

The Scrutiny and Consideration of the Families of Male v. Female US House of Representatives Candidates

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Abstract

The issue of women's underrepresentation in politics is highly relevant in today's political climate. The purpose of this research is to determine whether female candidates face more scrutiny and consideration of their families and family lives than do male candidates during a campaign. To test the hypothesis that female candidates receive more scrutiny for their family and family lives than male candidates do, a sample of 45 male v. female US House of Representatives races (without an incumbent running) from the 2018, 2016, and 2014 elections was collected. Then, 600+ local newspaper articles were coded for positive, neutral, and negative mentions of the candidate's family. The data were examined across party lines and regions of the US to see if where a candidate runs or what party they belong to yields different results than the overall trends in the US show. The data suggest that overall, most mentions of a candidate's family are neutral. The data also suggest that over time, the mentions of family for male candidates have become more negative and the negativity surrounding female candidates' families has decreased. An implication of this research is that women only perceive that their families receive more scrutiny than their male counterparts, with the exception of female Republican candidates and female candidates in the Western region of the US.

Keywords: Women's Political Underrepresentation, Political Candidate's Family, Media Bias

1. Introduction

In 1917, Representative Jeannette Rankin of Montana became the first woman elected to the United States House of Representatives. In the 103 years since Rankin was first elected, 327 women have served in the House. By comparison, 10,710 men have served in the House since its founding in 1789. Four states- Alaska, Mississippi, North Dakota, and Vermont have not yet had a female member of the House. After the 2018 election, female membership in the House reached its highest total ever: 102 female representatives holding office. However, even after this increase in females in office, the deficit in female representation is evident.

It is a common misconception that the dearth of women in elected office is because of electoral failure; however, women are almost as likely to win electoral office as men when they decide to run¹. Hence, one key reason women are not elected in larger numbers is that insufficient numbers of women run for office. In elementary school, girls are just as ambitious as boys in their desires to run for president or other elected political offices. However, this desire drastically drops off for women as they reach high school¹. Given these dynamics, it is important to understand and research about why women are not running for office. Some reasons that women do not run include the challenges they know they might face during the campaign such as sex discrimination, sexist media coverage, harsh stereotypes, overestimation of their liberalism, the double-bind, and being held to higher standards than men^{2,3,4,5,6}. Similarly, many women have been socialized to prioritize their family and domestic roles over their professional roles outside of the home¹. Though this is changing, some women still feel they cannot have a political career and raise children at the

same time. Women are also likely to undervalue their competitiveness; they are more risk averse than males, and they are less likely to receive encouragement to run for office^{3,5,6,7}. Additionally, women candidates may face more scrutiny for their families and family lives than those of men, creating an environment that might discourage women from running for office. For example, just seconds into a recent marketing ad for the upcoming Bravo TV series, “In a Man’s World,” a woman says, “I didn’t know that running for office was gonna target my momhood.” Given that most people are very protective of their families, especially those with children, fear that the family might be exposed to heightened scrutiny and potential harm could seriously diminish the desire to run for office. For this reason, this study poses the question: Is the level of scrutiny geared toward the family life of a candidate, or the family itself, higher for female candidates running for the House of Representatives than male candidates?

The lack of gender diversity in Congressional elections clearly leads to a lack of diversity in Congress, which is detrimental to society because women benefit Congress in many ways. The presence of women in Congress has dramatic results on the laws being written, how things get done, and how much gets done^{3,4,5}. Some, though not all, of the gridlock in Congress could be helped by a higher presence of females. Though men can sometimes represent women well, men simply cannot understand all the needs and desires of women. When women are in the room, decision-making is fundamentally changed. Children are not voters and therefore get no voice in their own protection, yet they are a vulnerable population and so desperately need to be adequately protected. It is vital that there are people in the room accounting for the needs of children, and women tend to place a higher priority on accounting for the needs of children at much higher rates than men do⁸. Similarly, since women have been underrepresented in political office for many years, there is a need for new or changed legislation to protect the fundamental rights of women. States with higher female representation propose and pass more bills dealing with women’s, children’s, and family’s issues than states with lower representation of women^{9,10}. In addition to women bringing different viewpoints to Congress, women have proven to be more willing to work across party lines and are more eager to collaborate to accomplish good policy results instead of needing credit to boost their ego⁸. Skills that women possess and must bring to Congress help women, children, and families. An increased presence of women in Congress helps all citizens by alleviating gridlock and addressing the pressing problems facing our nation. For this reason, it is vital to figure out some of the numerous root causes of why women are underrepresented in Congress.

