

Presidents' Sex and Popularity: Baselines, Dynamics, and Policy Performance

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Abstract

Public approval is a crucial source of executive power in presidential systems. Does the public support female and male presidents similarly? Combining insights from gender and politics research with psychological evidence, this study theorizes sex-based differentials in popularity based on more general expectations linking gender stereotypes to diverging performance evaluations. Using quarterly analyses of 18 Latin American democracies, South Korea, and the Philippines, the analyses compare the levels, dynamics, and policy performance of macro-approval for male and female presidents. As expected, female presidents are less popular, experience exaggerated approval dynamics, and their approval is more responsive to security and corruption (though not economic) outcomes. These findings have clear implications for our understandings of mass politics, political accountability, and presidentialism.

Keywords:

Executive approval, presidents' sex, gender stereotypes, policy performance, corruption, public security

Presidents' ability to govern depends on their public standing. Seminal work on the United States is unequivocal on this point and identifies a consistent cycle of honeymoon, decay, and rebound punctuated by elections (Neustadt 1960; Stimson 1976; Mueller 1970; 1973). Comparative research corroborates both conclusions. In Latin America, for example, popularity exhibits similar dynamics (Carlin et al. forthcoming), helps presidents finish their terms (Pérez-Liñán 2007), enact their agendas (Calvo 2007), prevail in inter-branch bargaining (Martínez-Gallardo 2012), govern by decree (Shair-Rosenfield, Stoyan, and Sagarzazu n.d.), and change re-election rules (Corrales 2016). Popularity, in short, is power.

Mounting research, however, suggests female presidents wield that power differently than their male counterparts. Not only are they more likely to mobilize their core constituents on the basis of gender identity and network with elite feminists (Reyes-Housholder, forthcoming), to advance pro-women policies and gender equality (Waylen 2016), and to nominate more women to cabinet posts (Reyes-Housholder 2016), they are also less likely to govern by executive decree – especially when they are highly popular (Shair-Rosenfield and Stoyan forthcoming). The centrality of public approval to presidential politics, coupled with distinct governing styles of male and female presidents, make the following question a research imperative: does the sex of the president influence public evaluations of him or her?

This study addresses this question first by analyzing whether female and male presidents are, on average, equally popular and whether their popularity follows similar dynamics. If not, it could suggest they face distinct opportunities to shape

political outcomes. Secondly, this study tests whether the public punishes female and male presidents differently for policy failures across the domains of security, corruption, and the economy. If so, the executive's sex would become crucial to theories of mass politics, political accountability, and presidentialism—a discussion to which we later return. In short, answering these questions can identify potential power discrepancies between male and female presidents and assess whether executive sex hinders the attribution of responsibility mechanisms that undergird policy accountability.

To guide our analysis, we develop a theoretical framework built on insights about gender stereotypes from the literatures on gender and politics and social, organizational, and political psychology. Traditionally the executive is considered the most masculine branch of government (Duerst-Lahti 1997). Gender and politics research underscores how gender stereotypes fuel the perception that female political leaders lack the stereotypical masculine attributes (e.g. toughness, decisiveness) associated with leadership (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; Alexander and Andersen 1993; Leeper 1991; Schneider and Bos 2014; Lawless 2004). Despite an explosion of research on female presidents (Martin and Borrelli 2016; Murray 2010; Reyes-Housholder 2016; forthcoming; Schwindt-Bayer and Reyes-Housholder 2017; Schwindt-Bayer 2018; Shair-Rosenfield and Stoyan forthcoming), how gender stereotypes influence their public standing remains unclear. Hence our study makes important theoretical and empirical contributions.

Compared to their male counterparts, we expect gender stereotypes to dilute female presidents' honeymoon support levels, make them less popular on average, and raise the price they pay for policy failures. We test these expectations using quarterly measures of public approval of presidents in 20 democracies in Latin America and East Asia over the past 35 years from the Executive Approval Project (Carlin, Hartlyn, Hellwig, Love, Martínez-Gallardo and Singer 2016), economic indicators from World Bank, corruption perceptions from Varieties of Democracy (Coppedge et al. 2016), and security data from United Nations and the Global Terrorism Database (2017). Corroborating expectations, results suggest female presidents enjoy less initial approval, experience exaggerated approval dynamics, and their approval is more responsive to security and corruption (though not economic) outcomes. Hence mass publics endow female presidents with less power to shape policy throughout their administrations and hold them to higher standards in key policy areas than male presidents.

The rest of this study proceeds as follows. First, we theorize how gender stereotypes influence public evaluations of the president and identify some observable expectations. Next we describe the data and methods used to test our expectations. After reporting and discussing our results, our conclusion explores their broader implications.

Gender Stereotypes and Presidential Approval

Our theory assumes gender stereotypes lead the public to apply stricter, and even double, standards to female presidents. As a result, they should tend to begin their terms with lower levels of approval than men, govern with less approval than men, and sink to lower levels over the course of their terms than men. Additionally, poor performance on valence issues should, on average, be more damaging to female presidents than male presidents. Let us consider each of these propositions in turn.

Psychic Handicaps: Exceptions, Tokens, Double Standards & Double Binds

The notion that female presidents are less popular than male presidents might seem counter-intuitive. If one typically breaks the ‘highest glass ceiling’ by besting at least one male candidate, then the negative gender stereotypes that might otherwise undermine a woman’s successful bid for the presidency are unlikely dominant in society. By this logic, women might be expected to enjoy *higher* levels of presidential approval than men. But female presidents’ pathways to power and the contexts surrounding their elections often augur against it, spurring powerful counter-narratives that sap their public legitimacy.

Critics can, for example, overshadow the significance and novelty of electing a country’s first woman president by crediting her triumph to exceptional circumstances that create space for outsiders (Jalalzai 2013; 2016; Skard 2015; Schwindt-Bayer 2010) – such as a democratic transition, a post-conflict situation, severe political mistrust. Other counter-narratives link women’s rise to power to

privileged connections with a male political leader, i.e. wives/widows, daughters, and protégées (see Hinojosa 2012, chapter 7). Although many male presidents have benefitted from similar circumstances (Carreras 2012) and connections (Reyes-Housholder and Thomas 2018), these counter-narratives can nevertheless undercut public support for female executives, as we explain below.

What sustains such counter-narratives has well-known psychological foundations. Our workhorse is the Lack of Fit Model, which presupposes that expectations about a person's success at a particular task affect evaluation processes (Heilman 2001, 660; see also Heilman 1995). Through this lens, gender stereotypes ought to influence presidential approval because effective political leadership requires actors to display *agentive* traits – such as aggressiveness, ambition, forcefulness, self-sufficiency, self-confidence – generally associated with men (Eagly 1987; Bakan 1966; Alexander and Andersen 1993; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993). However, most people associate women with the opposite¹ – *communal* traits – such as affection, compassion, kindness, helpfulness, and gentleness. These widespread (cf. Hartmann 2006; Williams and Best 1990) and remarkably durable (Deaux and Kite 1993, 114) gender stereotypes create *incongruity* between the essential qualities of leadership and expectations for female leaders (Eagly and Karau 2002; Fulton 2014). In turn, this 'lack of fit' leads the public to evaluate female presidents more harshly than male presidents.

Additionally, gender stereotypes feed skepticism towards female executives. Scholars cite a double standard whereby women political executives are subjected to

¹ For a more nuanced perspective, see Schneider and Bos (2014).

closer scrutiny and stricter demands than their male colleagues (Skard 2015, 78). This argument parallels organizational psychology research highlighting a double standard in evaluations of the job performance of female and male leaders or managers (Berger et al. 1986). Experimental research consistently shows that when female and male subjects achieve equal levels of performance, women are held to stricter competence standards (Foschi 1996; 2000; Heilman 2001). In other words, female leaders must *outperform* men to be considered equally competent. After interviewing fifteen women presidents and prime ministers from around the world, Liswood (1995, 68) reaches the same conclusion: “on no question posed to women at the top was there more uniformity than on this one: Are women leaders scrutinized differently than male leaders? From all quarters came a resounding Yes.” Female executives felt they had to work harder than men because the public, the press, and other politicians doubted their capacities.

