

Blaming Women or Blaming the System? Public Perceptions of Women's Underrepresentation in Elected Office

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Abstract

While scholars understand some of the reasons for the underrepresentation of women in elected office in the United States, we know almost nothing about what the public sees as the explanation for this reality. We also know relatively little about the degree to which people see women's underrepresentation as a problem. Drawing on blame attribution theories, we examine whether people believe that there are systematic or individual explanations for the number of women in elected office. As blame explanations often influence positions on outcomes, we also test whether these explanations are related to people's attitudes toward women in office and their vote choice behaviors in U.S. House races with women candidates present. Using data from a 2014 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) survey, we find differences among people in the blame explanations they make. These explanations are significantly related to attitudes about women in office but do not influence vote choice decisions when women run for office.

Keywords

gender, elections and voting behavior, American politics, women and politics

A critical question in examining why there are so few women in elected office in the United States is what might explain this situation. Women, who comprise 51 percent of the U.S. population and continue to make significant strides in education, occupational, and economic attainment, have yet to break through in proportionate numbers in politics. Scholars have examined this question from all angles, focusing on the number of women candidates, the relationship of women candidates to political parties, reactions from voters, and the dynamics of campaigns (Dittmar 2015; Dolan 2014; Lawless and Fox 2010; Sanbonmatsu 2006). But one thing we do not really understand is what members of the public think about the situation. We know that people take a range of positions on whether politics is appropriate for women, whether there should be more women in elected office, and even whether our country would be governed better with more women in positions of power (Dolan 2014; Pew Research Center 2008). And yet we have very little information on what the average voter sees as the reason for women's underrepresentation. Knowing more about public perceptions of the reasons for women's absence from elected office could be important to understanding their attitudes and behaviors toward women candidates for office, to the environment these attitudes create for women candidates, and even to potential policy or institutional solutions to change this situation.

Explanations for Women's Underrepresentation

Over the years, scholars of women and politics have identified several realities of social and political life that help account for the fact that women in the United States comprise about 20 to 25 percent of elected officeholders, from local to national office (Center for American Women and Politics 2017). These explanations tend to break down into two categories—elements of the lives of women that can limit their participation and aspects of our political system that inhibit their opportunities, or what some scholars refer to as “supply” and “demand” explanations (Carroll and Sanbonmatsu 2013; Holman and Schneider 2017).

Individual-level, or supply, explanations focus on aspects of women and women's lives, such as their family status or career choices, that make them less likely to run for office. There has been significant research that demonstrates women have lower levels of political ambition

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than men and devalue their own credentials for candidacy more easily than do men (Fox and Lawless 2011; Holman and Schneider 2017; Lawless and Fox 2010). Other work finds that women's family roles and the "second shift" can limit their ability to combine a candidacy with family life or that their career choices place them outside of the traditional occupations from which successful candidates emerge (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 1997; Elder 2004, but see Fox and Lawless 2014).

Demand explanations tend to examine the ways elements of our political system organize to limit women's opportunities to run for office. Here, political parties and other political elites fail to see women as viable candidates, are less likely to recruit them to run, and provide fewer resources or "winnable" opportunities than they provide to men (Bejarano 2013; Carroll 1994; Crowder-Meyer 2013; Fox and Lawless 2011; Niven 1998; Sanbonmatsu 2006).

Blame Attributions and the Public's Evaluation of Women's Underrepresentation

Although there is ample academic work on explanations for women's underrepresentation in office, we know much less about how the voting public views this situation. Understanding how people evaluate this reality is important. Messages about women and women's place in political life come from many sources—the media, academics, political parties—and can saturate our elections, which can have an impact on how voters perceive women candidates (Falk 2010; Greenlee, Holman and VanSickle-Ward 2016). Public-opinion polls demonstrate that Americans still see discrimination against women in our society, believe that it is easier for men to get elected to office than women, and see both individual- and system-level explanations for women's status (Cohn and Livingston 2016; NORC 2016; Pew Research Center 2008). But we still lack a theoretically driven understanding of how people explain women's dramatic underrepresentation.

A place to begin such an examination is with the literature on blame attribution. This work suggests that people like to be able to explain situations, that they seek out explanations as a way of making sense of the world around them. This body of work suggests that people strive to understand, simplify, and control their environments and that part of this process involves understanding the causes of some situation, event, or behavior (Heider 1958). Causal attributions help people understand their environments, and these attributions are known to be important to shaping subsequent attitudes and behaviors about a range of issues (Gomez and Wilson 2003; Jones et al., 1972).

There are two general types of causal attributions that people make: internal/dispositional and external/environmental. An internal attribution focuses on the character, ability, personality, or disposition of individuals as the proximate cause of some situation or behavior, while an external attribution involves a judgment that the environment, social context, or situational influence is a cause of the situation. People's responses to observed behaviors often hinge on whether they see individual or situational causes as primary (Fiske and Taylor 1991). These centers of blame generally correspond to the "supply" or individual and "demand" or systemic explanations for women's underrepresentation made by scholarly work on the subject.

