

**Restoring Faith in American Democracy:
The Effect of Women Candidates on Adolescents' Evaluations of Politics in 2018**

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Abstract

In the wake of the 2016 presidential election, Democratic-leaning adolescents (both girls and boys) became more skeptical of democracy. In 2018, however, Democratic girls' confidence in democracy rebounded, while that of Democratic boys continued to decline. Why did they diverge? In this paper, we employ a unique three-wave panel study of adolescents and their parents, to test whether Democratic girls became more positive toward democracy if they lived in places where Democratic women ran for high-profile political office. They did. The same is also true of Democratic boys and Republican girls but to a much lesser extent; Republican boys, on the other hand, actually became slightly less likely to see American democracy as responsive. These results suggest that descriptive representation can foster a more positive perception of democracy, especially among underrepresented groups. But those who are politically advantaged appear unaffected.

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The unprecedented 2016 American presidential election generated widespread hand-wringing over the breakdown of democratic norms, rising intolerance, and threats to civil liberties and rights. Among other things, the defeat of the first woman presidential nominee by a man who derides women and is accused of sexual assault was viewed by many as an indictment of persistent inequality in the American political system. These developments appear to have undermined confidence in American democracy among those most likely to view them as a threat. In our recent work (Campbell and Wolbrecht 2019), we found that Democratic-leaning adolescent girls (but not Democratic boys or Republicans of either sex) expressed less confidence that the American political system represents the people in the wake of the 2016 election.

Disillusionment with American politics was not the only response to the 2016 election, however. Frustration with the post-2016 state of American politics generated historic levels of political interest, engagement, and activism, particularly among women. Not only did women take to the streets, they tossed their hats into the ring: The election of Donald Trump is widely credited with inspiring an unprecedented number of women to run for federal, state, and local office in the 2018 midterm elections. Almost entirely Democrats, these women candidates also were historically diverse, including pioneering women of color, native women, and LGBTQ women candidates. Many ran unconventional campaigns, emphasizing their authenticity, experiences, and gender; campaign ads included images of women serving in the military, recounting personal crises, and breastfeeding their children (Cauterucci et al. 2018).

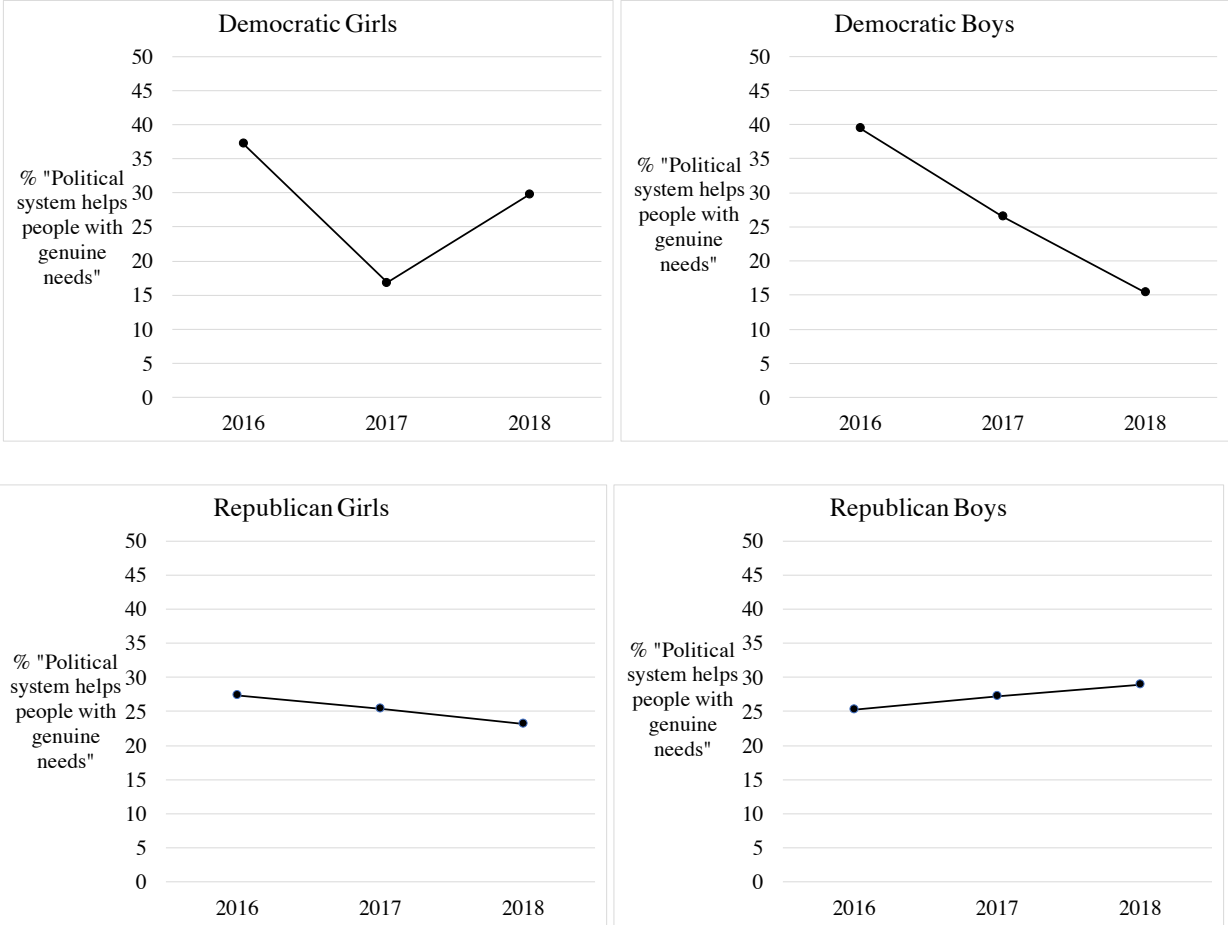
The presence and success of these candidates often was framed as embodying the possibility of a political system more representative of the diversity of the American public (Wolbrecht 2018). Did young women become more optimistic about American politics as a result? Specifically we ask: Given that Democratic girls became less confident in American democracy post-2016, did the historic number of women candidates help assuage and improve girls' concerns about political representation in the United States in 2018?

On the face of it, the answer appears to be yes. Democratic girls clearly rebounded in terms of satisfaction with the American political system in 2018. Figure 1 shows the percentage of adolescents, by gender and party, who agree that “the political system in this country helps the public with their genuine needs,” at three time periods: during the 2016 presidential campaign, during the first year of the Trump administration (2017), and during the 2018 midterm campaign. (These data are from the Family Matters panel study, described in more detail below).

