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When a Woman Meets a Woman

**Comparing the Use of Negativity of Female
Candidates in Single and Mixed-Gender
Televised Debates**

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ABSTRACT

A substantial amount of political communication research focuses on the similarities and the differences between the campaign communication of female politicians in relation to their male counterparts. The interest in how women communicate in politics is a natural consequence of the increasing representation of women in national and local politics. As such representation becomes ever more normalized, the occurrence of all-female election campaigns likewise becomes more frequent. Yet, no research has attempted to investigate what the *absence* of male politicians in a campaign means for the communication patterns of female candidates. This study asks whether or not female candidates for congressional and senatorial office in the United States use more, less, or as much negative campaigning in televised debates when their opponent is also female as opposed to male. To answer this question the paper employs a quantitative content analysis covering most all-female elections in the 2018 midterm elections and comparing them to mixed-gender races in the same election cycle. The study finds that women in fact use less negativity in debates when their opponent is also female, controlling for a set of context and interaction variables. Furthermore, the results indicate that there does not seem to be a relationship between whether the candidate is an incumbent or a challenger on the effect of the gender of the opponent on the use of negative attacks. Neither does the candidate's standing in the polls. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of these findings in a political climate largely defined by an unusual president and mass mobilization of women within the Democratic Party. Finally, it proposes further research into the dynamics of communication in the absence of male candidates, arguing that it provides one of the most pertinent methodological opportunities in examining the implications of the ascendance of women in politics.

Keywords: attacks, negative campaigning, gender, televised debates, content analysis

1 INTRODUCTION

In 2016, Hillary Clinton became the first woman nominated as a major party's candidate for president. In 2018, more than half of all newly elected members of the House of Representatives were women resulting in the highest share of women in Congress ever. And in the 2020 Democratic primary, there are six women running for the party's nomination, at least three of whom have a credible path to that nomination. As more and more women are running and getting elected, scholars are seeking to gain a better understanding of how, if at all, such an increasing number of women in politics change the way politics is done and perceived. Political communication scholars, for example, have long engaged with questions revolving around the similarities and the differences between women and men in campaigning. Do they campaign on the same issues? Do men behave differently when their opponent is a woman? Do women use typically feminine linguistic cues, or do they try to adapt and adopt the more historically conventional masculine linguistic cues? And how do women grapple with the use of negative campaigning?

There is a multitude of studies that all in different ways deal with these questions. However, as women's presence in campaigns becomes more frequent, so does the possibility that *both* parties nominate a woman for a particular election. Our understanding of what it means to be a politician is often grounded in how politicians have historically been. That is, being a good politician is usually associated with how men have been successful as politicians. Women have often had to adapt to male political behavior in order to be perceived as acceptable to the wider public (Hayes and Lawless 2016). Does this type of consideration persist even when there are no men present in an electoral contest? Or do women candidates feel less of a need to take their gender into consideration in their campaigning when their opponent is also female? The motivation behind this study stems primarily from the fact that, in the 2018 midterm election, some of the highest stake electoral contests featured all-female races, notably in the Arizona and Wisconsin Senate elections as well as in Virginia's 10th congressional district and Georgia's 6th congressional districts, among others. While recent research demonstrates that male politicians use negative campaigning as much when their opponent is female as when their opponent is male, the same study also shows that they tend to use less *uncivil* communication when their opponent is female (Maier and Renner 2018). This study asks whether female politicians use a different language in campaign communication when their opponent is also female as opposed to male? This is an analysis that has hitherto been nearly impossible to make due to the relatively few election campaigns featuring all-female candidates in the United States. In

particular, we are interested in the use of attacks as a general strategic option in election campaigns by female candidates in televised debates.

This study begins by examining the existing literature on negative campaigning and women in politics, arguing the increasing amount of women candidates for federal office in the United States allows us to explore a hitherto unexplored area of negative campaigning: the extent to which female candidates moderate their level of negativity in campaigns depending on the gender of their opponent. The literature review concludes with an overview of the conceptual framework undergirding the subsequent analysis and posits a set of testable hypotheses. A thorough overview of the methodology, the sampling strategy, coding frame and the statistical tools follows, after which the paper reports on the results of the content analysis. Finally, the paper discusses those findings and their broader implications in a political climate where gender seems more pertinent in the political discussion and in political campaigns than perhaps ever before. The study concludes with a discussion of possible directions for future research.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Negativity in American Campaigns

The study of negative campaigning has received an increasing amount of attention in recent years (Fridkin and Kenney 2012). Overall, existing literature focuses on three separate—yet often overlapping—aspects of negative campaigning. What is negative campaigning and how do we measure it? What makes a political candidate go negative against their opponent? And finally, what are the effects of negative campaigning (Nai and Walter 2015)? This study is concerned primarily with the second question; more specifically, it examines gender differences in negative campaigning and the extent to which the gender composition of a House or Senate race influences the amount of negative campaigning used. Broadly speaking, negative campaigning can be defined as the “act of attacking the opponent on his or her program, values, record or character instead of advocating his or her own program, values, record or character” (Benoit 2007, Nai and Walter 2015, Lau and Pomper 2004). Negative campaigning has become an integral part of political campaigns in the United States and works as a central way to distinguish points of difference between candidates.

A central theory of campaigning is Walter L. Benoit’s Functional Theory (Benoit 2017, Benoit, 2007), which argues that the central goal of a campaign is to appear preferable to the opponent, and that the campaign consequently can produce three types of messages to make that happen: acclaims (self-praise), defenses (refuting attacks), or attacks (criticize opponent). Furthermore,

these messages can focus on either *policy* or *character* (Nai and Walter 2015), and they can be of a civil or an uncivil nature (Brooks and Geer 2007, Kahn and Kenney 2004). Incivility is slightly more difficult to define than negativity, because it is about the tone of the negative message delivered. A common definition of incivility is ‘the explicit use of harsh, shrill, or pejorative adjectives’ as well as the use of exaggerations (Fridkin and Kenney 2012, Gervais 2014). Some studies argue that not only has American political communication become more negative, it has also become more uncivil, particularly in the era of Donald Trump (Mutz and Reeves 2005, Maier and Renner, 2018).

