

# MASSACHUSETTS AND WASHINGTON: IMPACTS OF REGIONAL PREJUDICE AND IMPLICIT BIAS ON FEMALE REPRESENTATION IN STATE LEGISLATURES

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## Abstract

*Do hidden regional attitudes towards women explain the variance in the share of female candidates across state legislatures? This paper aims to establish the variable of regional implicit bias towards women as an explanation for the disparate share of female candidates elected to state legislative bodies in Washington and Massachusetts. Building upon previous literature that explores the influence of the cultural context upon election outcomes, the author argues that greater implicit bias against females will result in lower levels of female candidate emergence and female candidate success. This relationship was tested comparing Gender Career-Family Implicit Bias scores (IAT). Results demonstrate that Washington residents have a lower average IAT, while Massachusetts citizens have a greater bias. Likewise, Massachusetts was found to have lower levels of emergence and candidate success in comparison to WA. The author offers various mechanisms (political history, feminist history, presence of female role models) that may inform these biases. The author concludes with policy recommendations to normalize women in Massachusetts politics.*

## Introduction

Massachusetts is regarded as the most liberal state in America, with an overwhelming 78% of Massachusetts legislators identifying as Democrats (NCSL, 2018). It has developed a national reputation as an incubator of progressive policies and center of progressive thinking. Although the state of Washington currently has a Democratic trifecta, one in which the Democrats control the governorship and both houses of the state legislature, the partisan composition within the state is not dominated by the Democrats. Numerous scholars have demonstrated that states which favor liberals elect more women to state legislative seats (Arceneaux, 2001; Norrander & Wilcox, 2008; Sanbonmatsu, 2006). Fox & Lawless (2012) explains this trend when they found that women are significantly more likely than men to express progressive attitudes, and thus eligible women candidates overwhelmingly align with the Democratic Party. In light of this scholarship and Massachusetts' overwhelming liberal representation in the state legislature, one would expect the share of female representatives in Massachusetts to be higher than the share of female representatives in Washington. This expectation is bolstered by the work of Palmer and Simon (2006), who introduced the idea that certain demographic and political characteristics render areas "women-friendly" and increase the election of female candidates<sup>1</sup>. As illustrated by Table 1 (See Appendix), Massachusetts ranks higher than Washington in five out of the six categories. This finding suggests that Massachusetts is more "women-friendly" than Washington and should thus have a higher share of elected female representatives. Despite these environmental and partisan advantages, Massachusetts lags far behind the near-parity that Washington has attained in the female representation in state legislatures. Washington currently has a share of 37.4% of women in the state legislature, while Massachusetts has only a mere 25.5% of seats held by women. This paper aims to highlight potential state variations that could explain the puzzling difference between the share of Washington and Massachusetts female representation in the legislature.

While possible explanations for this difference in female political representation is multifaceted and necessarily extends beyond the scope of this paper, existing scholarship has pointed to the impact of "cultural context" (Windett, 2018) and hidden "social bias" (Norris, 2006) in the formation of female ambition and perceptions of the electorate. Using the Harvard Gender Career-Family implicit bias test (IAT score) as a metric, it is expected that Massachusetts has a lower share of female representatives in the state legislature because residents possess a greater underlying prejudice against females than Washington residents. Consistent with this expectation, the comparison of the average IAT scores of both states reveals that Massachusetts has a higher average implicit bias towards females than Washington. Additional evidence

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<sup>1</sup> Six characteristics that are positively related to the election of women include: proportion urban, relative median income, percentage of college graduates, proportion of African Americans, proportion of Hispanics, and proportion of foreign-born residents (Palmer & Simon, 2006).

also suggests that this bias may negatively impact both female candidate emergence and female candidate success, which may explain the lower share of females in the Massachusetts state legislature. I propose that these differences in implicit bias can be attributed to variance in several regional characteristics, including female role models, political history, and feminist history.