Note that in 2016, about a quarter of Republican girls and boys agreed that the political system is responsive, compared to almost 40% of Democratic girls and boys. Within the parties, there were no gender differences in 2016. Democrats, both girls and boys, became increasingly disillusioned after the 2016 presidential election—girls more so than boys. Republicans' views of the American political system, however, were virtually unchanged in 2017. These same girls and boys were asked the same question again in the late Summer and Fall of 2018, the height of the midterm campaign. Republicans remained unmoved in their evaluations of the American political system. Democrats, on the other hand, diverge: Democratic girls experienced a substantial rebound in their optimism about

the American political system, but Democrat boys were even more likely to express dissatisfaction during the 2018 midterm election campaign.

Figure 1. Perceptions of American Democracy, 2016-2018



Source: Family Matters Study

Does the wave of Democratic female candidates help explain these shifts? Using a unique three-wave panel study of adolescents and their parents, we find that Democratic girls were more likely to express confidence in political responsiveness in 2018 if they lived in places where Democratic women ran viable campaigns for the House, Senate, or governor's office. Importantly, this effect is found most strongly and consistently among girls who describe themselves as Democrats, the group who experienced the sharpest decline in political confidence after 2016 and who we expect would have identified most closely with the overwhelmingly-Democratic women candidates in 2018. Moreover, the beliefs about the political system of Democratic boys and Republican girls also are responsive to the presence of female Democratic candidates in 2018, but to considerably less of an extent than for Democratic girls. The opinions that Republican boys express about the American political system, however, are impervious to exposure to women as political candidates.

Expectations

A truly unprecedented number of women ran for office in 2018, and nearly all of them were Democrats. Figures 2A and B show the numbers of Democratic and Republican women running for the U.S. House and Senate since 1970. The original Year of the Woman also was a mostly Democratic phenomenon, as the sharp increases in both Democratic series (House and Senate) in 1992 indicate. The upsurge in women running in 2018 far exceeds all previous years by a considerable margin. The number of women running for governor also hit historic highs in 2018, with 12 Democratic and 4 Republican women running in gubernatorial elections; the previous record was 10 total (CAWP 2018).

Figure 2A.

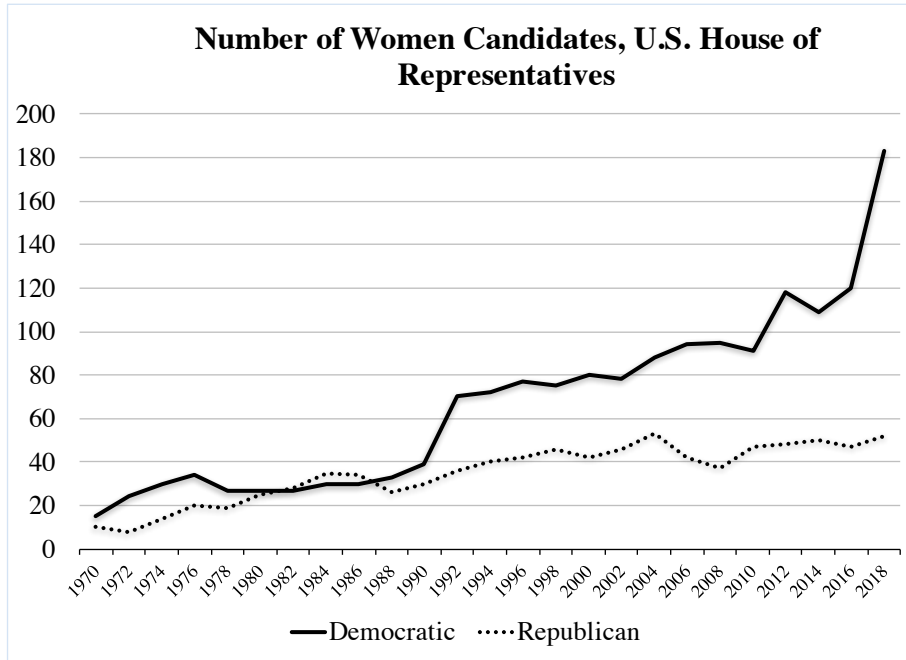
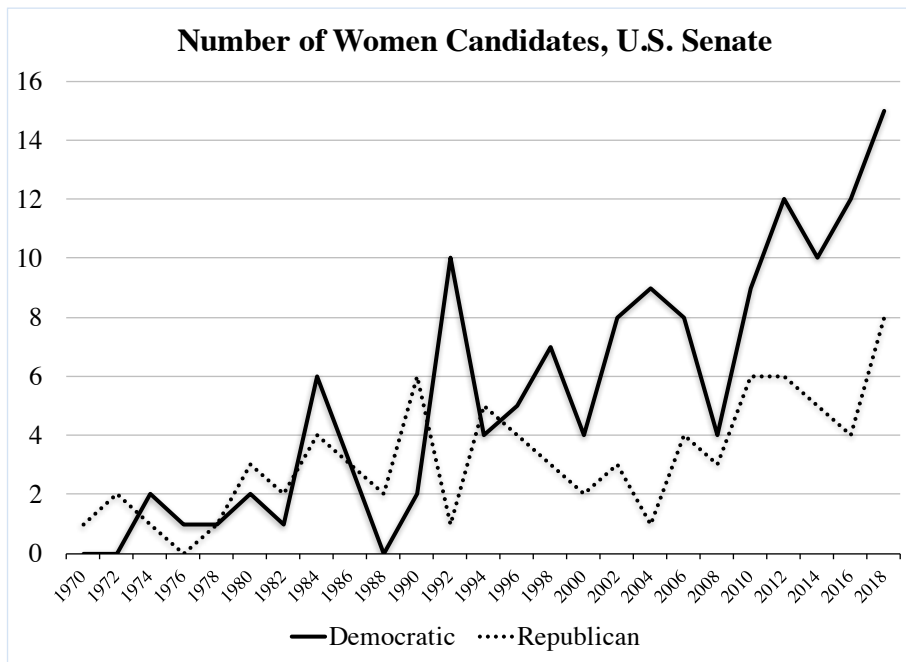


Figure 2B.



