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Do women only talk about "female issues"? Gender and issue discussion on Twitter

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Abstract

Purpose – Recent research has shown that female US House candidates were more likely to talk about so-called "female issues" on Twitter during the 2012 election (Evans and Clark, 2015). In this paper, the author extends this former work by investigating the Twitter activity of all US House representatives during their 2012 election and seven months later (June and July of 2013). The purpose of this paper is to show that women do talk more about "female issues" than men, but do not only focus on these issues.
Design/methodology/approach – This paper content analyzes the tweets sent by female and male representatives in the 113th Congress during their 2012 elections, and seven months later.
Findings – Female representatives spend significantly more time devoted to "female issues" on Twitter than male representatives, but their time is not dominated entirely by "female issues." Even though the difference is not statistically significant, women sent more tweets about "male issues" than men both during and after the 2012 election. Women tweet more than men about "women," but they also care about business issues, as is evidenced by that issue being one of the most discussed on Twitter by female representatives during both the election and seven months later.
Originality/value – Unlike other studies on gender and issue discussion, this paper examines a new type of communication: Twitter. Tweets are split by issue type (female/male) and the author sees that while women do discuss "female issues" more than men, they do not exclude "male issues." This paper also shows that women focus on "female issues" both during elections and after.
Keywords Gender, Twitter, Campaign communication, Female issues
Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Scholars typically suggest that the descriptive representation of females in public office is important for the substantive representation of female issues, particularly because female representatives are more likely to work on issues of interest to females in general (Berkman and O'Connor, 1983; Dodson, 1998; Dodson and Carroll, 1991; Mansbridge, 1996; Pitkin, 1967; Swers, 1998). By placing issues on the agenda about issues directly related to women, female representatives may increase the likelihood that the government will respond to women (Mansbridge, 1996).

While placing items on the national agenda is one important step for our government to address issues affecting women, unfortunately very little time is spent by female representatives discussing these issues. For instance, in an analysis of 101 official congressional Websites, Gershon (2008) shows that on an average only 2 percent of female representatives' total issue discussion was related to issues directly relating to gender. Evans and Clark (2015) also show that during the election of 2012, on an average representatives sent only 4.23 tweets about "female issues." Although female representatives discussed these issues at a higher rate than their male counterparts, these issues occupied a very small percentage of their total issue discussion.

In this paper, I examine the way female and male representatives portray themselves on Twitter. Specifically, I ask whether female representatives present

themselves to the public on Twitter in a stereotypical way by stressing certain "female issues" more often than men. This paper analyzes the tweets sent by female and male representatives in the 113th Congress during their 2012 elections, and seven months later. In this way, we are able to see whether female representatives stress different issues depending on the campaign context.

Literature review

Research on gender and elections has shown that women have slowly made gains in holding political office, and many have attributed their slow progression to the socialization of gender roles. Studies have found that citizens are more likely to project traits that are considered "feminine" (caring, compassionate) onto female candidates, while "masculine" (tough, strong) traits are projected onto male candidates (Alexander and Anderson, 1993; Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993; King and Matland, 2000; Koch, 1999). By projecting these traits onto candidates, male candidates are therefore assumed to be more competent on foreign policy, trade, and economic issues (i.e. "male issues"). Women, on the other hand, are thought of being more interested and competent in "female issues" like healthcare, poverty, education, and environmental issues (Brown et al., 1993; Kahn, 1992; McDermott, 1998). For a full list of issues defined as "female" and "male," please see Table AI.

Playing into these stereotypes is the fact that for much of the recent past, scholarship has shown that female representatives tend to discuss "female issues" more often than male representatives (Kahn, 1993; Kahn and Goldenberg, 1991; Larson, 2001; Dolan and Kropf, 2004; Fridkin and Woodall, 2005; Gulati, 2004; Witt et al., 1994). For instance, Dolan and Kropf (2004) find that men claim credit for "male issues" while women claim credit for "female issues" in their analysis of newsletters. Women generally report paying attention to issues directly related to gender and women (Dodson, 2001; Gerrity et al., 2007; Swers, 1998; Thomas and Welch, 2001). Some work suggests that these differences, however, can be explained by the political context or partisanship (Tolleson-Rinehart, 2001; Reingold, 2000).

