpartisan elections sometimes function similarly to partisan judicial elections and recommend research allow theory to dictate whether Michigan is classified as nonpartisan or partisan. We believe our classification of Michigan is most justified because we are interested in the availability of the partisan heuristic as voters are casting their ballots. However, to ensure the robust of our results, we run additional models: one in which Michigan is coded as a partisan contest and one in which Michigan is excluded. In each additional model, our substantive findings remaining consistent. The results of these additional analyses are presented in the appendix.



**Table 3**  
Summary statistics.

	Nonpartisan		Partisan	
	Mean	Standard Dev.	Mean	Standard Dev
Voted Woman Candidate	0.52	–	0.64	–
Woman Respondent	0.47	–	0.49	–
Shared Party w/Woman Candidate	0.49	–	0.60	–
Partisanship	0.05	0.96	0.02	0.98
Ideology	3.69	1.91	3.55	2.01
Total Campaign Spending	655261.31	275130.95	513060.94	474250.01
Woman is Incumbent	0.12	–	1.00	–
College Educated Respondent	0.42	–	0.44	–
White Respondent	0.87	–	0.73	–
Born Again Christian	0.31	–	0.35	–
Observations	1157		1117	

men (Alexander and Andersen, 1991; Diekman and Schneider, 2010). To some degree this stereotype is rooted in reality, as women do tend to be more liberal and identify with the Democratic party at higher rates than men (Kaufmann and Petrocik, 1999; Kaufmann, 2002; Newport, 2009).<sup>3</sup> Given the presence of these ideological stereotypes, in a nonpartisan context Democrats may be more likely to support female candidates because they believe they are the more liberal option. Because women are more likely to be Democrats than men, any gender affinity effects we find may be an artifact of Democrats voting for candidates they assume are also Democrats. If this were the case, women's support for women would be more attributable to partisan considerations than gendered considerations. By including the interaction between respondent partisanship and electoral context, we will be able to ensure any potential finding we have is a gender affinity effect rather than what Dolan (2008) calls the “party-sex overlap.”

In addition to our key independent variables, we control for other factors known to influence vote choice in judicial elections. We control for shared partisanship with the female candidate (Bonneau and Cann, 2015), whether the female candidate is the incumbent (Bonneau, 2005a), and total campaign spending (Bonneau, 2005b). To determine candidate party in nonpartisan elections, we used Bonneau and Cann's (2015) classification of partisanship based on candidates personal statements of partisanship, whether they received endorsements from a political party, and previous service in state or local party organizations. Because the effect of shared partisanship varies across partisan and nonpartisan races, we interact shared partisanship and electoral context (Bonneau and Cann, 2015; Lim and Snyder, 2015).<sup>4</sup> We control for total campaign spending to proxy for the information context of each election, the assumption being that higher

spending equates to a higher levels of information. We include this control to account for the fact that voters may be more or less likely to vote for a woman candidate when the information context is rich and they can instead rely on policy cues (Bonneau and Cann, 2015; Bonneau and Hall, 2009; Bonneau, 2007; Hall and Bonneau, 2006, 2008). We also control for whether the voter is a born again Christian under the assumption these voters may have “traditional” values and be less likely to vote for female candidates (Shibley, 1998). Our models also include demographic controls which are conventionally included in models of vote choice (Bonneau and Cann, 2015; Bonneau, 2005b). Summary statistics for each of our variables are presented in Table 3.

Since our dependent variable is binary, we estimate a logit regression model which includes robust standard errors clustered on each individual election. The results of the model are presented in Table 4.

Because the effects predicted in Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 are interactive, the coefficients for female voter, nonpartisan context, and the interaction term must be interpreted in concert with one another. To facilitate the substantive interpretation of our results, we plot the gender gap in the probability respondents voting for the woman candidate in Fig. 1. We define the gender gap as the difference in the probability of women and men voting for the female candidate. A positive number indicates that women voters were more likely to vote for the woman candidate, while a negative number indicates that male voters were more likely to vote for the female candidate.

