

## The Genderization of American Political Parties in Presidential Election Coverage on Network Television (1992–2020)

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This content analysis investigates the genderization of political parties in network news coverage of U.S. presidential campaigns over the past 28 years. Based on Bem's seminal Sex-Role Inventory, classic news values and leadership qualities were operationalized as masculine, feminine, and gender-neutral. Republicans were presented as more masculine and less feminine and gender-neutral than Democrats. These trends fluctuated some, but the differences between parties intensified over the course of the 8 presidential elections. The findings have implications for future studies that investigate the viability of gendered and transgendered candidates against the backdrop of political party identity.

*Keywords: Bem's Sex-Role Inventory, gender, news frames, elections, content analysis*

Since the 1970s, perceived low testosterone levels of Democrats have been ridiculed by Republicans, journalists, and late-night TV hosts. By 1992, Sidney Blumenthal argued in *Gentleman's Quarterly* that Democrats are equated with an unbecoming feminine brand of empathy while the fierceness of Republicans was growing in masculine appeal (Blumenthal, 1992). In 2001, Al Gore and George W. Bush exemplified this simplistic construction of the two dominant political parties. Naomi Wolf was hired to remake Gore into an *alpha* male, befitting the Oval Office (Henneberger, 1999). The idea that he hired a woman to teach him how to be a man kept pundits busy for weeks (Seelye, 1999). In *The New York Times*, Maureen Dowd (1999) wrote:

Now Ms. Wolf has to make the unfun Gore fun. She has come up with her most un-feminist notion yet: Urge a gentle, new-age beta male to act like a *Fight Club* macho alpha male, the sort who bares his teeth and drags women off to his cave. (para. 14)

Images of a Stetson-wearing Bush cutting brush on his ranch served as the media's antipode for Gore's masculinity deficit. Since then, associations of masculinity with Republicans and femininity with

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Democrats resurfaced regularly in the popular press (Hinderaker, 2012; Mayer, 2020)—from Barack Obama’s wimpiness in herding Republicans to Donald Trump giving common currency to the term *toxic masculinity*.

Despite these popular media anecdotes of political party genderization and survey data showing that the U.S. electorate view political parties in gendered terms (Winter, 2010), there are few tools and little scholarly effort in monitoring the processes by which gender is imprinted on political parties. Instead, political party identities are typically examined in gender-free terms as the outcome of social-issue (Tresch & Feddersen, 2019) and character-trait (Clifford, 2020) ownership. For example, in the U.S. context, Democrats have a positive reputation for handling social welfare issues and compassion is a character trait associated with their party identity. Republicans have strong ownership of matters related to defense and taxes. In terms of trait ownership, they are perceived as forceful leaders. The underlying gender dimensions of these issues and traits remain largely unexplored while the sparse but compelling evidence that political parties are genderized in the eyes of the electorate signal serious implications for the intersection of party and candidate gender identity.

The current study focused on a longitudinal content analysis of network news coverage across eight presidential elections spanning 28 years to assess the genderization of political parties in mainstream news media coverage of U.S. presidential candidates. Over the course of this period, network news offered the most consistent and widely used outlet of news to monitor over-time patterns. At the outset, this endeavor requires positioning in terms of at least three matters. First, we recognize that the news stories we studied are the product of complicated codependencies between journalists, political candidates (and their image handlers), and the electorate. While news stories are often seen as the work of individual journalists or news organizations, we examined them here as artifacts that afford insight into the tenor of macro-level societal patterns. Second, the U.S. presidency is arguably the most masculine office in the country and the presidential election news beat has a long history as the bastion of male domination in journalism (Meeks, 2017; North, 2016). News coverage of the competition for this office can therefore be expected to skew in favor of masculinity compared to other election contests or nonelection coverage of politics and politicians. Third, like Winter (2010), we treat presidential candidates as conduits of political party identities and therefore expect party genderization to be observable in coverage of individual candidates. In fact, the line that separates party and candidate becomes somewhat artificial during presidential election seasons when political parties invest in large public spectacles to produce a nominee who is conferred as the embodiment of the party. This candidate-as-proxy-for-party is arguably not as firmly in place during nonelection seasons. To assess the potential genderization of Democrats and Republicans, we employed a validated coding instrument (Hale & Grabe, 2018) based on a blend of news values and revered presidential candidate traits (Gans, 1979), and Bem’s (1974) Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI).

### **Gender Schema Theory, Politics, and News Media**

Democratic theory assigns journalists a weighty responsibility as the fourth estate that empowers citizens with cold, hard facts to make informed decisions every few years when they enter a voting booth (McNair, 2009). This noble ideal has not convincingly materialized in full blown democracies (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007). Scholarship in service of finding explanations for this failure typically point to journalistic shortcomings or the public’s apathy for informed civic engagement (Strömbäck, 2005; Wolfe, 2006). Beyond

these valuable diagnostics, some scholars have considered the ramifications of cognitive load—imposed by the contemporary media environment—for active citizenship. The vertiginous volume of information, its omnipresence through mobile devices, and its interactive pull might indeed pose an unordinary cognitive challenge to citizens (Graber, 2001; Grabe, Bas, & van Driel, 2015). In cognitive overload, human beings use heuristic shortcuts to navigate through information glut. A system of interconnected schema enables simplification of information processing by (1) tuning out detail in favor of generic characteristics that correspond with existing schema and (2) directing attention to information that is in line with existing schemas to avoid what is schema incongruent (Leyva, 2019). In this context of cognitive shortcuts taken to tame the information tide, Bem's gender schema theory (GST) offers a plausible explanation for the genderization of political parties—both in terms of media content patterns and public perceptions. GST emphasizes the readiness to encode and organize information based on gender stereotypes. As Bem (1981) explains, gender dichotomies are powerful in reducing complexities to cognitively digestible simplicity. In the contemporary media environment voters maneuver through an information maze with gender (and other) schemas activated. Journalists are immersed in the same media ecosystem, with no specialized immunity to gender schema activation, leaving little reason to expect gender neutrality in their reporting (see Major & Coleman, 2008).

