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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Revisiting Candidate Gender Effects: Heuristics, Sexism, and Information Environments

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Abstract

Existing research often interprets the limited impact of candidate gender on vote choice as evidence of minimal gender bias in politics. However, this overlooks the dual role of candidate gender, as both a heuristic for substantive representation and a trigger for sexism in voter decision-making. These competing mechanisms can diminish the effects of each other, obscuring the true influence of gender bias in electoral behavior. Using conjoint experiments in South Korea, a context where gender issues are highly politicized and sexism remains widespread, we examine how candidate gender affects voter evaluations in low- and high-information environments. Our findings reveal that in low-information settings, candidate gender serves as a cue for substantive representation, leading to co-sex voting among women, while simultaneously activating hostile sexism among male voters, reducing support for female candidates. In high-information settings, explicit candidate policy positions diminish the reliance on gender cues but do not eliminate gender bias. Instead, sexism manifests through opposition to gender-equity policies rather than direct discrimination against female candidates. These results suggest that information environments shape the expression of gender bias, rather than eliminating it, offering a more nuanced understanding of the conditions under which candidate gender influences electoral preferences.

Keywords: candidate gender; gender bias; sexism; candidate evaluations; information environment; conjoint experiment; South Korea

A large body of research on women's underrepresentation in politics attributes this gap to both supply- and demand-side factors.[1] On the supply side, gendered socialization is shown to depress women's political ambition and reduce their

likelihood of pursuing office (Fox and Lawless 2011; 2014; Fulton et al. 2006; Schneider et al. 2016). Women also face institutional barriers in party recruitment and nomination processes (Kang et al. 2021; Kitchens and Swers 2016; Lawless and Pearson 2008). On the demand side, voters often rely on gender stereotypes, perceiving women as less suited for political leadership, which can lead to harsher scrutiny and different expectations for female candidates (Bauer 2020a; 2020b; Bos 2011; Ditonto, Hamilton, and Redlawsk 2014; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993).

Recent studies employing experimental methods offer a more nuanced view of voter attitudes. Some find that women candidates face electoral disadvantages (Clayton et al. 2020; Ono and Yamada 2020; Teele, Kalla, and Rosenbluth 2018), while others report a modest female advantage or no systematic bias. A meta-analysis of 67 studies by Schwarz and Coppock (2022), for instance, finds that voters on average tend to favor female over male candidates. These findings suggest that voter bias may not be the primary explanation for women's underrepresentation in office.

However, this general absence of average voter bias does not mean that gender no longer matters in elections. Gendered voting patterns may still emerge in ways that are contingent on voters' attitudes and the information environment. Rather than asking whether female candidates are penalized on average, we examine how and under what conditions candidate gender influences vote choice, sometimes subtly, sometimes powerfully. Specifically, we theorize that candidate gender can serve two distinct heuristic functions for voters.

In this study, we investigate the mechanisms by which candidate gender influences voter evaluations and choices. Specifically, this study begins with the understanding that candidate gender plays two different roles in voters' evaluations of candidates. First, candidate gender can act as a positive heuristic, particularly for women voters who expect greater policy responsiveness from female representatives. Prior research shows that some voters, especially women, engage in co-gender voting in anticipation of substantive representation on gender-related issues (Dolan 2003; Herrnson, Lay, and Stokes 2003; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993). Second, candidate gender can also function as a negative heuristic, activating hostile sexist attitudes that diminish support for female candidates. Importantly, sexism is not confined to male voters; both men and women can hold hostile sexist beliefs (Cassese and Barnes 2019; Glick and Fiske 2001), but these beliefs may operate differently across groups.

This study investigates how these two mechanisms — substantive representation and hostile sexism — interact with the information environment to shape voter evaluations. We fielded a conjoint experiment in South Korea, a context characterized by the politicization of gender issues and gender divides in politics. Our design includes both low- and high-information conditions. In the low information condition, we examine whether candidate gender serves as a heuristic for substantive representation, expecting co-gender voting to emerge, particularly among women anticipating greater advocacy from female candidates. We also assess whether hostile sexism moderates this effect. Among male

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voters, stronger sexist attitudes are expected to reinforce support for male candidates. Among women, however, sexism may weaken co-gender preferences, leading to more neutral patterns. In the high-information condition, where candidates' policy positions are clear, we expect voters to rely less on gender cues. Instead, gender bias is expressed not through voter support for a specific candidate gender, but through their preference for certain policy positions.

The findings of this study highlight two distinct ways candidate gender influences voting: as a heuristic for co-gender voting and as a trigger for hostile sexism. These mechanisms can weaken one another, helping to explain why the average effect of candidate gender often appears minimal (see also Hansen and Dolan 2023). As shown in the Results section, hostile sexism affects both men and women, but in different ways — dampening male support for female candidates while neutralizing female voters' preference for women. Therefore, when considering the effect of candidate gender, a more nuanced understanding and interpretation of the results is necessary.

Our results also show that the impact of sexism depends on the information environment. In low-information settings, voters rely more on gender cues, and sexist attitudes more directly shape candidate evaluations. In high-information settings, however, gender bias shifts from penalizing female candidates to opposing candidates who support gender equality policies. In this sense, sexism is not activated by candidate gender per se but is instead channeled through opposition to gender equity policies. These findings highlight that even if voters do not explicitly discriminate against female candidates as some studies suggest (Dolan 2014; Schwarz and Coppock 2022; Teele, Kalla, and Rosenbluth 2018), gender bias persists in shaping electoral outcomes by influencing voter preferences on policy.

Finally, by focusing on South Korea, a country marked by persistent underrepresentation of women in politics, this study contributes to the broader literature by examining gendered voting dynamics in a non-Western context. In doing so, it enhances the external validity of theories that have been developed primarily in US and European settings, and provides a critical test of how candidate gender influences voter behavior in societies characterized by entrenched sexism and sharp gender polarization.