As Fig. 1 illustrates, our analysis provides support for Hypothesis 1. The gender gap in partisan elections is 0.019 and not statistically significant. In a partisan context, women vote for the female candidate at a predicted probability of .6812, while men vote for the female candidate at a probability of .6613. This finding suggests that when partisanship is available on the ballot, women do not rely on gender as a cue. Instead, in this context the partisan cue overwhelms any considerations that may be rooted in shared sex. The analysis also provides support for Hypothesis 2. The gender gap in nonpartisan elections is 0.136 and statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ). In other words, after accounting for other factors, women voters have a 0.136 higher probability of voting for the female candidate than male voters. Specifically, the predicted probability of a woman voting for the female candidate is 0.628, while the probability of a man voting for the woman candidate in a nonpartisan election is 0.491. This finding demonstrates that when the partisan cue is lacking, women rely instead on a gender cue to help inform their vote choice such that they are more likely to vote for the woman candidate. Finally, the difference-in-difference in the gender gap between electoral contexts is .1168, which represents a statistically significant difference ( $p < .05$ ). In other words, the gap between men and women is nearly twelve percent higher in nonpartisan elections than it is in partisan elections.

<sup>3</sup> For a more extensive discussion of the dynamics underlying this gender gap see Oudercin (2017).

<sup>4</sup> While we control for shared partisanship in nonpartisan contexts, we do not mean to imply that partisanship is widely known in nonpartisan elections. While elites and the most knowledgeable voters likely can infer the partisanship of judges in nonpartisan races, it is unlikely that the mass public has the information to do so. Schaffner and Diascro (2007) demonstrate that news media coverage of judicial elections do not focus on the partisanship, ideology, or issue preferences of candidate for judicial office. Instead, news media focuses on personal histories, occupational backgrounds, and horse race coverage of polls. This is especially true in the nonpartisan contexts. In another study, Salamone et al. (2017) find that candidates for judicial office rarely advertise themselves in a partisan or ideological manner. Instead, candidates focus on broadcasting their experience and personal histories. Further, while prior studies have found partisanship to predict vote choice in nonpartisan judicial elections, the effect size is roughly half of that in partisan judicial elections (Bonneau and Cann, 2015, chapter 2). Our own results produce substantively similar findings. In partisan contexts shared partisanship strongly predicts vote choice and in nonpartisan contexts—while still significant—the effect of shared-partisanship is much smaller. Therefore, we feel comfortable assuming that in these nonpartisan contexts that partisanship is not widely known.

**Table 4**  
Logit regression model: Voting for woman supreme court candidate.

	(1)
	Voted for Woman Candidate
Woman Voter	0.0902 (0.0815)
Nonpartisan System	– 0.991*** (0.284)
Woman Voter × Nonpartisan	0.468** (0.147)
Shared Partisanship	6.113*** (0.0893)
Shared Partisanship × Nonpartisan	– 4.429*** (0.158)
Democratic Voter	– 3.270*** (0.499)
Democrat × Nonpartisan	3.151*** (0.220)
Republican voter	– 3.840*** (0.504)
Republican × Nonpartisan	2.750*** (0.305)
Female Candidate Incumbent	– 0.0802 (0.208)
Total Campaign Spending	– 0.00588 (0.0264)
Ideology (↑ liberal)	0.0536 (0.296)
College Grad.	0.0431 (0.264)
White Voter	– 0.252 (0.650)
Constant	0.684 (0.876)
Observations	2219

Robust standard errors in parentheses.

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

## 5. Experimental evidence

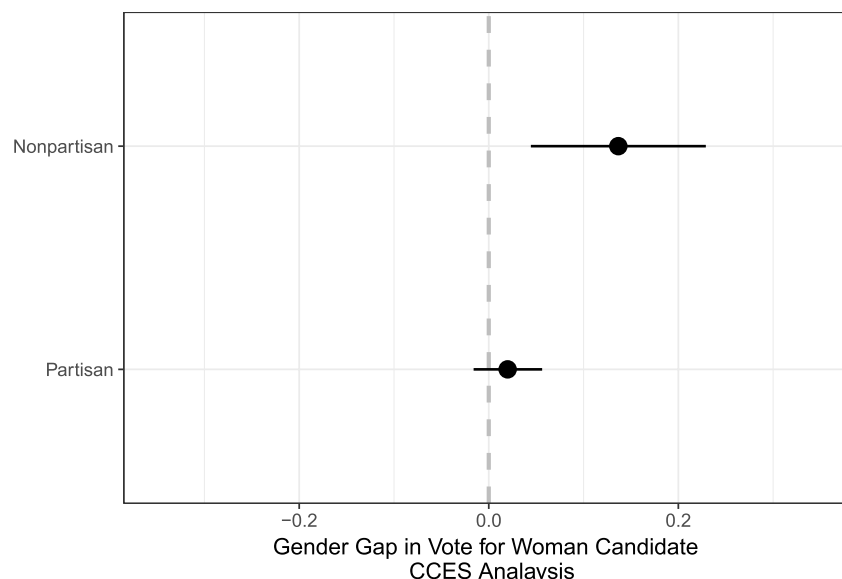
Our analysis of vote choice in judicial elections is limited to the 2012 judicial elections in which a female candidate ran against a male candidate. This limited us to elections in six states. Unfortunately, in