Surprisingly, Bem's (1974, 1981) work is not widely employed in political science or media research. Gender stereotypes associated with individual candidates are often examined (see Van der Pas & Aaldering, 2020), but GST is rarely tested directly. There are at least two exceptions. First, Aalberg and Jenssen (2007) found experimental evidence of gender schemas at work in evaluations of male politicians as more knowledgeable, trustworthy, and convincing than their female counterparts based on delivery of exactly the same speeches. Second, Hitchon and Chang (1995) tested GST in the context of political TV commercials for men and women candidates. They found that information about stereotypical female topics such as family were recalled better when presented by female than male candidates. They also manipulated the tone of campaign advertising and found attack ads from male candidates were recalled better than those from female candidates (see also Chang & Hitchon, 1997). Beyond the sparse application of GST, political science and media scholars have accumulated evidence of gender divides on several layers of the political process.

### **Mediated Genderization of American Politics**

The majority of research at the intersection of gender, politics, and media make comparisons in terms of the quantity and topical coverage of candidates or the perceptions and voting behavior of the electorate. For example, a group of studies focused on media coverage of female political candidates, for various offices, document that they received less issue coverage (Johnstonbaugh, 2018; Verge & Pastor, 2018) and are given more negative attention in horse-race campaign coverage (Kahn, 1996; Shor & Miltsov, 2020) than males. A related body of research in persuasive communication shows stereotypical gender *self-representation* of candidates in advertisements and on websites (Bystrom, Robertson, Banwart, & Kaid, 2004) and social media (Jungblut & Haim, 2021).

The gender of political candidates has been investigated as a factor that might influence voter perceptions and point to stereotypes about women (Harp, 2019; Lachover, 2017) that make them less viable candidates than men (Kahn, 1996). Unsurprisingly, voters see male politicians as tough and assertive

(Huddy & Capelos, 2002; Lawrence & Rose, 2010) and female politicians as warm and gentle (Raicheva-Stover & Ibroscheva, 2014). Yet, recent studies have shown that voters do not always attribute feminine characteristics to female candidates (Brooks, 2013; Dolan, 2014) and they also do not associate masculine characteristics of leadership with female candidates (Bauer, 2017; Schneider & Bos, 2014). It is reasonable to think that political party genderization might explain some of these effects. However, voter perceptions of political parties as gendered are not included in audience studies, perhaps because political party genderization is under studied. Challenges in conceptualizing and operationalizing political parties as gendered might be partially responsible for this shortfall. At the same time, genderization of other inanimate objects is a vibrant area of scholarly interest (Ha, 2018; Lakoff, 2010). In fact, genderization has been shown to apply to colors (Karniol, 2011), occupations (McDowell, 2021), technology (Shaw-Garlock, 2014), and disease (van Driel et al., 2018).

As one of a handful of scholars who have pursued the genderization of political parties, Winter (2010) used a nationally representative survey over three decades and found patterns in the electorate's gender-specific perception of Democrats as feminine and Republicans as masculine. According to Winter (2010), gendered traits assigned to political parties are seated in cognitive schema that are acquired during years of socialization. In the same vein, Huddy and Terkildsen (1993a) showed that genderization of political parties is rooted in gender stereotypes about the party, extended to candidates representing the platform. Although U.S. presidential campaigning has become more individual- than party-focused over the past half century, candidates are perceived as party appendages who emerge from long and complicated processes that political parties control (Wattenberg, 2019). They often endure close to a year of public scrutiny leading up to and including the primary election process and are formally nominated by their parties in large, mediated spectacles during conventions. Presidential candidates can therefore be described as political luminaries who serve as proxies for their political parties. To be sure, in individualistic societies such as the United States the news media's coverage of political parties focuses on individual actors within parties, who collectively define party identities.

In the United States, the two major political parties have taken distinctly different strategies in shaping political party identities, grounded in political ideology. Lakoff (2010), a cognitive linguist, argues that liberals and conservatives think differently because of rooted metaphors of the *Nurturing Mother* (liberal) and the *Strict Father* (conservative). This ideological distinction maps loosely onto Democrat (liberal) and Republican (conservative) identities. Shapiro and Mahajan (1986) identified education, health care, and poverty as *compassion issues* that Democrats have mastered (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993b). Republicans, on the other hand, are viewed as competent on issues that require masculine force like military defense and countering crime and terrorism (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993b). Hypothetical candidates with feminine personality traits were found to be rated better at handling *compassion issues* (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993a), associated with the Democratic Party.

The interactive relationship between candidate gender and party genderization on voter perceptions of candidates has enjoyed relatively little research attention but is likely to become a productive area of research as nonbinary candidates enter the political arena. Some scholars argue that gender cues might take a back seat to party cues (Huddy & Capelos, 2002), while gender stereotypes have been shown to transcend party cues. Interestingly, Sanbonmatsu and Dolan (2009) found that gender stereotypes affected

evaluations of Republican and Democrat women candidates differently, offering evidence that gender and party affiliation have become deeply entangled in the genderization of American politicians. Furthermore, Hayes (2011) found that voters are affected by party stereotypes more than gender stereotypes when evaluating candidates. Taken together these studies afford a reasonable conclusion that American political parties have become genderized. One explanation for this phenomenon is policy positions on gender-sensitive issues that Wolbrecht (2000) traced back to the Equal Rights Amendment. By the 1980s this divide was fully deployed with hardened positions on women's reproductive rights: Democrats showing more leniency to a woman's choice than Republicans (see also McDermott, 2016).

*Gender gap* studies constitute a substantial chunk of the body of research on politics and gender. After the universal suffrage and the feminist movements of the 1970s, women represent a major source of electoral power. Although there is no uniformity in how women vote, there are certain patterns in how they lean politically (Dittmar, 2015). Women tend to vote for the Democratic Party, while a larger proportion of men vote for Republicans (Kaufmann, 2006; Wolbrecht, 2000). McDermott (2016) has shown that people with masculine personality traits, regardless of gender, are more likely to support Republicans whereas feminine personality traits are statistically associated with support for the Democratic Party. Media coverage of *gender gaps* in political leaning might also have contributed to the genderization of parties (Chaney, Alvarez, & Nagler, 1998). Since the 1980s, the media spotlight followed this gap in sustained and perhaps exaggerated ways (Ladd, 1997), which might have contributed to the public's perceptual associations of gender with the two parties (Winter, 2010).