Disentangling the Effect of Candidate Gender

Candidate gender can influence voter decision-making in two key ways. First, it can serve as a *heuristic for substantive representation*, a shortcut that helps voters infer what kinds of policies a candidate may prioritize. Second, it can act as a *trigger for sexist attitudes*, especially among voters who hold hostile views toward women in positions of power. While both mechanisms are well established in existing literature, they are often treated in isolation. We integrate these perspectives to offer a more complete account of how candidate gender shapes voter behavior, and then theorize how *information environments* condition the relative weight of each mechanism.

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In low-information environments where voters lack detailed knowledge about candidates, demographic traits like gender become especially salient. A rich body of research shows that male and female politicians often prioritize different issues: women are more associated with policies related to welfare, education, and public health, while men are seen as more concerned with economic and security issues (Gidengil 1995; Seltzer and Heller 1997; Yildrim 2022). These patterns are commonly traced to differing socialization experiences (Beutel and Marini 1995; Huddy, Cassese, and Lizotte 2008). In the absence of issue-specific information, gender serves as an important political heuristic cue that voters can use to infer candidates' ideology and issue priorities (Dolan 2003; Gay 2002; McDermott 1998). This dynamic fosters *co-sex voting*: women prefer female candidates who are assumed to support women's issues, and men may prefer male candidates aligned with traditionally masculine priorities. In the South Korean context, previous studies have found that women are more supportive of female candidates and of policies such as legislative gender quotas (Kim et al. 2003; Lee 2013), suggesting that gendered heuristics matter in candidate evaluation. Conversely, women's representation is likely to produce opposing reactions among male voters, as more policies in favor of women can be interpreted by men as a threat to their status. The election of female candidates may heighten status anxiety among men (Kim and Kweon 2022) and an increase in women's social and economic status could be regarded as a challenge to men's masculinity and self-worth (Edwards 2006; Green and Shorrocks 2023; Kehn and Ruthig 2013).[2]

Hypothesis 1 Women (men) are more likely than men (women) to vote for female (male) candidates.

Candidate gender can also activate *sexist biases*, especially among voters with strong hostile sexist attitudes (Bracic, Israel-Trummel, and Shortle 2019; Cassese and Barnes 2019; Schaffner, Macwilliams, and Ntena 2018). These voters perceive female political leadership as a threat to traditional gender hierarchies and often question women's competence and legitimacy as leaders (Cassese and Barnes 2019; Winter 2023). Consequently, sexists have low levels of support for women's representation (Dahlerup 2006; Murray 2014). In the 2016 US presidential election, for instance, research showed that sexists with strong hostility toward women showed higher support for Trump in response to Trump's attack on Clinton for playing the so-called "women's card" (Cassese and Holman 2019). Importantly, hostile sexism is not exclusive to men. Some women also endorse sexist beliefs, often due to internalized norms or alignment with dominant group benefits (Cassese and Barnes 2019; Glick and Fiske 2001). Thus, while the heuristic perspective predicts co-sex voting based on shared identity and inferred policy alignment, the bias activation perspective suggests that sexism can shape candidate evaluations negatively across both male and female voters, regardless of shared gender.

The literature identifies several forms of sexism — hostile, benevolent, and modern — that may influence political behavior in distinct ways (Archer and Kam 2020; Beauregard and Sheppard 2021; Glick and Fiske 1996; 2001; Swim et al. 1995). This study focuses on hostile sexism, as it most directly captures overt hostility toward women in leadership. Indeed, Schaffner (2022) finds that hostile sexism is the strongest and most valid predictor of candidate evaluations.[3]

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Hypothesis 2 Voters, both men and women, who hold stronger sexist attitudes are less likely to support female candidates than those who hold weaker sexist attitudes.

In real world settings, candidate gender acts both as a *heuristic cue* and as a *trigger for bias.* These two mechanisms may operate in competing directions depending on the voter's own gender and level of sexism. For example, male voters high in sexism may exhibit reinforced in-group bias, while female voters high in sexism may experience cross-pressures between shared identity with a female candidate and negative attitudes toward women in leadership. Conversely, male voters low in sexism may be less inclined to favor male candidates. These dynamics can result in muted or inconsistent effects for certain subgroups.

Hypothesis 3 Strong sexist attitudes are likely to reinforce co-sex voting among male voters, while weakening co-sex voting for female voters.

Candidate Gender in High- and Low-Information Environments

Information environments vary across electoral contexts and significantly shape how candidate gender influences voter behavior. In South Korea, for example, local elections or the entry of unfamiliar candidates often create *low-information settings*, whereas national contests or media saturated campaigns typically represent *high-information environments* where candidate platforms are more widely known. In these high-information contexts, voters use a range of cues other than candidate gender when evaluating candidates in elections. McDermott (1997) shows that gender cues affect voters with minimal information the most and its heuristic effect may be limited by the presence of other heuristic information. Therefore, an information environment is important for understanding the effect of candidate gender on voting choices. Information rich contexts offer voters more opportunities to learn about candidates' qualifications for political leadership positions. de la Cuesta, Egami, and Imai (2022), for instance, show that partisan cues are less powerful in shaping voter choice in high-information environments. Similarly, we argue that the effect of candidate gender, both as a heuristic for substantive representation and as a stimulus for sexism, weakens when individuating information about candidates' policy positions on gender issues is available.

First, the effect of candidate gender as a cue for substantive representation is strongest when voters lack explicit information about where candidates stand on gender-related issues. In the absence of such information, voters infer candidates' policy positions from their demographic characteristics, including gender. However, in high-information environments, voters are better equipped to assess candidates' policy preferences directly. As a result, they are less likely to rely on gender-based heuristics to infer substantive representation (see also Andersen and Ditonto 2018; Dolan 2014; Jones and Brewer 2019; Sanbonmatsu 2002). In this context, co-sex voting is unlikely to occur (Erickson and Black 2001; Frederick and Streb 2008; Matson and Fine 2006; McDermott 1998). Importantly, the diminished effect of candidate gender does not mean that voters disregard

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gender entirely. Rather, gendered voting is more likely to be shaped by candidates' policy positions. Female voters tend to support candidates who advocate for gender equality, while male voters are more likely to oppose such candidates and policies.