What fosters this double standard? The main mechanism at work is asymmetric performance attribution. Women’s success in managerial roles is more often attributed to luck or effort than to ability. Yet their failures tend to be ascribed to *lack* of ability. For men, the logic is reversed. When men succeed, it is attributed to their ability, but when they fail it is chalked up to bad luck or lack of effort (Swim and Sanna 1996; Deaux and Emswiller 1974; Nieva and Gutek 1980).

Hypothetically, female political leaders could dodge such bias by adopting a posture that clearly contradicts these stereotypes, i.e. acting tough and leading assertively. Practically, this is futile for two main reasons. First, sociologists find that

in male-dominated arenas, such as politics, women are usually seen as “tokens” of their groups (Kanter 1977). Sapiro (1981, 711) notes that even when they do not claim to represent women, “female candidates and officeholders are forced into a ‘woman’s role,’ or at least they are forced to be defined as ‘woman’ candidates or politicians rather than simply as candidates or politicians.” Gender stereotypes are also hard to shake because they are not only descriptive but *prescriptive* (Burgess and Borgida 1999). Prescriptive norms require women leaders to be nurturing and to seek compromises, not assertive or aggressive. Since behaving ‘*agentically*’ violates these prescriptive norms for women (Heilman 2001; Rudman and Glick 2001), this strategy could backfire, fueling public disapproval of female presidents. Indeed female executives are often derided as authoritarian or too aggressive.² Traits considered normal or fitting in a male president are disparaged in female presidents, thus depressing their public standing (Goodyear-Grant 2013). Female presidents thus face a femininity/competence “double bind” (Jamieson 1995): if they are caring and kind, their political ability is questioned, but if they display assertiveness and competitiveness, they are criticized for lacking femininity (Carroll 2009). Therefore, we expect gender stereotypes to condition public evaluations of female presidents.

² For instance, Brazilian media derided Dilma Rousseff for her “masculine” traits in the run-up to the 2010 presidential elections (Dos Santos and Jalalzai 2014). In the 2008 Democratic primaries in the United States, North Carolina Governor Mike Easley described Hillary Clinton as someone “who makes Rocky Balboa look like a pansy” (cited in Carroll 2009, 8).

The Gendered Toll of Policy Failures on Presidential Approval

Building on this theoretical scaffolding, we expect gender stereotypes to translate into gendered differentials in punishment for policy failures in a range of domains. While presidents can, generally, expect rising corruption, economic downturns, and escalating insecurity to damage their public standing, we expect the damage will be worse for female presidents than for their male counterparts. We see these claims as a series of auxiliary hypotheses to our original expectation that gender stereotypes undermine the popularity of female presidents. As such, to the extent these expectations are consistent with empirical reality, they should bolster our stereotyped-based theoretical framework.

How gender stereotypes lead to differential public scorn for men and women leaders is, perhaps, clearest in the case of corruption. Women are generally believed to be morally superior to men and, hence, less politically corruptible (Goetz 2007; Barnes and Beaulieu 2014, n.d.). Traits such as “honesty”, “trustworthiness”, and “integrity” are more consistently associated with female politicians (Alexander and Andersen 1993; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; Kahn 1996; Huddy and Capelos 2002). These stereotypical traits of female politicians are particularly salient in the electoral arena. While corrupt bureaucratic institutions tend to constrain the behavior of women, female executive candidates have more leeway to develop their own agenda and embrace an anti-corruption message consonant with their value preferences. Women tend to emphasize their integrity for strategic reasons also, i.e. to stand out and attract votes (Stensöta and Wängnerud 2018; Stensöta, Wängnerud, and

Svensson 2015). While women's perceived edge over men on these traits is an asset for female presidential candidates during campaigns, especially where corruption is rife, once in office these traits exaggerate expectations of probity for women. Since corrupt behavior is profoundly counter-stereotypical and violates prescriptive gender norms of purity, honesty, and morality, a female president implicated in corruption could lead to exaggerated punishment in the court of public opinion (Eggers, Vivyan, and Wagner forthcoming).

Work on scandals demonstrates how severely the public castigates women politicians for transgressing these stereotypical norms (Barnes, Beaulieu, and Saxton forthcoming; 2018). More generally, Skard (2015, 192) notes "corrupt practices continued [under female presidents in the Philippines and Indonesia], and the women presidents were hit all the hardest by allegations of corruption and nepotism because they had promised principled governance." Dramatic events elsewhere echo this point. Revelations of massive corruption schemes begun under their male predecessors led to the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff and calls for Michelle Bachelet to step down in Brazil and Chile, respectively. Argentina's former president, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, has been indicted on multiple fraud and corruption charges and public opinion is overwhelmingly against her. But when the Panama Papers linked incumbent, Mauricio Macri, to illegal offshore tax havens, his approval ratings did not sustain any lasting damage. While male South Korean presidents have been not immune to accusations of corruption and cronyism, evidence implicating female president, Park Geun-hye, in abuses of power led to the country's

first impeachment in 2017. In a similar vein, Joyce Banda (first female president of Malawi) received a higher electoral sanction for her implication in a corruption scandal (Cashgate) than male incumbents facing similar corruption allegations in previous elections. While corrupt male incumbents tend to easily win reelection in Malawi, Banda was defeated and only received 20% of the votes in the 2014 presidential elections (Dulani et al. forthcoming; Lora-Kayambazinthu and Kalilombe Shame 2016). In short, since corruption runs counter to women's perceived rectitude, we expect women presidents to pay more dearly for it.

Beyond corruption, crisis contexts can activate stereotypes and increase their influence on mass opinion in other policy domains. The psychological processes whereby citizens tend to attribute stereotypical leadership qualities to politicians based on their sex results in the stereotypical attribution of issue skills. Hence men are perceived to perform better on "masculine" issues (e.g. defense, security, foreign affairs), which require tough, rational, emotionally stable, and decisive leaders; i.e. the stereotypical characteristics of male political leaders (O'Brien and Barnes forthcoming). Indeed, Tickner's seminal work argues that gender-based leadership stereotypes "reinforce the belief, widely held (...) by both men and women, that military and foreign policy-making are arenas of policy-making least appropriate for women" (1992, 3). On the contrary, women are perceived as more qualified to deal with "feminine" issues (e.g. health care, education, and the environment), policy domains more closely associated with stereotypical female characteristics (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; Alexander and Andersen 1993; Sjoberg 2014). We argue that

the policy failures of female presidents in “masculine” policy areas activate gender stereotypes, and result in steeper declines in public approval.

In particular, publics often hold negative stereotypes regarding women’s ability to deal with issues of physical security, including foreign and domestic terrorism (Holman, Merolla, and Zechmeister 2011; 2016), defense (O’Brien and Barnes forthcoming), and crime (Sanbonmatsu and Dolan 2009; Dolan and Lynch 2016). Political opponents and the media may implicitly reinforce these stereotypes by questioning female presidents’ competence on security. Therefore, when faced with significant security challenges (i.e. crime, terrorism) female leaders should enjoy limited, if any, rally-‘round-the-flag effects. And since, as mentioned above, women’s failure in ‘masculine’ tasks tends to be attributed to intrinsic inability, whereas men’s failure in those same tasks tends to be attributed to external factors (e.g., bad luck) (Swim and Sanna 1996), the president’s sex could be expected to affect how the public attributes responsibility for security crises. Female presidents might be perceived as directly responsible because stereotypes suggest they are incompetent in this area, whereas male presidents’ failures may be deflected from incompetence onto external factors. By this rationale, female presidents should be expected to suffer greater declines in approval than male leaders when foreign or domestic terrorist attacks occur or crime spikes.