Though there are some females in Congress, the numbers are insufficient to affect institutional change. The critical mass theory states that 30% of a group is needed for a minority to have some effectiveness in changing or shaping an institution³. Neither branch of Congress has reached this percentage yet. The increasing number of women trickling into Congress and higher ranks of politics is making an impact on the laws being made to some extent, but women need to exceed this 30% threshold to really start making a difference. Therefore, studying why women are not running for Congress and are representationally disadvantaged is vitally important.

2. Literature Review

The issue of women’s underrepresentation in politics is pressing and highly relevant in today’s political climate. Therefore, there is existing research on a variety of topics evaluating different variables and gender in political campaigns. Some of this existing research studies why women are not running for elected office and the challenges they face when running that could contribute to their losses. For instance, women traditionally have not been in the career fields that typically lead to political positions, there are structural barriers such as the incumbency advantage, electoral gatekeepers recruit women 10% less than men to run for office, and there is a gender gap in political ambition that begins as early as high school and strengthens in college^{5,7}. All these factors contribute to dissuading women from running. Women also undervalue their competence compared to men of similar skill sets and situations and are more likely to perceive a competitive and biased electoral environment, thus making them less likely to run for office⁶. This prior research helps explain the barriers and challenges that solely women face, contributing to their underrepresentation in politics.

Some prior research suggests that stereotypes actually help candidates^{3,4} or have no effect on female candidates, specifically that they have no impact on evaluations of the policy abilities and traits of women candidates^{5,6,7}. Numerous studies suggest that in the past decade, women are not treated any differently than men are in political campaigns and that overall attitudes towards women in politics have changed for the better. Partisanship, ideology, and incumbency play a much larger role than sex does in voter attitudes, election outcomes, and news coverage^{1,3,4,5,13,17}. Similarly, some prior research suggests that there are no significant gender differences in the quantity of press coverage candidates receive, the amount of references to their sex, and in the traits and issues with which they are associated with¹. Prior research also suggests that voters hold some gendered attitudes, both positive

and negative, about women candidates. However, these attitudes are not related to the campaign results and do not affect people's votes. Many times these attitudes are developed by party beliefs and party traditions, especially within the Republican Party, and this finding supports the notion that parties play a much larger role in an election than sex of a candidate does¹⁶.

There are some political scientists that argue that female candidates are treated differently, and often worse, in campaigns, especially by the media, than male candidates¹. If one were to think about the coverage they have seen on TV news stations about women candidates, it does seem different than the coverage male candidates receive. For example, Hillary Clinton's pantsuits and general appearance always seemed to be brought up in her coverage when the suits and appearance of Barack Obama were seldom mentioned. Stereotypes are not new to politics, however. Older studies have shown that stereotypes harm female candidates^{3,4,5}. The climate surrounding women and their rights was quite different 20 to 30 years ago. Women were just coming on to the political scene in greater numbers after years of being restricted by traditional gender roles which often ascribed women to the home. Consequently, women as political leaders were a significant change that people were adjusting to, and many were not adjusting well. There was a moderate amount of overt and hostile sexism at the time. Many voters stated that they just did not trust a woman's capabilities in office and thought that she should still be home with the children. This type of outright discrimination or even hatred for female candidates is mostly gone now³.