### **Journalistic Culpability**

Historically, political party identity construction and maintenance played out in news media coverage, as the result of complicated and layered symbiotic daily interactions between politicians, news media, and voters (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013). Through carefully crafted media appearances a political party and the character traits of its candidates become a matter of public perception management that involves a contest for frame control among three entities: political candidates (and advisors), the news media, and voters (Denton, Trent, & Friedenberga, 2019).<sup>1</sup> Over the past two decades social media have given politicians direct access to voters, diluting the power that news media once held as the primary platform for shaping political identities (Chadwick, 2017). Despite the diminished dominance, the mainstream news media's presidential election coverage continues to draw the public's attention (Chadwick, 2017).

Campaign strategies of candidates are often steeped in gendered perceptions of parties. Republican presidential candidates are known for being fitted to masculine personas in contraposition to Democratic opponents (Fahey, 2007; Ha, 2018). Journalists, in an attempt at objective coverage, avoid and counter blatant attempts by campaigns to influence the framing of candidates but often embrace these image handling events in an attempt to satisfy audience interests in candidates. In the tradition of Shoemaker and Reese (2013), the results that are reported here are offered in the context of image handlers, journalists, and audience interests culminating in what is reported. That said, among the three entities in this triangular

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<sup>1</sup> See Chadwick's (2017) account of hybrid media systems where the relationships among politicians, media, and publics are driven by adaptation and interdependence.

tension that produces candidate framing, the journalistic role in presenting candidates is the central focus of this study.

The dynamics of newsrooms have enjoyed voluminous research attention: from Breed's (1955) paradigm-setting work on news selection to agenda setting and news framing. Entman's (1993) widely used conceptualization of framing points to the practice of selecting some aspects of a story so that "a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation gets promoted" (p. 52). Although not part of the news framing tradition, Edelman (1993) alluded to a similar process in describing contestable categories—a way of making sense of political life. In this framework, news transcends the notion of an objective account of the physical world: Journalists use and offer news consumers the tools to assign meaning and categorize impressions.

Based on newsroom ethnography and content analyses, Gans (1979) found that journalists do a daily rummage through the physical world to select a small number of events to share with news users. Their methods for selecting and composing the news are based on professional and societal values that produce reportage on the world—not by objective standards—but from a normative stance of how it should be. In this classic work, Gans (1979) identified 15 enduring news values and leadership traits rooted in American journalistic coverage of candidates. Table A1 of the Online Appendix (available at <https://drive.google.com/file/d/10n6KTsEBQX5ZGpy1nWpDx-It-CtCyS9M/view?usp=sharing>) summarizes the 15 values and traits that formed the basis for the coding instrument that is also operationalized in terms of genderization in the method section. Below are some exemplars of the values and traits included in this study.

Grounded in the American pioneer spirit of human autonomy, *rugged individualism* surfaces when candidates are presented as free thinkers, independent from the influence of big business and government whereas an indecisive candidate, one beholden to the establishment and concerned about approval ratings run counter to this value. John McCain's maverick image as unyielding to the status quo is a classic example of rugged individualism. *Moderatism* softens rugged individualism, by emphasis on a candidate's even keel in policy stances and personal life history. An erratic voting record or associations with extremism suggest lack of moderatism—as some coverage of Barack Obama's alleged ties with 1960s activist William Ayers exemplified. *Patriotism* is found in reporting that emphasizes loyalty to American interests. Draft dodging or giving in to pressure from abroad suggests a shortfall of patriotism. *Altruistic democracy* pares down the commitment to freedom, equality, and prosperity for all. G. W. Bush's compassionate conservatism exemplifies this sentiment. Reporting that emphasizes self-interest, elitism, or an uneven hand in governance counters this value as Mitt Romney's remarks that 47% of Americans are irresponsible and undeserving of his efforts, did in 2012. *Responsible capitalism* balances the hard edge of a free market with protection of labor and conservative spending of taxpayer money. Media coverage of G. W. Bush's recommendation that Americans take their children to Disney World and shopping after 9/11 came to haunt Republicans, and John McCain in particular, during the 2008 election as the economy collapsed. *Small town pastoralism* surfaces in reports that link candidates with rural America. Framing Bill Clinton as the son of a single mother who grew up in Hope, Arkansas, exemplifies this value. Discomfort with small town life and traditions counters this value.

Gans (1979) also identified ideal leadership traits, which overlap with political communication research findings (Dodd, 2018; Steele & Redding, 1962; Trent, Short-Thompson, Mongeau, Nusz, & Trent, 2001) and political scientists who have shown variance between Democrats and Republicans in terms of trait ownership. Republicans have a reputation for being forceful leaders who are strongly principled, while Democrats are associated with compassion and empathy (Hayes, 2005). *Honesty* as a cornerstone of morality surfaces when reporters cover a candidate as frank and unvarnished as opposed to a spreader of disinformation and deception. The controversy surrounding Kerry's military record (Swift Boat Campaign) during the 2004 election produced news frames that both questioned and reinforced his honesty. *Vision* is signaled in coverage of a candidate's creative problem-solving skills and clearly formulated policy positions. Dole is a stand-out example of a candidate who was framed as lacking vision. During the 1996 presidential campaign, he was covered as an incoherent speaker who referred to himself in the third person, spoke in incomplete sentences, and delivered speeches with no main point (Lewis, 1997). *Physical stamina* is suggested in reference to a candidate's resilience, strength, and good health. Visual material showing participation in physical activities emphasizes this trait. On the other hand, video material of Hillary Clinton collapsing at the 15th commemoration of 9/11 in New York City, clinched a frame of inadequate physical stamina around her for the remainder of her 2016 campaign. Reporting on *courage* includes focus on bravery and resolve when the candidate faces challenges. The news media's amplification of the "Yes We Can" slogan of the 2008 Obama campaign serves as an example of courage framing. Avoiding challenges (e.g., Trump spending time in the White House bunker during protests) points to courage deficiency. *Intelligence* is implied in references to the candidate as bookish, educated, or articulate. Both Kerry and Gore were framed as somewhat professorial. Suggestions of low intelligence surface in suggestions that a candidate is inarticulate or dim-witted. Quayle's blunders on the 1992 campaign trail and the ensuing media focus exemplify negative framing of intelligence. Quayle was captured on camera changing a 12-year-old student's correct spelling of potato to "potatoe" at the Muñoz Rivera Elementary School spelling bee in Trenton, New Jersey. American presidents are viewed as the guardians of the country's *moral* core and draw journalistic scrutiny of the candidate's integrity versus corruptive tendencies. Trump's moral soundness (infidelity, rape accusations, tax evasion, etc.) intensified in media coverage from the 2016 to 2020 campaigns, questioning his moral core. *Charisma* or a dynamic and inspiring personality is seen as an indicator of persuasive and managerial prowess. During the 2008 election campaign, Obama became known for his moving speeches. Lack of charisma comes across in references and visual evidence of a dull candidate, dominated by other leaders. *Dedication* or a tireless commitment to the call of duty is a trait Americans value in presidents. Lackluster campaigning or invisibility signals low dedication. G. H. Bush, looking at his watch during a 1992 debate with Clinton was widely framed as a sign of his lack of dedication—even during a televised debate. *Populism* puts a candidate in the frame of an ordinary person, often visualized in casual attire and visits to diners, bowling alleys, and assembly lines rather than indulging the habits and luxuries of high society.