A large section of studies into negative and uncivil campaigning concerns the extent to which negativity and incivility mobilizes or suppresses turnout and what the overall perceptive effect of the communication is on the electorate. While the results are inconclusive, the attention it receives serves to underscore the perceived importance negativity has in the decision-making processes of campaigns (Ansolabehere, Iyengar and Simon, et al. 1994). It is for that reason that the Functional Theory is important and a useful framework for understanding campaign communication; it allows us to use those decision-making processes as the starting point of our analysis. Generally, candidates engage in a cost-benefit analysis where the potential benefits of going negative have to outweigh the costs in terms of backlash effects (Roese and Sande 1993). Furthermore, in a two-party first-past-the-post system like the U.S., candidates are naturally vote maximizers since a majority of the vote enables the candidate to get elected and enact policy as a result (Walter and Nai 2015). Previous research shows that, generally, candidates tend to use acclaims more frequently than attacks, likely due to the risk that an attack backfires. Additionally, U.S. candidates tend to discuss policy more than character, both in acclaims and attacks (Benoit 2017). However, at the same time, the news media tend to report more on character than policy, as well as reporting on attacks more frequently than candidates use them (Benoit, Stein and Hansen 2005). Such a dynamic underlines the importance that negativity plays in the mediatized election campaign. It also indicates that reporting on audiovisual campaign events—such as televised debates—is likely to put disproportionate emphasis on attacks, often based on character rather than policy, in the post-debate coverage (Benoit 2017).

2.2 Women on the Battlefield

It is indisputable that an increasing number of women are entering politics. A number of leading scholars on women in politics argue that more women in politics also leads to a transformation of both politics and policymaking. A primary reason for this is that women in general tend to have different political attitudes than men. In particular, women tend to be more liberal

and have a stronger focus on reproductive issues such as social policy, infrastructure, and environmental policy (Maier 2015, Lovenduski and Norris 2001). Much of this divergence in political attitudes likely stems from socialization effects in that the life experiences of men and women tend to differ, which in turn ends up informing their politics (Norris 1996). Given diverging legislative behaviors between men and women, it is not inconceivable that women might also campaign differently.

A significant body of literature has taken up the task of identifying such gender differences in the use and effect of negative campaigning. Whether or not women candidates use negative campaigning less, more or as much as their male counterparts is up for debate. Some research suggests that women use less negative campaigning than men, likely due to gendered socialization as mentioned above (Herrnson and Lucas 2006), others argue that women in fact use just as much negative campaigning as men (Bystrom and Kaid 2002). However, while this group of scholars argue that women use at least as much negative campaigning as men do and that the campaign style of men and women has been converging over time, they also show that they tend to use it differently. Specifically, they tend to attack more on issues rather than character, and they also tend to be more civil about their attacks than men do (Bystrom 2004).

This last caveat offers one possibly appealing explanation for the scholarly disagreement. The research that argues women use less negativity than men usually explain it by suggesting that female candidates who do use negativity will be perceived as being at odds with public expectations of female behavior. Such societal stereotypes usually depict women as “kind, helpful, sympathetic and passive in contrast to men who are depicted as independent, forceful and aggressive” (Walter and Nai 2015, Huddy and Terkildsen 1993). On the basis of such stereotypes, women might experience a ‘gender penalty’ for going negative because negative campaigning is generally seen as an act of aggression (Trent and Friedenbergs 2008). However, at the same time, female candidates often feel the need to demonstrate that they are ‘as tough’ as their male counterparts, in part as a way to counteract typically gendered media narratives that women have to contend with (e.g., focus on personal life, physical appearance, or questions of likability) (Lau and Pomper 2004, Mo 2015, Braden 1996). As such, it is not unreasonable to hypothesize that while women might indeed use negative campaigning as much as men in order to appear ‘tough,’ they use it in a *civil* rather than *uncivil* manner to highlight differences on *issues* rather than *character* so as to not appear ‘unlikable’ and too aggressive. Still, this explanation and indeed most theoretical explanations given in the literature depicts female campaign behavior *in relation to* male behavior. That is, female political behavior is usually analyzed in relation to the status quo of male candidates, and consequently, we have very little theoretical or empirical knowledge of how female candidates behave when there are no men present in the arena of contention.

2.3 Dynamics of Televised Debates

A political campaign is multifaceted; it includes everything from town halls, canvassing, industry and activist visits, rallies, online campaigning, and debates. In other words, there are many arenas within which a candidate can engage in negative campaigning. A televised debate, however, is a marquee event in most campaigns and usually attracts the single highest number of viewers for any individual campaign event (Birdsell 2017). It is also one of the only ways for the candidates to engage directly with one another. The emergence of debate participants who are not white men has sparked interest in the extent to which the personal characteristics (as opposed to performance characteristics) alter in some way the debate engagement (Atkeson and Krebs 2008).

Some early studies on this suggest that women candidates were less aggressive than male candidates in debates and were less likely to speak out of turn or to interrupt their opponent more forcefully (Edelsky and Adams 1990). However, other more recent studies dispute that, and find that women candidates do not exhibit any significantly different behavior compared to their male counterparts in debates (Banwart and McKinney 2005). Still, the literature on debates is surprisingly scarce. Most attention on debates has been given to the presidential level where the population size is relatively small, and we therefore know very little about the differences and similarities between presidential election debates and down-ballot election debates. For example, does a 'higher' level election raise the stakes sufficiently to incentivize candidates to go negative? And with heightened stakes, are women candidates more self-conscious about social roles and stereotypes? Some gender studies research suggests that most women candidates do not in fact win less frequently than male candidates, *unless* the election is at the executive level (Hayes and Lawless 2016). Whether that has anything to do with their personal characteristics or campaign/debate performance seems uncertain. Without more research into debate dynamics in down-ballot races, it seems premature to make any such conclusions. Functional Theory scholars have found that generally there is a lot of consistency in messaging patterns across 'debates in all cycles and at all of the levels that they examined' (Benoit and Hansen 2004, Birdsell 2017). That is, on average, controlling for gender, debaters use about an even amount of acclaims, attacks, defenses across different election levels and political cycles. Incumbents tend to be more positive than challengers, and both incumbents and challengers tend to prefer issues over character-based messaging.