However, while there is little outright hatred for female candidates that still remains, recent studies still find varying levels of discrimination against women in campaigns^{3,16}. One important finding is that female candidates do not start off campaigns at a disadvantage solely due to their gender in today's world as the majority of people are not overtly sexist anymore. These stereotypes must be activated by different types of communication during the campaign. This activation of feminine stereotypes (ex. thinking of women as nurturing, trustworthy, empathetic, and family-oriented) diminishes support for female candidates in elections but the activation of many of the same feminine stereotypes for male candidates actually boosts their support in elections by a small amount²⁵. Some researchers have found that stereotype activation depends on the type of information voters have about a candidate^{3,4}. Other researchers specify that stereotype activation only happens when individuals receive information on a woman that aligns with traditional feminine norms⁵. Overall, research suggests that activated feminine stereotypes will somehow affect the ways in which voters evaluate the abilities and qualifications of female candidates.

In sum, though prior research suggests that there have been significant changes in attitudes toward female candidates, more recent research finds that stereotypes still harm female candidates. As such, this study seeks to examine different ways in which stereotypes and gender norms harm female candidates in elections and thus potentially dissuade other females from running for elected office. As many researchers suggest, it is possible that the underrepresentation of females in politics could be due to numerous factors. These might include stereotypes, their presentation in media, gender bias, or the scrutiny they receive based upon their family lives (the subject of this inquiry), and perhaps other factors as well.

The scrutiny of media towards women seeking election for a political office can be harsh. For example, Sarah Palin received scrutiny for trying to run for Vice President while raising a young and special needs child. Barack Obama was not criticized in the same way for running for President while raising two young girls, so on the presidential level, there has been some history of scrutinizing female candidates for their family lives but not male candidates. Kelly Ayotte ran for New Hampshire's US Senate seat in 2010 and received numerous concerns that being elected to this position would not allow her the proper time to raise her two young children. The criticism is not just aimed at women with children, however. For example, Jari Askins was a single and childless woman in Oklahoma who ran for governor in 2010 amid many vicious speculations about her not knowing or understanding enough about the average Oklahoma family due to her lack of one¹⁶. Kelly Ayotte did end up winning her race despite this scrutiny but Jari Askins lost by a landslide (numerous factors came into play in this defeat). These two examples show the manner in which women candidates are scrutinized regarding their family structure in ways that men are not in politics today.

Because of prior research findings and historical attitudes towards women, the hypothesis for this study is that female US House of Representatives candidates will face more scrutiny and consideration of their families and family lives than men do. If female candidates are being judged more harshly based upon their family lives and their family members, then bringing this dynamic to light is important. Only then will the public be aware of these disparities and misrepresentational issues can begin to be reconciled. Given that women only perceive that their families are given greater scrutiny, then this research is important to dispel this myth, thereby minimizing this concern so more women might consider running.

3. Research Design

Many researchers have studied the broader stereotypes female and male candidates are judged upon while in office^{13,14,15,16,17,21,22,23}. In attempts to hone in on some of the true reasons that women are not running for elected office and thus that women are not in elected office, this research studies a more specific stereotype: the evaluation and scrutiny candidates receive regarding their families and family lives. This study specifically asks: How does the gender of a US House of Representatives candidate affect the evaluation and scrutiny they receive regarding their family and family life?

The independent variable measured is gender. The data on gender is then cross sectioned by the region of the US in which the election occurs. The data examined in the regional categories provides more insight on where the true issues with gender-based scrutiny lies. The data on gender is also cross sectioned along party lines in hopes to see the challenges women of each party face because Republican and Democratic candidates might face different battles during campaigns. This study only investigates open-seat races as these races will be the most competitive and the complexity of the advantages of incumbency are not relevant. Only races involving one man and one woman are examined to better focus on the nuances between men and women in media coverage. The data in this study is collected from the 2018, 2016, and 2014 election cycles for US House of Representatives races to study as these are the most current and relevant. There are 45 races that fit into these criteria, a sufficient number of cases to begin to detect patterns and trends and this is a big enough sample size to produce meaningful results. Cases were selected based upon data from the Ballotpedia database.