other years in which the CCES asked about vote choice in judicial elections there are either no elections where female candidates ran against male candidates or these elections did not happen in both partisan and nonpartisan contexts. Therefore, we cannot further test out theory using additional validated voting data. This is a limitation to our analysis. To address this limitation we designed a set of conjoint experiments to further test [Hypothesis 1](#) and [Hypothesis 2](#).

Our conjoint experiments presented participants with profiles of two hypothetical candidates for a state supreme court election. These profiles included information on the candidates' partisanship, incumbency status, gender, and information on whether the state bar association rated them as very qualified, qualified, or not qualified. Each piece of information was randomized within candidate profiles. To simulate a nonpartisan election, half of participants were randomly assigned to not receive any information about candidate partisanship. In the partisan experiment, we only analyze elections in which participants selected between candidates of opposing parties to replicate the context of a general election. While here we are concerned with vote choice in contests where a female candidate runs against a male candidate, participants were shown elections in which female candidates faced female candidates and male candidates faced male candidates for increased realism. However, these pairings are excluded from the present analysis. We present relatively little information in our conjoint experiments to mimic the low information context of judicial elections. After viewing candidate profiles, participants were asked which candidate they preferred. Participants were asked to evaluate 5 pairings of candidate profiles. By evaluating which combinations lead to more support, the conjoint experiment isolates traits that are more or less influential in vote choice ([Hainmueller et al., 2014](#)). Examples of the prompts displayed to participants are presented in [Fig. 2](#).

950 participants were recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) to take part in our conjoint experiments. To be eligible for participation, individuals had to be located in the United States and at least 18 years of age. Participants were paid fifty cents for completing the experiment. Conducting research on MTurk has some potential problems. [Berinsky et al. \(2012\)](#) demonstrate that MTurk samples are non-representative of the US population and this may harm the external validity of results produced with MTurk samples. However, despite the non-representativeness of MTurk samples, many studies have demonstrated that MTurk produces valid results that replicate findings based on population-based samples ([Clifford et al., 2015](#); [Thomas and Clifford, 2017](#)).

Since we are interested in whether survey participants preferred the female candidate, we estimate a logit regression model predicting



**Fig. 1.** Gender Gap in Voting or the Woman Judicial Candidate. Difference in Probability and 95% confidence intervals displayed.

Please carefully review the options detailed below, then please answer the questions.

Which of these choices do you prefer?

	Judicial Candidate 1	Judicial Candidate 2
<b>Partisanship</b>	Democrat	Republican
<b>Incumbency</b>	Candidate is an incumbent	Candidate is not an incumbent
<b>Gender</b>	Male	Female
<b>State Bar Association Rating</b>	Highly Qualified	Qualified

Judicial Candidate 1

Judicial Candidate 2

Please carefully review the options detailed below, then please answer the questions.

Which of these choices do you prefer?