During campaigns, research has also shown that females spend more time discussing "female issues" while males spend more time on "male issues" (Fox, 1997; Kahn, 1993). Recent work, however, shows that the difference between men and women and their advertising may be fading, and differences now may be attributed more to party than gender (Bystrom, 2006; Dolan, 2005; Niven and Zilber, 2001; Shapiro and Walsh, 2002; Williams, 1998). Looking specifically at mixed-gender races, Bystrom et al. (2004) concludes that women and men are very similar in their webstyles and issue agendas.

Previous work on gender and the discussion of "women's issues" has examined traditional media, like television and print advertisements. More recent work has started exploring how candidates can use social media, particularly Twitter, to gain votes (Evans et al., 2014; Gainous and Wagner, 2014; Hargittai and Litt, 2011). Twitter allows users to communicate with all of their followers in 140 characters or less. Twitter began in 2006 but was not used by most politicians until 2012, when it was the eighth most visited site during the election (Hendricks, 2014). Twitter allows candidates to talk directly to their followers with the absence of filtering by traditional television. Candidates can control the message sent on Twitter, which is beneficial for outsider candidates. As Dolan (2005) describes, like candidate websites, Twitter allows candidates to talk about "as many or as few issues as they want" (p. 33). In the world of the shrinking sound-bite, this helps candidates get out messages that may be missed by traditional media.

Candidates in the "out-group" are particularly drawn to new media to gain an advantage over majority group members (Gainous and Wagner, 2014; Karpf, 2012). Twitter offers advantages over traditional media for all candidates, but particularly those in the "out-group." First, Twitter is free, which is good for candidates with few campaign resources. Twitter also gives candidates an unlimited space or platform, in terms of the number of tweets.

Since women are a minority in Congress, they should be drawn to new social media, like Twitter. Previous research has shown this is the case, with women more likely to have accounts and use them more frequently (Gainous *et al.*, 2014; Hargittai and Litt, 2011; Evans *et al.*, 2014). For instance, Gainous *et al.* (2014) find that in 2010, female candidates were more likely to "innovate in their campaigns with the goal of diminishing the disadvantage" (p. 16), and were more likely to adopt stereotypically masculine behaviors (send more negative attack-style tweets).

Unfortunately for female candidates, traditional media portrays candidates in stereotypical ways. Research has shown that females get less coverage and when they do get coverage, traditional media focusses on "female issues" (Braden, 1996; Kahn and Gordon, 1997; Witt *et al.*, 1994). According to Braden (1996), female politicians are asked questions by traditional media that are not asked to men, and describe them "in ways and with words that emphasize women's traditional roles and focus on their appearance and behavior" (p. 1). The same stereotypes that citizens use to evaluate candidates are also discussed heavily by news media outlets (Kahn, 1996). As Bystrom (2004) also describes, women are also "more likely to be the subject of "negative gender distinctions" – where their sex is described as an obstacle or barrier to political office" (p. 443). For these reasons, we should expect that women will be drawn to Twitter, and should discuss the issues that they generally care about. Only one study to date has examined gender and the issues discussed on Twitter. Evans and Clark (2015) show that female candidates were more likely to discuss "female issues" on Twitter during the 2012 election. They did not, however, examine the likelihood of discussing "male issues," or separate the tweets by specific issues. For instance, do females only tweet about "female issues"? Do men pay attention to "female issues" as well? Other work on candidate websites has found that there are little differences on the issues presented by men and women, and that both focus on "female issues" (Niven and Zilber, 2001). It is possible that men focus on "female issues" on Twitter as well.

It is also unclear whether female representatives only focus on "female issues" during elections, or if they continue to give preference to those issues after the elections are over. Evans *et al.* (2015) show that women and men tweet similarly after elections are over. They did not, however, examine the specific types of issues discussed.

Research expectations

Previous work on gender and campaign communication on Twitter reveals that women and men communicate differently during elections (Evans *et al.*, 2014; Evans and Clark, 2015), but communicate similarly after the election is over (Evans *et al.*, 2015). During elections, for instance, female candidates send significantly more tweets about issues in general (Evans *et al.*, 2014; Evans and Clark, 2015), and tweet more about "female issues" (Evans and Clark, 2015).