The dependent variable measured in this study is the scrutiny candidates receive regarding their family and family life. Data is collected from local newspapers from each race. This study only examines newspaper articles from three months prior to the election from each race in hopes to get the most pressing coverage of these candidates as these months are when the largest amount and most relevant coverage of the election will occur. The number of local newspapers is based on the number of articles available that cover the candidates within the specified time period prior to the election. This method provides a roughly similar number of articles for each race to keep data consistent. Local newspapers provide better coverage for these types of elections and are more likely to be consumed by the potential electorate. Using content analysis, the data from the newspaper articles was coded for positive, neutral, and negative mentions of the candidate's family and family life. Examples of positive mentions about the candidate's family and family life include admiration for the candidate as a parent balancing a job and career, praise for the candidate dropping his/her child off at school, or how they give back to their community by coaching a basketball team for their child. Neutral mentions would be simply a statement of information about the candidate's family. For example, "the candidate has two children and a husband who works in the field of agriculture." There are no context clues that are positive or negative about this situation, so it remains neutral. Negative mentions would include critiquing of a candidate for his/her family life. For example, mentioning the horrors of a single woman running for office and not understanding what families want because of that, or a child that is in rehab because of the candidate's deficient parenting must say that the candidate also cannot be in office would both be counted as negative mentions. Such negative coverage often subtly (or not so subtly) indicates why the candidate should not be in office. According to this coding scheme, each type of mention for each candidate in a race is counted and recorded in the data set.

Based on prior research, this study has a control for the partisanship of the district and candidate competitiveness. To control for the partisanship of the district, a PVI data set was examined to see how the voting pattern in each district varies from national trends. The votes in each race's district for the presidential election were also examined to see how those percentages break down to control for partisanship of the district. This study measures candidate competitiveness by examining the amount spent on the campaign by each candidate. Data is collected from the FEC exclusively to get this information on the total amount raised for each candidate's campaign as candidates who are more qualified will raise more money³. The previous experience of each candidate is also examined to see whether they have held an elected office to control for the candidate's competitiveness. These two controls will help focus on the goal of this study and cut out some of the extraneous variables.

4. Data Analysis

Overall in this study, out of 613 articles read, the family of a candidate was mentioned 346 times. Sixty-four percent of the mentions of a candidate's family were neutral. Positive family mentions occurred 24% of the time and negative family mentions occurred only 12% of the time. Since most family mentions were neutral, it can be inferred that most

sources are just trying to give the simple facts about the candidates and sometimes their family is included in that biographical information. Some examples of the neutral mentions that were recorded include general statements that a candidate had a husband/wife and children, ran their family business, that the candidate is the daughter of farmers, the candidate is the son of immigrants, and the location of their family’s residence for the past few years. Many of the positive family mentions were the candidate or the newspaper author trying to use family and some of the better things happening in their family to make the candidate look more appealing. Some examples of positive family mentions include how inspiring it is that the candidate is the first in her family to attend college, how a candidate is a true family man/woman at home and would never do anything to disrupt families, and discussions of how a candidate’s TV ad takes a lighthearted look at a candidate’s happy family life. The negative examples were typically candidates bashing their opposing candidate’s family or the newspaper revealing negative aspects of the family life of a candidate. Some negative examples include how a candidate’s life was derailed in high school due to a teen pregnancy, allegations of cheating and sexual assault against the candidates, and accusations of using family money or family prestige instead of merit to gain a leg up in the election. This research shows that most mentions of family of electoral candidates are neutral with negative media coverage occurring only in a small minority of cases.

