

Rachel Bernhard | Research Statement

In 1922, Walter Lippmann wrote that “the real environment is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance...we have to reconstruct it on a simpler model before we can manage with it.”¹ In 2017, the information environment is even bigger and more complex, increasing scholars’ need to understand how our brains simplify our political decisions—to vote for candidates, to run for office, and to hold government accountable. How does using a “simpler model” affect the representation we receive? In my dissertation, I test whether our decision-making process affects the types of candidates we elect using experiments and election data. In a second project, I examine women’s decisions to run for office using ethnographic and computational methods. In a third, I explore whether information complexity exacerbates the electoral blind spot for voters with surveys and experiments.

Voter Decision-Making and Descriptive Representation

How do citizens judge whether political candidates are qualified? Extensive evidence suggests that candidate appearance has a non-trivial impact on voter decision-making. Social scientists often argue that the brain’s preference for taking cognitive shortcuts explains this phenomenon, but this still fails to explain why voters prefer one shortcut to another. My dissertation argues that the difficulty of voting, especially in state and local elections, inclines voters to rely on stereotypes, which substitute for thorough judgments of candidates’ qualifications. Direct elections of candidates may therefore pose too high a hurdle for citizens, not just because it is costly to pay attention, but because even when voters do, they are misled by cues that trigger familiar patterns of cognition. This has implications for descriptive representation of women, ethnic minorities, and the working class, which I test using survey experiments and quantitative analyses of election results.

My dissertation uses six papers to show that “simpler model” we use to evaluate candidates has important consequences for descriptive representation, and by extension, for the design of our electoral system. Three of these papers examine how voters behave when they have information about candidates’ appearances. I find that voters judge female candidates more heavily than male candidates on their age and attractiveness, which I describe as a “Tinder mentality” in my article “Tinder Decides: Mate Suitability Influences Votes” (under review). This holds whether the data is drawn from survey experiments or from actual elections. “A Change of Face” (with Dominik Hangartner, Jens Hainmueller, Gabe Lenz, and Teppei Yamamoto), exploits original survey and panel election data, which improves causal leverage over previous research, to assess whether changes in the appearance of the same candidate over time influence the number of votes he or she receives. In “High Standards? Candidate Height Drives Vote Choice,” I show that voters’ use of appearance cues is not limited to faces in voting pamphlets. I use experiments to manipulate perceptions of candidates’ heights in photos of a (simulated) debate, and find that while voters prefer taller candidates, those who benefit the most—Asian and female candidates—are statistically likely to be shorter than their white male opponents.

Three other papers examine individual phases of the process by which voters evaluate candidates. In “The More You Know: Voters’ Quest for Information about Local Candidates for Office” (under review, with Sean Freeder), we use a series of online survey experiments to show that when voters learn about a candidate for the first time, they tend to search for the policy stances of male candidates, but for the qualifications of female candidates. My 2017 APSA paper, “Timing the Gap: Gender

Stereotyping in Local Elections in California, 1995-2013” (with Sarah Anzia), analyzes a large new cross-sectional panel dataset of races for California local offices, using election timing as an instrument for the electorate’s knowledge about down-ballot races. We find that when voters know less about the candidates, women fare better in city council and school board races, but slightly worse in mayoral elections, and much worse when those districts are more Republican. I test whether Democrats and Republicans favor distinct styles of leaders in a way that might impact representation of women in “Wearing the Pants? Gendered Leadership Styles and Candidate Evaluations.” In two survey experiments with registered voters, I found that Democrats favored national candidates more when they were described as feminine, while Republicans slightly preferred masculine leaders.

My first book project will build on these findings to illustrate the consequences of voters’ snap judgments for descriptive representation. New experiments will assess whether voters have prototypes of what a candidate “should look like” and how candidates might strategically alter their appearance and occupation listings to appeal to voters. Other chapters will draw on unpublished data from the above papers to examine individual variation in stereotype usage, candidate names as race and gender cues, and the implications for electoral systems that rely on direct elections of candidates. The book will also make theoretical contributions to the study of voter decision-making in low-information environments. Researchers typically assume that the use of heuristics depends on characteristics of the voter—not on characteristics of the candidates. My research emphasizes that stereotyping determines the set of traits by which candidates are judged, not just how candidates are ranked on these traits. Moreover, it fills a gap in the literature on snap judgments, which tends to overlook how cues like appearance might have dissimilar effects by race or gender.