Finally, policy failure in the economic realm could lead to divergence in public approval for female and male presidents. Though the gender and politics literature often considers economics and finance as male domains, the empirical record, and

thus our expectations, are decidedly mixed. Research on women's political representation in Latin America demonstrates that women are less likely to be appointed to economic committees in the legislature (Schwindt-Bayer 2010) and economic portfolios in the cabinet (Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson 2016). The implication is that women are discriminated against and not considered good economic managers. This may well be the case for Latin American party leaders, but it is not necessarily indicative of gender stereotypes in the economic domain among the public at large. Indeed, Funk et al. (2017) find that while the public's economic perceptions are positively related to the likelihood of women being nominated as legislative candidates in Latin America, they do not systematically influence women's electoral success in the region. Hence the clear bias against female politicians in the economic domain among party gatekeepers is inconsistent with evidence of such bias in the electorate. In other words, the elite-level dynamics that lead to the underrepresentation of women in top economic posts cannot clearly be attributed to widespread gender stereotypes in the economic domain.

Similarly, political psychologists find no systematic link between stereotypical traits attributed to female and male politicians and perceptions of economic expertise and effective economic management. According to Huddy and Terkildsen (1993, 122), "personality traits that might improve a candidate's standing on economic matters are simply not thought of as exclusively male or female characteristics (...). On the basis of trait stereotypes, we would not necessarily expect voters to rate male or female politicians as better able to handle economic issues." Several studies

corroborate this conclusion (Leeper 1991; Alexander and Andersen 1993; Williams and Best 1990; Sapiro 1983).

Clearly, the literature contains competing arguments that augur against a simple theoretical expectation. If the scholarly ambiguity is replicated among the public, then female presidents may not be more harshly punished than their male counterparts for economic downturns. Such a null finding in this domain could be interpreted as evidence of the power of gender stereotypes in the domains of corruption and security and their relative weakness in the economic domain. Evidence consistent with gender bias among the public in the economic domain, however, could allow our results to weigh in on this unresolved matter. We present two-tailed hypothesis tests to address both possibilities.

Data and Methods

To test our expectations we employ data from third-wave democracies with presidential systems, i.e. with (a) a single popularly elected head of state and government, not accountable to the legislature or (b) a popularly elected head of state and a separate head of government, with the latter not accountable to the legislature (Siaroff 2003). Beyond this institutional commonality, cases in our sample share liberalizing development arcs and democratization processes marked by relatively high degrees of Western linkage and leverage (Levitsky and Way 2005) – characteristics not shared by established Western presidential democracies, i.e. the

United States – which could affect presidential approval dynamics and accountability.

Sample

Our sample is comprised of the most recent post-transitional periods in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, the Philippines, South Korea, Uruguay, and Venezuela. These 20 cases account for 2/3 of the universe of presidential systems per Siaroff (2003); data limitations preclude the other 10.³ Our sample also includes 10 female presidents or 2/3 of the universe (see Table 2).⁴ Given the relatively few cases of female presidents to date, we opted for including in our sample all female presidents for which we have data (six from Latin America and three from East Asia); but since gender stereotypes are prevalent cross-nationally in different cultural contexts (Williams and Best 1990; Hartmann 2006; Fiske 2017) we fully expect our results would hold if data were available for other cases in Asia and Africa.

Restricting our sample to either Latin America or East Asia would reduce not only external validity, but statistical power and our estimates' reliability as well. Indeed,

³ Benin, Ghana, Guyana, Indonesia, Liberia, Malawi, Namibia, Palau, Seychelles, and Sri Lanka.

⁴ Janet Jagan (Guyana), Megawati Sukarnoputri (Indonesia), Joyce Banda (Malawi), Chandrika Kumaratunga (Sri Lanka), and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (Liberia) are not included in our sample due to lack of presidential approval data.

the Philippines and South Korea make up 33.33% of the female presidents in our sample.⁵ Moreover, variation on our key explanatory variables is more pronounced within these regions than across them. For example, South Korea rates between Costa Rica and Argentina on V-Dem’s corruption scale; the Philippines is on par with Mexico. With regards to security, the Philippines’ homicide rate is nearly identical to Peru’s with South Korea and Chile having similarly low levels of crime and political violence. As for economic growth, the Philippines is no outlier, with similar rates of growth (and contraction) as many Latin American cases. South Korea’s economy has generally fared better than the Latin American cases, but like many of them, such as Argentina and Chile, it too has seen periods of significant contractions along with periods of booming growth.

Table 2: Observations of Female Leaders in Our Sample

Country	President	Quarter In	Quarter Out	# Quarters in Sample
Argentina	Cristina Kirchner	Q4 2007	Q3 2015	32
Brazil	Dilma Rousseff	Q1 2011	Q2 2016	22
Chile	Michelle Bachelet (1st term)	Q1 2006	Q4 2009	16
	Michelle Bachelet (2nd term)	Q1 2014	Q2 2016	11
Costa Rica	Laura Chinchilla	Q2 2010	Q1 2014	16
Nicaragua	Violeta Chamorro	Q2 1990	Q4 1996	27
Panama	Mireya Moscoso	Q2 1999	Q2 2004	21
Philippines	Corazon Aquino	Q2 1986	Q2 1992	25
	Gloria Macapagal Arroyo	Q1 2001	Q2 2010	38
South Korea	Park Geun-hye	Q1 2013	Q4 2016	17

⁵ The baseline model results illustrated in Figures 1 and 2 are unchanged by the exclusion of the East Asian cases from the sample (see Figure A1 and A2 and Table A4 in the online appendix).

The extensive overall variation Latin America boasts on these dimensions is, nevertheless, attenuated under female presidents. For example, according to Transparency International, corruption tends to be lower in Latin American countries with female leaders than in the Philippines (only Nicaragua rates worse) but higher than in South Korea (only Chile and Costa Rica rate better). And although some Latin American female leaders have presided over discrete incidents of terrorism, the regional hotbeds (Colombia, Peru, El Salvador) lack female presidents. Conversely, in the Philippines terrorist attacks have been relatively high under both male and female presidents (see Figure 4 below).

One potential drawback of our broad sample is that cultural norms and the nature of gender stereotypes may exhibit national and regional idiosyncrasies (e.g. Murray 2010). To the extent that this is true, finding support for our hypotheses should be harder. In all, sampling across regions helps maximize variation on our main explanatory variables—president sex conditioning honeymoons and performance in the economic, corruption, and security domains—which facilitates our hypothesis test and bolsters generalizability.

Measuring Presidential Approval

The Executive Approval Project (Carlin et al. 2016) collects multiple aggregate survey data series from public and private polling firms for each country in our sample. In their natural forms, these data series present two key challenges for creating comparable and reliable time-serial measures of presidential approval. First, question wordings and response options differ from firm to firm and even from survey

to survey within the same firm. Second, the periodicity at which firms run surveys can vary from weekly to biennially. Looking across countries, rarely are the same questions polled regularly in more than a handful of countries. Not surprisingly, much of the previous work on comparative executive approval is limited to data sources from single firms that have maintained the same question wording and sample structure over a number of years (Campello and Zucco Jr. 2016; Cuzán and Bundrick 1997; Johnson and Schwindt-Bayer 2009; Pérez-Liñán 2007; Fernández-Vázquez 2007).

To overcome these challenges we turn to an approach first developed for analyzing presidential popularity and macro public opinion in the United States. Stimson's (1991) dyads-ratio algorithm combines all available approval series from multiple polling firms into country-specific measurement models to generate quarterly time series of presidential approval that are valid and comparable across presidents, countries, and time. More technically, Stimson's approach converts each individual time series of presidential approval in a given country into temporal dyadic ratios. Using forwards and backwards recursion, the algorithm computes communalities between the various data sources and time points. From these communalities the algorithm creates a time-continuous measure of approval. Thus, this recursive algorithm allows for numerous disparate public opinion sources to be reliably and consistently combined into a single unidimensional series capturing the public's view of the executive (see Stimson forthcoming for a detailed explanation). Through it, we

have generated quarterly measures of *presidential approval*⁶ for over 150 presidential administrations from 18 Latin American countries, South Korea, and the Philippines from the 1970s to 2017. This is our dependent variable.