Causal attributions are thought to be important in the study of public opinion because decisions about who to credit or blame for a situation are important for determining responsibility of government actors and elected officials, as well as for shaping policy preferences. Political scientists have drawn on blame attribution theory to examine evaluations of a range of political issues. Joslyn and Haider-Markel (2016), Haider-Markel and Joslyn (2008), and Whitehead (2014) have examined how attributions about the causes of homosexuality are related to stereotypic judgments about gays and lesbians, support for gay rights, and support for same-sex marriage. Gomez and Wilson have applied blame attribution theory to explanations of symbolic racism and evaluations of government actors during Hurricane Katrina (Gomez and Wilson 2006, 2008). Other scholars have used this framework to examine attitudes toward the poor, gun control policies, and health care policies (Cozzarelli, Wilkinson and Tagler 2001; Gollust and Lynch 2011; Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2001; Joslyn and Haider-Markel 2013).

Beyond public support for policies, attributions have been shown to be important in influencing voting behavior. While much of this literature focuses on evaluations of the economy, the larger dynamics at play can be instructive for other domains of concerns. Arceneaux (2003) challenged the notion that Americans facing economic adversity are less likely to vote, finding that blame attributions can be a motivator of turnout. Using American National Election Studies (ANES) data, he finds that less well-off people who blame the government for economic conditions are more likely to turn out to vote than those who do not make blame attributions. Other research on economic evaluations finds that blame attributions can shape the direction of voting as well. Aldrich et al. 2014 find that patterns of blaming Democrats in Congress and/or President Obama were related to vote choice among Tea Party voters in the 2010 congressional midterm elections. Other work finds that holding the government responsible for economic conditions can both benefit (D'Elia and Norpoth 2014; Rudolph and Grant 2002) and

hurt (Feldman 1982; Lau and Sears 1981) incumbent presidents. Partisanship is often related to these attributions of blame, with partisans failing to blame their favored party when times are hard and denying credit to opposition parties when times are good (Marsh and Tilley 2009; Tilley and Hobolt 2011).

There is variation among individuals in the blame attributions they make. For example, partisans are more likely to see government as less deserving of blame when leaders share their party and to make different evaluations of government activities, such as economic conditions (Aldrich et al. 2014; Tilley and Hobolt 2011). Ideology also shapes whether people see individual-level or system blame on issues such as who deserves health care or poverty support programs, with liberals being more likely to see the poor as trapped in an unfair social environment, while conservatives focus more on individual limitations (Cozzarelli, Wilkinson and Tagler 2001; Gollust and Lynch 2011). In-group cues can pull people toward policies or against "others" on racial issues, immigration, and gay rights (Gollust and Lynch 2011; Kinder and Kam 2009). Finally, political sophistication has consistently been demonstrated to shape attributions, with high sophisticates having a greater capacity to acknowledge the complexity of the social world and see systemic explanations than those with lower levels of sophistication, who tend to focus on individual-level explanations (Duch, Palmer, and Anderson 2000; Gomez and Wilson 2006, 2008; Joslyn and Haider-Markel 2013).

If attributions are a common psychological device, they may be a useful tool for evaluating people's explanations for women's underrepresentation in elected office. And if these attributions are antecedent to preferences and behaviors, we can examine whether attributions about the causes of women's underrepresentation in elected office have any relationship to attitudes toward women in office or voting for women candidates when voters have the opportunity to do so. Given that we know so little about what people think about the reasons for women's current status, this project will contribute to our understanding by opening this line of inquiry and examining what people think about women's underrepresentation and whether their thoughts are related to attitudes and behaviors toward women candidates.

Hypotheses

People's understanding of the reasons for women's underrepresentation in elected office could easily take many forms, as there is not one simple explanation for this situation. Despite decades of progress toward equality for women in social, economic, and political life, women in the United States still live and work in a system that is dominated by men. Americans are still likely to see

barriers to women's entry into business and politics and to believe that women compete on an uneven playing field. Others see deficiencies in women themselves, whether in their own qualifications or in the life choices that make them less able to climb career ladders (Pew Research Center 2008). The varied beliefs about societal discrimination and individual inadequacies can be organized in the "systemic" versus "individual" blame categories advanced by the blame attribution literature. This provides the basis for our examination of public perceptions about women's underrepresentation.

We test three hypotheses. First, we examine the determinants of individual and systemic explanations for women's situation. Here, we expect that women and those with higher levels of political knowledge are more likely to see systemic explanations for women's underrepresentation and less likely to see fault in individual women. Each of these hypotheses is in line with existing literature. For example, women are more likely than men to see discrimination against women in social and political life and to think that men have an easier time getting elected to office (Cohn and Livingston 2016; Lawless and Fox 2010; NORC 2016). The blame attribution literature suggests that knowledge should help people see the bigger picture of systemic explanations for situations at work, leading people with higher levels of political knowledge to be more likely to agree with systemic explanations for political phenomena.