Similarly, the effects of sexism vary across information environments. In low-information settings, where only demographic traits are visible, sexists are likely to respond negatively to female candidates, interpreting their gender as a threat to traditional gender hierarchies. Thus, strong sexist attitudes can lead to backlash against female leadership in these environments. Like other voters, sexists rely on ascriptive cues when individuating information is unavailable. However, when candidate-specific policy information is provided, even strong sexist voters may shift their focus from candidate gender to ideological alignment. Ditonto (2019) shows that sexists tend to seek less information about female candidates and evaluate them more negatively, even when policy preferences are aligned. Yet when such information is explicitly provided, it still has the potential to shape voting decisions. For example, Utych (2021) finds that while sexism predicts lower ratings for women candidates, it also depresses evaluations of Democratic candidates of either gender. When partisan information is present, the effect of sexism on support for male candidates is comparable to its effect on support for female candidates. This logic can be extended to gender-related policy information. We argue that in high-information contexts, policy content, not candidate gender, drives the preferences of sexist voters. Those high in hostile sexism, regardless of gender, are more likely to support candidates who oppose gender equality initiatives. Nonetheless, one could argue that entrenched gender stereotypes may continue to shape candidate evaluations, such that even when policy stances align, sexist voters still penalize female candidates due to perceptions of incompetence or weak leadership (Alexander and Andersen 1993; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993). If this is the case, then providing information about a candidate's position on gender equality policies may not be sufficient to fully counteract the influence of candidate gender.

Hypothesis 4 For both female and male voters, co-sex voting will not appear when information about candidate policy positions on gender issues is provided. Instead, female voters are more likely to support candidates who are supportive of gender equality policies while male voters are more likely to support those who oppose them.

Hypothesis 5 The effect of candidate gender will not differ among individuals by the strength of their sexism when information about candidate policy positions on gender issues is provided. Instead, sexists are more likely than non-sexists to prefer those who oppose gender equality policies than those who support them.

Case Selection: South Korea

We focus on South Korea to empirically examine our hypotheses. In recent years, gender issues have become central to sociopolitical conflicts (Kim and Kweon 2022), shaping electoral outcomes, particularly among younger voters (Kim

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2022). While younger men and women share views on some issues, they diverge sharply on gender equality (Park 2020). Contrary to the common expectation that younger generations hold more egalitarian views than their older cohorts, recent studies suggesting that hostility toward women is not significantly weaker among individuals in their 20s and 30s compared to those in their 40s and 50s. In contrast, clear gender differences persist, with men displaying higher levels of hostile sexism than women (Jeong and Lee 2019; Kim and Kweon 2022).

The politicization of gender issues has important implications for understanding political behavior in South Korea. Although the mean levels of hostile sexism in most groups appear to be moderate, in the political context that is highly politicized around gender issues, the activation of these attitudes can exert a strong influence on vote choice and partisanship. For example, Koo (2021) finds that individuals with high levels of hostile sexism were more likely to support a conservative candidate who had been criticized for sexist remarks. Similarly, strong sexist attitudes increase opposition to gender equality policies such as legislative gender quotas (Kwon and Yoon 2022).

Given these dynamics, South Korea offers a unique and important case for studying gender bias in politics. On one hand, the strong politicization of gender divides may give rise to gendered voting patterns, with women favoring female candidates (co-sex voting) and men supporting male candidates. On the other hand, the heightened salience of gender equality issues suggests that dispositional biases against women, particularly among those with strong sexist attitudes, regardless of gender, may override gender-based affinity in vote choice. These competing forces make South Korea an ideal context for examining the dual nature of gendered candidate evaluations: one shaped by co-sex voting, and the other driven by entrenched sexist attitudes, across both low- and high-information electoral environments.

Research Design

For empirical testing, we conducted original conjoint experiments with 1,645 South Korean adults using Qualtrics.[4] The survey is an online convenience survey, so the sample is not nationally representative of South Korean population. However, we used a quota sampling method based on gender, age, and region to ensure balanced representation across these attributes.

To ensure the quality of the responses, we excluded respondents who failed to pass an attention check at the beginning of the survey. We used two different conjoint experimental designs to test our hypotheses. Specifically, the respondents were randomly divided into one of two groups: low-information (N = 807) and high-information groups (N = 838). As shown in Table 1, subjects in the low-information group were presented with profiles of two hypothetical candidates who ran in a legislative election that only have candidates' demographic information.[5] Candidate profiles in the high-information group also included information about the candidates' policy positions and partisanship. For the latter group, we focused on three policy areas to provide information on policy positions: taxation, gender quotas, and regional quotas. Each of these policy

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Table 1. Conjoint table samples

Attributes	Low-info group profile example	High-info group profile example
Gender ∈	Female/Male	Female/Male
Age ∈	27/36/45/54/63/72	27/36/45/54/63/72
Education ∈	High school/ Community college/ University/Post-graduate	High school/ Community college/ University/Post-graduate
Wealth ∈	Less than 100m/ 100–300m/ 300–500m/ 0.5–1b/Over 1b	Less than 100m/ 100–300m/ 300–500m/ 0.5–1b/Over 1b
Occupation ∈	Laborer/Civil movement/ Business entrepreneur/Party official/ Professionals (Doctors, lawyers, professors, etc.)	Laborer/Civil movement/ Business entrepreneur/Party official/ Professionals (Doctors, lawyers, professors, etc.)
Region ∈	Seoul/Youngnam/Honam/ Gyeonggi/Gangwon/ Chungcheong/Jeju	Seoul/Youngnam/Honam /Gyeonggi/Gangwon/ Chungcheong/Jeju
Experience ∈	Previously elected/ Experienced an election (but not elected)/ Current incumbent/ First-time candidate	Previously elected/ Experienced an election (but not elected)/ Current incumbent/ First-time candidate
Party ∈	(not presented)	Minju/People's Power
Taxation ∈	(not presented)	Reduced taxation/EPR system
Gender quota ∈	(not presented)	Expended mandated quota/Reduced or removal of quota
Regional quota ∈	(not presented)	Expansion/Status quo/Removal