This work adds to the current stream of literature by examining whether gender affects the likelihood of focussing on both "female" and "male" issues during and after congressional elections. While Evans and Clark (2015) show that female candidates were more likely to tweet about "female issues" during the 2012 election, it is unclear

whether the same holds true for "male issues." One might expect given the previous work on gender and issue discussion to find that male representatives tweet more about these issues. At the same time, however, since female candidates have been shown in multiple studies to tweet more about "issues" in general (Evans *et al.*, 2014, 2015), they may also be more likely to tweet about "male issues." Since some research has shown that there are no gender differences when it comes to the selection of the most important issue during the campaign (Dabelko and Herrnson, 1997), there may be no significant differences between male and female representatives and their likelihood of discussing "male issues."

Second, while Evans *et al.* (2015) find that female and male representatives send similar types of messages on Twitter after their elections are over, specific issues discussed by the representatives have not been examined. Since females are more likely to discuss "female issues" during election, and they tend to claim credit for "female issues" in newsletters and on their websites after elections are over, I expect this focus on issues related to women to continue for these female representatives on Twitter.

Research method

Tweets were collected for all individuals who won their 2012 House elections for the two months prior to their election (September 6-November 6), and then a second time for two months during the summer of 2013 (June 1-July 31). In both waves, tweets were collected from representatives' official Twitter pages.

Tweets were coded for whether they were specifically about so-called "women's issues." There is a large literature about what constitutes a "female issue" vs a "male issue," and many authors have examined whether female representatives are more likely to discuss these issues in their campaigns or focus on them once in office (Bratton, 2002; Dodson and Carroll, 1991; Reingold, 2000; Swers, 2002; Thomas, 1991, 1994; Wolbrecht, 2000). "Women's issues" tend to be those that disproportionately focus on women as a group. Scholars typically include a broad base of issues that are associated with women, like education, healthcare, and the environment, and some include issues about sexuality such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, questioning and allied rights. The definition that I use draws on descriptions from previous studies, and I include both the traditional topics associated with females as a group, as well as more recent topics like gay rights. I also include discussions of crimes that are more likely to be committed against females, like rape and domestic violence. I also incorporate the issue of abortion and birth control. Other issues that were discussed in the election that were about defense, crime, security, war, and budgeting were coded as "male issues." These also feature prominently in the literature as issues that stereotyped to be more masculine in nature. The tweet content analysis employed here follows in the footsteps of Evans and Clark (2015). For a listing of specific issues coded as "female" and "male," please see Table AI.

Since previous work has shown that party identification is associated with the number and type of tweets sent (Evans *et al.*, 2014; Gainous and Wagner, 2014), I include a variable for whether the representative is a Republican ($=1$) or Democrat ($=0$). Since some have argued that the Democratic Party owns "female issues," including a variable for party identification helps us test this theory. During the election models, I also include a measure for the competitiveness of the election. Any race listed as a "toss-up" or "leaning" by the Cook Political Report on September 13, 2014 was coded as competitive ($=1$). In Evans and Clark's (2015) earlier work, those in competitive districts sent significantly more tweets about "female issues" than those in

safe districts. Finally, I include a dummy variable for whether the person who won their election was previously an incumbent ($=1$). All three of these variables were used in Evans and Clark's (2015) work.

The unit of analysis for the models that follow is the individual representative. Since the dependent variables are the number of tweets sent, a count model is more appropriate for my calculations than a linear regression model (Long, 1997). In some instances, there are many zero observations in the data, which signify that there were candidates who did not send any tweets about male or female issues. Negative binomial regression models (NBRM) enables the conditional variance of the dependent variable to exceed the conditional mean, and allows me to model heterogeneity in my data.

Results

During the 2012 election, 391 US House representatives were using Twitter. On average, these individuals sent approximately 68.78 tweets from September 6 to November 6 (election day). Representatives sent 4.65 tweets on average about "female issues" and 6.10 tweets about "male issues." Betty McCollum (D, Minnesota's 4th District) tweeted the most about "female issues" at 149 tweets.