Source: Center for American Women and Politics, Rutgers University

We expect that these women candidates help explain the renewed confidence in the American political system expressed by Democratic girls in 2018. Women candidates were the subjects of widespread press coverage in 2018, including a *Time* magazine cover story entitled “The Avengers: First They Marched, Now They’re Running” (Alter 2018). As this headline linking women candidates to the Women’s March suggests, the wave of women running in 2018 was consistently framed as a response to and part of a broader “resistance” to Donald Trump’s presidency (e.g., North 2017; Simon and Lah 2017; Tackett 2017). If the misogyny and stunning defeat of the 2016 election led Democratic girls to become less optimistic about the American political system (Campbell and Wolbrecht 2019), we hypothesize that the widely-trumpeted wave of path-breaking women candidates contributed to Democratic girls’ increasing confidence in American politics in 2018.

Scholars have long theorized that the presence (and absence) of women politicians can have important effects on citizens’ views of the political system and of political representation in general, particularly for fellow group members. In her classic work on descriptive representation, Jane Mansbridge (1999, 626) argues that in addition to representing different perspectives, women and minority representatives are capable of “increasing the polity’s de facto legitimacy in contexts of past discrimination.” A political system in which members of previously-excluded groups (women, people of color) are able to contest elections and serve in office may be viewed, especially by members of those same groups, as more representative, fair, equitable, and open (Phillips 1995). The presence of fellow group members, Mansbridge (1999, 650) notes, can make “members of historically underrepresented groups...feel as if they themselves were present in the

deliberation.” In other words, diverse representatives can lead fellow group members to perceive the political system as more responsive to the people as a whole.

Following Mansbridge and others (e.g., Phillips 1995; Sapiro 1981), we expect the presence of women candidates to encourage more confidence in the responsiveness of the political system. Most previous empirical work considers the impact of the presence of women politicians on such factors as political knowledge and interest, or behaviors such as discussion or campaign involvement. Evidence suggests that the presence of women can spur greater political engagement among women in general (Atkeson 2003, Dolan 2006; Fridkin and Kenney 2014; Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006; Hansen 1997; High-Pippert and Comer 1998; Koch 1997; Wolbrecht and Campbell 2017; see also Broockman 2014; Gilardi 2015; Mariani et al. 2015), although others fail to uncover an effect (Dolan 2006; Lawless 2004; Wolak 2015, 2019).

Focusing on the impact of women politicians on beliefs about the political system more broadly, the absence of women from politics has long been held at least partially responsible for women’s perceptions of the political system as biased and inaccessible. For example, the longstanding finding that women are less likely to report that they feel personally capable of affecting or understanding politics (personal efficacy) is often attributed to the persistent image (and reality) of politics as “a man’s game” (Atkeson and Rapoport 2003; Bennett and Bennett 1989; Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 1995; Campbell et al. 1960; Conway 1985). Experiences that reinforce group exclusion from politics can have important effects. Perceptions of gender bias in the political arena discourage women from running for political office, for example (Lawless and Fox 2010). Davis and Weber (2018) find that respondents who believe African Americans experience institutional

discrimination are more likely to express dissatisfaction with democracy (importantly, they find that high levels of racial resentment are also associated with democratic dissatisfaction). If exposure to or recognition of bias undermines citizens' sense that the political system is well-functioning, representative, or responsive to individual action, evidence that bias is being successfully challenged and overcome—such as by a historic number of traditionally underrepresented candidates—might move those attitudes in the other direction.

Work on the impact of women politicians on beliefs about the political system are less common than those about the impact on engagement and behavior, but previous research is generally encouraging. Women express greater external efficacy when their governor is female and as the percent of women in the state legislature grows (Atkeson and Carrillo 2007). Similarly, women report increased efficacy and feelings of political confidence when represented by women (High-Pippert and Comer 1998). Cross-national research is suggestive; both women and men express greater satisfaction with democracy in their country and confidence that elections reflect voters' views as the percentage of women representatives increases (Karp and Banducci 2008; but see Burnet 2011).

The conditions of the 2018 midterms appear particularly conducive for women politicians to have a positive impact on women's views of the American political system. The framing of women politicians as either emphasizing women's breakthroughs and achievements or their continued exclusion appear to shape such effects: In a series of experiments, Bauer, Krupnikov, and Yeganeh (2019) find that the gender gap in office-seeking ambition narrows when respondents are exposed to frames emphasizing the advances women have made in politics, but expands when the frames highlight women's

persistent under-representation. Along these same lines, experiences viewed as confirming men's advantages in and women's exclusion from the political arena have been found to discourage interest in political participation among girls (Bennett and Bennett 1989; Croson and Gneezy 2009; Greenstein 1969; Lips 1995, Lizotte 2017). This work leads us to expect that women candidates are most likely to have a positive impact when their presence is framed in terms of empowerment and achievement, rather than evidence of on-going discrimination. While the 2018 wave of women candidates certainly highlighted women's continued underrepresentation, women candidates (and coverage of them) largely took on an empowering tone, with popular slogans—The Future is Female, Nevertheless, She Persisted, and others—emphasizing the revolutionary power of women's candidacies.

The conditions were amenable in other ways as well. Previous research on engagement indicates that women politicians are more likely to affect political engagement under specific conditions: when they are novel (running for an office held by a man), when they are viable, and when they are highly visible—particularly when that visibility highlights their gender. We are particularly interested in evidence that women politicians are more likely to encourage engagement when attention is drawn to the uniqueness of women as political candidates and leaders. For example, our previous work (Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006) finds that adolescent girls' engagement with politics rose noticeably in 1984, when Geraldine Ferraro became the first woman major party vice presidential nominee, and in 1992, the first Year of the Woman, when considerable media attention was drawn to the then-record number of women candidates. Similarly, both Koch (1997) and

Hansen (1997) find that the presence of women politicians inspired greater engagement during 1992, but not in 1990 or 1994, when women received far less attention.

In this paper, we are specifically interested in the effects of women candidates on adolescent girls and boys. The popular “The Future is Female” slogan emphasized the goal of greater gender inclusion and empowerment for future generations of women in particular. Activists are correct to view younger people as a target for political change. Childhood socialization is a key determinant of many fundamental political behaviors and attitudes (Beck and Jennings 1982; Campbell 2008; Jennings, Stoker, and Bowers 2009). While we expect that the attitudes and behaviors of older people are likely more “crystalized” and thus resistant to alteration, younger people are still learning about the political world, developing their political habits, and more open to change (e.g., Alwin et al. 1991; Beck and Jennings 1991; Krosnick and Alwin 1989; Sears 1983; Stoker and Jennings 2008). In her argument for greater descriptive representation, Mansbridge (1999, 551) argues that “Young people in particular need these kinds of role models.” Previous research finds that the presence of women politicians is associated with greater political engagement among younger women and girls in particular in both the U.S. and cross-nationally (Beaman et al. 2012; Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006; Mariani et al. 2015; Wolbrecht and Campbell 2007, 2017).