	Judicial Candidate 1	Judicial Candidate 2
<b>Incumbency</b>	Candidate is an incumbent	Candidate is not an incumbent
<b>Gender</b>	Female	Male
<b>State Bar Association Rating</b>	Not Qualified	Very Qualified

Judicial Candidate 1

Judicial Candidate 2

**Fig. 2.** Example of designs displayed to participants. Upper design displays an example in which partisanship was displayed while the lower design displays an example in which partisanship was not displayed.

preference for the female candidate as a function of participant sex, candidates' incumbency status, candidates' state ABA rating, and in the partisan experiment whether the participant shared partisanship with either of the candidates. The model includes robust standard errors clustered on each participant. If [Hypothesis 1](#) is supported, there should be no difference between male and female propensity to support the woman candidate in the partisan experiment. If [Hypothesis 2](#) is supported, women participants should be more likely to prefer the woman candidate in the nonpartisan experiment. [Table 5](#) presents the results.

The first column of [Table 5](#) displays the results for the nonpartisan experiment. The results support [Hypothesis 2](#). Female participants were more likely than male participants to support the female candidate. Specifically, a female participant had a predicted probability of .680 of supporting the female candidate, while a male participant had a predicted probability of .496. Thus, the gender gap in support for the female candidate in the nonpartisan context is .184 ( $p < .05$ ).

The second column of [Table 5](#) presents the results for the partisan experiment. The results support [Hypothesis 1](#). Female participants were

no more likely than male participants to support the female candidate. Specifically, a female participant had a predicted probability of .531 of supporting the female candidate, while a male participant had a predicted probability of .511. The gender gap in support for the female candidate in the partisan context then is just .02. Instead of shared sex, in the partisan experiment, a shared partisanship with the female or male candidate was the main predictor of vote choice. The gender gap for both the nonpartisan and partisan experiments are displayed in [Fig. 3](#).

One shortcoming of our analysis of the 2012 CCES data was that it was limited to just one election year and a total of six elections. For this reason, we conducted additional experimental analyses. The results to our experiments replicate the observational voting data from the 2012 CCES. The ability to replicate our results from the CCES with experimental analysis should assuage concerns over the shortcomings of the limited nature of the 2012 CCES data and further bolster our argument that women will be more likely to support women candidates in a nonpartisan context where partisan cues are not readily available. While neither our observational nor experimental results explain the underlying mechanism

**Table 5**  
Preferred woman candidate: Experimental analysis.

	(1) Nonpartisan Experiment	(2) Partisan Experiment
Woman Participant	0.772** (0.166)	0.0798 (0.212)
Woman Candidate Incumbent	– 0.00248 (0.184)	0.191 (0.214)
Woman Candidate Qualifications	1.409** (0.167)	– 0.139 (0.133)
Male Candidate Incumbent	– 0.0722 (0.224)	0.194 (0.209)
Male Candidate Qualifications	– 1.516** (0.185)	0.230 (0.127)
Shared Partisanship with Woman Candidate		1.283** (0.251)
Shared Partisanship with Male Candidate		– 0.948** (0.258)
Constant	0.249 (0.344)	– 0.490 (0.433)
Observations	1185	585

Robust standard errors clustered on participant in parentheses.

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

for this relationship, our analysis represents an important advancement in the existing research on gender affinity effects. We demonstrate that electoral context matters—specifically partisan versus nonpartisan elections—and influences the presence of gender affinity effects.

## 6. Implications and conclusions

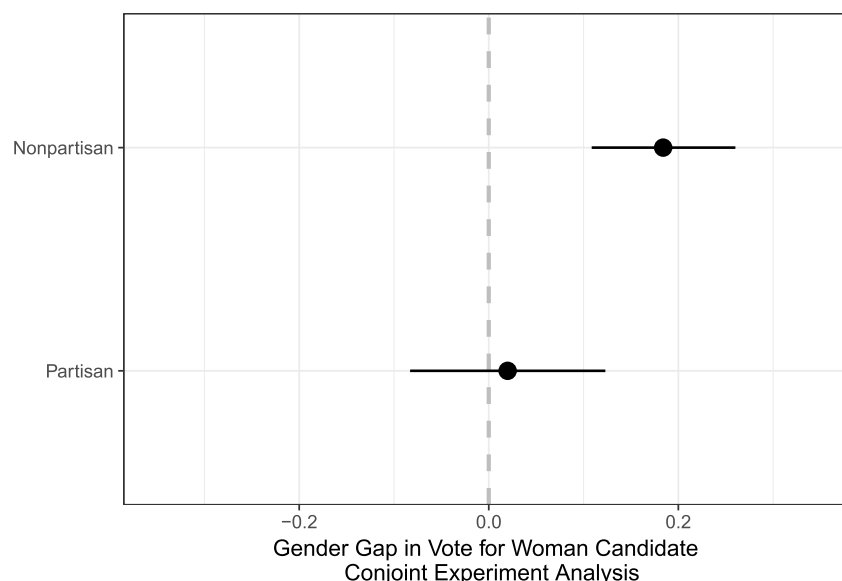
Our findings suggest that electoral context is an important factor in understanding the presence of gender affinity effects in American elections. We find evidence that a shared gender between voter and candidate can drive vote choice in certain contexts. Though past research on elections in the United States has largely neglected the study of nonpartisan elections, we take these elections seriously in our analysis. In doing so, our research represents an important advance in the literature on gender and vote choice. Our research serves as an initial step towards