In the summer of 2013, 413 representatives used Twitter, a modest increase. On average, these individuals sent 103.7 tweets. The tweet count varied from a low of two tweets total sent over the two months (Aaron Schock, Republican, IL 18th district; Jeff Miller, Republican, FL 1stDistrict) to a max of 818 (Ilena Ros-Lehtinen, Republican, FL 27th district). On average, members of Congress sent 21.3 tweets specifically about "female issues" and 17.67 tweets about "male issues." Kevin Brady, a Republican representative from Texas, sent the most tweets about "female issues" with 182.

Table I lists the top five issues (key words) used by representatives during both the last two months of the 2012 election and the summer months, by gender. As this table shows, female representatives do not only tweet about "female issues." Women regularly tweeted about the economy and business both during and after the 2012 election. There is a decent degree of correspondence between the genders, but women talk more often about "women"[1]. It should be pointed out, however, that men did not ignore women, as it was the fifth most discussed issue in the summer of 2013. However, 58 percent of male representatives never sent a single tweet about "women" in the summer of 2013[2].

Females – 2012	Males – 2012
1. Women	1. Business
2. Economy	2. Economy
3. Business	3. Families
4. Families	4. Family
5. Medicare	5. 9/11
Females – 2013	Males – 2013
1. Women	1. Obamacare
2. Obamacare	2. Immigration
3. Business	3. Families
4. Immigration	4. Family
5. Families	5. Women

Table I.
Top five issues discussed by gender

When I collapse the population of tweets into "female" and "male issues," I find that women sent significantly more tweets in general during the 2012 election, and almost double the tweets about "female issues" when compared to their male counterparts (significant at the $p \leqslant 0.01$ level). Women sent more tweets about "male issues," but the difference is not significant. The differences in means during the 2012 election are recorded in Table II.

During the summer of 2013, while female members of the House sent on average more tweets than male members, the difference was not significant. The type of issues discussed on Twitter, however, correlates with gender[3]. Women sent significantly more tweets about "female issues." As Table III shows, both women and men sent more tweets about "female issues" than "male issues" during the summer.

As Table II also demonstrates, Democrats sent more tweets during the two months leading up to the 2012 election, and more tweets about female issues, but the differences are not significant. In the summer months, however, Republicans sent significantly more tweets than Democrats.

Incumbency and competitiveness are significantly related to the number of tweets sent in general, and the number of "female" and "male" issue tweets during the 2012 election. Seven months later, incumbency was still significant as previous challengers sent significantly more tweets as well as more tweets about "male issues." During the summer of 2013, competitiveness was not a significant predictor of the number or type of issue tweet sent.

	Average number of tweets	Average number of "female issue" tweets	Average number of "male issue" tweets	n
Females	*95.21 (135.21)*	*7.78 (18.73)*	6.56 (11.15)	73
Males	*62.71 (80.86)*	*3.93 (5.83)*	6.00 (9.06)	318
Republicans	64.33 (101.66)	3.97 (5.81)	6.82 (9.88)	208
Democrats	73.84 (84.87)	5.41 (12.81)	5.29 (8.94)	183
Incumbents	*62 (95.35)*	*5.79 (10.60)*	*7.62 (10.05)*	312
Challengers	*95.54 (84.99)*	*0.15 (1.14)*	*0.16 (1.15)*	79
Competitive	*86.57 (72.21)*	*1.77 (3.69)*	*3.62 (7.41)*	53
Non-competitive	*65.99 (97.01)*	*5.10 (10.31)*	6.49 (9.71)	338

Notes: Standard errors reported in parentheses; italics are significant at the $p \leqslant 0.05$ level or less

Table II.
Demographics and 2012 election tweets about issues

	Average number of tweets	Average number of "female issue" tweets	Average number of "male issue" tweets	n
Females	112.71 (111.11)	*31.82 (26.33)*	19.65 (21.60)	78
Males	101.61 (101.61)	*18.85 (21.69)*	17.21 (17.63)	335
Republicans	*112.69 (121.86)*	19.51 (24.78)	18.21 (19.94)	220
Democrats	*93.46 (76.57)*	22.61 (20.97)	16.48 (16.49)	193
Incumbents	*98.17 (106.28)*	20.43 (23.70)	*16.22 (18.32)*	330
Challengers	*125.67 (89.02)*	24.77 (20.73)	*23.43 (17.90)*	83
Competitive	113.56 (114.49)	20.78 (16.45)	20.31 (18.00)	55
Non-competitive	102.19 (101.83)	21.38 (24.06)	17.27 (18.50)	358