In a time of intense partisan polarization, party identification is likely a key moderator for any impact of the presence of women candidates. Partisanship is a central way in which citizens organize and understand the political world. In previous research, women were more likely to be inspired to greater engagement by co-partisans—female politicians of the same party—particularly in more recent years (Reingold and Harrell

2010; also Andersen and Thorson 2010; Dolan 2006; Lawless 2004; Lühiste and Karp 2011; Stokes-Brown and Neal 2008b; Wolak 2015). Post-2016, it was Democratic adolescents (and especially girls) who became disillusioned with the American political system; Republicans, whose party and candidate won the election, did not change their beliefs about the ability of the political system to represent people's interests (Campbell and Wolbrecht 2019). In 2018, the phenomenon of *Democratic* women running for office was the focus of public attention, making it likely that any positive effects on adolescents would be found among emergent *Democrats*.

Finally, thus far we have focused largely on the effect of women politicians on other women. The purported salutary effect of the presence of disadvantaged group members in political positions on their fellow disadvantaged group members in the public has been the major thrust of theoretical speculation, activist expectation, and empirical investigation. The 2018 midterms were no exception: Candidates, parties, and the press all trumpeted the idea that the wave of female candidates would inspire and encourage political engagement and activism among women (e.g., Cauteuuci 2018).

Yet, Mansbridge (1999, 651) argues that for those whose aim is improved democratic legitimacy and integrity, the most important effect of diverse representatives is not on the underrepresented groups, but on those who have traditionally boasted prestige and power:

Yet I consider of even greater importance the effects of social meaning on the perceptions and actions of members of the more advantaged groups. There are sometimes more of them, and they are more powerful. My aim, in short, is changing the psychology of the "haves" far more than the psychology of the "have-nots."

Mansbridge’s concern is most centrally about beliefs regarding the political capacities, value, and interests of the underrepresented groups. By the same logic, we might expect, or hope, however, that more diversity in political leadership also would encourage greater confidence in how well the political system performs its representational function among those already-advantaged as well. Empirical evidence here is more mixed. Studies of role model effects sometime report that the presence of women politicians increases engagement among men/boys as well, but almost always to a more limited or less significant extent (e.g., Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006). Atkeson and Carrillo (2007) find that both women and men express greater external efficacy when their governor is female, but the percentage of women in the state legislature only affects women. High-Pippert and Comer (1998) report that women representatives are associated with increased efficacy and feelings of political confidence among women, but not men. In cross-national research, both women and men express greater satisfaction with democracy and confidence in elections the percentage of women representatives increases (Karp and Banducci 2008, but see Burnet 2011).¹

Hypotheses

We investigate the following hypotheses in this paper: The presence of Democratic women candidates in respondents’ own states and districts in 2018 had a positive impact on adolescents’ views of the American political system. We expect this effect to be positive,

¹ In distinct, but related work, shifts in beliefs about women’s capacity to govern are found more consistently among women rather than men (Alexander 2012). The recent natural experiment in India—where opportunities for women to fill leadership positions were randomly assigned to villages—has offered fruitful opportunities to gauge the impact of women’s leadership. In one study, Indian men, but not women, living in villages randomly assigned female representatives became more confident of the effectiveness of female leaders in general (Beaman et al. 2009).

not negative, because of the empowering ways in which women candidates framed themselves and were framed in 2018. Attention to women candidates in 2018 was widespread and highly salient, so we might expect to find such effects regardless of whether women ran in a respondents' own geographic locale. Yet, however prominent women candidates as an amorphous group may have been nationally, we still expect that candidates in one's own district and state are more visible, salient, and relevant to respondents, and thus more likely to shape their beliefs. At the same time, we focus specifically on the impact of Democratic women candidates (and not the far less numerous Republican women candidates) as these were the candidates most strongly presented as challenging the status quo.

We expect the effect of the presence of Democratic women to be particularly strong for young women (rather than young men) due to the experience of seeing their own underrepresented group members achieving political attention and power. Moreover, as the wave of women candidates in 2018 was largely a Democratic phenomenon and framed as a reaction to the Trump presidency, we hypothesize that these positive effects were concentrated among Democrats rather than Republicans.

Our hypotheses can be summarized as:

- a. Where more *Democratic* women ran for office, adolescents had a more positive view of American democracy;
- b. The effect of Democratic women candidates was greater for adolescent girls;
- c. The effect of Democratic women candidates was greater for adolescents who identify as Democrats.

Research Design and Results

The fundamental logic of our analysis is to test the impact of women candidates on adolescents' evaluations of the political system. To do so, we employ the Family Matters Study (FMS), a three-wave panel survey of American adolescents and their parents. The study began in the fall of 2016, when 997 adolescents in grades 9-12, along with one parent, were surveyed online. Subsequent waves were conducted with both the teens and parents in the fall of 2017 and 2018.²

The FMS has three key features for testing our hypotheses. First, the data are longitudinal, and thus reflect change (or stasis) over time. When modeling attitudes in 2018, we control for these same attitudes in 2017 and 2016. In other words, our results do not only reflect attitudes in 2018, but the *difference* between attitudes in prior years and those in 2018. While we do not model change per se, by accounting for previous attitudes we control for the respondents' baseline attitudes, thus strengthening the inference that any effects we observe are due to conditions in 2018.

Second, we have data from both adolescents and their parents; every question asked of the teens in the study was also asked of their parents. This enables us to account for influences in the home. Therefore, any effects are over and above the attitudes of the teen's parent.

² The re-interview rate for complete teen-parent dyads in from 2016 to 2017 was 60 percent; from 2016 to 2018 it was 43 percent. To account for panel attrition, each wave of data has been weighted to match the parameters of the U.S. population for teens and parents, respectively. The analysis reported here employs the teen weights, which were created by YouGov by matching to the 2013 American Community Survey, using the sampling frame of youth age 15-18 and currently in grades 9-12. The matched cases and the frame were combined and a logistic regression was estimated for inclusion in the frame. The propensity score function included age, gender, race/ethnicity, and census region. The propensity scores were grouped into deciles of the estimated propensity score in the frame and post-stratified according to these deciles.