A key proposition of this paper is that female presidents are, on average, less popular than male presidents. While this hypothesis can and will be tested with a dummy variable indicating the sex of the president, the dynamics of presidential approval offer additional points of comparison. Specifically, do female and male presidents have similar honeymoons, decays in support, and end-of-term campaign effects? Our analysis does not force honeymoons to be of a specific duration based on previous work. Rather, we derive it empirically using a set of dummies indicating quarters elapsed since the election and another set for the two quarters remaining until the next presidential election.

Explanatory Variables

Beyond how approval differs across the sex of presidents, we are also interested in how the public views female and male presidents when faced with differing governance challenges. As outlined above, we analyze gender differentials in

⁶ Items refer to “approval,” “favorability,” and ratings of the president’s “management,” “job,” “performance,” and “image.” We exclude questions related to vote intentions, trust or confidence, and grading systems (e.g. 1 – 7, 1 – 10). If the response choice is dichotomous, we employ the marginal of the positive response. If it is trichotomous with a “regular” or neutral middle category, we only analyze the “positive” marginals. For 4-part response choices, we sum all positive responses; if there are 5 responses, again we sum only positive response marginals and exclude “regular” or neutral categories.

aggregate approval across three issue areas: corruption, security, and macro-economy.

We gauge corruption with the index of political *corruption* that Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) calculates from country expert surveys of corruption perceptions in various aspects of the government (executive, legislature, judiciary, and public sector) (Coppedge et al. 2016). While V-Dem includes a specific measure for executive corruption, often presidents (including women) are judged not only on their perceived ability to control corruption in the presidential palace but across the public sector as well (Pérez-Liñán 2007; Reyes-Housholder 2018). We also select the V-Dem scale over other public corruption measures for a key reason: it has greater temporal coverage than any other measure for our sample. However, our results are unchanged if we substitute Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index for the V-Dem measure (see Table A5 in the online appendix).

Physical security is operationalized with two indicators. The first is crime. Measuring crime rates is complicated within countries and becomes dramatically more so across countries. Underreporting by ineffective police can make a country seem safer than it is. Scholars commonly overcome this challenge by focusing on a particularly serious crime that is least likely to go unreported—homicide. In many Latin American countries and in the Philippines violent crime has remained a salient

public issue for decades⁷. Since 2004, Latin Americans surveyed in the AmericasBarometer consistently rank crime (along with the economy) among the top two most important problems (1 in 3 respondents say it is the most important issue). We approximate crime with United Nations' annual *homicide* rate data. Since they are not reported annually for every country we fill in missing years using linear interpolation. Our second indicator is terrorism. Here we use the number of *terrorist attacks* per quarter from the Global Terrorism Dataset (2017). Because we have no a priori expectation regarding domestic versus internationally derived terrorist attacks on presidential approval, and completely international attacks are rare in our sample, we include all attacks recorded in the GTD. However, if we exclude those with an international component (ideological, logistical, etc.) the results are unchanged.⁸

For the economy, we use the World Bank's World Development Indicators data to measure GDP per capita growth (*growth*) and natural log of *inflation*. Since these variables are measured on a monthly basis for most of the period covered, they are aggregated into quarterly averages for our analyses. All other contextual variables are measured annually. To match them to our quarterly approval series, we follow

⁷ South Korea is somewhat of an outlier with regards to physical security and economic development, although not dramatically different from Chile or Uruguay. Models excluding South Korea are substantively identical to those reported below.

⁸ See Table A7 in the online appendix.

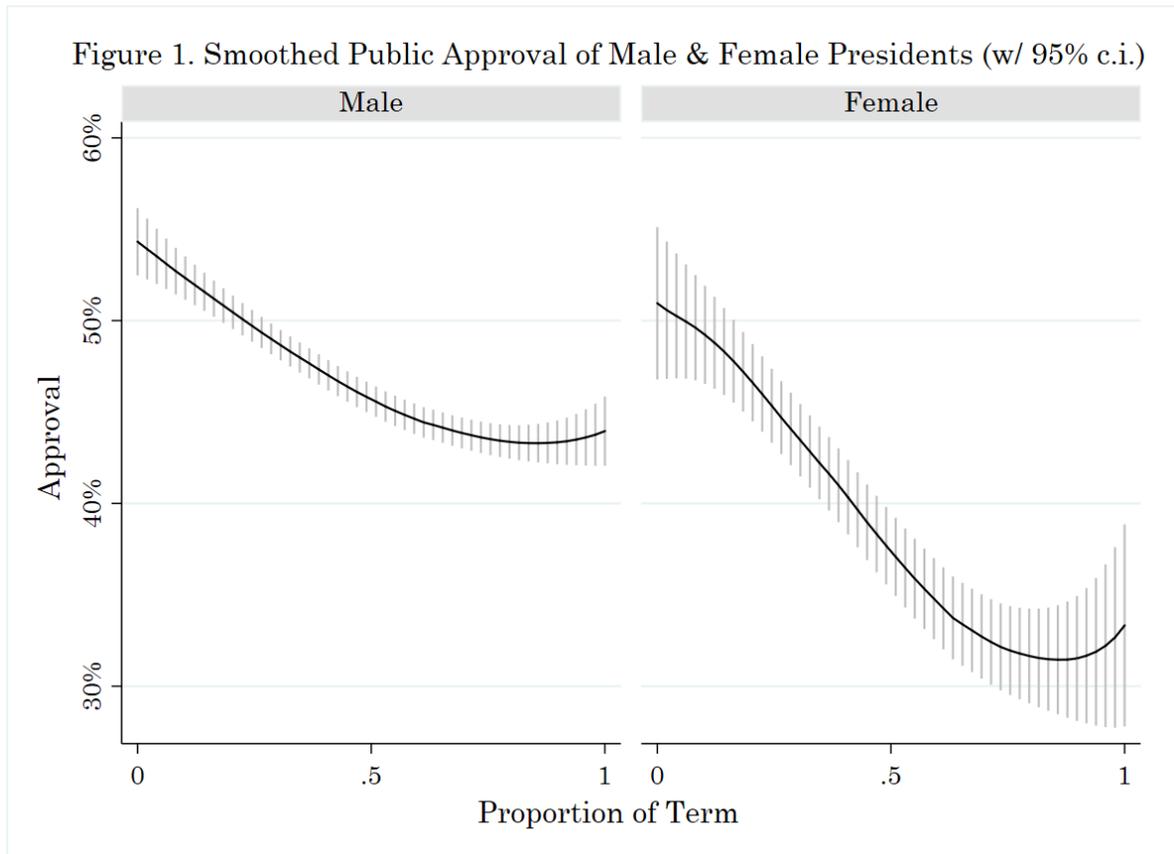
Carlin, Love, and Martinez-Gallardo (2015a; b) and linearly convert these annual data series into quarterly data series.⁹

Our empirical tests of the relationship between sex and presidential approval employ both semi-parametric and parametric approaches. First, we use smoothed kernel-weighted local-regression to see if female and male presidents have, on average, different patterns of popularity. While this approach gives us a flexible and general view of gender differences in presidential approval it cannot tell us whether the public responds differently to adversity regarding corruption, security, and the economy depending on the sex of the president.¹⁰ To test these arguments we turn to a parametric approach—panel regression with panel-specific AR(1) corrections (for serial correlation) and country fixed-effects (for panel heteroskedasticity). The inclusion of a regional control variable for the East Asian cases is consistently insignificant (see Table A8 in the appendix). Lags of independent variables are included where model fit indicates their appropriateness. The results reported are

⁹ The quarterly measures are moving averages from one annual observation to the next. Descriptive statistics for the variables are in the online appendix (Table A1). The table shows quarters with female leadership are 10% of the sample, not a common occurrence but regular enough for systematic analysis. Results using only those countries that have elected female leaders are substantively identical to those reported in below (see Appendix Table A6).

