Gendered qualifications: how gender equal election results hide gender bias

[Review of: N.M. Bauer (2020) The qualifications gap: why women must be better than men to win political office]

van der Pas, D.J.

Citation for published version (APA):

van der Pas, D. J. (2022). Gendered qualifications: how gender equal election results hide gender bias: [Review of: N.M. Bauer (2020) The qualifications gap: why women must be better than men to win political office]. *European Political Science*, *21*(4), 666-668. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41304-022-00372-y

BOOK REVIEW

Gendered qualifications: how gender equal election results hide gender bias

Daphne J. van der Pas[1]

Book reviewed:

The qualifications gap: why women must be more qualified than men to win political office

Nichole M. Bauer (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020), 221 pp. ISBN: 978-1108818896

Do female candidates have to be better than male candidates to win elections? For decades now, we have known that "when women run, women win" at least as often as men do. Yet, this apparently gender-neutral observation may hide significant and pernicious gender biases. Female candidates tend to have more political experience when they run, and as lawmakers they tend to be more productive. Bauer asks in *The Qualification Gap* whether the media's and voters' gender biased views of political qualifications can explain why female candidates need to be better than male candidates to arrive at the same electoral result.

Bauer is not the first to point out the paradox between equal electoral returns and higher female candidate and legislator quality, but the book's contribution is in its comprehension and unique focus on candidate qualifications. Bauer combines novel theorisation based on insights from social psychology with an impressive amount of empirical material. To the familiar theoretical toolkit of social role theory, role congruity theory and stereotyping, she adds the theory of shifting standards. She brings an enormously diverse and large amount of data to bear on these theories: a content analyses of 61 Senate campaign websites, a content analysis of about 3500 newspaper articles, systematic analyses of US Senate candidate biographical data, analyses of observational data from the 2016 American National Election Study (ANES) election survey, and no less than eight separate experiments with, in total, over two thousand respondents.

✉ Daphne J. van der Pas
d.j.vanderpas@uva.nl

[1] University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands

The empirical work starts out by confirming the masculine association of political leadership. This is an often-established finding, but Bauer does so in an original and innovative twist on a leadership visualisation task. This yields pictures of leaders that are in a staggering 90 percent of the cases, men. In another experiment, contrary to expectations, respondents actually prefer the candidate with feminine qualifications over the one with masculine qualifications, but this is likely because the feminine CV contains more political experience and is not perceived as feminine by the respondents.

Next, the book turns to the gendered information gap, looking at both how candidates present themselves in campaigns, and how the media report on them. This combination is crucial, as it helps us understand whether any systematic differences originate from journalists or the candidates themselves. The results are clear: female candidates do *not* undersell their qualifications, yet the media mention the political experience of male candidates substantively and significantly more. This holds true even when men and women have about the same amount of political office experience, although, male Senate candidates do tend to have more prior experience in the US House. Along the way, Bauer also reaffirms the results from other studies of gender and media coverage, that female candidates receive more family and gender references in newspapers.

Chapter five asks the key question: do voters hold female candidates to a higher qualification standard than men? Bauer argues that when asked whether a female candidate is qualified, voters use a lower "for a girl" (p.97) standard, which leads to relatively positive qualification evaluations compared to men. These do not translate in support, however, because this lenient standard is dropped when voters decide who is the best political leader. This is an important theoretical contribution to the field, that should inspire much further work and further empirical exploration. The analyses in the chapter offer a good first step, showing that female candidates score higher on qualifications questions but not on support. Future work can strengthen the evidence by using parallel objective and subjective measures (that the theory predicts give different results), and by excluding alternative explanations, like strategic discrimination (Bateson 2020).

Chapter six incorporates party stereotypes in the shifting standards theory, with the Democratic party being linked to femininity and the Republican party to masculinity. Indeed, the results show that Republican voters estimate female candidates' qualifications lower than comparable men and are less likely to support a female candidate. Democratic voters do not favour female candidates, despite the feminine party stereotype, but merely support men and women equally. This study is again a valuable contribution, that also provides a starting point for further exploration: why, for instance, do voters *assimilate* candidates to the stereotype when answering the qualification question (in chapter six), while they *contrasted* candidates to the stereotype (in chapter five)?

Importantly, the book ends by examining how we can disrupt the use of stereotypes, i.e., how can female candidates overcome the gendered qualification gap? In two experiments, Bauer shows that neither providing productivity information about candidates, nor self-promotion, can close the gap. However, a third experiment shows that providing a comparative anchor *does* help. Thus, merely saying

how many bills a legislator passed has little effect but telling voters how a legislator performs relative to peers, is an effective strategy.

In short, with this wealth of new theory and empirics, Bauer significantly adds to our understanding of the gendered qualification gap and, as such, should give inspiration and impetus to many further studies.

Reference

Bateson, R. 2020. Strategic discrimination. *Perspectives on Politics* 18 (4): 1068–1087.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Daphne J. van der Pas is Assistant Professor at the Political Science Department, University of Amsterdam. Her research focusses on democratic underrepresentation, gender, political media coverage and leadership and has appeared in the British Journal of Political Science, the European Journal of Political Research and the Journal of Communication, among others.