Third, the data are geocoded, enabling the inclusion of data on political campaigns within each respondent's congressional district and state. We have merged data on the 2016 and 2018 races for U.S. House, Senate, and governor, including the number of female candidates and their party affiliation.³ We include races for these three offices because previous research has shown that role model effects require female candidates to be visible. These are all high-profile offices that generate considerable media attention and involve extensive campaigning. Past research also has shown that candidates have an effect when they are viable. Accordingly, we only include those female candidates who either won or came within 10 percentage points of doing so (which, in 2018, was nearly all of them).⁴

The dependent variable is the measure of perceived democratic responsiveness displayed in Figure 1: whether the adolescent respondent agrees that "the political system helps people with their genuine needs." Responses were on a 5-point scale, ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. The variable is coded so that a higher value means a more positive view of the political system. Because the dependent variable is an ordinal scale, we employ ordered logistic regression.

Column 1 of Table 1 displays a model testing the relationship between women candidates and attitudes toward democracy. Control variables include the respondent's response in the two previous waves of the survey, as well as the parent's perception of democracy (measured, recall, with an identically-worded question). There also is a set of standard demographic variables, each with a plausible relationship with democratic

³ We are grateful to the staff of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University, who generously provided these data.

⁴ Because most women candidates in 2018 were competitive, results are essentially unchanged when we instead use a count of all candidates.

attitudes. These include age, race (Black), ethnicity (Hispanic), the parent's education level, and the education level the parent expects the teen to achieve. In addition, the model includes Female and Democrat, two variables which figure prominently in the analysis. The model also includes the key independent variable, the number of women candidates in the general election, which ranges from 0 to 5. This variable includes Democrats, Republicans, and any third-party candidates.

As shown in column 1, the coefficient for *Women Candidates* is small (-0.051) and far from statistical significance. In other words, the total number of women candidates has no effect—at least when we look at all candidates and all youth as a whole. Recall, however, that we hypothesize that it is *Democratic* women candidates who are most likely to have affected teens' perception of political responsiveness. Column 2 thus substitutes a count of Democratic women who ran for the House, Senate, and governor, which ranges from 0 to 3. In addition, the model includes a series of interaction terms, each of which tests whether any effects are specific to a particular subset of the population:

Female X Democratic Women Candidates: a positive coefficient means that girls are more responsive to women Democratic candidates than are boys.

Democrat X Democratic Women Candidates: a positive coefficient indicates that Democrats are more responsive to women Democratic candidates than are Republicans. Because the model also accounts for the interaction between Female and the number of candidates, it is interpreted as the effect for Democratic boys.

Female X Democrat: a positive coefficient shows that Democratic girls have the most positive perception of democracy.

Owing to this combination of interaction terms, in these models the main effect for *Democratic Women Candidates* reflects the effect on boys who do not identify as Democrats.⁵

The model in column 3 then adds another interaction term:

Female X Democrat X Democratic Women Candidates: this variable examines whether the effect of Democratic women running for visible political offices is specific to Democratic girls. A positive coefficient reflects that Democratic girls are the most likely to respond to women running under the Democratic banner.

Taken together, the results in columns 2 and 3 indicate that, consistent with our hypotheses:

- (a) it is *Democratic* women candidates, and not *Republican* women candidates, who have an effect on adolescents' evaluations of American politics; and
- (b) all girls, regardless of party, had a more sanguine attitude about the political system in places where more Democratic women ran; and
- (c) all Democratic-identifying teens, whether girls or boys, also became more positive toward American democracy as the number of women candidates increased (i.e. *Democrat X Democratic Women Candidates* is positive and statistically significant).

⁵ With this model specification, the variable technically shows the effect for boys who are either Republicans or Independents (the latter being a small share of the population). However, as explained below, further analysis shows that the negative effect is specifically for Republican boys.

This leaves one group who became *less* likely to view American democracy positively as more Democratic women competed for office: Republican boys.⁶

Table 1. Perceptions of Democracy
Results from ordered logistic regression

	1	2	3
Political system helps, Wave 1	0.324 (0.111)***	0.178 (0.113)	0.180 (0.113)
Political system helps, Wave 2	0.621 (0.109)***	0.752 (0.114)***	0.769 (0.116)***
Political system helps (Parent), Wave 1	0.003 (0.102)	0.055 (0.107)	0.051 (0.107)
Age	-0.077 (0.123)	-0.118 (0.125)	-0.128 (0.126)
Black	-0.717 (0.287)**	-0.862 (0.312)***	-0.825 (0.307)***
Hispanic	0.021 (0.260)	-0.052 (0.265)	-0.066 (0.265)
Teen's Expected Education Level (Parent)	-0.181 (0.098)*	-0.193 (0.099)*	-0.191 (0.099)*
Parent's Education Level	-0.111 (0.055)**	-0.146 (0.057)***	-0.152 (0.057)***
Female	0.541 (0.203)***	-0.679 (0.393)*	-0.454 (0.469)
Democrat	0.074 (0.207)	-1.392 (0.367)***	-1.188 (0.433)***
Women Candidates, 2018	-0.051 (0.091)		
Democratic Women Candidates, 2018		-0.530 (0.221)**	-0.420 (0.254)*
Female X Democrat		1.228 (0.432)***	0.785 (0.663)
Female X Democratic Women Candidates, 2018		0.600 (0.267)**	0.377 (0.369)
Democrat X Democratic Women Candidates, 2018		0.991 (0.264)***	0.756 (0.375)**
Female X Democrat X Democratic Women Candidates, 2018			0.465 (0.529)
N	342	342	342
Pseudo-R2	0.08	0.12	0.12

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. Standard errors in parentheses.

⁶ While the models in Table 1 group Republicans and Independents together, the results for Republicans in Figure 3 are from a model (not shown) in which Republican is interacted with Democratic Women Candidates.

Because interaction terms are difficult to intuit, Figures 3A and 3B display predicted probabilities generated from the model in column 3.⁷ First, Figure 3A shows that, where there were no Democratic women candidates in 2018, Democratic boys and girls have the same—negative—view of American democracy. As the number of candidates increases, both groups’ attitudes toward democracy improve. However, Democratic girls experience far more of an effect than Democratic boys. Where there were three Democratic women candidates (the maximum), 80 percent of Democratic girls agree that the political system helps people with their needs, compared to roughly 20 percent of Democratic boys. In Figure 3B we see that Republican girls also reacted positively to the presence of Democratic women candidates. In fact, the increase in their positivity toward democracy is even greater than for Democratic boys, rising from roughly 18 percent where no Democratic women ran to 45 percent in places with three candidates.

The fact that the effect for Democratic girls moves in the same direction as for Democratic boys and Republican girls explains why the coefficient for *Female X Democrat X Democratic Candidates*, while positive, is not statistically significant in column 3. Democratic girls’ attitudes were rising, but not at a significantly greater rate than each of these other groups (recall that the sample size is relatively small, making significance an especially high bar in this model).