While this study mainly focuses on the drivers and causes of negative campaigning, it is important to also mention some of the potential effects of negativity in campaigns. To reiterate some of the main tenets of the Functional Theory, candidates have incentives to go negative if and only if they believe it will hurt the opponent more than a potential backlash will hurt

themselves. Nevertheless, researchers have had a difficult parsing out the effects of debate performances and what makes a good or a poor debate performance (Hillygus and Jackman 2003). In fact, it is often suggested that a more elusive notion of pre-debate expectations to a given candidate drives what is then considered a good or poor performance. As such, if there are high expectations to a candidate who then fails to live up to that expectation, the performance can be considered lackluster, while on the other hand an otherwise dominant performance can be perceived as aggressive and mean (Birdsell 2017). The point here is to emphasize that there does not seem to be any standard decision-making procedure for a candidate deciding to go negative in a debate and it is thus always a calculated risk. In addition, since women candidates often face social-role-based expectations, that decision-making procedure is likely made even more challenging because of the need to balance social role expectations with the political expectation of being tough enough and up to the task.

2.4 Conceptual Framework and Research Objectives

This study focuses on a very specific type of two-way race; namely when a woman is up against another women. Multiple previous studies have demonstrated that the characteristics of the target matters when the sponsor of a message decides to go negative. Importantly, a series of studies have shown that male candidates tend to use less negativity when they are facing off against a female opponent as opposed to a male opponent, primarily because male candidates risk appearing to be ‘beating up’ a woman (Walter and Nai 2015, Kahn and Kenney 2004, Maier and Renner 2018). The rationale behind this study is that we have hitherto had too few cases of female candidates running against other female candidates, and we therefore have a significant gap in our knowledge on female behavior on this front. Due to the relative dearth of empirical evidence on gender differences in the use of negativity in debates, this study’s hypotheses are derived partly from the evidence we have about female candidates’ behavior in such debates, and partly from evidence about women’s behavior in other types of campaign communication. The primary research question is therefore the following:

RQ1. To what extent do female politicians use negative campaign communication when their opponent is also female as opposed to male?

At the outset, we have little theory upon which to base our hypotheses regarding how female candidates behave in a race without male candidates. We therefore need to base the hypotheses on theories about female stereotypes and social roles; specifically, the idea that since women need to prove to the electorate that they are as ‘tough’ as male candidates, the public expectations about female behavior changes when only women are competing. In other words, the ‘need’ to appear tough disappears and female politicians can safely comply with public expectations about their social role:

- H1. Female politicians use *less* negative campaigning when their opponent is also female

In order to gauge not just whether female politicians use more or less negative campaigning, but also *how* they use it, we pose the following additional research question:

- RQ2. Does the gender of the target moderate the *emphasis* of the attack (i.e., issue-based versus character-based)?

It is slightly more complicated formulating clear expectations regarding this research question because there is very little literature describing the relationship between target gender and issue vs. character-based emphasis in campaign communication. The literature on women's use of negativity suggests that women in general use issue-based attacks more than character-based attacks in mixed-gender races (Maier 2015). However, a case can be made that character-based attacks are considered less legitimate and hence riskier than issue-based attacks. Hence, based on the theory and hypothesis outlined above, we can formulate a hypothesis that takes social roles into account:

- H2. Female politicians attack more on issues than on character in single-gender than they do in mixed-gender debates.

Next, the candidate's status in the race as well as standing in the polls are important variables that can moderate the level of negativity used in the campaign. In the United States, being a challenger rather than an incumbent is associated with a degree of disadvantage. The incumbent has had time to build up name recognition and a presence in the community and will usually receive the bulk of the media attention, whereas it is the challenger's job to prove to the electorate that the incumbent has somehow failed at improving the community and that they will do a better job representing the district. Consequently, the challenger will have a greater incentive to go negative than the incumbent (Lau and Pomper 2004). The standing in the polls can influence the level of negativity because the candidate who is trailing in the polls has more incentive to take risks in trying to improve their relative standing. Conversely, front-runners might not want to risk jeopardizing their lead by going negative and incurring backlash effects (Damore 2002).

- RQ3. Is the effect of the candidate's status in the race as well as standing in the polls on the use of negativity moderated by the opponent's gender?

This research question allows us to examine gender effects through a variety of interactions. As clarified in this literature review, previous research does demonstrate that the above factors influence how and when candidates use negative campaigning. Here, we are positing that there might be an interaction between status in the race and standing in the polls with the

gender of the opponent. Firstly, it is conceivable that female challengers feel an even stronger need to appear tough if the incumbent is male rather than female, consequently exacerbating the need to go negative. Female incumbents, on the other hand, do not face the same 'social role'-based risks as male incumbents in relation to the perception of 'beating up' a woman. Therefore, we should expect female incumbents to use negativity against male and female challengers at about the same rate.

- H3. Female challengers show a lower level of negativity in single-gender debates than in mixed-gender debates; conversely, female incumbents show about the same level of negativity in single-gender debates as in mixed-gender

Candidates who are leading in the polls are in general less likely to go negative, because the perceived threat is relatively low and the risk of backlash effects high. Still, it is possible that gender has an effect on this relationship. Here, we conjecture that female candidates who are leading in the polls have a strengthened incentive to conform to social roles because their position in the lead means they will likely be more risk-averse. That is to say, they have incentives to avoid 'upsetting social conventions' by attacking male opponents. On the other hand, when female candidates are behind in the polls, they have a general incentive to take the risk of going negative, and the gender of the opponent likely will not have a significant effect.

- H4. Female candidates show a higher level of negativity in single-gender debates than in mixed-gender debates when they are leading in the polls

In addition to gender, there are a few other important character traits that may be of importance. Firstly, the ethnicity of the message sponsor might have an impact on that person's willingness to go negative, because racial minorities in the U.S. often feel the need to run a 'deracialized' campaign which aims to broaden the coalition of support beyond the racial minority. Central to such a campaign is the attempt to appear non-threatening, for example by avoiding negative campaigning (Krebs and Holian 2007). However, due to the low level of female congressional and senatorial candidates of color, it is outside of the scope of this study to include race as a variable.