## Review of Literature

The question of whether sexism and female stereotypes influences the lack of gender parity in politics underpins the seminal body of existing gender and politics research. Scholars sharply disagree on its resolution; thus, it remains one of the most pressing subjects of research and continues to permeate the public consciousness. Schreiber and Adams (2008) contend that women are equally as successful in attaining office as men when they run for office, rejecting the idea that voting behavior is influenced by sexist attitudes towards women. However, many recent scholars have identified a strong correlation between vote choice, female stereotypes, and sexist attitudes (Schaffner et. al, 2018; Ransford, 2007; Wayne et. al, 2018; Lizotte, 2018). It has been noted that a culture in which “sexism and discrimination [is] rife” constitutes a “significant barrier for female participation” (Briggs 2000; Pini & McDonald 2011). A similar “social bias” (Norris, 2006) towards women was found to negatively impact the electorate’s perception of a female candidate’s “abilities, qualifications, and experiences” (Norris, 1993) and thus negatively impact electoral outcomes.

Although the share of women in politics has grown on the whole, this increase has not been symmetric across the United States or the world. Seminal research upon the impact of regional culture in the share of female representation notes that “where favorable conditions exist more women are likely to be elected” (Diamond, 1977, p. 29). Thus, in order to explain state differences in female representation and participation in politics, scholars have pointed to regional “cultural contexts” (Magin, 2011), or the differences in “the dominant values and attitudes towards the role of women in society and political life” across disparate areas (Norris, 1993). Scholars have attributed differences in these underlying prejudices to “religion” and “political heritage” (Magin, 2011), as well as the prevalence of “female role models” (Pini & McDonald, 2011).

State cultural characteristics and underlying sexist attitudes about women have been documented to impact the degree of female representation in state legislatures as a result of two essential aspects of candidacy: (1) female candidate emergence and (2) election performance. First, the environment created by the prevalence of underlying female stereotypes inhibits female selection into politics by reducing female political ambition. Atkeson and Carrillo (2007) found, for example, that the likelihood for women to run for higher political office is significantly increased in states where women are

perceived as “equal in capabilities”. Likewise, Windett (2008) found that regional characteristics can either discourage or encourage women to run for public office, arguing that they constitute “*the primary factor* influencing female candidate emergence,” and can activate or deactivate the political ambitions of potential female candidates.

The second potential detriment of regional prejudicial attitudes lies in female election performance. Scholars have suggested that female politicians may be negatively evaluated by voters with sexist attitudes because stereotypical feminine qualities are inconsistent with the masculine traits deemed necessary for leadership roles (Schneider & Bos 2014; Koenig et. al 2011). As a result of these attitudes, female candidates may not be perceived as qualified public servants, or male candidates may be automatically associated with superior leadership and governance—both of which would negatively impact vote choice. Following the 2016 United States Presidential election, a study conducted by Schaffner and Wayne (2016) found that sexist attitudes strongly predicted vote choice, and thereby influenced the 2016 election outcome. Windett (2008) similarly found that as the culture of a state became less traditionalistic and more progressive, women were not subject to the same gendered scrutiny and thus a “drastic increase of 25.12 percentage points in the probability of a successful female primary candidate” was observed.

This rich foundation of scholarly research suggests that regional differences in ingrained attitudes and subconscious prejudices towards women may work to explain state variances in female political representation in the legislature. Therefore, when this framework is applied to the present case it is expected that:

*Massachusetts residents have a stronger subconscious gender bias than Washington residents, and this contributes to the smaller share of female representation in the Massachusetts legislature.*