¹⁰ All results presented below are identical to those which include a measure of leader ideology. Because our sample is cross-regional the only comparable ideological measure is the Database of Political Institutions executive party ideology measure. See Appendix Table A2.

generated from an OLS model but are identical to those produced from a panel GLS model. Below we include additional details on modeling choices.



Results

Starting with the semi-parametric approach, Figure 1 graphs presidential approval (y -axis) over the proportion of the term (x -axis) for male (left panel) and female presidents (right panel). It shows how strikingly different the overall patterns of approval are depending on the sex of the president. Male presidents, on average, enter office with higher approval levels than female leaders; they also enjoy longer honeymoons. Female presidents tend to begin their terms 5.75 percentage points lower than men according to a t -test ($p = .03$) based on the first tenth of their tenure. Additionally, they suffer steeper declines over the course of their terms and reach a

significantly lower floor than male presidents (30.5% vs. 43.9%, $p = 0.000$). Overall, the results displayed in Figure 1 strongly support our theoretical expectation that female presidents are, generally, viewed with a more critical eye than male leaders and their popular support suffers in turn. Though female presidents appear to have a more pronounced end-of-term campaign bump, neither this bump nor the observed bump for male presidents – let alone the difference between them – is significant.

While the semi-parametric approach has the distinct advantage of allowing the data to speak more independently from modeling decisions it also is somewhat limited in its ability to provide direct tests of how and when the public evaluates female presidents differently than male presidents. Thus, Table 1 displays the results from time-series cross-sectional models. Model I is the baseline test of whether or not, on average, the public rates female leaders less favorably than male leaders, controlling for economic conditions and honeymoon effects (the election lags and leads). The results replicate those of the semi-parametric model in Figure 1: female presidents, on average, are significantly less popular than male presidents. Specifically, they are 15% less popular (i.e., roughly 7.2 percentage points).

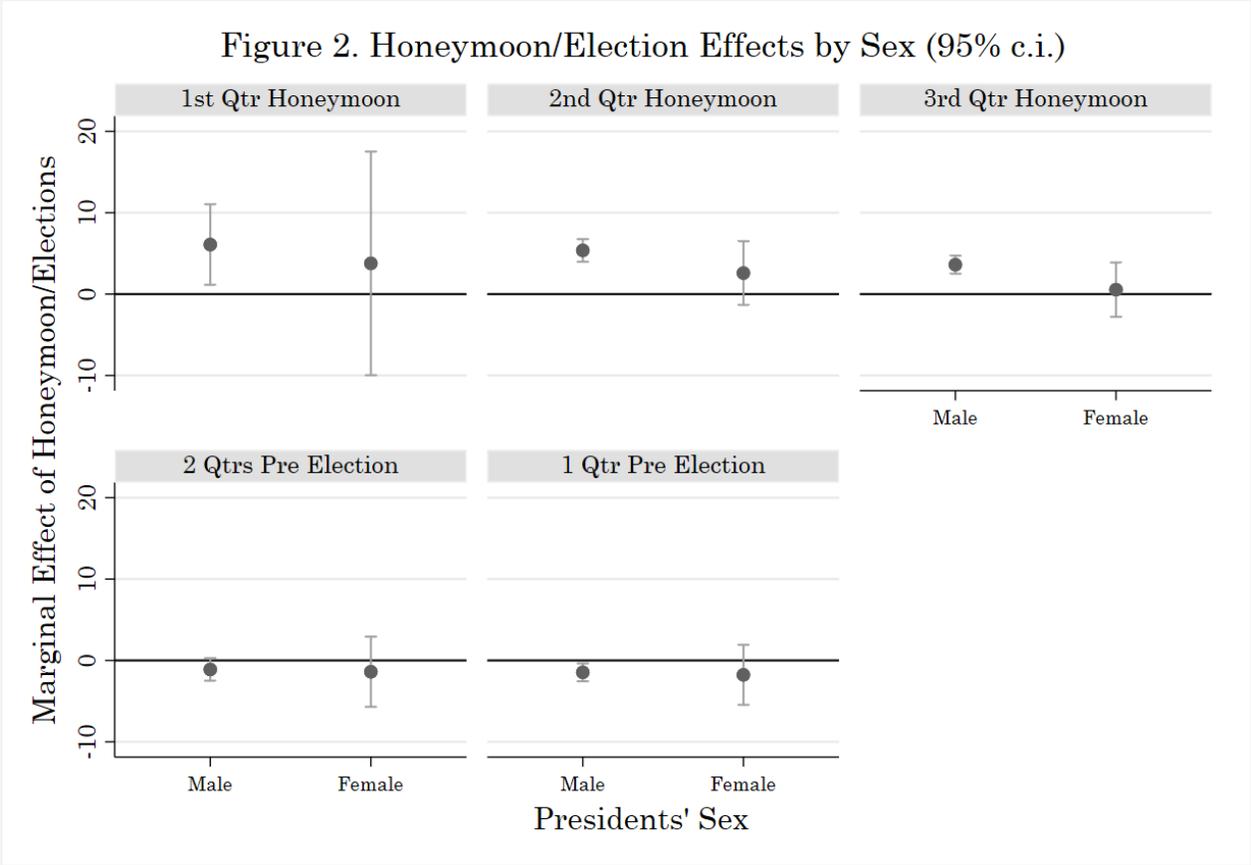
Table 1. Sex and Executive Approval in 20 Presidential Democracies

	I	II	III	IV	V
GDP Growth	0.182 <i>0.211</i>	0.2 <i>0.211</i>	0.189 <i>0.211</i>	0.384 <i>0.331</i>	0.319 <i>0.219</i>
GDP Growth _{t-1}	0.044 <i>0.211</i>	0.015 <i>0.211</i>	0.037 <i>0.211</i>	0.290 <i>0.328</i>	-0.073 <i>0.219</i>
ln(Inflation)	-2.211* <i>1.301</i>	-1.701 <i>1.299</i>	-2.092 <i>1.299</i>	-6.291*** <i>1.890</i>	-0.973 <i>1.495</i>
ln(Inflation _{t-1})	1.105 <i>1.307</i>	0.691 <i>1.306</i>	1.037 <i>1.305</i>	2.133 <i>1.913</i>	0.46 <i>1.493</i>

Female President	-6.687***	1.893	-5.826***	3.761	-1.161
	<i>1.389</i>	<i>2.386</i>	<i>1.415</i>	<i>2.765</i>	<i>1.343</i>
Corruption Perceptions		-11.690			
		<i>11.280</i>			
Female×Corruption Perceptions		-25.32***			
		<i>5.661</i>			
Terrorist Attacks			-0.00263		
			<i>0.0105</i>		
Female×Terrorist Attacks			-0.0931***		
			<i>0.0327</i>		
Homicide Rate				-0.179*	
				<i>0.106</i>	
Female×Homicide Rate				-1.314***	
				<i>0.275</i>	
Female×GDP Growth					-1.001
					<i>0.833</i>
Female×GDP Growth _{t-1}					1.497*
					<i>0.818</i>
Female×Inflation					-1.789
					<i>3.074</i>
Female×Inflation _{t-1}					-1.928
					<i>3.165</i>
Presidential Election	0.0938	0.168	0.143	-1.455	-0.128
	<i>0.725</i>	<i>0.722</i>	<i>0.724</i>	<i>1.105</i>	<i>0.725</i>
Presidential Election _{t-1}	5.109***	4.999***	5.052***	4.498***	4.996***
	<i>0.684</i>	<i>0.682</i>	<i>0.684</i>	<i>1.063</i>	<i>0.685</i>
Presidential Election _{t-2}	3.327***	3.261***	3.296***	3.433***	3.266***
	<i>0.543</i>	<i>0.541</i>	<i>0.543</i>	<i>0.87</i>	<i>0.543</i>
Presidential Election _{t+1}	-1.136*	-1.054	-1.129*	-2.577**	-1.165*
	<i>0.685</i>	<i>0.683</i>	<i>0.684</i>	<i>1.067</i>	<i>0.685</i>
Presidential Election _{t+2}	-1.487***	-1.452***	-1.500***	-2.344***	-1.504***
	<i>0.541</i>	<i>0.539</i>	<i>0.54</i>	<i>0.863</i>	<i>0.541</i>
Constant	52.76***	57.67***	52.42***	59.75***	50.94***
	<i>5.725</i>	<i>6.942</i>	<i>5.702</i>	<i>3.892</i>	<i>5.775</i>
Observations	2,115	2,115	2,115	897	2,115
Number of countries	20	20	20	19	20
R ²	0.254	0.259	0.252	0.506	0.269

Country Fixed-Effect regression with panel-specific AR1 corrections. Standard errors in italics.