Next, we examine whether these perceptions about blame for women's situation are related to other attitudes about women candidates, specifically whether people want to see more women in office and whether they think that having more women in office leads to better governing. Here, we hypothesize that people who see systemic reasons for women's underrepresentation will be more likely to support the idea of having more women in office and believe that having more women leads to better governing. It is not unrealistic to expect that people who see flaws among women might take those to be limitations to political leadership (Alexander and Andersen 1993; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; Koch 1997). This hypothesis is also based on work that demonstrates that people who have more positive attitudes about women and their place in the political world are more likely than others to want an increase in women's representation in elected office (Dolan 2014; Dolan and Lynch 2015; Sanbonmatsu 2003).

Finally, we examine whether these attributions matter to people's behaviors by examining whether they are related to vote choice in House elections in which women candidates run against men. The blame attribution literature demonstrates that people's perceptions of responsibility for situations are often related to policy outcomes on related issues. For example, seeing systemic explanations for poverty is associated with higher levels of

support for social welfare programs (Applebaum 2001). With regard to the status of women in elected office, there is no direct policy proposal to examine, no legislation to provide funding for women candidates or calls for party quotas for women. Instead, the closest thing we have to something akin to a policy outcome is vote choice. As a result, the final analysis here examines whether people's perception of the reason for women's underrepresentation is related to their vote choice decisions in races involving women candidates. We would expect that people who blame the political system for women's underrepresentation would be more likely to vote for a woman candidate when they have the chance to do so.

Data and Method

The data for this project come from a module placed on the 2014 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), a national stratified sample survey administered by YouGov/Polimetrix, which sought to examine public attitudes and behaviors toward women candidates.¹ One intent of the study was to examine voting for women candidates who ran against men for the House of Representatives, so our module included an oversample of 600 cases beyond the usual 1,000, bringing the number of respondents in this module to 1,600.

Blame Attribution

The primary variables of interest in this project involve two views of the reasons for women's underrepresentation in elected office. Following Iyengar (1989), we offer respondents a series of statements and ask them to evaluate whether each is an important explanation for women's underrepresentation. To this end, we employed the following item:

Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following explanations for why there are fewer women in elected office than men in the United States.

Respondents were then offered eight potential explanations. These items are derived from the literature on women's underrepresentation and are intended to represent a range of potential explanations. While not an exhaustive list, they aim to focus on ideas about bias against women candidates in the political world and on the elements of individual lives that can shape potential candidates.

- In general, there is still discrimination in public life.
- Many people hesitate to vote for women candidates.

- Men receive more positive coverage from the media.
- It is harder for women to raise money to run for office.
- There aren't enough women willing to run for office.
- Family commitments keep many women out of politics.
- Men are more interested in politics than are women.
- Women don't have the right experience for politics.²

Factor analysis of the eight items identifies two dimensions of blame—one focused on individual-level attributes and the other identifying systemic explanations.³ These two factors line up squarely with what existing literature identifies as the demand and supply explanations for women's underrepresentation. The items that loaded on the systemic dimension are the first four listed above. These items reflect some of the broad system-level concerns about bias and unequal treatment that people at both the mass and elite levels express about the challenges women candidates face in the United States (Bauer 2015; Kittilson and Fridkin 2008; Lawless and Fox 2010; Ono and Burden 2017). The latter four items on the list are those that loaded as individual-level explanations. These speak to the individual situations and attitudes that can inhibit women's candidacy (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 1997; Carroll 1989; Darcy, Welch and Clark 1994; Elder 2004; Holman and Schneider 2017; Lawless and Fox 2010).

So that readers may acquaint themselves with these items, Table 1 presents the frequencies for each of the eight items for the sample as a whole and by the sex of the respondent. These frequencies clearly demonstrate that people generally agree women face systemic barriers to their movement into elected office. In total, 76 percent say that there is still discrimination against women in public life, and 71 percent agree that people hesitate to vote for women candidates. With regard to structural challenges, 62 percent of respondents believe that men who run for office receive more positive media coverage than do women, and 55 percent say that raising campaign money is harder for women.

With regard to the items that focus on blaming women, there is less agreement among respondents. Here, 73 percent say that one of the primary reasons for women's underrepresentation is that not enough women run for office, and 71 percent agree that family is a barrier that keeps women out of politics. However, on two items that evaluate women's abilities directly, smaller numbers "fault" women. A total of 48 percent of respondents agrees that men are more interested in politics, but only

Table 1. Frequencies—Full Sample and by Respondent Sex.