Perhaps more significant than race, however, is partisanship. While the literature on party effects on the use of negativity is inconclusive, there are at least some theories that seem more convincing than others. In particular, some scholars argue that Republican candidates are more likely to go negative than Democratic candidates because conservatives are not only less averse to negative campaigning, aggression and conflict than liberals, but in some cases might even exhibit a relatively strong negativity bias whereby the negative is weighted stronger than

the positive (Soroka 2004, Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995). However, we do not include partisanship as a hypothesis in this study because even though the analysis concerns a series of individual House and Senate races, those elections took place in a *national* election where Republicans were defending their majorities. This is a context that cannot be easily controlled for, and the results would likely be skewed as a consequence.

Furthermore, we need to consider a series of context variables. These variables include the type of election (e.g., senatorial vs. congressional), a candidate's standing in the polls, as well as the status of the sponsor. Previous research suggests that negativity in political campaigns in the U.S. is on the rise (Geer 2006). That is to say, it does not merely vary from election year to election year; rather, there is a longer-term trend towards more negativity for a variety of reasons (e.g., professionalization of campaigns, political mediatization, and polarization). Combined with the fact that more and more female candidates are running for office in the U.S., it is worth asking what role, if any, gender plays in this regard. While this study is not longitudinal, it will likely allow us to make certain predictive statements regarding the state of negative campaigning in a political context where women will have a larger role to play than in the past.

This study analyzes televised debates from senatorial and congressional campaigns in the United States. Much previous research on negative campaigning focuses on TV advertising, printed campaign material, speeches or expert judgment (Gélineau and Blais 2015), but relatively little systematic analysis of televised debates has been conducted. However, televised debates are arguably some of the most important events to occur in an election campaign, and have been shown to persuade voters to change their votes (Maier and Faas 2011) since they have the potential to reach larger audiences than most other types of campaign communication and garner substantial amounts of news coverage both before, during and after the debate.

3 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Methodology

This study employs a content analysis to answer the research questions and explore the hypotheses outlined above. A content analysis is appropriate in this regard because it is the most useful research technique to systematically detect patterns. Specifically, the analysis aims at identifying certain characteristics of messages, in this case negative debate communication (Holsti 1969). Each of the observations are assigned codes that indicate the presence or absence of certain variable characteristics as defined in the following sections.

Quantitative content analyses have various important strengths that are useful for this study. Firstly, it emphasizes transparency and replicability. Since content analyses usually rely on observational, publicly available, data, academic scrutiny of the analysis is facilitated and replicability enabled. A strong conceptual framework is essential to a content analysis, because different coders ought to have a similar understanding of key terms and concepts that are to be coded and analyzed.

Secondly, it can be used to describe and make inferences about certain characteristics of communication; in this case, we are interested specifically in the tone, strategy, and purpose of debate messages by female candidates. Quantitative content analyses have previously been criticized for simply being a process of ‘counting’ that does not necessarily lead to meaningful inferences (Thomas 1994). While the analytical process is indeed a process of counting occurrences, a well-constructed content analysis will be thoroughly and meaningfully rooted in theory upon which the content analysis can add empirical and interpretive power. In relation to this project, the content analysis can both be used to build theory in a hitherto underdeveloped research area as well as to shed descriptive light on potential implications of an increasing presence of women in campaigns.

3.2 Data Selection and Sampling Strategy

This study covers televised debates from the 2018 congressional and senatorial elections across the United States. It covers most of those races in which both the Republican Party and the Democratic Party were represented by female candidates. Half of all debates analyzed are mixed-gender and selected to achieve parity between the two parties (i.e., an equal amount of Republican and Democratic message sponsors and targets).

This study identified 20 female sponsors in a total of 15 debates held during the 2018 congressional and senatorial midterm elections. The matchups were chosen to reflect both party and gender diversity with five Democratic sponsors in all-female matchups, five Republican sponsors in all-female matchups, five Democratic sponsors in mixed-gender matchups and five Republican sponsors in mixed-gender matchups. In the all-female matchups, both participants in the debate were analyzed as both sponsors and targets to make up for a relative lack of recent all-female matchups. In total 20 female candidates were identified and 10 male candidates. Furthermore, most of the races were chosen for their level of competitiveness, reflected in their polling averages at the time of the debate. In all, the debates ranged from tossup (i.e., polling average $\pm 1-5$), to lean GOP/Dem (i.e., polling average $\pm 5-10$), to solid GOP/Dem (i.e., polling average $\pm 10+$). The diversity in competitiveness enables a more thorough analysis of the impact of standing in the polls on the level of negativity.

Transcripts for each debate were retrieved from C-SPAN’s website which catalogues recent debates for Congress. Each debate was then broken up into coding units according to the Functional Theory. According to the Functional Theory such a coding unit is a *theme*, defined as the part of the text or speech that addresses a coherent idea. Such themes can vary in length from a single phrase to several sentences. These units are usually separated by a change of speaker, strategy, content, or reference object (Maier and Renner 2018). This study identified and coded 608 functional candidate statements. Each statement was connected to a speaker after which the total amount of statements made by the speaker was aggregated¹ in order to calculate the share of total statements that were attacks, acclaims, defenses, etc. Our unit of analysis is therefore the debate appearance of a female candidate ($N = 20$). It is important to note that the prevalence of all-female races is still relatively low in the United States. It means that the population of interest (i.e., all-female debates) for this particular study is also small and so is this study’s sample size. This sampling strategy was chosen in order to replicate—to the greatest extent possible—the methodological choices made by Maier and Renner 2018 for greater comparative strength.