Candidate Decision-Making and Descriptive Representation

Substantial evidence suggests that American women’s lower political ambition explains much of the gap in their descriptive representation. Women’s ambition is depicted as largely static, the result of discouraging early socialization or slow-changing structural causes. Yet researchers face a methodological obstacle to studying candidate emergence: focusing solely on those who have already decided to run is too late to understand the full process, but systematically identifying those yet to decide is very difficult. One consequence is that researchers can only observe ambition well before or long after a decision is made, which may obscure changes in women’s ambitions over time.

I approach this problem by studying women recruited into multi-month candidate training programs run by a national women’s political organization, Emerge America, which allows me to observe women in the process of deciding. Importantly, only 51% of the women who participate in Emerge America end up running for political office, despite months of training and substantial costs. I observed two years of trainings in a state affiliate, held unstructured interviews with several dozen participants, and conducted a national survey of the organization’s 2,083 alumnae.

I expect three articles to result from this work. The first, an in-progress article titled “Untamed Shrews: Obstacles to Attaining Office in Women’s Own Words,” provides a thick description of women making the decision about whether to run for office. I find that even highly qualified and politically ambitious women are discouraged from running because they believe they are evaluated on superficial criteria like their appearance and voices, and that regardless of their parental status they are treated as neglectful mothers. The second, “To Emerge? Breadwinning and Income in Women’s Decisions to Run” (with Shauna Shames, Rachel Silbermann, and Dawn Teele), uses the survey data to examine variation in these women’s decisions to run. Differences between men and women and within the pool

of women that suggest a new logic of candidate emergence. Women's propensity to run decreases as their financial contribution to a household increases, while men's increases; moreover, we find significant disparities in run rates between partnered white women and partnered women of color. The third, an early-stage collaboration with Frances Rosenbluth, combines Emerge's data on their applicant pool with population Census data and VoteSmart data on nearly eighty thousand candidates for local office, collected using computational methods. We plan to use these data to describe the political economy of running for office: what occupations men and women start out in, what occupations local candidates come from, and how training program candidates might differ still further.

Within this field, candidate recruitment and training represents the leading edge of research, allowing opportunities for novel collaboration moving forward. I am the lead editor (with Mirya Holman, Shauna Shames, and Dawn Teele) of a special issue of *Politics, Groups, and Identities* (expected 2018) that explores how to increase the diversity of female candidates. With a grant from the FELS Institute at the University of Pennsylvania, we are organizing a conference in November and an edited volume entitled *Good Reasons to Run* that will bring together academics and practitioners hoping to improve recruitment of female candidates around the world.

Voter Decision-making and Substantive Representation

Past scholarship stresses the importance of information *sparsity* to voter decision-making, but takes few steps to assess the importance of information *complexity*, which underlies the premise of the "electoral blind spot."³ Yet, Congressional Republicans emphasize the concision of their bills, and prior research shows that issue complexity affects reliance on heuristics and ballot roll-off. Moreover, it is unclear whether procedural complexity and issue complexity function to limit democratic accountability in the same way, and whether they mean the same things to partisans with vastly different beliefs about the scope of government.

Preliminary data from a pilot study carried out in collaboration with Amy Lerman suggests that partisanship moderates some beliefs about what bill complexity signals. Unexpectedly, while both Democrats and Republicans agreed that increasingly complex bills are the fault of a broken system of government, Republicans nonetheless agreed with Democrats that government should solve more problems, not fewer. However, more conservative respondents and third-party voters felt that complex bills hid corruption and waste, preferring solutions that "everyone can understand."

I see the potential for a second book project, tentatively entitled *It's Complicated: Simple Governance vs. Good Governance in the Twenty-First Century*, that explores these questions, roughly divided into three parts. In the first part, I expect to provide descriptive survey data on voters' beliefs about trade-offs between simplicity and efficacy in government, as well as factors like partisanship that might moderate those preferences. In the second, I plan to examine whether voters agree on which issues are complicated or the ways in which they are complicated. For the third section, I am interested in conducting field and survey experiments to investigate whether framing bills as more or less complicated affects voting behavior.

1. Lippmann, W. *Public Opinion*. (Transaction Publishers, 1922).
2. Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP). *Current Numbers of Women Officeholders*. (Eagleton Institute of Politics, 2017).
3. Bawn, K. *et al.* A Theory of Political Parties: Groups, Policy Demands and Nominations in American Politics. *Perspect. Polit.* **10**, 571–597 (2012).