Notes: Respondents in each treatment group were provided with a pair of two profiles in 10 times. All attributes in each profile were randomly ordered and attribute levels were randomly generated.

areas taps into the salient political issues in South Korea encompassing the economy, gender conflict, and regionalism.[6] In the survey, each respondent was presented with 10 pairs of profiles. To ensure that the specific order of attributes did not affect participants' responses, we randomized the order of attributes in the profiles. Additionally, to examine potential concerns about profile distribution and potential interactions affecting the gender effect (de la Cuesta, Egami, and Imai 2022), we tested for possible two-way and three-way interactions among candidate gender, party affiliations, and their positions on the gender quota. As shown in the appendix, the estimated interaction terms were all statistically insignificant, suggesting that the effect of candidate gender is relatively consistent across party lines and candidates' policy positions.

In this study, we were interested in how sexist attitudes shape candidate evaluations. Following previous studies (Barnes, Beall, and Holman 2021; Beauregard and Sheppard 2021; Cassese and Holman 2019), we employed three widely used items to measure hostile sexism (Glick and Fiske 2001). These items included the following three statements: 1) most women fail to appreciate all that men do

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for them; 2) women seek to gain power by gaining control over men; and 3) most women interpret innocent remarks or acts as sexist. We asked the subjects about the extent of their agreement or disagreement with these statements on a five-point scale.[7]

For the purpose of analysis, we performed a factor analysis on the three items to construct an index measuring hostile sexism. To achieve this, a principal component analysis with varimax rotation was employed. The result shows that all three items strongly loaded onto a single factor, indicating that they represent a unidimensional construct. For the details of the factor analysis, see Appendix B.[8] In subsequent analyses, hostile sexism was recorded as a binary variable. We divided all respondents into high (1) and low (0) hostile sexism groups based on whether their average scores on the three hostile sexism items were above or below the median and then compared differences between these groups in both low- and high-information conditions.[9]

For our dependent variable, we were interested in candidate evaluations by respondents, particularly their voting support. After each pair of profiles, all respondents were asked to choose which one of the two candidates they wanted to vote for.

Analysis Results

In presenting the analysis results, we first demonstrated that voters rely on candidate gender when specific information about a substantive representation is unavailable. In such circumstances, both male and female voters would prefer candidates of the same gender, expecting descriptive representation to lead to substantive representation. Following this, we examine how individual levels of sexism influence preferences based on candidate gender, and finally, how these dynamics shift across different information environments.

Low-Information Environments

We begin by examining whether voters engage in co-sex voting when they lack detailed policy information about candidates. Following Leeper, Hobolt, and Tilley (2020), we estimated the marginal means for each candidate attribute using a regression-based estimator. As shown in Figure 1, individuals tend to maintain more favorable attitudes toward candidates of the same gender, confirming our first hypothesis (H1). Among female respondents, the marginal mean for female candidates was 0.52 and that for male candidates was 0.48. Among male voters, the marginal mean for female candidates was 0.47 and that for male candidates was 0.53. This gendered preference for candidate gender is noteworthy given that female and male respondents did not show different preferences for other candidate attributes. In other words, while female and male respondents largely shared preferences regarding candidate age, occupation, wealth, education, and region, they diverged significantly in their preferences for candidate gender, each prioritizing co-sex candidates.

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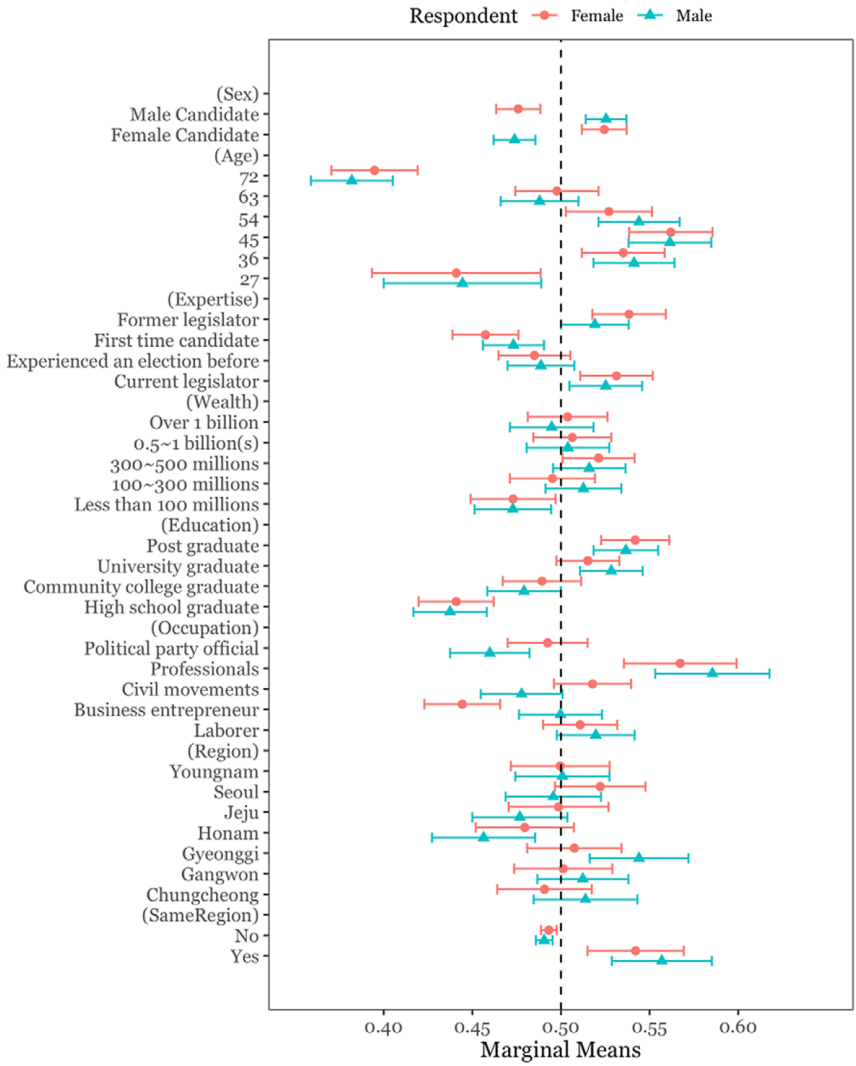

Figure 1. Marginal means by respondents' gender.