understanding how gender affinity effects manifest outside of partisan contexts, we believe our findings have implications for the study state and local elections, primary elections, and other contexts where voters are not selecting between candidates from opposing parties.

The analysis presented in this study both confirms and challenges the conventional wisdom on partisanship and gender affinity effects. Previous research has concluded that gender is often not a strong influence of vote choice—with some notable exceptions—and that instead political factors, such as partisanship, are the best predictors of voter decision making. Our analysis supports this conclusion. In contexts where voters had access to information about candidate party, this was the single best predictor of vote choice. Simply put, partisans voted for their co-partisans. In this context we found no evidence that women voters preferred women candidates. Instead, both men and women voters made their selection based on partisanship.

However, where previous research has been quick to conclude this means gender has only minimal effects on vote choice, we argue that there is still a meaningful role for gender to play in U.S. elections. While national level elections occur under partisan systems, many state and local elections do not. In these contexts gender can serve as a meaningful cue that influences vote choice. In our analysis, we observe that in nonpartisan elections women were more likely to vote for the woman candidate. Indeed, this finding holds even after accounting for potential confounders. This suggests that in nonpartisan elections, gender affinity effects are not only present, but can meaningfully shape electoral outcomes.

Our results show that in nonpartisan contexts there is evidence of gender affinity effects. Specifically in these elections a woman voter had a .136 higher probability of voting for the female candidate than a male voter. This effect could be large enough to swing election results in competitive elections. This in turn could mean that some women were elected due to gender affinity effects. This has implications for judicial decision-making in state courts. For example, [Boyd et al. \(2010\)](#) and [Boyd \(2016\)](#) find that female judges are more likely to rule in favor of female claimants in sex discrimination cases than male judges. Further, [Boyd et al. \(2010\)](#) show that a woman judge's presence on a panel increases the probability of male judges voting for the female claimant in sex discrimination cases. A study conducted by [Leonard and Ross \(2016\)](#) demonstrates that state supreme court with a higher percentage of female judges have a higher rate of consensus than courts with lower percentage of female judges. Beyond the decision-making context, a greater share of female judges may increase citizen's perceptions of the court's legitimacy (see [Clayton et al., 2018](#)). Thus, beyond the implications our results have for voting and vote choice, there may also be



**Fig. 3.** Gender Gap in Voting for the Woman Judicial Candidate. Difference in Probability and 95% confidence intervals displayed.



downstream implications for the function of judicial institutions.

While we view our research as an important contribution to the study of gender and vote choice, we acknowledge that there are some limitations to the present study. First, due to data availability, our observational analysis is constrained to one election cycle and six elections. This necessarily hinders our ability to look at judicial elections across all states in which judges are selected in popular elections. Instead we must rely on the subset of races that occurred in 2012. As data on voting behavior in state judicial elections becomes increasingly available, our findings will be able to be expanded to a wider array of cases and elections. As an acknowledgement of the limited nature of the observational data, we conducted a set of conjoint experiments. These experiments replicated the finding of our observational analysis: women were more likely to vote for female candidates in nonpartisan elections but are no more likely to for the female candidate in partisan elections.