ID No.	Election	Sponsor Candidate	Target Candidate
1	Utah 4th Congressional District	Mia Love (R)	Ben McAdams (D)
2	Arizona Senate	Martha McSally (R)	Kyrsten Sinema (D)
3	Arizona Senate	Kyrsten Sinema (D)	Martha McSally (R)
4	Virginia 7th Congressional District	Abigail Spanberger (D)	Dave Brat (R)
5	Tennessee Senate	Marsha Blackburn (R)	Phil Bredesen (D)
6	Wisconsin Senate	Tammy Baldwin (D)	Leah Vukmir (R)
7	Wisconsin Senate	Leah Vukmir (R)	Tammy Baldwin (D)
8	Georgia 6th Congressional District	Karen Handel (R)	Lucy McBath (D)
9	Georgia 6 th Congressional District	Lucy McBath (D)	Karen Handel (R)
10	New York 22nd Congressional District	Claudia Tenney (R)	Anthony Brindisi (D)
11	Virginia 10th Congressional District	Jennifer Wexton (D)	Barbara Comstock (R)
12	Virginia 10 th Congressional District	Barbara Comstock (R)	Jennifer Wexton (D)
13	Nebraska Senate	Deb Fischer (R)	Jane Raybould (D)
14	Nebraska Senate	Jane Raybould (D)	Deb Fischer (R)
15	Missouri Senate	Claire McCaskill (D)	Josh Hawley (R)

¹ The share of negativity was calculated as follows: (number of units coded as ‘attack’/total number of functional and nonfunctional units) x 100

16	Mississippi Senate	Cindy Hyde-Smith (R)	Mike Espy (D)
17	Michigan Senate	Debbie Stabenow (D)	John James (R)
18	Nevada Senate	Jacky Rosen (D)	Dean Heller (R)
19	Washington 8th Congressional District	Kim Schrier (D)	Dino Rossi (R)
20	South Carolina 1 st Congressional District	Katie Arrington (R)	Joe Cunningham (D)

3.3 Coding Frame and Intercoder-Reliability Index

One important challenge with studies on negativity pertains to operationalization. Previous research on negativity have varied in the way they code the ‘tone’/‘rhetorical strategy’ of a message. Some have coded an entire advertisement as negative, if there is a single passage of a negative character, while others have coded balanced ads as neutral. The same goes for speeches or debates. Part of this problem is alleviated by having a well-defined coding unit. Unlike other media, such as tweets, a televised debate can be difficult to break into units of analysis. Is it the debate as a whole, a minute, a sentence, or perhaps a paragraph? The coding frame is heavily inspired by (Maier and Renner 2018) and includes five main response variables of interest: strategy, attack purpose, attack valence, statement content, and type of character statement.

This study uses the Geer Method (Geer 2006) for coding ‘strategy’. The Geer method divides speech into distinct idea units, or appeals, that pertain to issues or candidate traits, which can be either negative or positive in tone. Notably, the Geer method does not have a neutral ‘contrast’ category, because there can be so much variation within such a category that aggregation can lead to misleading impressions of the overall tone in the message. This method attempts to capture tone by proxy through the rhetorical strategy. The strategy has five categories (attack, acclaim, defense, self-criticism and praise of opponent) as outlined in the codebook in the appendix.

Choosing a robust operationalization method in relation to tone is particularly important because it indicates how the researcher assumes that negativity affects individuals. For example, one method (Jamieson 2000) aggregates each negative word into different levels of negativity, and subsequently codes the whole message as either positive, contrasting, or negative based on different aggregated negativity thresholds. However, such a method implicitly assumes that only when a message is very negative in the aggregate will it affect the individual watch-

ing it (Allen and Stevens 2015). It is important to acknowledge that different levels of negativity are experienced differently by viewers, and a single negative word or sentence can have a disproportionate effect on the negativity impression. For this reason, this project opts for units that express a coherent idea that is either generally positive (i.e., focus on the sponsor herself, through acclaims, defenses or self-critiques) or negative (i.e., focus on the target through attacks). In effect, each coded statement is assigned a rhetorical strategy resulting in a categorical variable rather than ordinal. Since each candidate is rather idiosyncratic in speaking style and substance, it would not be appropriate to use the total amount of coded statements as the sample. If done so, it would effectively decouple each coding unit from the candidate.

The study also includes variables related to attack purpose, attack valence, statement content, and type of statement content. The operationalization of these response variables is outlined below as well as in the appendix. A sixth response variable, incivility, was dropped from the sample since uncivil statements occurred so rarely that there would not be enough statistical power behind it to make any credible analyses. Reliability is important in content analyses because the quality of the coding scheme is a function of the ability of a third person to be able to code the data and achieve the same results (Neuendorf 2002). A second coder was trained to code 10 percent of the total amount of coding units; 61 out of the total 608 statements were randomly chosen among the 20 debates. The Krippendorff's Alpha intercoder-reliability scores for the five response variables are reported in the table below; all five passed the conventionally accepted threshold of 0.80.

Table 1

Operationalization of response variables with reliability scores

Variable	Measurement	Krippendorff's Alpha
Rhetorical strategy	(1) Attack	0.878
	(2) Acclaim	
	(3) Defense	
	(4) Self-criticism	
	(5) Praise for opponent	
	(99) No apparent strategy	
Attack purpose	(1) Attack on personal characteristics	0.811
	(2) Attack on issue stands	
	(3) Attack on associations	
	(4) Attack on background	
	(5) Attack on record	
	(99) N/A	

Table 1

Operationalization of response variables with reliability scores

Variable	Measurement	Krippendorff's Alpha
Attack valence	(0) Implicit	0.93
	(1) Explicit	
	(99) N/A	
Statement content	(0) Political content	0.9
	(1) Character-based content	
	(2) Structuring of the debate	
	(99) Content not clear	
Type of character statement	(1) Policy/Issue competence	0.832
	(2) Leadership	
	(3) Integrity	
	(4) Personal	
	(99) Unclear	

The study uses hierarchical multiple regressions to establish correlations. Hierarchical regression is useful in the process of model selection in order to determine the most appropriate number of control variables to include. Furthermore, it allows us to examine potential interaction effects among variables. For example, does the gender of the opponent matter more or less or the same for a sponsor's incentive to go negative if the sponsor is behind, even or ahead in the polls? Since the sampling units are the presence of a woman in a debate, it is unlikely that the study finds many statistically significant results. This is not necessarily detrimental to the findings because the population itself is small. In other words, while we will not be able to generalize in the abstract about female debate behavior in single-gender races for federal office, we will be able to say something about current trends in such settings in the United States, even without statistical significance.