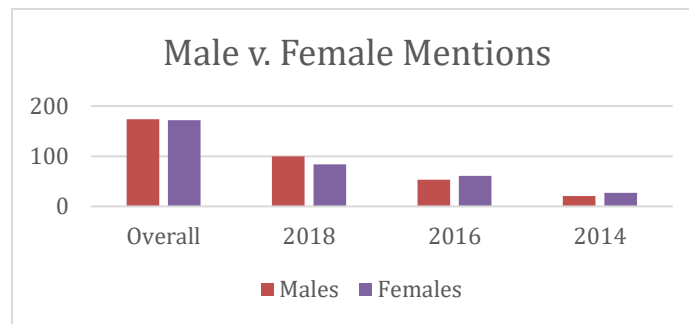


Figure 1. Male v. female family mentions

The data from Figure 1 states that in the most recent 2018 election campaign, the families of males were mentioned 100 times while the families of females were mentioned only 84 times. In the 2016 election, families of the female candidates were mentioned more with a total of 61 mentions while males only received 53 mentions. In the 2014 election, again the families of female candidates were mentioned more with a total of 27 mentions while male families received only 21 mentions. The fact that the most recent election, where 54% of family mentions were about a male candidate and only 46% of family mentions were about a female candidate is a change from the prior two elections where female’s families were mentioned more frequently. This switch could potentially signify a shift in attitude of Americans away from thinking about the families of female candidates more than the families of male candidates.

At the core of this research is the data concerning the scrutiny that candidates receive for their family life. Overall, there are 2.8% more male negative family mentions than there are female negative family mentions. There are 10.6% more neutral female family mentions than neutral male family mentions and there are 7.8% more male positive family mentions than there are positive female family mentions. These figures show that overall, males receive a little more negative and positive attention in the media than the families of females do, in contradiction to the hypothesis of this study.