Next, we examined whether male or female respondents with high sexism exhibited different preferences than those with low sexism, particularly concerning male or female candidates. In particular, we partitioned our dataset by respondents' gender and levels of hostile sexism and subsequently estimated the marginal means for candidate attributes. "High HS" signifies respondents whose average score across the three hostile sexism items exceeded the median value among all respondents, while "Low HS" denotes those scoring below the median.

Figure 2 summarizes the findings. Panel (a) represents the marginal means of preferences of respondents with high hostile sexism toward male and female

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candidates, broken down by respondent gender. Panel (b) shows the same information for respondents with low hostile sexism. Panel (c) displays the difference in marginal means depending on the level of sexism.

Panel (c) shows that the direction of the sexism effect was similar among male and female respondents: those with high hostile sexism preferred male candidates over female candidates, confirming our second hypothesis (H2). However, Panels (a) and (b) reveal that the effects of hostile sexism on male and female respondents differed in important but nuanced ways. In Panel (a), male respondents with high hostile sexism showed approximately 0.08 greater preference for male candidates compared to female candidates. For male respondents with low hostile sexism (Panel b), the effect of candidate gender appears insignificant as weak sexism counterbalances the effect of gender-based preferences. This suggests that for male respondents with high hostile sexism, concerns about substantive gender representation and hostility toward female candidates influenced their candidate preferences in the same direction, resulting in strong co-sex voting.

For female respondents, the patterns were reversed. Female respondents with low hostile sexism (Panel b) demonstrated clear co-sex voting, preferring female candidates over male candidates by approximately 0.08. This indicates that low

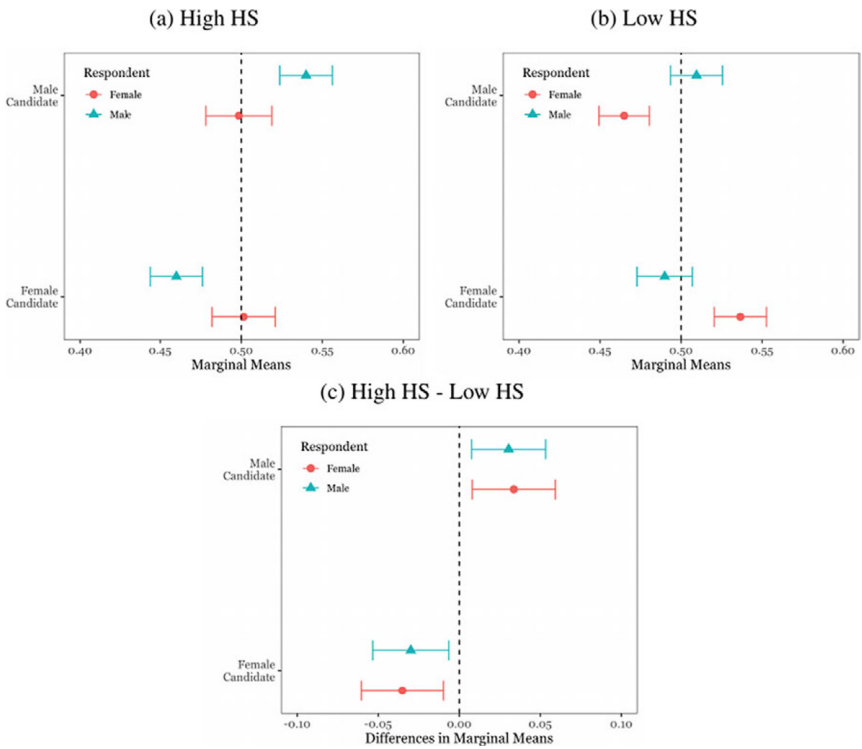

Figure 2. The effects of hostile sexism — low-information context.

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sexism and concerns about substantive representation reinforced their preference for female candidates. In contrast, female respondents with high hostile sexism (Panel a) showed no significant gender preference, as their sexist attitudes significantly weakened their baseline preference for female candidates.

These findings highlight how the two mechanisms — concern about substantive representation and sexism — can simultaneously drive respondents' preferences, sometimes reinforcing and sometimes counteracting each other. This explains why what appears to be statistically insignificant effects should be interpreted carefully. For instance, what appears to be the insignificant effect of hostile sexism on female candidates does not mean that women cannot be sexist, or that hostile sexism does not affect women. Compared to women with weak hostile sexism, those with strong sexism had higher levels of hostility toward female candidates. However, the effect of sexism was moderated by their baseline preference for substantive representation, leading to a statistically insignificant result.

High-Information Environments

Next, we examined how these dynamics change when candidate profiles included information about candidates' partisanship and their stances on three policies. Figure 3 presents the marginal means for each candidate attribute among male and female respondents. We expected respondents to use candidate gender as a heuristic to understand substantive gender representation in the absence of substantive information. However, when more accurate information was available, the respondents relied less on candidate gender cues. The results presented in Figure 3 corroborate these expectations.