	Disagree		Agree	
Blame system				
Discrimination in public life	23.33%		76.67%	
People hesitate to vote for women	26.66%		73.34%	
Men more positive media coverage	37.87%		62.13%	
Raising money harder for women	45.46%		54.54%	
Blame women				
Not enough women run for office	27.87%		72.13%	
Family keeps women out of politics	28.76%		71.24%	
Men more interested in politics	50.78%		49.21%	
Women do not have the right experience	85.05%		14.95%	
Blame system—By sex of respondent				
	Disagree		Agree	
Blame system	Men	Women	Men	Women
Discrimination in public life	227 31.57%	122 15.74%	492 68.43%	653 84.26%
People hesitate to vote for women	212 29.49%	186 24.09%	507 70.51%	586 75.91%
Men more positive media coverage	311 43.44%	251 32.64%	405 56.56%	518 67.36%
Raising money harder for women	353 49.65%	319 41.59%	358 50.35%	448 58.41%
Blame women—By sex of respondent				
	Disagree		Agree	
Blame women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Not enough women run for office	215 30.24%	198 25.68%	496 69.76%	573 74.32%
Family keeps women out of politics	217 30.18%	213 27.45%	502 69.82%	563 72.55%
Men more interested in politics	327 45.67%	430 55.56%	389 54.33%	344 44.44%
Women do not have the right experience	584 81.45%	684 88.63%	133 18.55%	90 11.62%

15 percent say that women do not have the right experience to be successful candidates. These frequencies suggest that people are more likely to see individual-level structural constraints on women's opportunities to run for office, but are much less likely to see women as personally deficient somehow.

It should not be surprising to see that women and men take somewhat different perspectives on the system and individual reasons for women's underrepresentation. As Table 1 shows, women are much more likely than men to see discrimination in public life (+22 points), to believe that people are still hesitant to vote for women (+13 points), and say that men receive more positive media coverage (+13 points) and have an easier time raising money than women (+8 points). This suggests that

women see a somewhat hostile environment for women seeking political office, which is in line with other research on attitudes among women and men about political candidacy (Lawless and Fox 2010). Interestingly, there are much smaller differences between women and men on the items that place blame on women directly, with women being more likely than men to say that not enough women run for office (+5 points) and less likely to believe that women do not have the right experience for politics (-4 points). There is virtually no difference in the percentage of women and men who see family life as a barrier to women's candidacies (+1 point), where we might have expected women, who generally shoulder more of the responsibilities for home and family, to see this as a more significant barrier. For the individual-level

Table 2. Determinants of System Blame.

	Discrimination in public life	Hesitation to vote for women	Men more positive media	Hard to raise money
Education	-0.038 (0.090)	-0.342* (0.100)	-0.157 (0.084)	0.144 (0.088)
Woman	0.639* (0.153)	0.225 (0.149)	0.500* (0.145)	0.111 (0.149)
White	0.016 (0.185)	0.029 (0.181)	-0.063 (0.177)	0.056 (0.170)
Age	0.008 (0.004)	0.001 (0.004)	0.011* (0.005)	0.019* (0.004)
Party ID	0.305* (0.108)	0.303* (0.134)	0.271* (0.121)	0.347* (0.113)
Political Ideology	0.397* (0.056)	0.138* (0.060)	0.151* (0.055)	0.132* (0.052)
Political Knowledge	-0.436* (0.119)	-0.259* (0.118)	-0.362* (0.112)	-0.414* (0.117)
-2 -1	-1.792* (0.381)	-3.610* (0.383)	-2.115* (0.409)	-1.152* (0.361)
-1 1	0.016 (0.364)	-1.176* (0.371)	0.173 (0.402)	1.270* (0.364)
1 2	2.542* (0.384)	1.515* (0.373)	2.265* (0.424)	3.574* (0.388)
Observations	1,312	1,310	1,305	1,302
AIC	2,790.24	2,753.695	3,061.498	2,969.647

Standard errors in parentheses. Ordered logit models using poststratification weights. AIC = Akaike information criterion.

* $p < .05$.

items, it is only on the question of whether men are more interested in politics that we see a significant gender difference, with 60 percent of men agreeing and only 43 percent of women taking this position.

Analysis

The analysis conducted here involves three steps. First, because we want to understand more fully how different individuals evaluate the reasons for women's underrepresentation, we predict the individual blame items as a function of respondent sex, age, race, education level, party, ideology, and political knowledge.⁴

Next, because the blame literature suggests that attributional differences can structure people's evaluations on related issues, we test to see whether blaming women or the system for women's underrepresentation is related to attitudes toward women's presence in elected office. Here, there are two dependent variables—whether respondents want to see more women than is currently the case elected to office and whether respondents believe that having more women in office leads to better governing.⁵ In these models, we predict the attitude items as a function of respondent sex, age, race, education level, party, ideology, political knowledge, and two blame indices.⁶

Finally, given that the blame attribution literature suggests that voters who blame government or leaders for current political situations, we test to see whether blame perceptions play any role in voting for women candidates. Variables in this model include voter demographics, whether the woman candidate and respondent share a political party, the party of the respondent, the incumbency status of the woman candidate, the seat status, campaign spending by the woman candidate, and the competitiveness of the race.⁷

Results

Determinants of Blaming the System

The first step in the multivariate analysis here is to predict who is more likely to “blame the system” and who is more likely to “blame women.” In Tables 2 and 4, we report the results of ordered logit models that estimate the determinants of each of the eight blame attribution items.