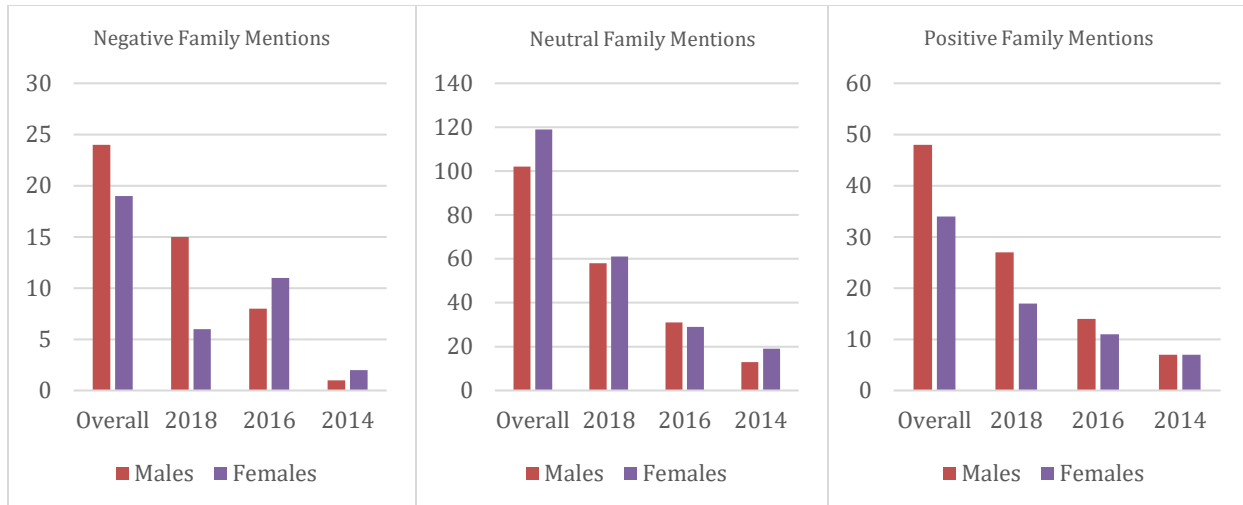


Figure 2. Negative, neutral, and positive family mentions

Figure 2 demonstrates that in 2014 and 2016, female candidates' families had 2.6% and 2.9% more negative mentions than males did, respectively. However, in 2018, the families of male candidates had 7.9% more negative mentions. This data shows that over time, the mentions of family for males have gotten more negative and the negativity surrounding female families has actually decreased. Overall, female family mentions were neutral 69% of the time while male family mentions were neutral 59% of the time. Figure 2 demonstrates that every year, male candidates' families had more positive mentions than the families of female candidates. In 2018, male positive family mentions were about 7% more frequent than that of a female family mention, in 2016 positive male family mentions were about 8% more positive than females, and in 2014, male positive family mentions were about 11% more frequent than positive female family mentions. These data reveal that over time, male positive family mentions have gone down in frequency.

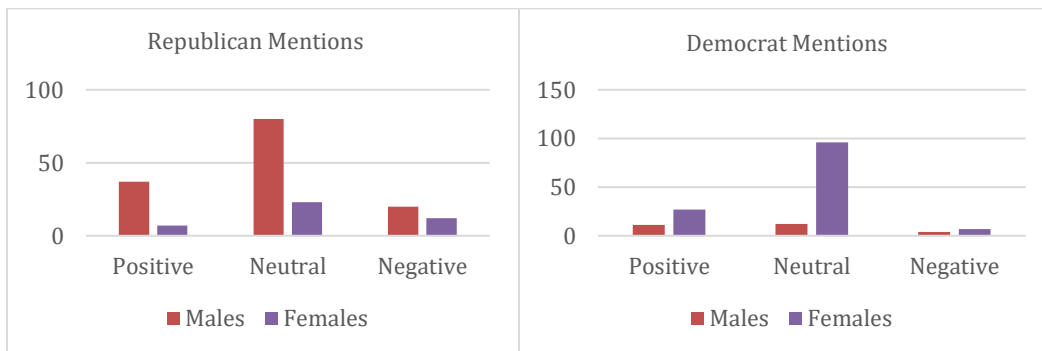


Figure 3. The nature of Republican candidates' v. Democratic candidates' family mentions

Figure 3 notes that Republican female candidates had more negative mentions than Republican male candidates by a margin of 14%. For the Democratic Party, the families of female candidates received more negative mentions than the families of male candidates by a margin of 5% but they also receive more positive mentions than the families of male candidates do. Republican female candidates also experience more negative family mentions than Democrat female candidates by 13%. The comparison of mentions between Republican and Democrat male candidates are similar, but Republican male candidates do have about 4% more negative family mentions than Democrat men do. Overall, Republican candidates as a whole face more negative mentions of family than Democrat candidates do. Specifically, Republican female candidates receive more scrutiny concerning their family than any other candidates. For Republican female candidates, the hypothesis of this study is supported in that females receive more scrutiny for their family life than Republican men do and than Democrat women do.

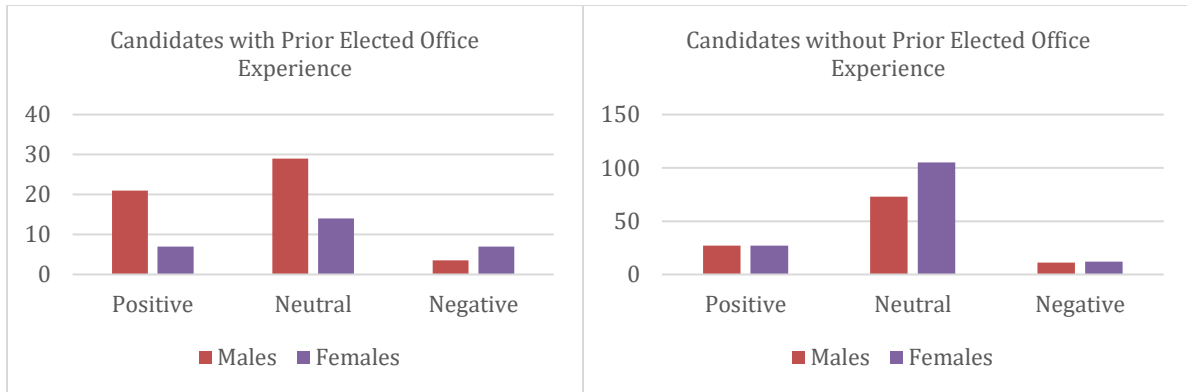


Figure 4. The nature of family mentions for candidates who have prior elected office experience v. candidates without such experience