Research questions were formulated to probe differences in how candidates from the two political parties were presented in terms of (a) individual news values and leadership traits; (b) the underlying feminine, masculine, and gender-neutral tenor of the news values and character traits per Bem's (1974) BSRI; and (c) longitudinal fluctuations in these representations.

*RQ1: Were there differences in news value and leadership trait framing for candidates from the two political parties?*

*RQ2: Were there differences in framing candidates from the two political parties as masculine, feminine, and gender-neutral?*

*RQ3: Were there longitudinal differences in how candidates from the two political parties were presented in terms of individual traits and values and composite masculinity, femininity, and gender-neutrality frames?*

### **Method**

The study reported here investigated network (ABC, CBS, NBC) news coverage of eight U.S. presidential elections (1992–2020). The starting point in 1992 is a practical one, related to access to archived material. Despite the rise of cable news and online media platforms, network news is the most widely used and trusted source of election information among likely voters over the course of this 28-year period (The Pew Research Center, 2019, 2020). As is routinely done in content analyses of presidential elections (Grabe & Bucy, 2009) the sample frame for each year stretched from Labor Day to Election Day. Composite weeks of newscasts were constructed with a randomly selected network representing each weekday. This procedure yielded 368 newscasts: 41 for 1992, 1996, and 2004; 44 for 2000, 49 for 2008 and 2016, 47 for 2012, and 56 for 2020. From the sample, 888 campaign stories were identified for analysis—thus an average of 2.4 stories per newscast. A campaign story was defined as one in which presidential or vice-presidential candidates were central to the narrative. They were shown and referred to as they appeared on the campaign trail making speeches and interacting with potential voters and journalists. Stories about election-related issues such as voting machines, voter registration, or congressional debates about campaign finance reform were not treated as campaign stories.

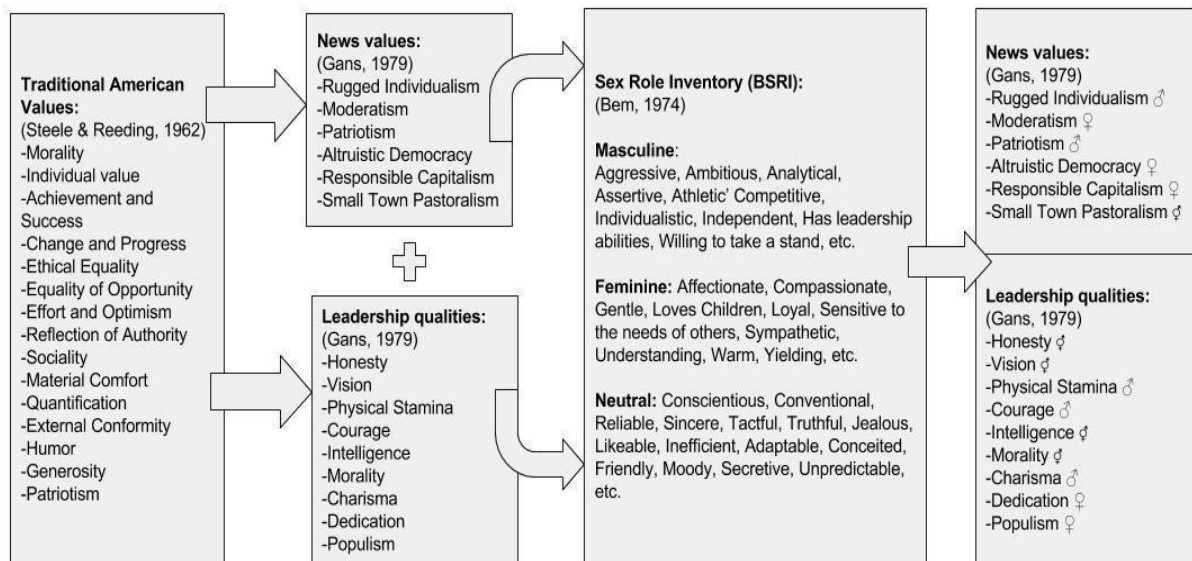
### **Coding Instrument**

This study employed a validated coding instrument for genderizing political party identities (Grabe & Bas, 2013; Hale & Grabe, 2018). Grabe and Bas (2013) recruited five professional journalists to score the 15 identified character traits and news values (see Table A1 of the Online Appendix A for a summary) for underlying gender dimensions. Three female and two male (28–36 years old) journalists agreed to the task. Bem's (1974) BSRI and the codebook definitions of the trait/value frames were provided, followed by training, and classification of traits and values as masculine, feminine, or gender-neutral. Journalists had no contact with coders, no access to the sample, and were uninformed about the goals of the study.

There was 100% agreement among them on five frames as masculine: patriotism, stamina, courage, individualism, and charisma. These frames correspond with BSRI and Spence, Helmreich, and Stapp's (1975) Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ) masculine attributes: competitive, aggression, active, athletic, forceful, independent, individualistic, willing to take risks, defends own beliefs, feels superior, and willing to take a stand. There was also unanimous agreement on four frames (populism, dedication, altruistic democracy, responsible capitalism) as feminine and another (moderatism) drew consensus among four of the five journalists. One categorized it as gender-neutral. These five frames line up with BSRI and PAQ feminine dimensions, including devotion to others, helpfulness, warm in relation to others, gentle, kind, compassionate, sympathetic, understanding, and sensitive to the needs of others.