In Figure 3, in contrast to the low-information environment, the marginal means for male and female candidates did not differ significantly from 0.5 among both male and female respondents, indicating that candidate gender ceased to affect respondents' voting choices when policy positions and partisanship information were available. Moreover, confidence intervals generally overlapped across respondent genders.

Instead, the candidates' stances on the gender quota produced a significant difference in marginal means between male and female respondents. Among the male respondents, the marginal means for candidates who preferred expanding the gender quota were approximately 0.46 among male respondents but 0.52 among female respondents. This was the opposite of that for candidates who preferred to remove gender quotas. The marginal means for such candidates were 0.52 among male respondents and 0.47 among female respondents. For the candidates who preferred to maintain the current system, the marginal means are not different from 0.5 both among male and female respondents. In other words, both the male and female respondents preferred candidates whose positions were consistent with their gender interests. Note that we did not observe a significant gender gap in the marginal means of candidates' stances on the estate tax and regional quota. A gender gap was observed only when the issue was relevant to gender issues. These findings support our fourth hypothesis (H4).

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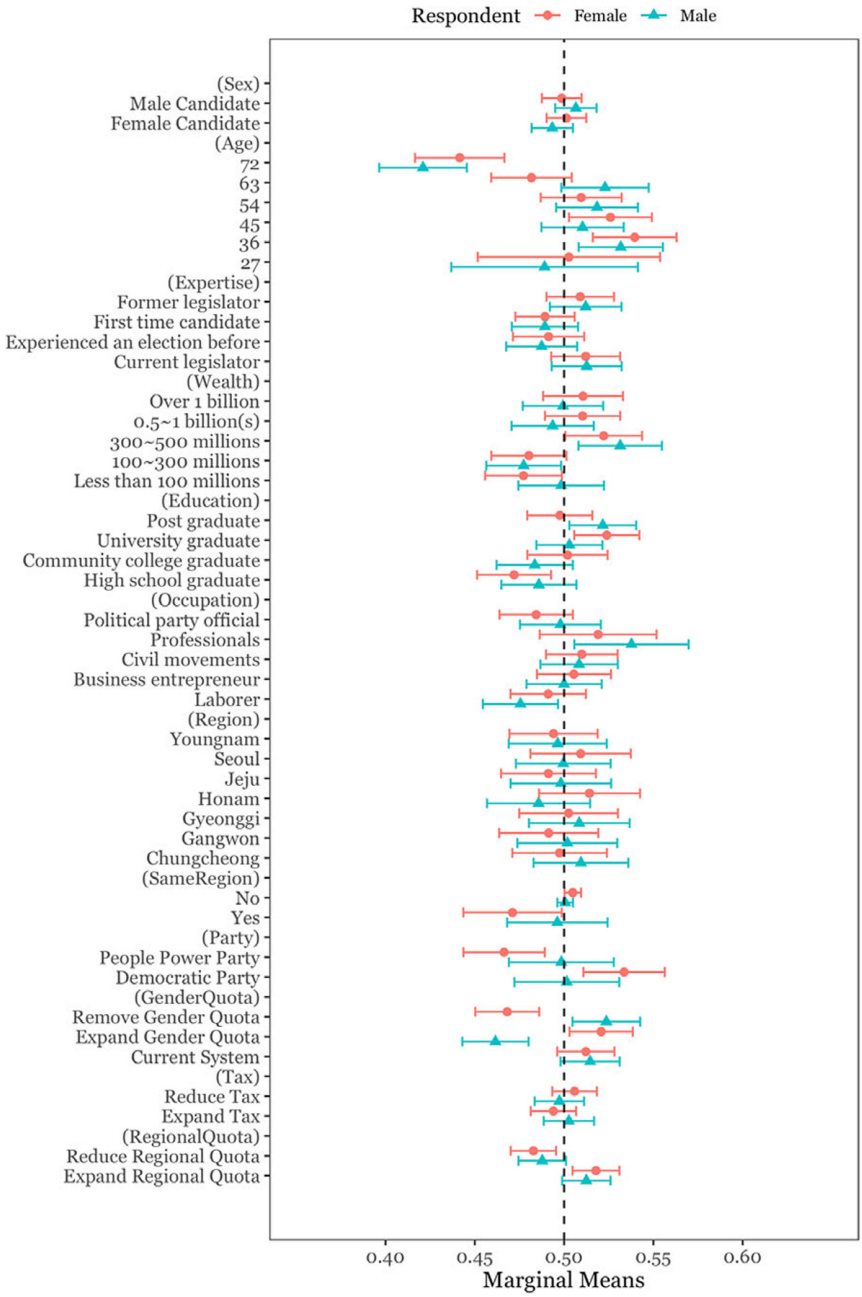

Figure 3. Marginal means by respondents' gender — high-information.

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Next, we examined the effect of individual sexism in a high-information context, as shown in Figure 4. In Panel (c), the differences in marginal means for male and female candidates were not significantly different from zero for both male and female respondents. In Panels (a) and (b), the marginal means for male and female candidates were not statistically different from zero among respondents. These results are in clear contrast with those shown in Figure 2. In a high-information context, candidate gender became ineffective as a cue, regardless of the strength of individual hostile sexism.