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1



Turning to sex differentials vis-à-vis election effects, we produce the marginal effects for three quarters following an election to capture the honeymoon period and for two quarters preceding an election for male and female presidents¹¹ (additional quarters are not significant in either case). Figure 2 clearly illustrates that while male presidents enjoy significantly greater approval during the first three months of their presidencies in comparison to the rest of their tenure, female leaders have, at

¹¹ If female leaders come to power in a systematic fashion when conditions are poor (i.e. bad economy, low physical security, high corruption), then differences in approval could be due to differences in conditions rather than the sex of the leader. We do not find any evidence that this is the case. Female leaders' first six months in office are on average no different than male leaders' on these scores (see Table A3 in the supplemental materials).

best, a very limited and short-lived honeymoon. While the differences in honeymoon effect for each individual quarter between male and female presidents are insignificant¹², the cumulative impact of negligible honeymoon effects for female presidents means that the total honeymoon effect between male and female leaders is substantial (7.2 percentage point gap) and significant ($p = .001$). The figure also shows that female presidents revert to the sample mean at the end of the term while male leaders remain about 1 percentage point below it. This fits Figure 1—female leaders’ approval falls faster and into a much greater trough than male leaders but with the possibility of an end of term bounce that male leaders do not experience (however, the bounce only brings female leaders to parity with male leaders).

The related set of expectations regarding public evaluations of female and male leaders in the areas of corruption, physical security, and economic performance are tested in Models II-V of Table 1. Model II tests our theoretical prior that perceived public corruption damages female leaders’ public standing more than their male counterparts. Results are consistent with this expectation. The sharp sex-based effect is highlighted in the top graph of Figure 3, which plots the predicted approval levels for male and female presidents across the range of observed public corruption ratings for female leaders. Mounting corruption perceptions have essentially no effect on male presidents’ approval ratings but significantly, and substantially, damage public support for female presidents.

¹² The difference in the third quarter between male and female presidents is nearly so ($p = .08$).

The last two elected presidents in Brazil effectively illustrate the general pattern shown in Figure 3. Both Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva (a male) and Dilma Rousseff (a female) presided over major corruption scandals, but the consequences were much direr for Rousseff than for Lula. During Lula’s first term, the ruling party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores* or PT) was accused of making large monthly payments to a number of deputies in exchange for votes supporting the agenda of the PT (Pereira, Power, and Raile 2008). Lula was never charged for this highly publicized scandal – known as the “*mensalaõ*” – but many of his key advisers were sentenced and several others were forced to resign. Most crucially for our purposes, Lula’s approval rate was largely unaffected and he easily won reelection in 2006. Moreover, his approval ratings during his second term defied the common pattern of cyclical approval, increasing steadily over time (Santos Mundim ND).

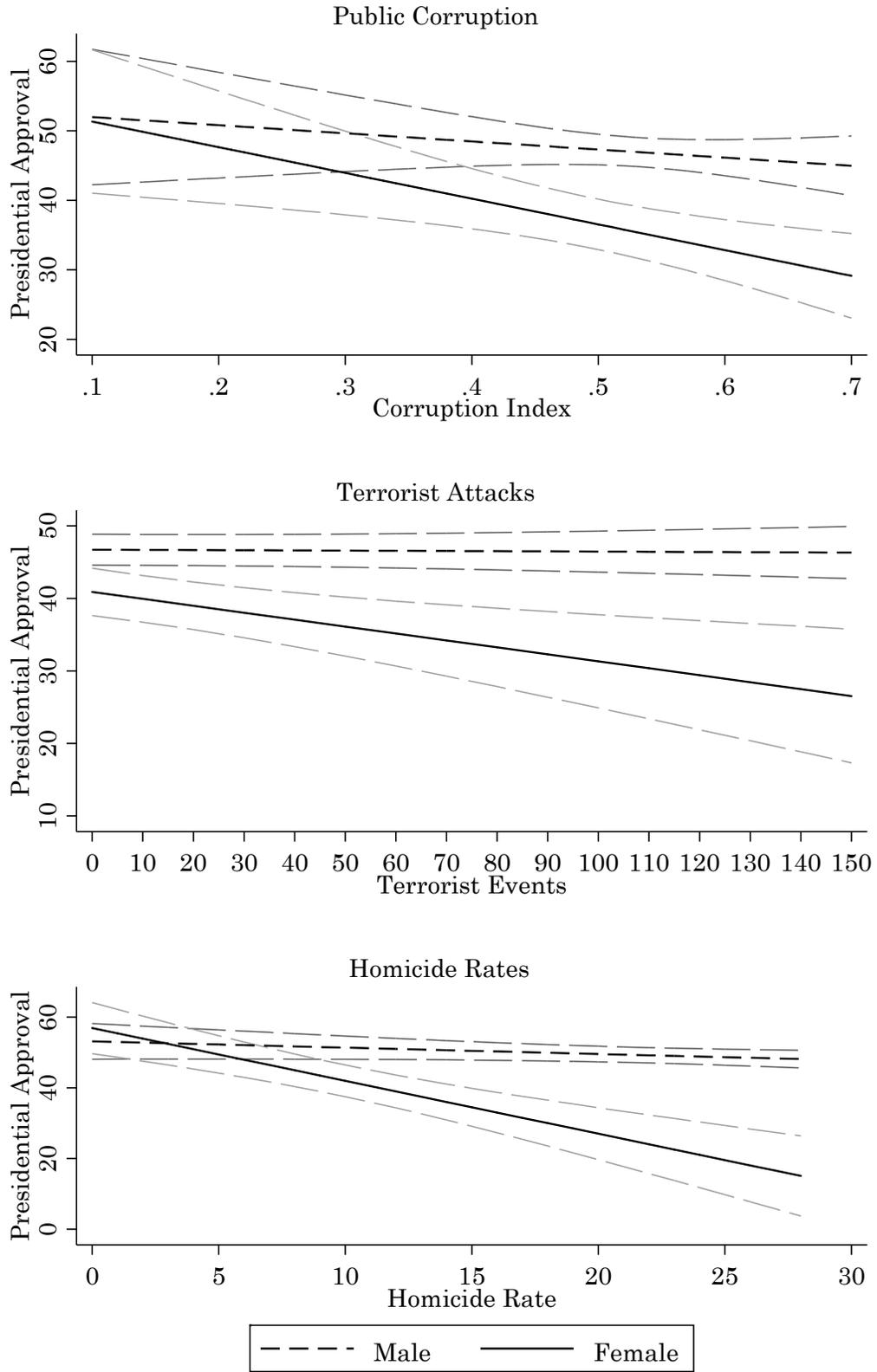
In stark contrast, Rousseff’s popularity nosedived as a result of corruption allegations. Despite being widely perceived as “one of the few politicians in Brazil not to accept bribes” (Watts 2016), Rousseff faced accusations of manipulating the federal budget to conceal economic problems and improve fiscal outcomes ahead of the 2014 elections. Window-dressing government accounts is arguably a much less serious offense than bribing opposition deputies. Nevertheless Rousseff suffered a steep decline in her popularity. By late 2015, her approval rate had sunk from the 40’s at the time of her reelection to just 8%. Massive street demonstrations and widespread public support for her impeachment (Romero 2016) eventually ended in Rousseff’s impeachment and removal from office in 2016. In sum, if we compare recent male and

female Brazilian presidents from the same political party, the male survived a major corruption scandal almost unscathed and remains in the hunt for a second reelection while a comparatively less serious corruption allegation unseated the female.