Notes: Standard errors reported in parentheses; italics are significant at the $p \leqslant 0.05$ level or less

Table III.
Demographics and 2013 tweets about issues

Women in both parties sent more tweets about "female issues" than men both during and after the 2012 election. For instance, during the election among Republicans, females sent 6.6 tweets about "female issues" on average while men sent 3.7 tweets ($p \leqslant 0.05$). Democratic women sent approximately 8.23 tweets about these issues, compared to 4.2 tweets on average sent by Democratic men ($p \leqslant 0.05$). During the summer months in 2013, Democratic females sent 30.24 tweets on average about female issues, while Democratic men sent 19.25 ($p \leqslant 0.01$). Republican females, on the other hand, sent 36.74 tweets about "female issues," compared to 18.58 on average for Republican men ($p \leqslant 0.01$).

To determine the effect of the independent variables on the likelihood of tweeting about "female issues," I calculated a NBRM and the results are given in Table IV. During the 2012 election, gender, incumbency, and competitiveness were significant predictors of tweeting about "female issues." Women sent approximately 1.75 times as many tweets about "female issues"; those in competitive races sent half as many tweets about "female issues"; and incumbents sent 32 times as many tweets about "female issues" when compared to challengers[4].

During the summer months, I continue to find strong support for the role of gender on the likelihood of representatives sending "female issue" tweets. Female representatives sent 1.71 times as many tweets about "female issues" as male representatives (see footnote 4). Incumbents sent 22 percent fewer tweets than challengers (see footnote 4). The other independent variables were not significant.

To see the effect of these variables on tweeting about "male issues," I calculated a second round of NBRM and the results are displayed in Table V. Incumbents tweeted

	2012	2013
Female	0.56 (0.20)**	0.54 (0.13)**
Republican	−0.15 (0.16)	0.02 (0.10)
Incumbent	3.49 (0.34)**	−0.25 (0.13)*
Competitive	−0.56 (0.26)*	−0.16 (0.15)
Constant	−1.76 (0.35)**	3.16 (0.13)**
Log likelihood	−885.17	−1,674.48
Prob > χ^2	0.0000	0.0002
n	389	413

Table IV. Negative binomial regression model of female issue tweets

Notes: Standard errors are reported in parentheses. *$p \leqslant 0.05$; **$p \leqslant 0.01$

	2012	2013
Female	0.12 (0.19)	0.17 (0.13)
Republican	0.28 (0.15)	0.19 (0.10)*
Incumbent	3.79 (0.32)**	−0.39 (0.13)**
Competitive	−0.20 (0.24)	0.01 (0.15)
Constant	−1.93 (0.33)**	3.22 (0.13)**
Log likelihood	−981.34	−1,602.72
Prob > χ^2	0.0000	0.0054
n	389	413

Table V. Negative binomial regression model of male issue tweets during 2012 election

Notes: Standard errors are reported in parentheses. *$p \leqslant 0.05$; **$p \leqslant 0.01$

significantly more times about "male issues" in 2012, sending 44 times as many as challengers (see footnote 4). In the summer months, however, challengers tweeted more about "male issues," sending 33 percent more tweets than incumbents (see footnote 4). Republicans also sent 17 percent more tweets about "male issues" in the summer of 2013 (see footnote 4). Gender and competitiveness were not significant in either model.

Discussion and conclusion
As these results demonstrate, female representatives spend significantly more time devoted to "female issues" on Twitter than male representatives, but their time is not dominated entirely by "female issues." Even though the difference is not statistically significant, women sent more tweets about "male issues" than men both during and after the 2012 election. Even though women tweet more than men about "women," women also care about business issues, as is evidenced by that issue being one of the most discussed on Twitter by female representatives.