There were acceptable levels of agreement about gender-neutral frames. Honesty and morality drew full consensus while vision and intelligence were classified as gender-neutral by four of five journalists. Intelligence was evaluated as masculine by one and vision as feminine by another. Small town pastoralism was viewed as gender-neutral by three of five journalists. It should be noted that two journalists declined to evaluate this Gans value. Figure 1 summarizes the procedure whereby masculine, feminine, and gender-neutral frames were operationalized by Grabe and Bas (2013). Hale and Grabe (2018) employed this instrument in a study of social media.



**Figure 1. Conceptual flow of building an instrument to measure genderization in election coverage.**

The unit of analysis was the individual candidate who appeared in a campaign story. Across 888 campaign stories, 1587 candidate appearances were identified indicating that, at an average, close to 2 ( $m = 1.79$ ) candidates appeared per campaign story. Every candidate appearance in speech or in a reporter's voice-over reference was coded for the 15 news values and character traits (see Table A1 in the Online Appendix). Three options were available for the coding of values and traits: (1) the candidate was presented as possessing it; (2) lacking it; or (3) no reference to it.

### **Reliability of Categories**

Given the size and longitudinal stretch of this data collection effort, coding was divided into five chunks, employing six coders. Some served as coder reliability checks to provide continuity in coder reliability across elections. For the 1992–2004 elections two coders collected (in equal share) data with another two as reliability checks. Twenty percent of the sample produced acceptable agreement (Krippendorff's  $\alpha = .82$ ), with a minimum of .80 agreement across 15 categories. The 2008 election data was collected in equal share by two coders, one of them involved in the 1992–2004 coder reliability

assessment. Overall, Krippendorff's alpha was .83 with a minimum of .81. The 2012 data was collected by one coder who was involved in all prior coding efforts. A random sample of 76 individual cases from previous years served as a reliability check on this coder. Agreement with prior coding decisions was high: Krippendorff's  $\alpha = .89$  with the lowest category at .84. The 2016 and 2020 data were collected by a coder who was involved in all earlier data collection and a new reliability coder. Across 77 cases, the Krippendorff's alpha was at a minimum .90 with an average of .97. The primary coder for the 2016 and 2020 data also conducted an intra-coder reliability check on 128 cases (five newscasts per election), going back to the 1992–2012 elections. Krippendorff's alphas varied from .85 to 1 with an average of .95.

### Results

Research questions 1 and 2 prompted assessments of framing differences between Republicans and Democrats in terms of news values and leadership traits individually—and in terms of the larger Bem-inspired masculine, feminine and gender-neutral frames. Observed and expected frequencies with Chi-square analyses are summarized in Table 1. Results are statistically significant for all dimensions of masculinity. The trend is clear: Democrats were below and Republicans above expected individual masculine frame frequencies. This finding is also reflected by results for *lacking* masculine qualities: Republicans fell below while Democrats exceeded statistical expectations of almost all individual categories, but at a statistically significant level only for physical stamina (see Figure B1 of the Online Appendix B).

**Table 1. Chi-Square Results for Individual Frames and Character Traits.**

Frame/Trait	Democrats Have It		Republicans Have It		$\chi^2$	$p$	Democrats Don't Have It		Republicans Don't Have It		$\chi^2$	$p$
	Observed	Expected	Observed	Expected			Observed	Expected	Observed	Expected		
<b>Masculine</b>												
Patriotism	188 (25)	241	323 (39)	269	32.94	.001	31 (4)	25	23 (3)	28	2.33	.083
Stamina	42 (5)	67	99 (12)	74	18.95	.001	54 (7)	40	30 (4)	44	10.32	.001
Courage	65 (8)	994	134 (16)	105	19.48	.001	32 (4)	31	35 (4)	35	.01	.515
Individualism	19 (2)	91	173 (21)	101	122.34	.001	33 (4)	35	40 (5)	39	.13	.406
Charisma	200 (26)	258	339 (41)	284	33.76	.001	42 (6)	42	48 (6)	48	.01	.498
<b>Feminine</b>												
Populism	429 (57)	388	392 (46)	433	17.02	.001	24 (3)	45	73 (8)	51	21.02	.001
Dedication	182 (24)	139	113 (14)	155	30.30	.001	11 (1)	15	21 (2)	17	2.18	.097
Democracy	263 (35)	158	73 (8)	177	164.50	.001	19 (2)	114	224 (26)	128	179.07	.001
Capitalism	139 (18)	99	72 (8)	111	33.84	.001	48 (6)	91	146 (17)	102	44.96	.001
Moderatism	105 (14)	71	46 (5)	80	33.23	.001	61 (8)	102	156 (18)	114	36.98	.001
<b>Gender-Neutral</b>												
Honesty	82 (11)	48	20 (2)	54	48.01	.001	112 (15)	178	265 (31)	199	61.12	.001
Moral	90 (12)	57	32 (3)	64	37.27	.001	39 (5)	102	178 (21)	114	86.50	.001
Vision	199 (27)	127	71 (8)	142	91.09	.001	51 (6)	126	217 (26)	141	103.32	.001
Intelligence	98 (13)	50	9 (1)	56	90.46	.001	9 (2)	63	124 (14)	70	95.49	.001
Pastoralism	102 (13)	72	51 (6)	80	25.59	.001	4 (<1)	9	15 (2)	10	5.30	.017