However, this does not mean that the influence of sexism disappears in candidate choice. Rather, sexism manifested itself in evaluating candidates' policy stances on gender quotas. In Panel (a), male respondents with strong hostile sexism preferred candidates who promised to reduce the quota (mm =

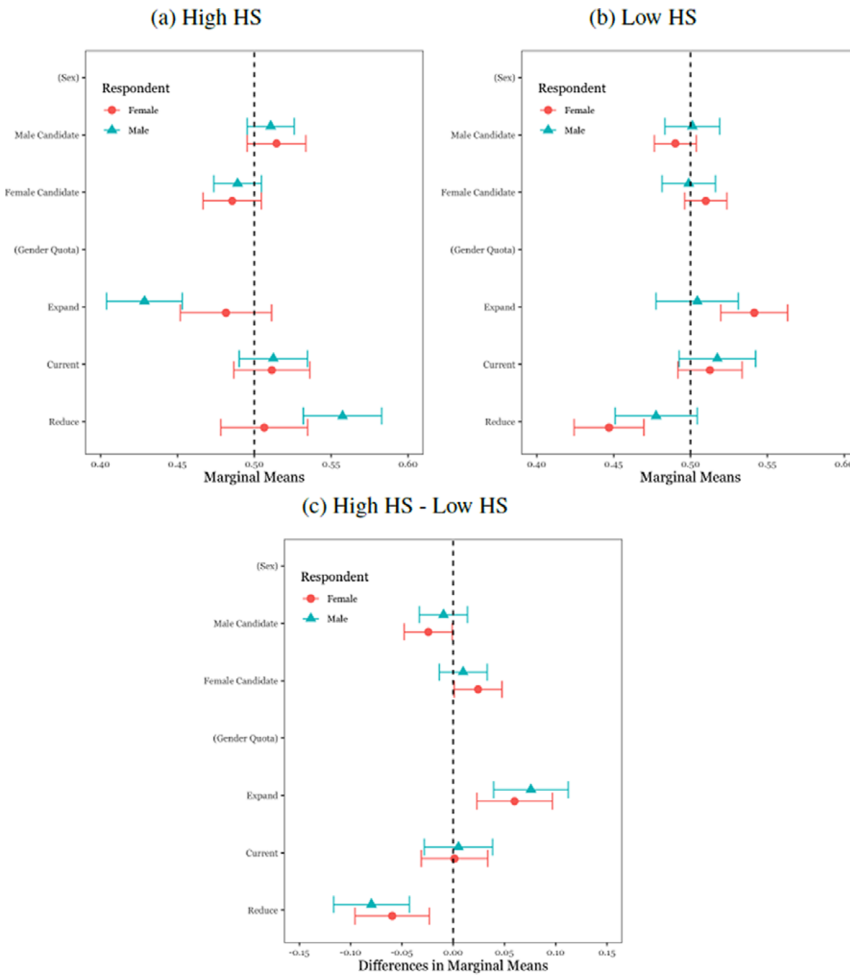

Figure 4. The effects of hostile sexism — high-information context.

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0.56) over those who promised to expand it (mm = 0.43). In contrast, female respondents with strong hostile sexism did not show distinctive preferences toward candidates based on their positions on the gender quota. This might be because sexist women's opposition to gender quota policies, motivated by their sexist attitudes, weakens their baseline preference for substantive representation based on their gender identity. In Panel (b), where respondents exhibited weak sexism, the candidates' positions on the gender quota did not affect male respondents' choices. This seemingly insignificant effect of candidate gender might have occurred because men's weak sexism eroded their baseline preference for substantive representation. In contrast, female respondents with weak sexism preferred candidates who promised to expand the quota (mm = 0.54) over those who promised to remove it (mm = 0.45). Overall, male respondents with high hostile sexism showed approximately 0.08 greater preference for candidates who proposed removing gender quotas compared to those with low hostile sexism. Similarly, female respondents with high hostile sexism demonstrated about 0.05 greater preference for candidates advocating quota removal than female respondents with low hostile sexism. These findings demonstrate that the effects of hostile sexism operate in the same direction for both male and female respondents, with sexist attitudes consistently predicting support for candidates who oppose gender quotas.

These findings support our prediction in the fifth hypothesis (H5). The findings suggest that candidate gender serves more as a signal of policy positions on gender issues than as a valence trait. Consequently, when voters are provided with information about candidates' policy positions, the influence of candidate gender diminishes.

Discussion and Conclusion

The impact of candidate gender on voter preferences has been extensively studied using conjoint experiments, leading to a growing body of research. While the findings from these studies are mixed, the general conclusion is that candidate gender has no effect on voting choice, or that voters generally prefer female candidates. In their meta-analysis study, Schwarz and Coppock (2022) concluded that voter bias against women candidates cannot be the main source of the underrepresentation of women in real world politics. However, these arguments and experimental results do not align well with the observed biases and antipathy toward female politicians that are still prevalent in the real world. This raises the question of the origin of this discrepancy. To address this puzzle, we posit that the discrepancy stems from a lack of understanding of what candidate gender represents to voters in their candidate evaluations.

This study argues that candidate gender can influence voters' choices in two ways. First, when voters aim to elect a candidate who can represent their gendered interests in an election, candidate gender serves as a heuristic for determining whether a candidate can effectively represent them. In this case, co-sex voting is likely to occur: male voters prefer male candidates, and female voters prefer female candidates. Second, candidate gender can influence a

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voters' choices by activating their sexist attitudes. When candidate gender is mobilized as a trigger for sexism, voters with strong sexism, regardless of gender, prefer male candidates to female candidates.

Previous studies have often interpreted the significance of candidate gender as evidence of sexism. However, because candidate gender can also serve as a cue for substantive representation, assessing bias based solely on the coefficient's significance can be misleading. Therefore, we analyzed the impact of sexism on candidate choice by directly measuring respondents' degrees of sexism and comparing those with higher and lower levels of sexism. Our results reveal a more nuanced relationship between sexism and the effect of candidate gender than suggested by previous research. Specifically, we found no effect of candidate gender among men with low hostile sexism and women with high hostile sexism. This can be attributed to the insignificant effect arising from co-gender preferences and the influence of sexism on candidate choice within these groups. These results imply that interpreting the absence of a candidate gender effect as an absence of sexism may be misleading. For instance, if female voters have incentives to support female candidates due to considerations of substantive representation, the lack of a candidate gender effect among female voters with strong sexism may not indicate that their sexism is not influencing their voting choices against women, but rather that the effect of sexism is counterbalanced by their preference for representation.