## Discussion of Methods

In order to measure the cultural environment, several metrics have been developed, including the “woman-friendly index” (Palmer & Simon, 2008) and “sociopolitical female subculture score” (Windett, 2008). State-level cultural characteristics, quantified by demographic trends in gender participation in education, the workplace, and political life, were used to extrapolate the “sociopolitical subculture score” by state (Windett, 2008), while demographic data relating to partisan makeup, race, and education were aggregated to compose the “woman-friendly index” (Palmer & Simon, 2008). However, each of these tests fail to capture the authentic attitudes and subjective beliefs held by the residents, basing predictions

about regional culture upon quantitative demographics. In-depth qualitative analyses have also been conducted to assess attitudes about gender (Briggs 2000; Ransford et. al, 2007), but these tests are necessarily limited by scope. Another prominent concern is that these tests fail to capture regional *subconscious* biases that inform attitudes about women and impact voter choice.

Alternatively, in order to gauge these underlying regional attitudes about women, a computerized test formulated in 2006 measures unconscious gender bias or “internalized sexism” of participants (Heldman, 2012). Termed the “Gender Career-Family Implicit Bias test” (IAT), this Harvard program measures the tendency for which individuals associate men with careers and women with family. Implicit bias is an integral part of the “social bias” and “cultural context” (Magin) as described by previous scholars, because it impacts the electorate’s perceptions of a female candidates. A high Gender IAT score could reflect a voter’s automatic association between men and political careers, and thus illustrate the disassociation with females and leadership, and perception that a female candidate may not have the proper “abilities, qualifications, and experiences” to serve (Norris, 1993). In “How Unconscious Sexism Could Help Explain Trump’s Win”, journalist and Yale graduate Carl Bialik points to the results of IAT tests and HCD research to argue that subconscious bias impacted vote choice in the 2016 United States Presidential Election. Jess McIntosh, director of communications for Hillary Clinton, similarly cited “internalized misogyny” as a sway in 2016 vote choice (Bialik, 2016). Although research about gender implicit bias is limited, scholars have dedicated great attention to a very similar Race IAT and have found that this test *does* predict prejudicial behavior and racial discrimination (Oswald et. al, 2013; McConnell & Leibold 2001; Greenwald 2006; Rooth 2010). These results indicate that the Gender Career-Family Implicit Bias may also have the potential to predict hidden prejudicial attitudes that inform voter behavior and influence a woman’s decision to run, which would explain the variance of female representation.

**Data & Findings**

The hypothesis was tested by aggregating the responses of the Gender Career-Family Implicit Association Test from 2017 for Washington (n=5200) and Massachusetts (n=5826). This test presents the users with an assortment of words and they must subsequently categorize them into groups of “career” and “family”. The mean of these test scores was taken for each state, and it was observed that the average of Washington participants was lower (.33) than the average for Massachusetts (.35). After conducting a T-Test, the mean difference was found to be statistically significant (p=.97) as demonstrated by Figure 2. These findings suggest that Massachusetts residents have a stronger implicit bias than those in Washington.

Gender Career-Family IAT			
	Mean	SD	n
Massachusetts	.35	.37	5836
Washington	.33	.37	5200

$\alpha = .05$                       *Test Statistic t = 1.9658*  
 $H_0 = \mu_{MA} > \mu_{WA}$                $\mu_{MA} > \mu_{WA}$     *P - value = .9753\**  
 $H_A = \mu_{MA} < \mu_{WA}$                $\mu_{MA} < \mu_{WA}$     *P - value = .0247*

**Figure 1**

*Data source: Project Implicit*

According to Colin T. Smith from *Project Implicit*, those with a “strongly liberal” ideology tend to score around .3, those identifying as “moderately liberal” around .4, and those “neutral” or “slightly conservative” score around .45 on the IAT Gender Career-Family test. The state of Washington scores significantly lower than what would be expected for such an ideologically diverse state, juxtaposed with Massachusetts’ relatively high IAT mean score for a “strongly liberal” state. This comparison underscores the salience of the difference between Washington and Massachusetts’ IAT mean scores (.02).