Finally, since the study analyzes publicly available data from public figures, there are no known ethical concerns.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 Results

As mentioned above, the study analyzed 608 functional statements made by 20 female candidates. The statements were connected to the speaker and then aggregated per debate. Descriptive statistics, expressed in Table 2, shows the share of statements that were considered attacks in all-female debates and mixed-gender debates, respectively. The table shows that about 37

percent of all statements made by female candidates in debates were attacks. In all-female debates, approximately 34.6 percent of all statements were attacks, while that share was 39.3 percent when the opponent was male. While it did not reach statistical significance, the table does show that female candidates in the sample were less likely to go negative against female opponents as opposed to male opponents. There is a mean difference of approximately 4.7 points across the sample, but this number should not be taken too seriously as it is not statistically significant. The important takeaway is the trend.

Table 2

Use of negativity in single- and mixed-gender debates in the U.S. midterm elections in 2018
(mean; in parenthesis: standard deviation)

	Total	All-Female Debate	Mixed-Gender Debate	<i>t</i> -test
% Attacks	37 (13.3)	34.6 (13.6)	39.3 (13.3)	n.s.
<i>N</i>	20	10	10	

However, we know from the literature on negativity and debates that a whole host of potential context variables can influence an actor's incentive to go negative. These context variables include whether the sponsor is an incumbent or a challenger or whether it is an open seat; the level of the election (i.e., whether it is congressional or senatorial); the sponsor's standing in the polls at the time of the debate; and political party. These variables have the potential to confound or suppress the effect of our main variable of interest, the opponent's gender. Table 3 includes three regression models. All models include the context variables mentioned above. Model 1 shows the same trends as the Table 1 with regards to the effect of the gender of the opponent on the level of negativity. That is, the opponent being female decreases the level of negativity used by approximately 9 points, controlling for all context variables. As with Table 1, none of the variables in Model 1 are statistically significant, which is not surprising considering the low number of observations, but the trend nevertheless holds. It also shows that, controlling for the remaining variables, challengers are more likely to go negative than incumbents, senatorial candidates are more negative than congressional candidates, being behind in the polls is associated with more negativity, and perhaps surprisingly, Democrats are more negative than Republicans (which can potentially be explained by the fact that Democrats were trying to reclaim the majority in the House and Senate in 2018).

Table 3

Impact of single- and mixed-gender debates on the use of negativity in the U.S. midterm elections in 2018

	<u>Model 1</u>		<u>Model 2</u>		<u>Model 3</u>	
	β	SE (β)	β	SE (β)	β	SE (β)

Gender of opponent (0 = male, 1 = female)	-9.005	(5.534)	-14.29	(8.459)	-24.02*	(9.116)
Status of sponsor (0 = incumbent, 1 = challenger)	5.628	(8.397)	0.0356	(11.34)	-3.396	(10.32)
Open seat	4.596	(6.707)	1.401	(9.156)	2.234	(8.217)
Election level (0 = congressional, 1 = senatorial)	10.00	(5.430)	9.074	(6.027)	12.98*	(5.771)
Standing in polls (margin/deficit in percentage points)	-0.742	(0.436)	-0.590	(0.490)	-2.090*	(0.895)
Sponsor's party (0 = Republican, 1 = Democratic)	3.542	(6.102)	3.172	(6.491)	0.196	(6.020)
Gender x Status of sponsor	—	—	12.47	(14.25)	24.03	(14.11)
Gender x Open seat	—	—	8.575	(15.40)	9.854	(13.82)
Gender x Standing in polls	—	—	—	—	2.016	(1.049)
Constant	32.65***	(5.939)	34.85***	(6.945)	40.05***	(6.787)
N	20		20		20	
Adjusted R ²	0.220		0.142		0.311	

Standard errors in parentheses

* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

Model 2 has the addition of the interaction between gender of opponent and the status of the sponsor. This interaction is included to gauge H3 regarding the use of attacks by women when they are either incumbents or challengers. To reiterate, H3 asserts that when a female candidate is a challenger to a male incumbent, she will feel a strong need to be perceived as 'tough' because she is essentially challenging the status quo. Conversely, a female incumbent has not only already won an election and therefore shown that she can be as tough as a man, but she also does not face the same social risks that male incumbents would when faced with a female challenger in terms of being perceived as 'beating up' a woman. H3 therefore claims that female challengers will be *more* negative when the opponent is male; and that female incumbents will be equally negative against female as they are against male challengers. Model 3 includes another interaction, namely between the target's gender and the sponsor's standing in the polls. This interaction aims at gauging H4, which asserts that female candidates show a higher level of negativity in single-gender debates than in mixed-gender debates *when they are leading in the polls*. The theory behind this hypothesis is that a candidate who is leading in the polls is likely going to be more risk-averse than if she was trailing in the polls. Consequently, a female candidate in such a scenario would take a greater risk going negative against a male opponent because it would have the potential to upset social conventions.

Model 3 shows a few interesting things. Firstly, the two interaction terms are not statistically significant, and on that basis, we cannot conclude that there is an interaction between neither the sponsor's status in the race and the opponent's gender nor the sponsor's standing in the polls and the opponent's gender. We can therefore reject H3 and H4. Still, it is important to reiterate the low sample size. The coefficients are in fact positive, showing a trend *in the sample* that indicates that for Gender x Status of sponsor, a female challenger with a female opponent is more negative than our base category, a female incumbent with a male opponent, all else being equal. Similarly, Gender x Standing in the polls is also positive, indicating that in the sample, when the sponsor is leading in the polls, she is more likely to go negative when the opponent is also female as opposed to male. In other words, the trends in the sample lend some credibility to the theory behind H3 and H4, but a meaningfully larger sample size is necessary in order to be able to reject the null hypotheses.²

Secondly, Model 3 shows that when controlling for the context variables and the interaction terms, we observe a statistically significant effect of the target's gender on the use of attacks in debates. Specifically, it shows that when the opponent is also female, the level of negativity decreases by 24 percentage points when controlling for the context variables as well as the interaction between the opponent's gender and their standing in the polls. This indicates that we could only obtain a statistically significant effect when including the interaction between target's gender and the sponsor's standing in the polls. Still, this is a significant result that allows us to confirm H1; that on average, female candidates use less negativity against female opponents when controlling for the aforementioned variables. Again, due to the low sample size, the coefficient, 24, should be interpreted with caution. The important result is the significant trend more than the degree. The final note on these results is the explanatory power of the models. Model 3 has an adjusted R^2 of 0.311 indicating that it explains about 31 percent of the variance. In other words, there is a lot of other potential variables that explain when and why a woman candidate go negative.