Additionally, we further demonstrate that the effects of candidate gender as a heuristic for substantive representation and the triggers of sexism vary according to the information environment. First, voters rely less on candidate gender when information about candidates' positions on gender issues, such as attitudes toward gender quotas, is available. These results suggest that the mixed evidence for candidate gender effects observed in previous studies may be attributed to the design of candidate profiles in conjoint experiments. If the profile fails to provide individuating information about a candidate's stance on gender-related policies, participants may infer this from the candidate's gender. When the candidate profile includes additional substantive information that helps voters infer the candidate's political leaning, as in Ono and Burden (2019), the effect of candidate gender is likely to diminish.

This study has further shown that when presented with information about candidates' policy positions that have significant gender implications, individuals with high and low sexism scores do not significantly differ in their responses to a candidate's gender. However, notable differences emerge in issues such as gender quotas, with those with strong sexism supporting the reduction of gender quotas, and those with weak sexism supporting their expansion. Hence, understanding whether sexism influences voting choices requires a broader perspective beyond mere attitudes toward candidate gender alone. Notably, as female legislators and candidates champion women's empowerment policies, opposition to these policies may contribute to the challenges faced by female candidates in winning elections. Nevertheless, it is important to differentiate between the effects of candidate gender and policy positions. Beyond descriptive representation, low public support for policies that aim to enhance women's status means that the substantive representation of women may be challenged when

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sexism is manifested through preferences for candidates who oppose gender equality policies, even when voters do not appear to discriminate against female candidates.

In summary, our study calls for a more nuanced interpretation of the candidate gender effect on voters' electoral choices. This is because the effects of candidate gender as a heuristic for substantive representation and a trigger for sexism are entangled in the results. As discussed previously, in some cases, the two mechanisms of candidate gender effects counterbalance each other. Therefore, what appears to be the statistically insignificant effect of candidate gender should not be readily interpreted as the absence of voter bias against female candidates. Rather, a more nuanced understanding of the role of candidate gender in voters' candidate evaluations is necessary. Additionally, we demonstrated that the influence of candidate gender, both as a heuristic and a trigger for sexism, is most pronounced when voters lack substantial information about policy positions. However, the waning effect of candidate gender in the presence of policy information does not indicate the eradication of gender bias. In this case, gender bias is manifested through voters' electoral choices based on policy positions rather than solely on candidate gender. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the impact of sexism on the choices of female politicians or those advocating for gender equality. Focusing solely on supply-side factors without addressing this issue presents inherent limitations in advancing the descriptive or substantive representation of women.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at http://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X25100251.

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NOTES

1. See Lawless (2015) for a comprehensive review.
2. Some may argue that support for female candidates may also be driven by both men's and women's expectations for descriptive or symbolic representation. While these are possible alternative mechanisms, as shown in the appendix, the analyses that combine respondents of both genders reveals that candidate gender has no statistically significant effect. More importantly, as presented in Figure 3, the candidate gender effect disappears once politicians' policy positions on gender equality issues are controlled.
3. While the existing literature identifies various forms of sexism, our paper focuses on hostile sexism. Modern sexism, often overlapping with hostile sexism, reflects denial of gender discrimination and opposition to gender equality efforts (Archer and Clifford 2022; Schaffner 2022; Valentino, Wayne, and Oceno 2018). Benevolent sexism has shown inconsistent effects, with some studies linking it to increased support for women (Cassese and Holman 2019; Glick 2019; Simas and Bumgardner 2017), and others to reduced support or no clear impact (de Geus, Ralph-Morrow, and Shorrocks 2022; Dwyer et al. 2009; Russo, Rutto, and Mosso 2014; Silvàn-Ferrero and Bustillos López 2007). We provide more detailed information regarding our operationalization of sexism in Appendix. In particular, Table B3 shows no significant variation between male and female respondents in

the distribution of high and low benevolent sexism. Figure D1 indicates that there was no significant variation in candidate gender effects by levels of benevolent sexism among either male or female respondents.

4. This experiment was approved by the Korea University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The approval number is KUIRB-2021-0383-01. For detailed information about the experiment, including participant recruitment, please refer to Appendix A.

5. Some may argue that expecting a low-information group to have absolutely no knowledge of parties or policies is unrealistic. However, instances of nonpartisan elections are not uncommon and can serve as relevant examples. For instance, in South Korea, candidates for superintendent education elections are not aligned with any political party. Similarly, from the first through third Local Assembly Elections, candidates ran without party affiliation. Moreover, voters tend to pay less attention to specific policy positions. These elections exemplify low-information scenarios. Nonpartisan elections were the most prevalent and durable municipal reform during the progressive era in the United States. See Kirkland and Coppock (2018) for more information about nonpartisan elections in the United States.

6. Since we provided high-information profiles that included both parties and policies, some may be concerned that it would be difficult to understand whether the weakening of the gender cue in the high-information group is due to the effect of party or policy. However, in prior experiments conducted with university students as a pilot reported in Kang and Kang (2022), the inclusion of political parties alone did not completely eliminate the tendency to vote for the same sex in South Korea.

7. Respondents can choose one of the following five options in their answer for each of the three statements. 1: "strongly disagree," 2: "Somewhat disagree," 3: "Neither agree nor disagree," 4: "Somewhat agree," and 5: "strongly agree."

8. The Eigenvalue of the factor is 2.26 and accounts for 75.4% of the total variance. All three items exhibited high factor loadings (above 0.85), suggesting that they measure a single underlying dimension. We also created an index for benevolent sexism measures for the purpose of a robustness check. The factor analysis shows that items for hostile and benevolent sexism are loaded on the two different dimensions, indicating that these two indices measure two distinct dimensions for sexism as predicted by previous studies (Beauregard and Sheppard 2021; Glick and Fiske 1996; 2001).

9. Note that we use actual responses, not factor loadings, to categorize respondents into high and low hostile sexism groups. The median value for all respondents was 2.67. Using this criterion, 735 individuals were classified in the high sexism group and 910 in the low sexism group. This discrepancy in numbers results from the discrete distribution of average values across the three hostile sexism items.

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