Figure 3B also provides visual confirmation that Republican boys’ attitudes toward democracy became more negative in the presence of Democratic women candidates. While every other line goes up, theirs goes down.

⁷ To generate these probabilities, all control variables are held at their observed values (Hanmer and Kalkan 2013).

Figure 3A.

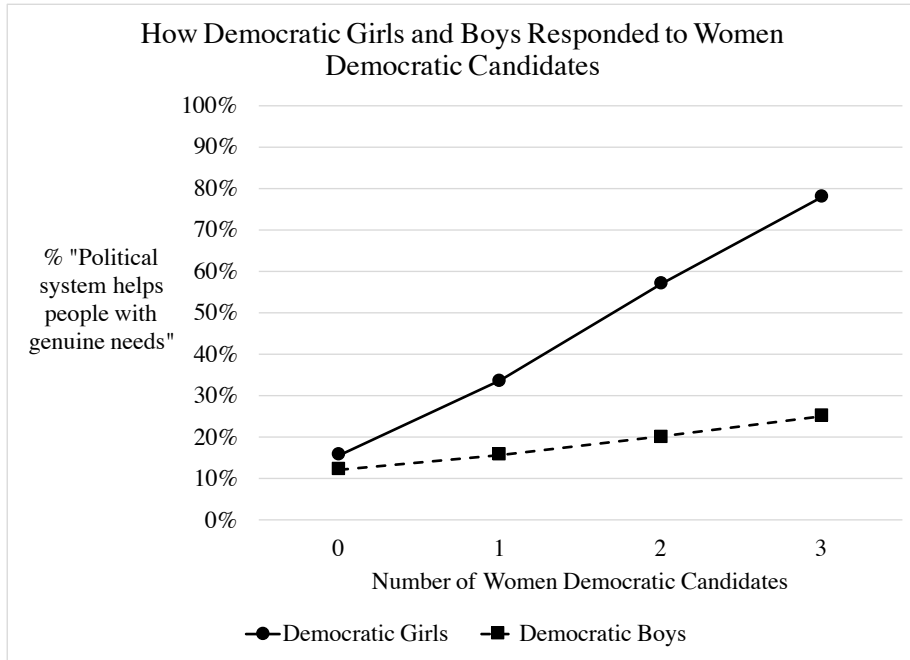
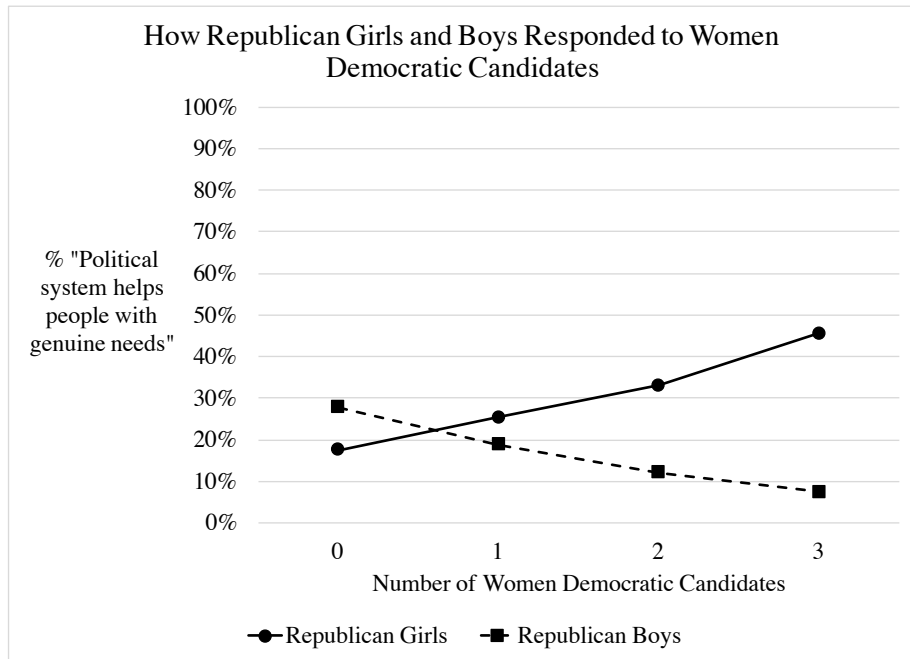


Figure 3B.



Predicted probabilities generated from model in column 3, Table 1. All control variables set to their actual values.

Past research also has found that political interest among young women can be triggered when women candidates are novel—running to replace a male incumbent (Wolbrecht and Campbell 2017). It is unclear whether a similar effect would be found for perceptions of democratic responsiveness in 2018, given the widespread attention given to both incumbent and non-incumbent women candidates. Consider, for example, that future presidential candidates Kirsten Gillibrand, Amy Klobuchar, and Elizabeth Warren all ran for re-election in 2018. In models that use a count of non-incumbent Democratic women candidates, we find results that are very similar to those for all candidates, incumbents or not. (Results available upon request).

These findings for Democratic women candidates lead naturally to the question of whether the same effect is found for Republican women. While smaller in number and less likely to emphasize their gender, it might still be the case that Republican-identifying teens, girls especially, would find inspiration in the candidacies of Republican women running for office. To see if this is the case, Table 2 presents two models that parallel those in Table 1. The difference is that these models account for viable Republican women candidates—again for the House, Senate, and Governor—instead of Democrats running for office. Again there is a series of interaction terms, but with Republicans instead of Democrats. The results are clear: Republican girls did not respond to the presence of Republican women candidates. Nor did girls who do not identify as Republicans. Nor did Republican boys. In contrast to the effects for Democratic women, Republican women elicited no response from American teens, even those of their own party.

**Table 2. Perceptions of Democracy
(With Republican Women Candidates)**
Results from ordered logistic regression

	1	2
Political system helps, Wave 1	0.337 (0.110)***	0.346 (0.111)***
Political system helps, Wave 2	0.610 (0.112)***	0.609 (0.112)***
Political system helps (Parent), Wave 1	0.007 (0.103)	0.013 (0.103)
Age	-0.063 (0.124)	-0.058 (0.124)
Black	-0.696 (0.292)**	-0.672 (0.291)**
Hispanic	-0.034 (0.268)	-0.011 (0.270)
Teen's Expected Education Level (Parent)	-0.159 (0.098)	-0.150 (0.099)
Parent's Education Level	-0.107 (0.056)*	-0.109 (0.056)*
Female	0.596 (0.255)**	0.677 (0.264)**
Republican	-0.064 (0.368)	0.107 (0.394)
Republican Women Candidates, 2018	-0.505 (0.303)*	-0.345 (0.329)
Female X Republican	-0.202 (0.481)	-0.566 (0.569)
Female X Republican Women Candidates, 2018	-0.026 (0.375)	-0.324 (0.448)
Republican X Republican Women Candidates, 2018	0.399 (0.404)	0.029 (0.506)
Female X Republican X Republican Women Candidates, 2018		0.969 (0.800)
N	342	342
Pseudo-R2	.09	.09

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. Standard errors in parentheses.