How these words and phrases are used by candidates is an area ripe for research. The research here shows that women send more tweets about issues considered more feminine in nature. How, exactly, are these words and phrases discussed? Men talk about "women," but in what ways? As mentioned previously, a male representative sent the most tweets about "female issues" during the summer of 2013. For instance, on June 11, 2013, the Obama administration backed down from a challenge they presented to the FDA regarding the emergency contraceptive Plan B One-Step. Directly following their decision, two members of Congress sent the following tweets:

- Bill Shuster: "The Obama Administration's decision to make the Plan B contraception pill available to girls of any age is […] http://t.co/qDiNU8uE2t"; and

- Jan Schakowsky – "Big win for women's health! Access to emergency contraception is so important and now Plan B available over the counter to all."

If you follow the link given in Bill Shuster's tweet, it takes you to the following Facebook post: "The Obama Administration's decision to make the Plan B contraception pill available to girls of any age is unconscionable and dangerous. In one fell swoop, they have removed the protection that parents and doctors provide and put politics above the health and safety of our youth." Bill Shuster is unhappy with the decision, while Jan Schakowsky praises the decision. Future research should examine the direction and position that male and female legislators take on these "female issues," keeping in mind that partisanship may play a role (Bill Shuster is a Republican, while Jan Schakowsky is a Democrat). What is clear from the research in this paper, however, is that women pay significantly more lip service to issues that are feminine in nature.

While these results show that women discuss female issues more often than men, we still do not know why women decide to stress certain topics over others both during and after elections. How do women decide what image they want to project to voters both in person and online? How much do women really think about the gender of their constituents? This is a direction for future scholars.

Future research should also examine whether females receive extra support when they discuss female issues on Twitter. Previous research has found that running as a "woman" (i.e. stressing "female issues") can help women gain votes in elections

(Herrnson *et al.* 2003), so it is entirely possible that stressing these issues on Twitter assist in bringing out female followers to the polls. At the same time, however, voters have been shown to favor more "male" traits in their leaders (Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993), so stressing "female issues" may hurt female representatives.

The issues stressed by candidates during elections matter. For instance, in 1992, there was an increase in the number of women in Congress. In that particular year, the focus of the country was on more domestic "female" issues. By focussing more on these issues, one could argue that women were helped at the polls. If international and budgetary issues are the focus of the public, women may suffer at the polls. If women are viewed as only caring about "female issues" at the exclusion of others, it can hurt them electorally (Larson, 2001). However, as this research shows, females discuss "male" issues as well. Simply put: female representatives in the twenty-first century focus more on all issues on Twitter than male representatives.

Notes

1. The word "women" came in 7th on the scale for the frequency of discussion by male representatives during the election of 2012. "Veterans" were discussed more than "women".

2. In total, 58 percent of men did not send any tweets about "women," compared to only 19 percent of women.

3. The correlation between being female and tweeting about female issues is 0.22. The correlation between being female and tweeting about male issues is 0.07.

4. Incident rate ratios.

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(The Appendix follows overleaf.)

Appendix

"Female" issues	"Male" issues
Healthcare	Defense
ACA	Military
Obamacare	Veterans
Affordable Care Act	VA
Social security	Vets
Medicare	Weapons
Medicaid	Nuclear
Welfare	Biological
Food stamps	Chemical
SNAP	Terrorism
WIC	Foreign policy
TANF	International relations
Children	Foreign affairs
Kids	War
Women	Iraq
Female	Afghanistan
Girls	Syria
Poverty	Iran
Family	Benghazi
Families	Homeland security
Education	9-11
Abortion	9/11
Pro-choice	Dream Act
Pro-life	Border security
War on women	Immigration
Birth control	Amnesty
Plan B	Agriculture
Rape	Legalization
Domestic violence	Pot
Gay marriage	Marijuana
DOMA	Liberty
Prop 8	Guns
Environment	Business
Binders full of women	Economy
Equality	Taxes
	Budget
	Wages
	Government spending
	NSA
	Spying
	Debt
	NATO

Table AI.
Male and female issues – words and phrases

Notes: Examples of male and female issue tweets: "Female" issue tweet: Niki Tsongas: "Joined colleagues on another amicus brief opposing #DOMA, hope to see this law follow #DADT and become another relic of a bygone era"; "Male" issue tweet: Tim Huelskamp: "Still no answer from President Obama on why help was not sent to the embassy in #Benghazi http://t.co/diFrncuo"

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