Table 4

Impact of single- and mixed-gender debates on the content of attacks in the U.S. midterm elections in 2018

	% Issue-based attacks		% Character-based attacks	
	β	SE (β)	β	SE (β)
Gender of opponent (0 = male, 1 = female)	11.34	(23.71)	-10.62	(23.65)

² Maier and Renner 2018 also test for these interactions with $N = 71$ and likewise failed to reach statistical significance.

Status of sponsor (0 = incumbent, 1 = challenger)	5.535	(26.85)	-4.626	(26.78)
Open seat	10.89	(21.37)	-10.35	(21.32)
Election level (0 = congressional, 1 = senatorial)	14.52	(15.01)	-14.62	(14.97)
Standing in Polls (margin/deficit in percentage points)	-0.975	(2.327)	1.052	(2.321)
Sponsor's Party (0 = Republican, 1 = Democratic)	24.37	(15.01)	-14.62	(14.97)
Gender x Status of sponsor	-24.18	(36.7)	23.41	(36.61)
Gender x Open seat	-38.91	(35.95)	38.62	(35.85)
Gender x Standing in Polls	0.996	(2.728)	-1.083	(2.720)
Constant	47.67*	(17.65)	51.48*	(17.61)
<i>N</i>		20		20
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²		-0.227		-0.223

Standard errors in parentheses

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

H2 asserts that women candidates attack more on issues than on character in single-gender debates than they do in mixed-gender debates. Table 4 shows a multivariate regression analysis with two outcome variables; % issue-based attacks and % character-based attacks. Here, none of the variables were even close to statistical significance, and since it draws from only the small share of the data that were attacks, it would be inappropriate to infer anything from the trendlines in this table. As such, we cannot reject H2's null hypothesis.

Table 5
Results Overview

Hypothesis	Result	Finding
H1. Female politicians use <i>less</i> negative campaigning when their opponent is also female	Null-hypothesis rejected	When controlling for context variables and interaction terms, female candidates do in fact use less negative campaigning when their opponent is also female.
H2. Female politicians attack more on issues than on character in single-gender than they do in mixed-gender debates.	Null-hypothesis <i>not</i> rejected	None of the variables reached statistical significance.
H3. Female challengers show a lower level of negativity in single-gender debates than in mixed-gender debates	Null-hypothesis <i>not</i> rejected	The interaction term did not reach statistical significance; however, the sample trend lends some evidence to H3.

H4. Female candidates show a higher level of negativity in single-gender debates than in mixed-gender debates when they are leading in the polls	Null-hypothesis <i>not</i> rejected	The interaction term did not reach statistical significance; however, the sample trend lends some evidence to H4.
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4.2 Discussion

This study's primary research question was to what extent female politicians use negative campaign communication when their opponent is also female as opposed to male. The main hypothesis in this regard was that when a female candidate's opponent was also female, she would—all else equal—use less negativity in debates because being in a debate without a male opponent could 'disincentivize' a female candidate from needing to appear 'as tough' as her opponent. The analysis found that when controlling for a series of context variables and interactions, that hypothesis does appear valid. The study also posed additional research questions aimed at parceling out *how* female candidates moderate their debate performance depending on the gender of their opponent. Here, the study did not find any statistically significant relationships. Whether that is due to the fact that there is indeed no relationship between, say, the gender of the opponent and the sponsor's standing in the polls on the one hand, and the level of negativity on the other, or due to a low sample size, is unclear. The occurrence of all-female debates is still sufficiently rare that it necessitates further exploration in future studies. The sample did point in the direction of the two hypotheses that address these interactions. Namely, that when a female candidate is the challenger rather than the incumbent in all-female debates, she uses less negativity than if she were up against a male incumbent; and that when a female candidate is leading in the polls, she uses *more* negativity in all-female races than if she was up against a male opponent. Both of these sample findings provide an interesting basis for further research.

There are certainly a range of methodological pitfalls to be mindful of when conducting this type of study. The most significant challenge in this project has been gathering a sample size large enough to make robust statistical analyses. Clearly, a sample size of 20 is not ideal, and has resulted in the conclusions drawn from the analysis to be merely tentative rather than definitive. There are two reasons for the low sample size; first, the prevalence of all-female debates is still rare and second, the scale and time requirement of coding a large number of debates has lamentably been outside the scope of this project. For reference, Maier and Renner (2018) had a sample size of 71 which compared not the gender of the opponent of a female

candidate, but rather the gender of the opponent of a male candidate, which is still after all a more frequent occurrence.

The starting point of this study was that we know very little about the dynamics of negative campaigning when there are no men present in the political contest. Men still make up the majority of elected politicians in most Western democracies, including both on the federal and the state-level in the United States. Nevertheless, the 2018 midterm election saw the highest number of women elected to Congress in a single election, and as the number of women in politics gradually increases, we also increasingly observe scenarios where both parties nominate a woman to compete for a congressional or a senatorial seat (although the number of women candidates from the Republican Party has not increased in recent years, and the number of Republican congresswomen and senators actually decreased in 2018).

Still, it is worthwhile contemplating and theorizing about the potential implications of gender parity in politics and campaigning, particularly in a year when at least three women are credible, major candidates for the Democratic Party's nomination for president in 2020. A persistent challenge in achieving equal gender representation in politics has been that fewer women in general have run for office; not that they cannot win at the same rate as men (Herrnson and Lucas 2006). This may not be surprising since it took—literally—more than a century for women to achieve suffrage in most modern democracies and thus enter the formal political arena. There is a lot of expectation that increasing the number of female officeholders and placing more women in positions of authority will do, broadly, two things: 1) 'close the gender gap in political engagement and participation by mobilizing women voters' (Dolan 2006), and 2) diminish the gendered expectations people have with regards to the social roles men and women have to comply by (Sanbonmatsu 2010).