Notes.  $Df = 1$

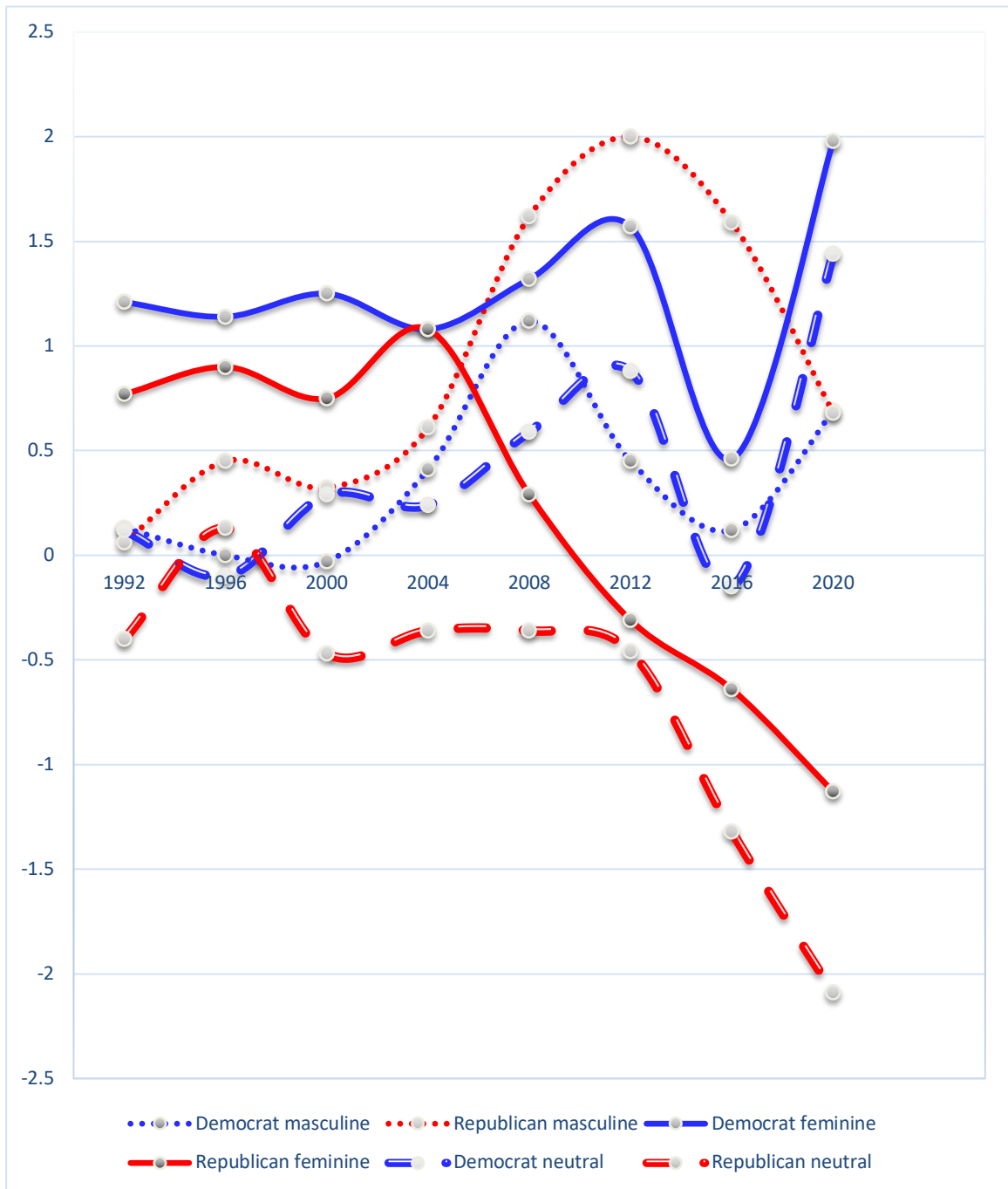
Frequency percentages of each individual value and trait are indicated in parentheses.

Thus, Democrats were significantly less often featured as patriotic, individualistic, courageous, and having stamina than Republicans and also framed as *lacking* stamina more often than Republicans. The consistency of Republicans outperforming Democrats in masculinity offer strong evidence of variance in coverage across party lines. Also worth noting is the relative concreteness of Republican masculinity revealed in the large differences between having and lacking masculinity traits (see Figure B1 of the Online Appendix B). Comparatively, Democrats were framed with more gender ambiguity by having and lacking masculine qualities in near equal amounts for several variables, with the exception of patriotism and charisma. Stamina, courage, and ruggedness drew stark differences between the two parties. In fact, Republicans were featured with at least twice as many of these masculine traits as Democrats.

Democrats were presented as *having* feminine qualities more often than Republicans—for all categories and at statistically significant levels (see Table 1 and Figure B1 of the Online Appendix B). Altruistic democracy produced a particularly strong divide: in 35% of appearances, Democrats were associated with this value—more than four times as often as Republicans (8%). Democrats rarely appeared as lacking altruism (2%) while more than a quarter of Republican appearances signaled a deficiency on this value. Republicans were also presented as short on responsible capitalism and moderatism—lacking these values more than having them. Moderatism and responsible capitalism received the lowest frequencies, while populism was clearly the most prominent feminine trait associated with both parties. Overall, Democrats registered below expected frequencies for *lacking* femininity while Republicans over-performed in falling short on all five feminine traits.

*Lacking* masculinity and femininity emerged with relative infrequency compared with *having* it. This was not the case with gender-neutral characteristics (see Figure B1 in the Online Appendix B and Table 1). Democrats emerged as significantly more honest and less dishonest as well as more moral and less immoral than Republicans. When it comes to cognitive ability, Democrats were framed as having three times the visionary ability and 13 times the intellectual prowess of Republicans. Moreover, Republicans were four times more likely to *lack* vision and seven times more likely to lack intelligence than Democrats. Small town pastoralism was also a value Democrats were framed as having significantly more of and lacking less than Republicans.

Research question 3 prompted an over-time view on gender framing. Character traits and news values were collapsed into three gender frames: masculine, feminine, and gender-neutral. A summary net score was calculated for each, subtracting instances of lacking (*maximum* = -5) from having a given trait/value (*maximum* = 5). A positive net score indicated that the candidate was associated with a specific gender frame whereas a negative net score indicated that a candidate was negatively associated with a particular gender frame. Findings appear in Figure 2 and Table C1 of the Online Appendix C.