	Mean IAT	Percent of Females in State Legislature
Massachusetts	.35	25.5%
Washington	.33	37.4%

**Table 2**

As demonstrated by the table above, a higher mean IAT is associated with a lower percentage of females in the state legislature (Table 2). The aforementioned findings are consistent with the expectation the smaller share of female representation in the Massachusetts state legislature may be attributed to the higher implicit bias of Massachusetts residents than Washington residents.

**Discussion**

As articulated previously, subconscious regional prejudices may systematically exclude women from politics by (1) restricting female emergence into politics and (2) lowering success rates of female campaigns. In the 2018 Massachusetts primary, only 43% of districts had a female candidate on the ballot for the state house while 60.2% of all tickets for the Washington state house general election had at least one female candidate. This relationship suggests that Massachusetts’

higher implicit bias may restrict female candidate emergence. Furthermore, out of the 21 *contested* 2018 Massachusetts primary elections that included at least one female on the ballot, only 33% of the female candidates were elected. Comparatively, in the Washington general election, 65% of women who ran in a contested election were elected. This substantive gap in female candidate success rate suggests that higher implicit biases in Massachusetts has an adverse effect on election outcomes and contributes to the smaller proportion of female political representation in the state legislature. Although causality is difficult to ascertain, these findings further suggest that the share of female political representation may be attributed to the impacts of implicit bias.

Implicit social cognition is developed by interactions with one's environment and indicative of engrained cultural attitudes. Therefore, it is necessary to assess the mechanisms by which different regional implicit biases may have developed in Washington and Massachusetts. Recent studies conducted by Nunn (2009; 2012) offer statistical evidence that regional historical developments have long-term impacts on "deeply held beliefs" and contemporary attitudes (Nunn, 2012, p.2). Citing Nosek (1999), Nunn (2012) suggests that these historically influenced beliefs are demonstrated in the results of gender implicit bias tests. Similarly, Giuliano (2017) extends the influence of regional history to gender roles and politics, stating that "differences in cultural norms regarding gender roles emerge in response to *specific* historical situations but tend to *persist even after the historical conditions have changed.*" Although the present condition of women in society has dramatically shifted from historical situations, these studies suggest that differences in subconscious attitudes towards women in Washington and Massachusetts can be partially attributed to the regional religious, political, and social/feminist history of each state.

Similar to many regions in 1630, Puritan women in the Massachusetts Bay Colony were prohibited from participation in town meetings and church leadership. The Puritans of early colonial America emphasized male supremacy, social hierarchy, and female sinfulness (Morgan, 1944). Women rarely participated outside of the home or helped work in the field. More than 200 years later, the territory that later became the State of Washington was obtained by the United States in 1846. Unlike Massachusetts, the settlers of Washington were not religious conservatives that sought to limit the political and social power of women. Conversely, the pioneer women who traveled to the Northwest by wagon on the harsh Oregon Trail helped to establish this "American frontier". The acceptance of greater female participation in the workforce and local government permeated the next 150 years of Washington feminist and legislative history.

Without the longevity of the Puritan religious institution and imbedded sense of tradition as one of the initial areas established in America, Washington consistently achieved greater strides towards female participation in state and

national government. Dr. David Olson, professor of political science at the University of Washington, argued that "because the West was settled later, male-dominated politics have been less embedded in the culture" (Raftery, 2012). Women's suffrage was established in Washington by 1910, while Massachusetts state government did not ratify this amendment until 1920. The Massachusetts Association Opposed to the Further Extension of Suffrage to Women (MAOFESW) was a potent source of pushback against the expansion of female political rights from 1890 to 1920: MAOFESW believed that it would destroy the established social order and corrupt the family (Pateman, 1994). As conveyed by Giuliano (2017), these divergent "historical conditions" and traditional attitudes towards women in Massachusetts and Washington may endure in contemporary culture. As noted by Nunn (2012), implicit biases may be transmitted vertically (e.g. parents to child) or through institutions (e.g. educational, political, and religious institutions). The endurance of these historical conditions would explain the greater subconscious bias of Massachusetts voters. Therefore, the impacts of divergent political and social history upon Washington and Massachusetts' institutions may be particularly salient in determining implicit bias.