In many ways, an all-female election represents one of the most pertinent scenarios under which we can explore such dynamics. When there are no men on the ballot, women candidates—supposedly—lose the need to situate their candidacy in relation to a male status quo. Nevertheless, this is still just a supposition; a counter-argument would be that most American congressional or senatorial elections are still *nested* in a national political environment where women officeholders are still a minority. Still, this study's findings provide an intriguing starting point to explore this dynamic more in depth in the future. There is at least some evidence that women actually do behave differently on the debate stage when no men are present.

Finally, it seems appropriate to situate this discussion in the current political climate in the United States, since as of this writing there has been two recent instances of more than one woman on a debate stage in the Democratic primaries for the 2020 general election, and there is at least the potential for some of the women to face off on a future debate stage without men

present, if the men in the race fail to gain traction. Since Donald Trump's electoral college victory against the first female nominee of a major party in a presidential election, women have organized to an unprecedented extent. There has been a slew of journalistic material published since Donald Trump took office arguing the same thing; namely, that the 2016 election has been the single most important catalyzing event in the organization of women in politics (Hudak and Zeppos 2017, Bassett 2017). This has been expressed both in the now-annual Women's March that first took place on the eve of Donald Trump's inauguration, but more substantially it was crystallized in first a record-setting number of female nominees for Congress in 2018, and subsequently in the 23 women who flipped seats previously held by men in the election (some of which were analyzed in this study).

It is still too early in the 2020 Democratic nominating process to say anything of substance with regards to how the women running behave compared to their male counterparts, not to mention how they adjust their rhetoric depending on the gender of their opponents. Still, we can point to some interesting anecdotes that have taken place in the first two debates. First, post-debate polling showed that California Senator Kamala Harris left the first debate as the biggest beneficiary after attacking former Vice President Joe Biden over his work in the Senate with segregationists in opposing busing (Silver 2019). In this particular instance, Harris did not seem deterred from attacking a male opponent and appeared to benefit from the attack—at least in the short term. In the second debate that took place in July 2019, Harris was the object of an attack by Hawaii Representative Tulsi Gabbard over her record as a prosecutor. Similarly, New York Senator Kirsten Gillibrand also attacked former Vice President in the second debate regarding an op-ed he had published as a senator. These anecdotes are interesting because this is the first time so many women have run for a party's nomination in a single election, and the way in which they conduct their campaigns has the potential to inform future research on the topic. Indeed, there has already been much focus on the challenges these women face in the nomination process, particularly regarding questions of 'electability,' and much newspaper space and cable TV airtime has been spent discussing whether or not Kamala Harris or Elizabeth Warren are 'tough' enough or 'electable' enough to take on Donald Trump (Martin 2019, Lerer 2019).

We are most likely still far removed from a scenario in which both parties nominate women for a presidential election, and it will be difficult to gauge how such a scenario might affect the dynamics on a presidential debate stage, not to mention the broader political discussion, until it happens. It seems clear, however, both from the findings in this study, and plausibly also from the anecdotal evidence described above, that women candidates at multiple levels face additional constraints they need to take into consideration before going negative. The theory of the double-bind that women face is well-documented. When women attempt to appear

tough, they often end up being perceived as ‘shrill,’ and when they attempt to appear competent, they are not considered likable or inspiring (Lee 2016). This seems particularly important in elections where men are also competing, which automatically renders the woman the ‘anomaly’. Therefore, it is imperative that researchers devote more attention to how the absence of male candidates in races at all levels and in all contexts alter how gender is organized. The findings in this study provide an intriguing foundation for scholars to begin examining how women candidates may or may not substantially change the conventional wisdom of campaign behavior when they are no longer viewed or judged in relation to their male counterparts.

5 CONCLUSION

This study asked whether female candidates for federal office in the United States moderate their level of negativity in televised debates when their opponent is also female as opposed to male. Based on literature on negative campaigning and gender effects in politics, the study posited that women would use *less* negativity in debates when their opponent is also female because the absence of a man on the debate stage would change the candidate’s gendered risk calculation. That is, the candidate’s need to appear ‘as tough’ and aggressive as a male politician would be rendered moot. Using a unique data set of televised debates from the 2018 mid-term elections, the study found that women do in fact use *less* negative campaigning when their opponent is also female, controlling for a series of context variables and interaction variables, thus supporting H1. The study also posited that the candidate would attack more on issues than on character when the opponent is also female. However, there was no significant difference in the data between single-gender and mixed-gender debates in this regard, and thus no support for H2. Finally, the study hypothesized that the candidate’s status in the race (incumbent vs. challenger) and her standing in the polls might interact with the opponent’s gender. H3 and H4 argued that female challengers show a lower level of negativity in single-gender debates as opposed to mixed-gender debates; and that when a woman is leading in the polls, she uses *more* negative campaigning in single-gender debates as opposed to mixed-gender debates. While not statistically significant, the results for both interactions pointed in the direction that H3 and H4 were positing. This should provide a good foundation for an expanded analysis into such interactions with a larger sample size. The study’s main challenge is a small sample size. For a quantitative content analysis, a larger sample size than 20 is necessary. Future research should expand the scope to include previous election cycles in order to enable analysis of as many all-female debates as possible. The paper has argued that because the population size is still small (albeit expanding), the low sample size is not detrimental to

the overall findings. While it might mean that we cannot generalize in the abstract, the findings do allow us to describe and conclude on the debate behavior of current female politicians.

Finally, the paper has engaged in a discussion of the broader implications of these findings in a political context defined in large part by President Donald Trump and American women's reaction to his election and his behavior in office. While it may still take a fair amount of years before women are nominated for president for both parties in a single election, it nevertheless appears that the 2016 election has accelerated the mobilization and activation of women running for office, at least for the Democratic Party. Many activists and feminist scholars hope that the closer we get to gender parity in national and local politics, the less importance will be placed on gendered stereotypes and the expectations of social roles that women currently face (Sanbonmatsu 2010). This study has aimed at laying a significant, albeit limited, foundation for future research on this topic. As more and more women enter politics, more observational data will become available—ripe for analysis on not just how women behave on the campaign trail *compared* to men, but also how women behave on the trail in the *absence* of men.

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