Are these effects specific to 2018? If we are right that Democratic women in 2018 were part of a national movement emphasizing female empowerment, we would not expect to see a similar effect for Democratic women candidates in 2016. In the presidential race, Hillary Clinton emphasized her path-breaking candidacy, but any effect of her candidacy would not be concentrated in particular geographic areas; media coverage of a presidential

race is ubiquitous. This was particularly true in 2016, a year in which the race featured two polarizing candidates who generated enormous attention. In results not shown (but available upon request), we have tested whether Democratic women candidates in 2016 had the same effects on democratic attitudes as in 2018. They did not. (Nor for that matter did Republican women candidates).

In sum, the results thus far show:

1. The presence of women candidates *in general* did not have an effect on adolescents' views of political responsiveness *in general* in 2018
2. The presence of Democratic women candidates did lead to a more positive perception of American democracy among Democratic boys, Republican girls, and—especially—Democratic girls in 2018.
3. The presence of Democratic women candidates led to a more negative perception of American democracy among Republican boys in 2018.
4. The presence of Republican women candidates had no effect on any teens' attitudes in 2018.
5. There were no comparable effects for Democratic women candidates in 2016.

Robustness Check: Another Measure of Democratic Attitudes

Thus far, we have relied on a single measure of how adolescents evaluate the American political system. If it is the case that Democratic women candidates fostered a more positive view of the American political system, we should see the same effect for other evaluations of American democracy. To confirm our results, we turn to a second question on the Family Matters Study, borrowed from the World Values Survey: “It is

important to me to live in a democracy.”⁸ This item was added to both the adolescent and parent surveys in the third wave of the FMS, as other scholars have noted a drop-off in positive responses among young people in liberal democracies, including the United States, in recent years (Mounk and Foa 2018; Mounk 2018).

Keep in mind the limitations of this question. For one, it was only included on the third wave of the survey, and thus it is not possible to control for baseline attitudes in 2016 and 2017. Also, among FMS respondents, there is not much variation. Only 4 percent of adolescent respondents disagree (including strongly disagree) that it is important to live in a democracy. Most of the variation, therefore, is between the midpoint (21 percent) and agree/strongly agree (34 and 41 percent, respectively).⁹

Table 3 mirrors Table 1, but with the item about living in a democracy as the dependent variable. All of the independent variables, including the interaction terms, are identical. The results also mirror those in Table 1. First, as with perceptions of democratic responsiveness, the number of *Women Candidates* (column 1) has no effect. Also echoing the earlier measure of democratic attitudes, there is an effect for *Democrat X Democratic Women Candidates* (column 2). However, in this case there also is a statistically significant effect for Democratic girls specifically (column 3)—meaning that as the number of

⁸ It has the same five response categories as above, ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree.

⁹ Parents’ attitudes are similar:

Strongly disagree	1.8%
Disagree	1.6%
Neither agree or disagree	16.6%
Agree	25.7%
Strongly agree	54.4%

Democratic women candidates rises, so does the value assigned to living in a democracy by Democratic girls.

Table 3. Importance of Living in a Democracy
Results from ordered logistic regression

	1	2	3
Important to Live in Democracy (Parent)	1.066 (0.143)***	1.105 (0.145)***	1.118 (0.145)***
Age	0.076 (0.123)	0.057 (0.124)	0.032 (0.125)
Black	-0.548 (0.256)**	-0.522 (0.259)**	-0.462 (0.253)*
Hispanic	0.437 (0.279)	0.452 (0.287)	0.424 (0.288)
Teen's Expected Education Level (Parent)	0.141 (0.101)	0.138 (0.101)	0.152 (0.101)
Parent's Education Level	0.139 (0.058)**	0.135 (0.059)**	0.122 (0.059)**
Female	-0.483 (0.207)**	-0.244 (0.387)	0.203 (0.461)
Democrat	0.629 (0.222)***	0.334 (0.393)	0.746 (0.459)
Women Candidates, 2018	-0.041 (0.096)		
Democratic Women Candidates, 2018		-0.339 (0.216)	-0.141 (0.242)
Female X Democrat		-0.384 (0.422)	-1.320 (0.673)**
Female X Democratic Women Candidates, 2018		-0.066 (0.273)	-0.516 (0.372)
Democrat X Democratic Women Candidates, 2018		0.494 (0.274)*	0.006 (0.385)
Female X Democrat X Democratic Women Candidates, 2018			0.987 (0.552)*
N	388	388	388
Pseudo-R2	0.16	0.17	0.17

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. Standard errors in parentheses.

Figures 4A and 4B display the predicted probabilities generated from the model in column 3 of Table 3, for Democrats and Republicans respectively.¹⁰ As expected, the overall level of agreement that living in a democracy is important is high. For almost all

¹⁰ As with Figure 3, all control variables are set to their actual values.

adolescents—Democratic boys, Republican girls, Republican boys—the line is in a negative direction, but the trend is far from statistical significance.¹¹ For most adolescents, then, the presence of Democratic women candidates was unrelated to their commitment to democracy. Importantly, however, the increase in that sentiment among Democratic girls is both statistically significant and substantively meaningful, moving from 78 to 89 percent. Even with a dependent variable that has little variation, there is still considerable movement among Democratic girls as the percentage of Democratic women candidates rises.

On balance, our robustness check confirms the primary finding from the analysis of perceived democratic responsiveness. In both cases, as the number of Democratic women candidates increases, Democratic girls have a more positive opinion of democracy.

¹¹ While the line for Republican girls' decline is noticeable, in a model (not shown) that specifically tests the interaction of *Female X Republican X Democratic Women Candidates*, the p value is .83. That is, that decline is nowhere near statistical significance.

Figure 4A.