Physical security is another performance area we expect to generate sex-based divergence in leader evaluations. Models III and IV suggest the popularity of female leaders is, indeed, more sensitive than that of male leaders to terrorist attacks and homicide rates. The middle graph in Figure 3 illustrates that an upturn in *terrorist attacks* neither boosts nor tanks male leaders' approval, possibly due to countervailing effects of "rally-'round-the-flag" and security failures (Romero, Magaloni, and Díaz-Cayeros 2016; Carlin, Love, and Martínez-Gallardo 2015b).¹³ But an escalation in *terror attacks* erodes female leaders' public standing. As for the *homicide rate*, increases hurt both male and female leaders. However, as the bottom graph of Figure 3 displays, the negative slope for male leaders is nowhere near as steep as that of female leaders. We also note that the top and bottom graphs in Figure 3 suggest the public generally supports male and female presidents equally well when times are good, i.e. when corruption is low or homicides are rare. It is only when conditions deteriorate that public evaluations of female and male leaders diverge.

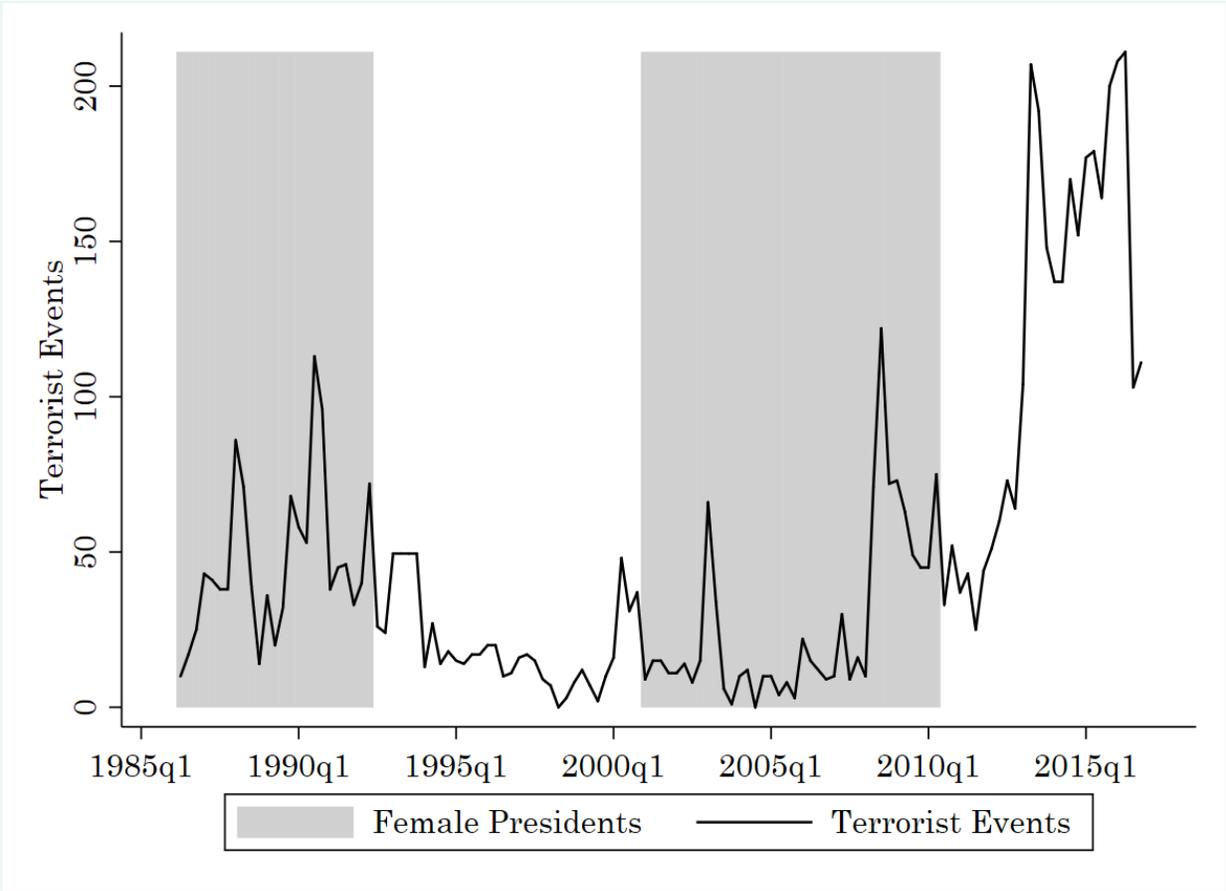
¹³ All predicted approval ratings in Figure 3 are across the range of observed values for female leaders for corruption, terrorist attacks, and homicide rates.

Figure 3. Conditional Presidential Approval, by Sex (w/ 95% c.i.)



The Philippines is a good case to compare the effects of physical security outcomes on the popularity of female and male presidents. Terrorism has been a major policy problem in the Philippines since the early 1970s (Banlaoi 2007; Ferrer 2007). A leftist insurgency (the New People’s Army) and Islamic militant groups (Moro Islamic Liberation Front and Abu Sayyaf Group) have committed thousands of terrorist attacks. However, as can be observed in Figure 4, the number of terrorist attacks varies over the Philippines’ democratic period from lows near zero in some quarters to more than 200 in others.

Figure 4. Terrorist Incidents in the Philippines (1986-2016)



Source: Global Terrorism Database

Compare the administrations of female president, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (2001-2010), and her male successor, Benigno Aquino III (2010-2016). As Figure 4 illustrates, under Gloria Macapagal Arroyo terrorist incidents were far fewer (27 per quarter on average) than under Benigno Aquino III (118 attacks per quarter on average). In spite of governing during a period of significantly lower terrorist activity in the country, the average approval of Gloria Macapagal Arroyo was much lower (23%) than that of Benigno Aquino III (55%).

It is also informative to contrast how spikes in terrorist attacks affected these presidents' popularity. A massive rise in terrorist incidents in 2008 (275, up from 65), nearly cut Gloria Macapagal Arroyo's approval ratings in half (from 22.5% to 12%). By contrast, when terrorist attacks nearly doubled in the first quarter of 2013 (from 64 to 104) Benigno Aquino III's popularity did not fall—in fact, it rose slightly (60 to 64%) in the next quarter. Only after several years of more than 100 attacks per quarter did his approval rate start dropping, and then only marginally, staying well above 40%.

In sum, contemporary evidence from the Philippines elucidates the differential punishment the public metes out for security failures depending on the sex of the president. In line with our theoretical intuitions, the female president (Gloria Macapagal Arroyo) suffered a greater decline in approval than her male successor (Benigno Aquino III) when terrorist attacks spiked. Moreover, she had a much lower average approval rate despite governing during a period with much fewer terrorist incidents.

Model V reveals no substantial evidence that the public judges female and male presidents differently when it comes to economic conditions (*Growth* or *Inflation*). Neither female nor male leaders are consistently rewarded for economic growth¹⁴ yet both are punished for high levels of inflation. These results resonate with political psychology research implying trait stereotypes about economic acumen are not gendered. As such, they bolster our theory, which hinges on clear stereotypes. Our results also underscore the potentially novel conclusion that the gender bias that reduces women's appointments to top economic posts in legislatures (Schwindt-Bayer 2010) and cabinets (Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson 2016) and nominations as legislative candidates (Funk, Hinojosa, and Piscopo 2017) is not replicated among the mass public. Therefore, women's lack of advancement to positions of economic power may owe more to supply-side, elite bottlenecks than demand-side, voter stereotypes. Such a conclusion is consistent with public opinion's comparatively more central role in determining who runs and wins the presidency and party elites' more determinative role in legislative and cabinet nominations. We stress the tentative nature of this conclusion and call for more research on gender stereotypes vis-à-vis presidents' economic management.