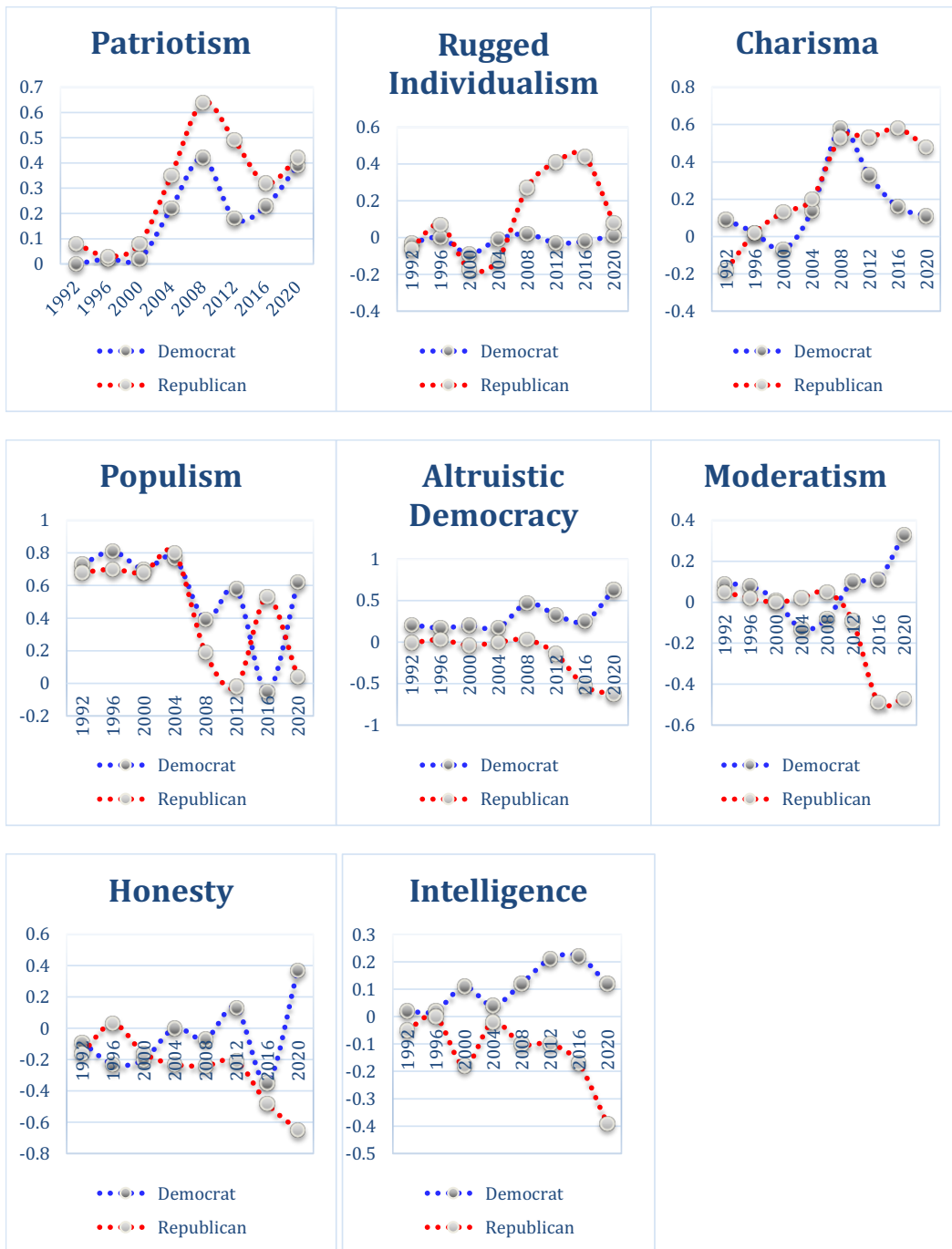


**Figure 2. Net score dispersion over time for frames by party.**

Republicans were presented as significantly more masculine than Democrats in all election years except 1992, 2004, and 2020, and a linear regression model (see Table D1 of the Online Appendix D) indicate a significant increase in Republican masculinity over time. Moreover, all individual masculine traits increased significantly over time for Republicans except stamina and courage, which decreased significantly from 1992 to 2020. Democrats had a spike in masculinity framing during 2004 and 2008, with the most noticeable difference to Republicans in 2012 and 2016. Romney/Ryan was presented as four times more masculine than the Obama/Biden ticket and Trump/Pence 13 times more masculine than Clinton/Kaine. It is likely that the Obama and Clinton campaigns steered away from masculinity to avoid negative stereotypes about assertiveness in Black people and women (Cooper, 2008; Holt, 2012). Regression analyses show a significant increase in masculinity for Democrats over time with patriotism and charisma as the significant drivers of that increase. For a more nuanced assessment of these straight-line regression analyses, frames that changed over time to account for 5 or more percent of variance ( $\text{Adjusted } R^2 \geq .05$ ) in either of the political party models were plotted in Figure 2. The ebb and flow of patriotism appears similar across parties, escalating after the terrorist attacks on 9/11, reaching a high point in 2008 and settling back at levels higher than before 9/11. The over-time evolution of charisma shows a Democratic low during the Gore/Edwards ticket in 2000 followed by a surge to the 2008 Obama/Biden election and a steady decline after that remaining higher than in the 1990s. Escalating Republican charisma and rugged individualism is apparent. Yet, there is a noticeable drop in rugged individualism framing from the 2016 to 2020 Trump/Pence campaigns, possibly signaling failure in selling the political outsider personae to journalists during the 2020 election.

Over-time feminine frame patterns emerged in striking accord with masculinity. Republicans were significantly less often framed as feminine than Democrats, except for 1996 and in 2004. In 2016, the Clinton/Kaine ticket received the lowest femininity net score for Democrats across the eight elections. It is likely that this anomaly indicates a campaign strategy to avoid a feminine persona for the first female candidate in U.S. presidential history. Alternatively, journalists exercised caution to sidestep gender stereotypic traps, thereby avoiding feminine coverage of the first woman nominee. The lack of existing models of covering female leadership at this level might have exacerbated the avoidance of feminine frames.