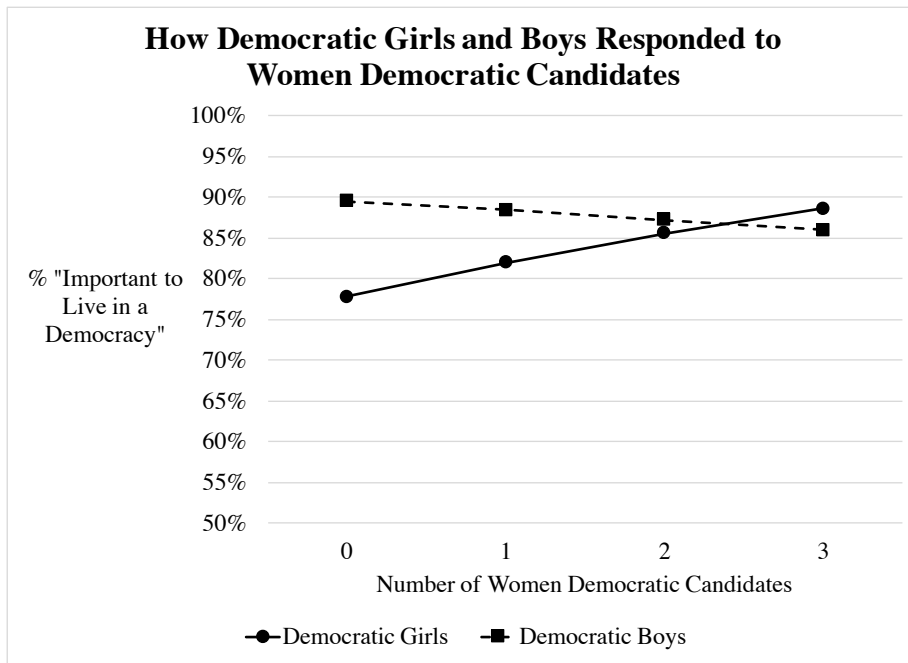
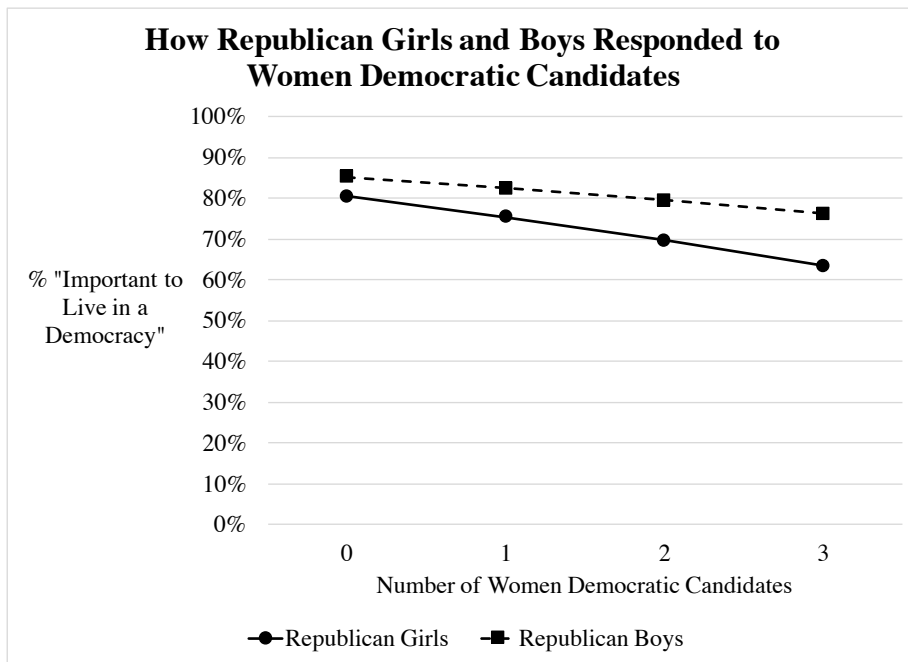


Figure 4B.



Predicted probabilities generated from model in column 3, Table 3. All control variables set to their actual values.

Conclusion

By the time the dust settled, a historic number of women were elected (or reelected) to state and federal office in November 2018: 25 women to the U.S. Senate (17 Democrats, 8 Republicans), 102 women to the U.S. House (89 Democrats, 13 Republicans), and 9 to governor's offices (6 Democrats, 3 Republicans) (CAWP 2019). Our research suggests that not only would these women transform the face of political leadership in the United States, but they—and the women candidates who ran viable campaigns but did not win—also helped to restore confidence in the American political system, particularly among the Democratic adolescent girls to whom they provide descriptive representation. Democratic girls, many of whom had become considerably less sanguine about the ability of the American political system to help people with their genuine needs after 2016, became more optimistic during 2018, especially when Democratic women candidates were running in their own state or district. And they were not alone: Both Democratic boys and Republican girls in districts and states with women candidates also became more confident in the political system, albeit to a far lesser degree than Democratic girls.

Yet, our findings might not be entirely encouraging for those pinning their hopes for greater trust and legitimacy on increased descriptive representation of women. The most advantaged group, Republican boys—the party in power at the time and the sex long over-represented in political power—are unmoved by the presence of women candidates. Indeed, they actually become slightly less likely to report that the political system helps people with their genuine needs when Democratic women ran in their own state and district. Mansbridge's hope and expectation that greater descriptive representation would change the attitudes and beliefs of those currently advantaged was not fulfilled in 2018. On

the other hand, Mansbridge is concerned with how the presence of underrepresented groups might shape perceptions of their capacity for political leadership. Future research should explore whether and how women and minority candidates shape such attitudes, not only among fellow group members, but among those most advantaged by the current system as well.

Another important next step is to investigate what effect these shifts in beliefs about the political system have on political behavior. We might expect that as adolescents become more optimistic about the responsiveness of the political system, they will be more interested in engaging with it, such as through voting, working for a candidate, and so on. On the other hand, our previous work found that Democratic girls in particular became more interested in protest—usually conceived of as a system-challenging form of political engagement—as they became more disillusioned with politics. If the 2018 wave of Democratic women candidates made Democratic girls more optimistic, should their interest in protest decline as a result? Or, to the extent that those women candidates were viewed as an extension of the Resistance with which the Women’s March and other protest actions are associated, does the presence of women candidates only affirm the importance of protest as a political repertoire?

From Brexit to Brazil, observers lament the varied challenges to liberal democracy worldwide, including what appears to be a declining commitment to it. The distance between citizen’s expectations for a democratic system—representative, fair, open—and citizens’ perceptions of how well the political system actually meets those standards is a central gauge of democratic legitimacy (Norris 2011). Our findings support the claim that increased descriptive representation of women can encourage more positive evaluations of

the political system, under conditions (apparently) of an empowering frame, shared partisanship, and/or shared disadvantaged group status. All the same, the lack of reaction (or even negative reaction) to diversification of the political system from those most advantaged by it points to persistent challenges for American democracy.

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