Overall, these analyses reveal contrasting patterns of public job approval across male and female presidents that are consistent with our stereotypes-based theory.

¹⁴ While the interaction for the lag of GDP growth is significant at the .1 level, it is signed in the opposite direction than the interaction with the non-lagged GDP growth measure, indicating there is not likely any substantively important conditional effect of growth.

On average, female leaders come into office with less support than male leaders and their support erodes more quickly. Furthermore, the public strongly withdraws support from female leaders in the wake of policy failures in physical security and public corruption. The one area in which the public appears to evaluate male and female presidents similarly is the economy. The analyses therefore provide macro-opinion evidence consistent with scores of micro-level studies on gender stereotypes in political, cognitive, social, and organizational psychology. Moreover, the analyses complement a growing corpus of gender and politics research identifying the particular challenges female leaders face.

Conclusion

The consensus view from decades of research in the United States is that popularity is a form of political capital that presidents can harness to help advance their agendas, improve the governing party's electoral prospects, and ensure re-election. Since no woman has yet been elected President of the United States, this case can tell us little about how gender stereotypes affect mass support for the president. The rise of women as political executives worldwide and what drives this trend are well documented (see reviews in Htun and Piscopo 2014; Jalalzai and Krook 2010; Jalalzai 2013). In turn, this has prompted much comparative research into women's representation, the individual-level predictors of support for women leaders, and whether women and men display different patterns of political behavior under women leaders (e.g. Desposato and Norrander 2009; Inglehart and Norris 2003; Morgan and Buice 2013; Morgan 2015; Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson 2014; Carreras

2017). It is not an exaggeration to say that our knowledge of women in politics has grown exponentially over the last three decades. Nevertheless, we still lack a basic comparison of macro-approval – a potent source of leverage for all presidents – when women and men are at the helm. As such, we have serious lacunae in our understandings of the role of the executive’s sex in mass politics, political accountability, and presidentialism.

The rise of female political leaders to top executive positions clearly signals that the political arena is no longer an exclusively male domain. Indeed, the notion of shattering of the “highest glass ceiling” (Fitzpatrick 2016; Murray 2010; Reynolds 1999) suggests that barriers are no longer absolute, and that women can now aspire to occupy high-profile executive positions. While gender stereotypes may not universally hurt female candidates (Murray 2010), this study’s arguments and findings imply that stereotypes impose important obstacles for women in executive office. Eagly and Carli (2007, 64) argue the “glass ceiling” metaphor is obsolete and inaccurate because “by depicting a single, unvarying obstacle, the glass ceiling fails to incorporate the complexity and variety of challenges that women can face in their leadership journeys.” The present study echoes that argument and shows that, even when they reach top positions in the executive, female political leaders still encounter hurdles in mass opinion that male politicians do not. In particular, our results demonstrate that female presidents are held to higher standards and punished more severely for policy failures than their male counterparts. Therefore, when assessing

the political advancement of women, we should consider not only the formal positions they occupy, but also the unique challenges they face when they reach those positions.

The foregoing analysis also suggests that the political advancement of women is not irreversible. If female presidents are evaluated more harshly and govern with lower public support on average, their rise to power might paradoxically create additional hurdles for female politicians. A case in point is Brazil. After the country's first female president, Dilma Rousseff, was impeached in 2016 in the midst of a corruption scandal, her male successor, Michel Temer, completely excluded women from his first 22-person cabinet, signaling an immediate backlash against female involvement in the executive (Sims 2016).

Regarding mass politics, our findings that the sex of the president is a reliable determinant of macro-approval should give scholars pause. If, indeed, women enjoy lower levels of presidential approval and tend to suffer greater punishment in the public eye for failures on major valence issues, how many other dimensions of macro-opinion behave differently with women at the helm? Might policy mood (cf. Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002) have distinct dynamics or skew more rapidly leftwards? Does the thermostatic model of public opinion (Wlezien 1995), whereby the public adjusts its spending preferences in various policy domains downward (upward) when outlays increase (decrease), operate differently depending on whether the policy domains in question (mis)-match the president's gender stereotypes? And to what extent might female leaders influence trends in macro-partisanship (MacKuen,

Erikson, and Stimson 1989)? In short, the results presented here point to numerous questions that have clear theoretical, normative, and practical implications.

Our conclusion that female leaders have the deck stacked against them when it comes to mass support does not fit neatly into extant theories of representation and accountability. Reams of studies on economic voting, and burgeoning literatures on corruption and crime voting, analyze how a wide range of contextual and individual factors influence the likelihood of sanctioning the executive for poor performance on these key valence issues (see Anderson 2007; Duch 2007; Stegmaier and Lewis-Beck 2013 for reviews) or selecting good leaders based on their competence (e.g. Alesina and Rosenthal 1995; Duch and Stevenson 2008; Fearon 1999). Such work spans from developed to developing contexts (e.g. Gélinau and Singer 2015; Manzetti and Rosas 2015; Pérez 2015; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2008; Campello and Zucco Jr. 2016). Core questions are whether citizens consider performance with respect to society as a whole (sociotropic) or just themselves (egotropic) and whether they judge based on the past (retrospective) or expectations (prospective). Few, if any, works in this area take seriously the impact of the sex of executive leaders. Our work provides a partial corrective in this regard but its theoretical ripple effects could be considerable.

For example, our findings challenge the sophisticated, but logical, sanction and selection models undergirding much of this research paradigm. If men are only systematically sanctioned for the economy, but not security or corruption, and women are sanctioned for all three, then gender stereotypes appear to disrupt individuals' ability to correctly attribute responsibility for outcomes in particular policy arenas.

Existing models do not account for the role of gender stereotypes in responsibility attribution at all, let alone across policy domains. Hence our study introduces a major wrinkle in sanctioning models of accountability. When it comes to selection models our findings imply that the leaders' sex enters into voters' evaluation of whether candidates are, "good types' who are principled, competent, and share the electorate's ends, independent of reelection incentives" (Fearon 1999, 82). Theorists who employ the selection model of rational retrospective voting (e.g., Alesina and Rosenthal 1995; Duch and Stevenson 2008) may, thus, seek to incorporate gender into the "competency signal" on which it hinges. In sum, if gender informs voters' responsibility attributions and the policymaker competency signals they extract, it alters the form and predictions of canonical models of accountability which serve as pillars of democratic theory.

Finally, as scholars weigh the pros and cons of presidential, parliamentary, and dual-executive models of democracy, they would do well to take our findings seriously. If female presidents are punished more roundly for policy failures than male presidents, and women are increasingly reaching the executive, then, *ceteris paribus*, we might expect female leaders to get impeached and/or removed at higher rates than males. If so, it could exacerbate the phenomenon of "interrupted presidencies" (Valenzuela 2004; see also Pérez-Liñán 2007; Hochstetler and Samuels 2011). More broadly, presidentialism – with its fixed terms and national executive mandates – may inject more gender bias into public support for the executive than parliamentarism – wherein executive survival depends on an on-going cultivation of

confidence and support. As *primus inter pares*, women prime ministers may be able to diffuse gender's effects through the parliament and cabinet more easily than a president with her own national mandate.

While the questions outlined in this final section are well beyond the scope of this study, they are suggestive of the wider set of puzzles our results place on the table. As women increasingly serve as political executives, questions surrounding the justice and fairness of public opinion vis-à-vis female executive leaders will occupy a more central role in debates over democratic quality and democratic representation. If this is the case, it could trigger creative public policies and institutional reforms that seek to mitigate the effects of sex-based stereotypes on governance. Without speculating further, let it suffice to say that our study holds theoretical and practical implications that warrant attention from students of democracy.

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