Second, while we believe our findings have implications for the study of gender in nonpartisan elections generally, we acknowledge that the present study only analyzes these effects in the context of one office: state supreme court judges. Thus, while our findings have theoretical application for the study of other nonpartisan state and local elections, further analysis would be needed to verify this claim. Despite this limitation, our study highlights that nonpartisan systems may be a fruitful avenue for researchers interested in understanding the role of gender in American elections. Our results should be seen as a first step in this research agenda, and we hope that other scholars will continue to study gender in

a wide array of nonpartisan contexts. Finally, while we are able to conclude that a gender affinity effect is present in the nonpartisan contexts we used in this study, we are unable to identify the precise mechanism underlying this effect. Data on nonpartisan elections is relatively limited; our hope is that as these types of elections receive more attention from researchers there will be increased data on these races that will allow us to further study the effects we identify in the present article.

Our findings highlight the need to take electoral structure into account when studying gender affinity effects in the U.S. The structure of electoral institutions can play a pivotal role in determining what information cues voters rely on when making their decision at the ballot box. Our study represents an attempt to take variation in these institutional structures into account. As scholars increasingly study electoral politics outside of national, partisan contexts understanding variations in electoral institutions, and the consequences these variations have for voting behavior will become and increasingly important component of our understanding of U.S. elections.

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## Appendix

### Michigan Robustness Results

Candidates for the Michigan Supreme Court are nominated by political parties and then compete in a nonpartisan election. Nelson et al. (2013) demonstrate that these nonpartisan elections sometimes function similarly to partisan judicial elections and recommend research allow theory to dictate whether Michigan is classified as nonpartisan or partisan. We believe our classification of Michigan is most justified because we are interested the availability of the partisan heuristic as voters are casting their ballots. However, to ensure the robustness of our results, we run additional models: one in which Michigan is coded as a partisan contest and one in which Michigan is excluded. In each additional model, our substantive findings remaining consistent.

Fig. 4 displays the results with different codings of the Michigan electoral system. The models estimated to produce the figure as identical to those in Table 4.

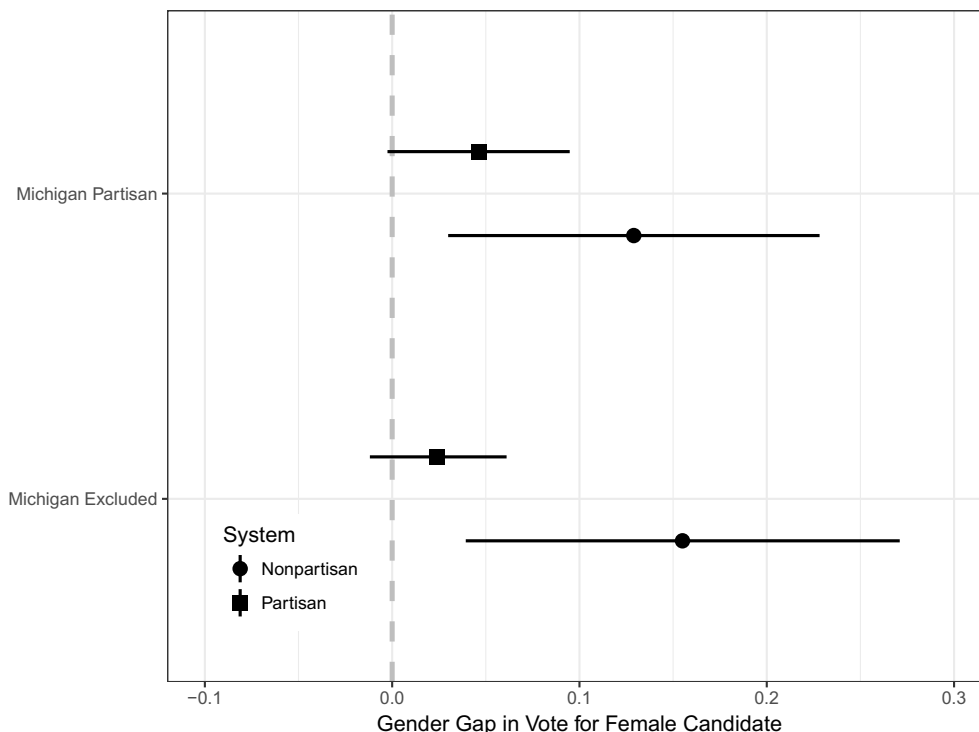


Fig. 4. Results with Different Codings of Michigan's Electoral System.

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