



Does gender matter for political leadership? The case of U.S. mayors[☆]

Fernando Ferreira^{*}, Joseph Gyourko

The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, United States
NBER, United States



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ABSTRACT

What are the consequences of electing a female leader for policy and political outcomes? We answer this question in the context of U.S. cities, where women's participation in mayoral elections increased from negligible numbers in 1970 to about one-third of the elections in the 2000's. A novel data set of U.S. mayoral elections from 1950 to 2005 was used, and a regression discontinuity design was employed to deal with the endogeneity of female candidacy to city characteristics. In contrast to most research on the influence of female leadership, we find no effect of gender of the mayor on policy outcomes related to the size of local government, the composition of municipal spending and employment, or crime rates. These results hold both in the short and the long run. While female mayors do not implement different policies, they do appear to have higher unobserved political skills, as they have at least a 5 percentage point higher incumbent effect than a comparable male. But we find no evidence of political spillovers: exogenously electing a female mayor does not change the long run political success of other female mayoral candidates in the same city or of female candidates in local congressional elections.

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1. Introduction

Even though women remain underrepresented in many important economic and political positions, there has been an increase in women taking on leadership roles in both the public and private sectors of many countries.¹ This change has attracted the interest of economists and other social scientists who want to understand the implications of female leadership (or the lack thereof, as the case may be) for public policy outcomes. Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004), for example, found that an increase in the female participation in politics in Indian villages resulted in a large increase in expenditures such as public investments to provide clean water.²

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^{*} Corresponding author at: The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, 1466 Steinberg Hall-Dietrich Hall, 3620 Locust Walk, Philadelphia, PA 19104-6302, United States.

¹ For example, female representation in national parliaments increased from an average of 1%–2% in 1970 to just over 19% in 2000 (Worldwide Statistical Survey (1995) and Inter-Parliamentary Union (2010) web site (<http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>)), but obviously remains well short of the female share of the population. In the executive branch of national governments, women have reached the pinnacle in Argentina, Germany, India, Brazil, and the United Kingdom, among others. And, the U.S. saw its most competitive female candidate ever in Hilary Clinton in the Presidential primary campaign of 2008.

² Other papers such as Clots-Figueras (2012) and Funk and Gathmann (2008) also report significant gender effects in other policy settings. A separate branch of this literature investigates the impact of women's suffrage rights and the increase in their labor market participation on fiscal outcomes. See Miller (2008), Lott and Kenny (1999) and Cavalcanti and Tavares (2011) for recent examples.

Local governments in the United States certainly have experienced an upsurge in female participation in politics. Fig. 1 depicts the increase in female participation in mayoral elections from 1950 to 2005. A negligible number of women participated in local mayoral elections until 1970. Female participation then increased to about one-third of mayoral elections before plateauing around 1995. The same figure shows that the percentage of females who won mayoral elections increased from about 2% in 1970 to more than 15% in recent years. Fig. 2 shows the raw probability of female victory over time, conditional on having a single female candidacy. Female candidates typically had less than a 50% probability of winning from 1965 until mid-1990s. After that, this unconditional probability lines up very closely to 50% line.

Was this dramatic shift in the gender composition of city leaders also followed by changes in local policy? According to the classic work of Downs (1957), the preferences of the politician should not impact policy outcomes. Male and female candidates, for example, would converge their policy platforms to cater to the preferences of the median voter. This view of the political process, however, was challenged by empirical papers that showed divergence in policy along partisan lines (Besley and Case, 2003; Lee et al., 2004). Alesina (1988) and Besley and Coate (1997) developed the citizen–candidate model to account for this divergence. This framework suggests that if candidates or parties care about certain outcomes and they cannot credibly commit to moderate policies, there will be divergence in the policies implemented by elected officials. In this setting, female mayors would implement policies that are more correlated with their preferences for provision of public goods and size of government. And, the available evidence indicates there are meaningful gender differences in preferences for various goods, so the

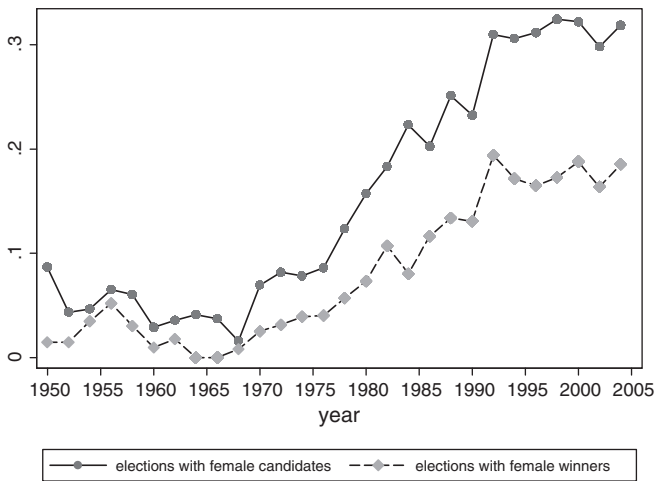


Fig. 1. Proportion of elections with at least one female candidate and proportion of female wins.