The results were also evaluated according to the prior job experience of the candidates. Prior experience is coded as holding any other elected office (ex. State Senator, mayor, State House of Representatives member). Figure 4 shows that for experienced men and women, the families of female candidates receive 5% more negative family mentions and 8% less positive family mentions than those of men. For candidates who do not have experience with prior elected offices, female candidates receive 6% less positive family mentions.

The geographical region of the United States in which the candidates were running was also examined. For this research, the South includes the states of Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, Kentucky, Georgia, Florida, West Virginia, Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina. The west includes the states of Alaska, Hawaii, California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Nevada, Utah, Wyoming, Montana, and Colorado. The Northeast includes the states of Delaware, the District of Columbia, Pennsylvania, New York, Vermont, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New Hampshire, and Maine. The Midwest includes the states of North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Iowa, Missouri, Montana, Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio. The Southwest includes the states of Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and Oklahoma. The region that has the most frequent number of positive family mentions is the South. Historically, Southerners have placed a large emphasis on and immense pride in their families and family lives so this finding does concur with common perceptions.

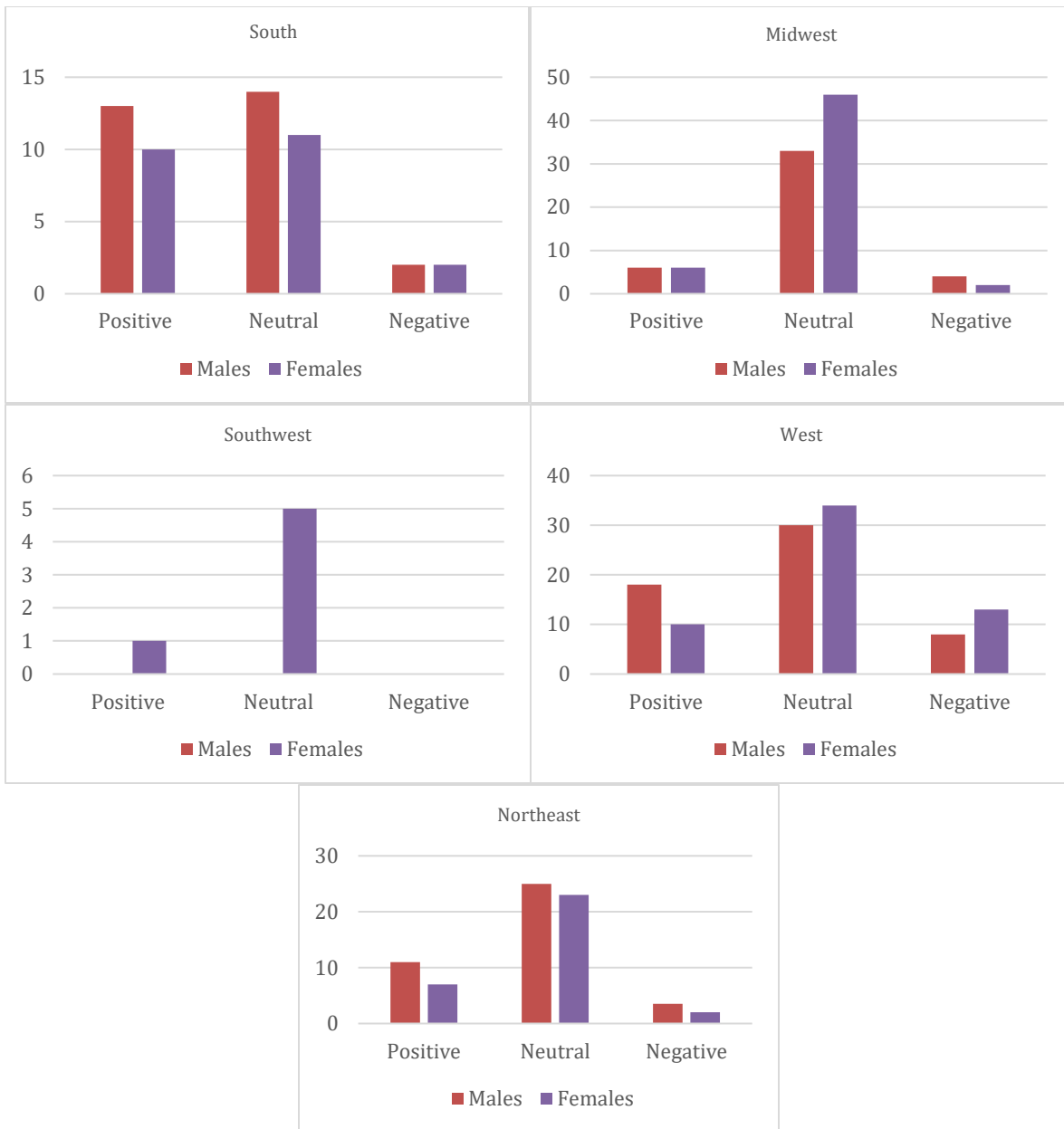


Figure 5. The nature of family mentions in the South, Midwest, Southwest, West, and Northeastern regions of the US

In the South, families of males are mentioned about 10% more than families of females are mentioned. The frequency of positive, neutral, and negative mentions in these categories are similar to each other so a bias against the families of female candidates is not present in the South, according to this research. In the Midwest, families of female House candidates are mentioned 11% more than families of males are mentioned overall. As Figure 5 notes, most family mentions are neutral in the Midwest. Male’s families are mentioned negatively 6% more frequently than female House candidates’ families are. In the Southwest, there were less family mentions than any other geographical region, hence less data for this category exists. Female