Taking determinants of system blame first (Table 2), we see there are several important predictors. First, as hypothesized, women are significantly more likely to see systemic roots for women's underrepresentation than are men. Women respondents are more likely to agree that there is discrimination against women in public life and that men

Table 3. Determinants of System Blame (by Party).

	Discrimination in public life	Hesitation to vote for women	Men more positive media	Hard to raise money
Republicans				
Woman	0.523 (0.307)	0.370 (0.299)	0.333 (0.347)	0.176 (0.297)
Political Knowledge	-0.474* (0.217)	-0.286 (0.234)	-0.315 (0.213)	-0.697* (0.247)
<i>n</i>	303	303	303	303
AIC	688.2466	657.1408	738.242	683.7107
Independents				
Woman	0.767* (0.269)	0.190 (0.262)	0.645* (0.254)	0.104 (0.256)
Political Knowledge	-0.550* (0.240)	-0.428* (0.216)	-0.610* (0.203)	-0.680* (0.208)
<i>n</i>	405	405	405	405
AIC	865.7319	802.5626	955.2868	917.3049
Democrats				
Woman	0.654* (0.243)	0.228 (0.272)	0.522* (0.239)	0.024 (0.239)
Political Knowledge	-0.073 (0.200)	0.097 (0.210)	0.085 (0.199)	0.142 (0.167)
<i>n</i>	481	481	481	481
AIC	908.7819	998.1857	1,076.208	1,081.856

Standard errors in parentheses. Ordered logit models using poststratification weights. AIC = Akaike information criterion.

* $p < .05$.

get more positive media cover than do women. However, women and men are not different in their perspective on whether people are hesitant to vote for women or whether women have a harder time raising money than men.

There are three other variables that are a consistent influence on the likelihood of respondents blaming the system for women's underrepresentation—ideology, political party, and political knowledge. Here, we see that liberals and Democrats are more likely to agree with each of the four items identifying systemic blame than are conservatives and Republicans. These findings make sense given that liberals and Democrats generally have more egalitarian gender attitudes and, according to the blame attribution literature, are more likely to see systemic explanations for various political situations (Cozzarelli et al., 2001; Dolan and Lynch 2015; Gomez and Wilson 2006; Joslyn and Haider-Markel 2013; Whitehead 2014).

The blame attribution literature suggests that people with higher levels of political sophistication are more likely to see systemic, as opposed to individual, level explanations for things. While the analysis here indicates that political knowledge is a significant differentiator of people's position on system blame, the direction is not expected. Here, people with higher levels of political knowledge are significantly less likely to agree with each of the statements about system blame than people with lower levels, who are more likely to agree with each item. This means that respondents with more political knowledge are less likely to see discrimination as a cause for women's underrepresentation, are less likely to believe that people hesitate to vote for women, and are less likely to see media coverage or fundraising to benefit men.

This finding is interesting, given that it is in the opposite direction of our hypothesis and of the expectation derived from the blame literature. Explaining this finding, then, causes us to think about perception versus accuracy. It is the case that the literature on women candidates offers evidence that the world is less hostile to women candidates than conventional wisdom might expect. This literature does not support the idea that it is harder for women to raise money or that people are hesitant to vote for women and finds that media coverage of women and men is now largely equal (Bystrom 2014; Dolan 2014; Fox 2014; Hayes and Lawless 2015). If we expect political knowledge to help people be able to accurately perceive the political world and we assume that some of the findings of academic literature may make its way into the media and into people's lives, it may make sense that respondents with higher levels of political knowledge are taking issue with system blame perspectives.

One additional way to consider this analysis is to look at the determinants of system blame for respondents by political party. Here, we focus on how sex and political knowledge behave. Table 3 presents the coefficients for the variables sex and political knowledge from ordered logit models run by party. These models contain all controls used in the analysis reported in Table 2. Interestingly, Republican women are no different than Republican men in their agreement or disagreement with the system blame items, while Independent and Democratic women are more likely to agree that there is discrimination against women in public life and that men get more positive media coverage than do women of their party. With regard to the significance of political knowledge to

Table 4. Determinants of Blaming Women.