Over the course of eight elections, feminine framing of Democrats remained statistically unchanged whereas Republicans grew significantly less feminine in network news coverage. For Republicans this shift occurred consistently across all individual traits, at statistically significant levels, except for dedication. Democrats became more feminine in all traits except populism—which was in a significant over time decline. Figure 2 graphically demonstrates the widening gap in femininity framing between the two parties, at its largest in the 2020 election. Figure 3 offers a more nuanced view on key individual frames. Populism was the most erratic over-time frame. The two political parties were locked in a tight populism contest from 1992 to 2004, perhaps reflecting the image handling of Lee Atwater and Karl Rove. Thereafter noticeable zigzag shifts occurred. McCain/Palin and Romney/Ryan appeared less populist with an increase for Trump/Pence in 2016 (corresponding record low for Clinton/Kaine) followed by a sharp decrease for that ticket in 2020 and Biden/Harris appearing around as populist as Obama/Biden in 2012. These fluctuations between 2016 and 2020 might reflect the differences in campaigning during the pandemic. While Trump/Pence drummed up large generic gatherings at airports on the outskirts of big cities in 2020, Biden/Harris appeared at small gatherings on the streets and in the hearts of towns and cities, meeting with interest groups that represented labor, faith, and community action.



**Figure 3. Net score dispersion over time for specific frames by party.**

Neutral framing of Democrats was significantly higher than Republicans—overall and for all individual traits/values. Figure 2 shows how this unfolded over time. Despite the 2016 anomaly, there was a significant over time increase in gender neutrality for Democrats and a significant decrease for Republicans. Perhaps most striking is the sharp over time decline in honesty and intelligence frames for Republicans, which are visually represented in Figure 3.

### Discussion

Findings reported here for the past eight American presidential elections produced systematic evidence that candidates of the two major political parties were subjected to genderization in strikingly sustained ways, with potential for influencing perceptions of party identities in the minds of voters. In fact, the pattern of statistically significant findings over a 28-year period puts Republicans in a masculine frame more and feminine frame less often than Democrats. Despite robust differences between parties, masculinity frames increased significantly over time for both parties. At the same time, Republican appearances became significantly less feminine over the course of 28 years. Thus, the news messages in this data set point to a trajectory of intensified masculinity in American politics that might reflect a time during which the United States had been involved in the masculine rituals of making war abroad, performing aggressive economic maneuvers on the world stage, and asserting its diplomatic independence from old allies. Day-to-day government actions might reverberate through campaign strategies and news media coverage thereof during election seasons. Tracking masculinity frames into the future (or going back in time) might offer further insight into whether the testosterone factor ebbs and flows with changes in American engagement globally and domestically.

Feminine frames were employed with statistical similarity up to the 2004 election. Thereafter Republicans became more one-dimensionally masculine while Democrats gained in femininity (with the exception of Clinton/Kaine) and gender-neutral framing. Indeed, Republicans became increasingly unidimensional masculine caricatures, reminiscent of the American superhero tradition. They were framed as blazing the campaign trail in brawn and grit—albeit short on morality and cognitive prowess. One could speculate that this frame shift after 2004 was inspired by unproductive image handler strategies that made presidents of Republican candidates at a one in four ratio. To be sure, this approach did not galvanize the female vote. Hillary Clinton received the lowest level of feminine framing of any Democratic candidate in this study. But male Democrats were positioned in contraposition to Republicans. They showed up in the news as beta men—indeed the kind who would hire women to teach them how to be men (Seelye, 1999). Thus, this study adds systematic evidence of how the masculine verve of Democrats has been subdued in network news frames. An optimistic take on this is the possibility that the combination of masculine, feminine, and gender-neutral framing kindled authenticity in character deployments that served Democrats well with citizens who are skeptical of government and disenchanted with the concocted identity performances of candidates. Alternatively, in an overcrowded information environment, citizens might be so schema dependent that this nuance is lost in cognitive shortcuts.

Testing relationships between gendered framing of parties, self-identified gender of candidates, and gender gaps in voting behavior is worthy of future research, especially as more women and nonbinary candidates are stepping into electoral politics around the world. Whether the instrument we used to study



genderization of American political parties through political candidates would fit in other national contexts is unclear. Differences in political values and media systems would likely require recalibration of the instrument. For example, it is likely that this instrument is best applied measuring genderization in candidate-centered political contexts compared to parliamentary systems with more pronounced party-centeredness. Nonetheless, presidents, prime ministers, and chancellors all run campaigns with some degree of candidate centeredness but rooted in the identities of the political parties that they represent. In that sense the findings stand as a useful point of comparison for elections of heads of state elsewhere in the world, regardless of political party or candidate centeredness of political systems.

The persistent patterns in party genderization we reported here align with the findings of Winter (2010) about the public's gendered view of the two major U.S. political parties. Yet, this content analysis of news is limited to identifying patterns in the social construction of a political process that involves a frame contest between journalists, the candidates (and their image handlers), and their perceptions of news users. Journalistic framing of the candidates might reflect carefully crafted image handler personas of candidates to attract voter support. At the same time, this coverage could also stem from socialization processes in the journalism profession, which is heavily masculinized—especially on the presidential election beat (Grabe, Samson, Zelenkauskaitė, & Yegiyani, 2011). Yet, journalistic decisions behind framing and strategic self-representations of the candidates cannot be teased out in the reported study. Along the same lines, relationships between news messages and voter perceptions fall within the reach of audience, not message research. Future experimental work would do well assessing if what we report here transcends or interacts with gender stereotypes attributed to individual candidates.

As large numbers of women are entering the political arena as candidates, genderization of political parties is likely to grow in frame prominence and mutate in modulation and complexity. Existing research shows that party schema overshadows individual candidate characteristics (Huddy & Capelos, 2002; Sanbonmatsu & Dolan, 2009) in driving information processing outcomes. Yet, incongruity between the gender of candidates and the gendered constructions of the political parties they represent drive shifts in the current state of party genderization. Specifically, the growth of female Republican candidates might initiate a changeover in the direction of gender-neutral and feminine frames, as this party struggle to define itself in a post-Trump era. This study, and the instrument we employed, could therefore serve as a stepping-stone for future studies interested in the journalistic or self-genderization of candidates and political parties worldwide.

Growing gender polarization of the two dominant parties that we observed might align with the political polarization that the U.S. political landscape is steadily contracting into. Indeed, the gender dichotomy might be amplifying political polarization by sharpening the delineation between party identities through genderization. As Bem (1981) put it: "There appears to be no other dichotomy in human experience with as many entities assimilated to it as the distinction between male and female" (p. 354). We argue that our study found evidence that political party identity is one of those entities that assimilated the gender dichotomy.

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