candidates’ families were mentioned 6 times and male candidate’s families were mentioned 0 times. Eighty-three percent of the female family mentions were neutral and the rest were positive family mentions. As Figure 5 notes, the West has the most frequent negative family mentions overall. In the West, families of males and females are mentioned at very similar rates with female mentions only surpassing the number of male mentions of family by 0.5%. Male candidates’ positive family mentions are more frequent than female

candidates' positive family mentions by 14.6%. The female candidates also have more negative family mentions than male candidates do by a rate of 3%. These results seem to show that in the Western region of the United States, there is a bias against the families of female candidates and they are evaluated with more scrutiny, as was predicted in this study's hypothesis. The Northeastern region has more male candidate family mentions than female candidate family mentions by a rate of about 28% overall. There are about 15% more negative male candidate family mentions than there are female candidate negative family mentions, showing that in contrast to this study's hypothesis, in the Northeast, the families of male candidates receive more scrutiny than females.

5. Conclusion

This research suggests that overall, women only perceive that their families are talked about more frequently and in a more negative light than the families of male candidates, contrary to the hypothesis of this study. The data from Republican candidates and candidates with prior elected experience align with the hypothesis of this study as in both groups, female candidates receive more scrutiny for their families and family lives than their male counterparts. Contrary to the prior 2016 and 2014 elections, in the most recent 2018 election, negative mentions of families of male candidates were more frequent than that of female candidates, so times are changing. The media content about mentions of a candidate's family is becoming more equal in nature and it seems as if there even is a swing in the direction of scrutinizing male families, though more research will need to be done in the future to confirm this trend. A future area of research to examine is to determine whether or not electoral success is diminished more for male or female House of Representative candidates when they receive scrutiny for their family and/or family life, which will lead to more insights about why women aren't represented in politics equal to men yet.

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