	Not enough women run	Family keeps women out	Men more interested	Do not have experience
Education	0.150 (0.083)	0.008 (0.085)	0.012 (0.077)	-0.206* (0.088)
Woman	0.278 (0.155)	0.280 (0.143)	-0.330* (0.146)	-0.735* (0.160)
White	0.302 (0.169)	0.087 (0.179)	-0.060 (0.188)	-0.048 (0.191)
Age	0.006 (0.005)	0.012* (0.005)	-0.001 (0.005)	0.009 (0.006)
Party ID	0.093 (0.119)	0.104 (0.118)	-0.081 (0.125)	-0.082 (0.132)
Political Ideology	0.009 (0.055)	-0.171* (0.055)	-0.168* (0.057)	-0.224* (0.060)
Political Knowledge	-0.281* (0.123)	0.021 (0.141)	-0.097 (0.119)	-0.460* (0.135)
-2 -1	-2.346* (0.434)	-2.317* (0.400)	-2.921* (0.400)	-2.522* (0.441)
-1 1	-0.323 (0.430)	-0.548 (0.400)	-0.866* (0.375)	0.363 (0.439)
1 2	2.422* (0.457)	2.433* (0.426)	1.337* (0.391)	2.521* (0.432)
Observations	1,310	1,311	1,309	1,310
AIC	2,821.47	2,755.866	3,151.351	2,491.623

Standard errors in parentheses. Ordered logit models using poststratification weights. AIC = Akaike information criterion.

* $p < .05$.

system blame, we see that knowledge is not significant among Democrats, but it is among both Republicans and Independents. Republicans with higher levels of political knowledge are less likely than other Republicans to disagree that there is discrimination in public life and that women have a harder time raising money. Independents with higher levels of knowledge are more likely than other Independents to disagree with all four blame system items.⁸ This analysis suggests that the finding for political knowledge is not a universal one, but instead is conditioned by political party.

Determinants of Blaming Women

As Table 4 demonstrates, there are fewer clear patterns among the determinants of blaming women for their underrepresentation in office. As with blaming the system, respondent sex is still a predictor. Here, women are less likely than men to say that men are more interested in politics and that women do not have the right experience. Respondents with a more conservative ideology are more likely to agree that family keeps women out of politics, that men are more interested in politics, and that women do not have the right experience, while party identification is not significant on any of the four items. With regard to political knowledge, we see that those with higher levels disagree that women do not have the right experience for politics and do not run often enough, but knowledge is not related to the items on family being a barrier and men's and women's interest levels.

Conducting this analysis for the three party groups (Table 5) demonstrates few differences for political knowledge across the groups but does reveal interesting differences among women. Republican women are less likely than Republican men to agree that women do not have the right experience for politics. Independent

women fail to agree with this statement and with the idea that men are more interested in politics. Among Democrats, women are more likely than men to agree that not enough women run for office and that family can keep women out of politics but are less likely to see women's experiences as a problem.

Blame and Support for Women in Office

Beyond determining the kinds of people who hold systemic- or individual-level blame explanations for political phenomena, the literature suggests that systemic or individual blame beliefs can predict people's positions on policies, events, or other related political realities. As a first step in determining the utility of blame explanations about women's underrepresentation, we examine whether these perspectives are related to people's attitudes about the number and benefit of women elected officials. Here, we hypothesize that people who take a more systemic view are those who are also likely to support the idea of having more women in office. It would seem sensible to suspect that people who blame women for their current state would be less likely to be in favor of a larger role for women (Alexander and Andersen 1993; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; Koch 1997).

Table 6 reports two logit models. In column 1, we see that blame attributions work as hypothesized: respondents who are more likely to blame the system for women's underrepresentation are more likely to want more women in office than is currently the case while those who blame women are less likely to want more women in office. It is clear that there is a relationship in people's minds between who is to blame for women's underrepresentation and what this might say about the qualifications of women. Those who see limits among women do not appear motivated to want more women in office. Those

Table 5. Determinants of Blaming Women (by Party).

	Not enough women run	Family keeps women out	Men more interested	Do not have experience
Republicans				
Woman	-0.197 (0.351)	0.058 (0.276)	0.331 (0.283)	-0.673* (0.287)
Political Knowledge	-0.371 (0.252)	-0.124 (0.248)	0.003 (0.204)	-0.261 (0.211)
<i>n</i>	303	303	303	303
AIC	659.8298	641.1462	723.9345	600.1388
Independents				
Woman	0.356 (0.287)	0.289 (0.284)	-0.874* (0.253)	-0.903* (0.304)
Political Knowledge	-0.422 (0.259)	-0.050 (0.305)	0.273 (0.281)	-0.393* (0.293)
<i>n</i>	405	405	405	405
AIC	843.4991	834.4349	911.3365	729.5061
Democrats				
Woman	0.535* (0.234)	0.448* (0.219)	-0.325 (0.237)	-0.561* (0.252)
Political Knowledge	0.143 (0.181)	0.259 (0.198)	-0.165 (0.190)	-0.419* (0.193)
<i>n</i>	481	481	481	481
AIC	998.096	1,031.405	1,191.893	902.0792

Standard errors in parentheses. Ordered logit models using poststratification weights. AIC = Akaike information criterion. **p* < .05.