Similar to the role of history in defining subconscious attitudes towards the role of women is the "virtuous circle" (Alexander, 2012) impact of female political role models on candidate ambition and voter perceptions. Many scholars have suggested that as more women are elected to political office, the perception that women are suitable for a political career becomes more salient in the minds of voters and potential candidates (Fox & Lawless, 2012; Gilardi, 2015). Therefore, a tradition of a high concentration of females in politics may influence implicit biases because the concept of women as politicians is normalized. In Washington, women serving in public office has been "as consistent as the rain" since 1912 when voters elected two women to serve in the state legislature (Raftery, 2012). Furthermore, Washington elected the first female mayor of a major American city in 1924 and elected a female governor in 1977. In stark contrast, Massachusetts did not elect a woman to the state legislature until 1923 and has never elected a female governor<sup>2</sup>. It is likely that the plethora of female role models in Washington has shifted the subconscious biases and attitudes of the electorate, whereas the opposite effect can be observed in Massachusetts.

## Policy Recommendations

The subconscious nature of implicit biases renders deeply engrained, unconscious attitudes difficult to change. According to Cornell University Law School, implicit associations do not necessarily align with declared beliefs and form at a very early age (Royer et. al, 2010). Further, nothing can be done to change the political, religious, and social history of

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<sup>2</sup> Jane Swift stepped into the role as acting Governor of Massachusetts in 2001.

the disparate geographical areas. While these factors pose a unique challenge for improvement, The Ohio State University’s Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity insists that these prejudices and implicit biases are “malleable” (2015).

A closer analysis of the aforementioned mechanisms illuminate two prominent policy recommendations that may reduce underlying prejudice towards female candidates in Massachusetts: (1) Publicize current Massachusetts female politicians in office, possibly through a comprehensive campaign in public schools and on social media, and (2) Continue to support, fund, and elect current female candidates in order to create additional political role models. Both of these policy recommendations aim to normalize women as executives, leaders, and politicians in Massachusetts, which may reverse implicit associations and bias as a result of the “virtuous circle” (Alexander, 2012) and trickle-down effect in increased female representation in the Massachusetts state legislature.

Publicizing current Massachusetts female politicians who have successfully campaigned for elective office and continuing to support current female candidates may have the ability to shift regional, deeply ingrained beliefs about women in politics (Alexander, 2012) and spur greater female political engagement (Burns et. al 2001; Carroll 1985; Kittilson 2005) which may increase the share of female representatives in the Massachusetts state legislature. Greater female visibility in politics is of “tremendous importance” (Astrom, 2005) in influencing the public “image of *what is normal*” (Wolbrecht & Campbell, 2007). As documented by Wolbrecht and Campbell (2007), the promotion of female political role models “inspires younger women who are still learning about the political world and their place within it” (p.921) and thereby has the ability to diminish engrained biases internalized by previous generations. As the MWPC and similar organizations continuously seek to publicize and promote female politicians in Massachusetts, they will “symbolize a more open political arena” to potential female candidates (Alexander, 2012) and diminish the idea that politics should be a male-dominated arena for both the voting population and younger generations (Williams, 1998). Improvements in women’s representation, and thus the creation of new political role models, will change “psychological barriers” (Atkeson 2003; Hansen 1997) for female entry and candidate success among voters by shifting implicit biases. As biases and attitudes change, Massachusetts should expect that the share of female of representatives in the state legislature will increase.

## Appendix

	% Urban	Median Income	% Black	% Hispanic	% Foreign Born
Massachusetts	92	\$77,385	7	12	15.7
Washington	84	\$70,979	4	13	13.5

*Table 2*

*Source: US Census Bureau (2013-2017)*

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