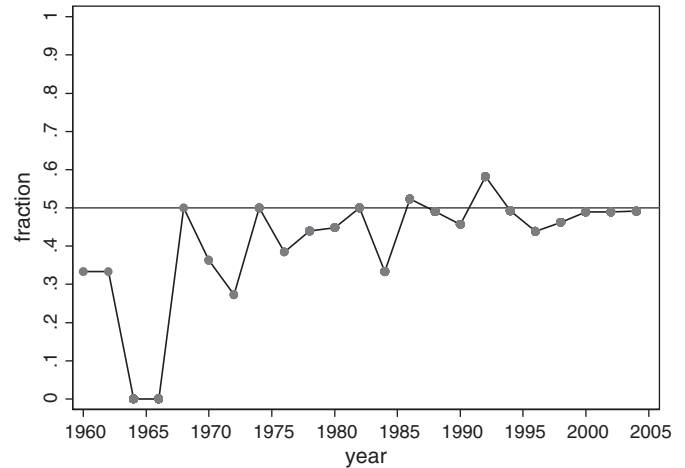


Fig. 2. Fraction of female victories when running against a male, by year.

potential for gender to affect behavior and outcomes exists.³ Moreover, if differences in the relevant preferences are extreme enough, the work by Glaeser et al. (2005) suggests that candidates' platforms might become even more divergent in the pursuit of strategic extremism.

In this paper, we investigate the impact of female participation in the executive branch of U.S. cities. In doing so, our study differs from existing research in several ways. It is the first to focus on women in chief executive positions in the local public sector, not on legislative participation.⁴ Mayors that have executive power could facilitate the reallocation of resources in a city to serve one's political preferences. Legislators, on the other hand, have to negotiate with other representatives (and possibly the executive) to pass legislation, so the impact of an added female legislator may not be as effective, or it may be noticeable only when large participation shocks are observed.

Mayoral elections also provide us with significantly more observations than are available on female executives in the private sector because participation by women in the public sector is much greater.⁵ This setting also allows us to study the impact of female leadership over time, including long run outcomes such as the political success of other women. By studying female political leaders in a more economically developed country such as the United States, we are able to add to a literature that includes important work on the influence of women political leadership in developing countries such as India (Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004; Clots-Figueras, 2012; Beaman et al., 2009). In doing so, we also are able to study the impact of female political leadership in the absence of quotas or reservations. This is useful because the consequences of electing women that did not benefit from dramatic public policy intervention may be different from those who did.

The underlying data source is an updated version of the mayoral election series used in Ferreira and Gyourko's (2009) study of local political partisanship. Information on more than 5500 direct mayoral elections between 1950 and 2005 from cities with populations of at least 25,000 residents as of the year 2000 is used in the empirical analysis. Our data reveals large differences in female participation across the country: women participate and win more often in cities with higher income and higher education levels, and that tend to be located in the

western part of the country. There are no large differences in the average party affiliation of a female candidate though.

The lack of randomized assignment of women to city offices represents an obvious empirical challenge to work on this topic. Differences in policy outcomes may be incorrectly attributed to the mayor's gender to the extent that cities in which women participate in local politics themselves have unique features that are correlated with certain types of policies. While some potential factors such as the fraction of highly educated people can be controlled for, there could be unobserved features of the community that both influence barriers to women's political advancement and are correlated with policy outcomes.

A regression discontinuity (RD) design is employed to mitigate this problem.⁶ More specifically, we compare short and long run outcomes across elections in which a female candidate barely wins against a male candidate to those in which the woman barely loses to a male candidate. In contrast to most results reported in the literature, we find no impact of gender on a variety of local outcomes such as the composition of municipal expenditures and municipal employment, the size of city government as measured by total spending or employment, or local crime rates.

These results suggest that the settings in which women are politically empowered influence the relevance of gender to policy and political outcomes. For example, it may be harder to change policy when individual women slowly take leadership positions, without the benefit of political quotas or reservations. Also, the nature of the political and economic environment in which cities compete in the United States does not provide much scope for redistributive policies, and local politicians may be more responsive to the preferences of the median voter (Ferreira and Gyourko (2009)).

Electing female leaders still could be generating important political spillovers even in the absence of an impact on policy outcomes. For example, it could increase the odds of success of other women in the future. However, our analysis concludes that randomly electing a woman as mayor does not produce higher success rates for other women in the near or long-term. In the immediate future, the high re-election rates of incumbent females (see just below for more on this) naturally crowd out the participation of other women candidates. No additional effects are evident one or two decades following the initial election. We also test whether a female mayor affects female success rates in other elections, such as in local congressional districts, but find no evidence of such spillovers.

³ See review of data evidence and related literature in Section 3.2.
⁴ Rehavi (2007) examines the impact of female state legislators in the U.S., and reports that increases in women legislators are associated with increases in health-related spending and decreases in corrections expenditures.
⁵ Research on the impact of women CEOs in the private sector generally does not find significant effects on stock prices or other measures of productivity, but very small sample sizes make those results hard to interpret, given the lack of statistical power. See Wolfers (2006) for more on that literature.

⁶ For recent overviews of RD, see Imbens and Lemieux (2008), and Lee and Lemieux (2010).

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