Table 6. Predicting Attitudes in Support of Women in Office.

	More women in government desired	More women better governing
Intercept	-2.39 (0.48)	-0.50 (0.56)
Education	0.31* (0.12)	0.10 (0.12)
Woman	0.32 (0.19)	0.37 (0.22)
White	-0.19 (0.24)	-0.10 (0.26)
Age	0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)
Party ID	0.44* (0.14)	0.45* (0.15)
Political Ideology	0.22* (0.07)	0.39* (0.08)
Political Knowledge	0.51* (0.15)	-0.11 (0.19)
Blame System Attitudes	0.19* (0.03)	0.18* (0.03)
Blame Women Attitudes	-0.13* (0.03)	-0.16* (0.04)
<i>n</i>	1,251	1,190
AIC	1,302.45	951.50
Log likelihood	-611.23	-435.75

Standard errors in parentheses. Ordered logit models using poststratification weights. AIC = Akaike information criterion. **p* < .05.

who do not fault women would prefer to see more of them in government. Beyond these influences, we continue to see Democrats, liberals, and those with more education and political knowledge support the idea of having more women in office than Republicans, conservatives, and those with lower levels of education and political knowledge.

The same relationship is evident in column two of Table 6, where we see that those who make systemic blame attributions are more likely to see an increase in

women and office lead to better governing and those who blame women taking the opposite perspective. Taking these two analyses together does suggest that important attitudes about women’s place in, and contribution to, government and elected office is shaped, at least in part, by perceptions about who or what is to blame for women’s current reality.

Vote Choice

The last step in the analysis examines whether blame attributions about women’s status are linked to behaviors on related issues. While there are currently no policy proposals to increase women’s representation to examine in the United States, such as candidate quotas or public funding for candidate training, we can look at vote choice decisions people make when they are faced with a woman candidate. If, as the previous analysis indicated, people’s blame attributions are relevant to their attitudes about women in elected office, then it is reasonable to ask whether this influence extends to voting behavior. The final analysis presented here measures the determinants of vote choice for House races in which a woman candidate ran against a man in 2014.

Table 7 presents the results of a logit model explaining the determinants of vote choice that demonstrate very little impact for blame attributions. People who blame women are not significantly more or less likely to vote for women candidates, while those who blame the system are more likely to choose the man in their race. While statistically significant, the substantive impact here is very weak, suggesting that this is not a major driver of vote choice decisions. In fact, this is borne out by the strength

Table 7. Vote Choice in Mixed-Sex House Races 2014.

	DV: Vote choice
Constant	-2.95 (2.10)
Education	-0.07 (0.33)
Woman	0.82 (0.52)
White	-0.15 (0.88)
Age	0.02 (0.02)
Same Party	5.80* (0.84)
Independent	3.13* (0.79)
Party ID	0.75 (0.49)
Political Ideology	0.27 (0.30)
Political Knowledge	-1.63* (0.64)
Woman Incumbent	0.11 (1.29)
Open Seat	0.28 (0.84)
Women Spending %	-0.48 (1.29)
Competitive Race	0.39 (0.63)
Blame System	-0.19* (0.08)
Blame Women	0.09 (0.09)
Observations	180
AIC	143.91
Log likelihood	-7.96

Standard errors in parentheses. Logit model using poststratification weights. DV = dependent variable; AIC = Akaike information criterion.

* $p < .05$.

of the coefficients of the two most important determinants of voting for women candidates. The most important influences involve political party, here whether a respondent shares the party of the woman candidate and whether the respondent is an Independent. Both of these groups are overwhelmingly likely to choose the woman House candidate in 2014. This finding is in line with recent research, which finds that traditional influences on voting, like political party identification, are the most significant predictors of voting for women candidates (Dolan 2014). The lack of impact for blame attributions, while counter to our hypothesis, is in line with work that suggests that people can hold a range of attitudes and preferences about women's role in political life, but that these attitudes do not have any relationship to vote choice in racing involving women candidates (Dolan 2014; Dolan and Lynch 2015). It is clear, if perhaps counterintuitive, that these attitudes do not overcome traditional influences on vote choice like partisanship and offer little in the way of explaining people's behavior in the presence of a woman candidate.

Conclusion

While the gender politics literature has produced some understanding of the attitudes people have toward women candidates and women in elected office, we knew relatively

little about what people see as the reasons for women's dramatic underrepresentation in office. By employing the blame attribution literature as a framework for examining reasons, we contribute to current knowledge in a couple of different ways.

First, we have demonstrated that people do make distinctions among a set of potential explanations for women's underrepresentation. The blame attribution literature is a useful way to examine these explanations. As expected, respondents in our survey make relevant blame distinctions, with some focused on system-level explanations and others placing more of the responsibility with women themselves. The most relevant findings here are that women are significantly more likely to blame the system than are men, and people with more political knowledge perceive fewer systemic influences than those with lower levels of knowledge.

In examining whether blame attributions are useful for predicting other political attitudes and behaviors, we find mixed evidence. People's blame attributions do shape their attitudes toward the benefits of having women in office, with those who blame systemic influences holding positive attitudes about increased numbers of women in office, and those who blame women being less likely to value having more women in government. Yet, these blame attributions are not related to behavior, specifically voting for women candidates.

The results of this project can suggest ideas for future research. To date, scholars have focused most of their attention on explaining for women's underrepresentation. This leaves room for work that looks more closely at public reactions to women's current situation and the importance these reactions can have in shaping the environment for women candidates. For example, recent work by Holman and Schneider (2017) finds that different messages about the reasons for women's underrepresentation can influence levels of political ambition among women in the public. If it is, indeed, the case that at least some of the findings from academic work about the environment facing women candidates can make its way through the media and other sources into our broader social conversations, accurate information about the public's attitudes on these questions could help encourage women to consider a candidacy. Particularly given the conventional wisdom among people that voters may still be biased against women candidates, this more positive information could be a valuable counterbalance (Dolan 2014; Lawless and Fox 2010; NORC 2016).

Beyond animating social conversations about public reactions to women's underrepresentation, findings from research on these attitudes might be useful to parties and campaign professionals who work with women candidates. Dittmar's (2015) recent work on the campaigns of women candidates revealed that many political professionals still

see a woman candidate's sex and gender issues as potential negatives that have to be managed and controlled. If parties and campaign professionals understand that the public is more positively disposed toward women candidates than they may believe, this could shape their decisions about campaign strategies. And, while perhaps challenging for parties to accept, understanding that the public is more likely to see systemic bias against women may prompt critical thinking about their own recruitment strategies and practices. Perhaps a better understanding of these dynamics of public support for women could lead political parties to consider potential support for quotas for women candidates or dedicated programs to recruit and train women candidates.

Regardless of the potential for practical outcomes, it is important for scholars to continue to examine the attitudes that Americans hold about women as candidates and elected officials. It is clear that many people, at both the elite and mass levels, believe that the public environment facing women candidates is still one with the potential for bias and antagonism (Carroll 2009; Lawless 2009; Lawless and Fox 2010; NORC 2016). We hope this research can function as part of a body of work that paints a more accurate picture of that reality.

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Notes

1. All analyses are conducted with poststratification weights applied.
2. In the survey, the eight items measuring blaming the system or blaming women were randomized. They are presented here to illustrate the four items included in each index.
3. Cronbach's alpha score for "Blame System" items = .76; Cronbach's alpha score for "Blame Women" items = .62. Factor analysis was estimated to correctly group the blame items by estimating several different variants of loadings. The results of the factor analyses indicated that the items could be grouped in the manner discussed above, according to theory, and without adding any items from one group to the other. Readers may note that the "Blame women" factor falls just shy of the standard .70.
4. Age—coded in years; Education—no high school = 0; high school grad = 1; some college = 2; two-year degree = 2; four-year degree = 3; postgrad = 4; Ideology—very conservative = 0; conservative = 1; somewhat conservative = 2; middle of the road = 3; somewhat liberal = 4; liberal = 5;

very liberal = 6; Party ID—Republican = 0; Independent = 1; Democrat = 2; Political interest—How often are you interested in news about government and politics? Hardly at all = 0; only now and then = 1; some of the time = 2; most of the time = 3; White—1 = white; 0 = non-white; Woman—woman = 1; man = 0; Political Knowledge—*Who decides laws?*—Supreme Court = 1; else = 0 + *House Majority Party?*—Republicans = 1; else = 0.

5. Desire More Women in Government—more women in these positions = 1; current number is just about right = 0; fewer women in these positions = -1; More Women, Better Governing—Governed Better = 1; Governed Worse = 0.
6. Each of the Blame variables was coded so that higher values indicate agreement with the statement—strongly disagree = -2, disagree = -1, agree = 1; strongly agree = 2.
7. Vote choice—respondent vote for the woman candidate? Yes = 1; No = 0; Same Party—respondent same party ID as the woman candidate? Yes = 1; No = 0; Independent—Respondent's party ID: Independent = 1; Republican or Democrat = 0; Woman Incumbent—woman running as an incumbent? Yes = 1; No = 0; Open Seat—woman running in an open seat? Yes = 1; No = 0; Woman Spending %—Women's campaign spending as percentage of total spending; Competitive Race—A race is competitive if the winner received 55 percent of the two-party vote or less: Competitive = 1; Not competitive = 0.
8. A check on the responses on the political knowledge index reveals that Independents are not significantly different from party identifiers in their levels of knowledge. They have the highest levels of "two correct" and the lowest levels of "zero correct," but the differences are not statistically significant.

Supplemental Material

Replication materials for this article are available with the manuscript on the *Political Research Quarterly* (PRQ) website.

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