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Framing Identity Politics: Right-Wing Women as Strategic Party Actors in the UK and US

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ABSTRACT

Women's political underrepresentation in right-wing parties remains a global phenomenon. Despite their rejection of "identity politics," the United Kingdom's Conservative Party and the United States' Republican Party have launched formal initiatives to recruit women legislative candidates. In this article, we ask: How do right-wing women advocate for increasing women's representation within parties that explicitly reject group identity politics? More specifically, we examine 1) how party elites frame the UK's Women2Win and the US's Project GROW campaigns, and 2) the role that women play in each of these initiatives. Through interviews with party elites and content analyses of news articles and campaign materials, we show that right-wing women in both countries function as strategic party actors, advocating for women's representation tactically within the specific ideological and electoral context of their party.

Introduction

The overall increase in women's political representation in the United Kingdom and the United States can be attributed predominantly to political parties on the Left. In the United Kingdom women make up 45% of the Parliamentary Labour Party – more than double the Conservative Party's 21% (Browning 2019). In the US Congress, this partisan discrepancy is even wider: women make up about 38% of the Democratic Party and only 8% of the Republican Party.[1] Keenly aware of these trends, the Conservative and Republican parties each launched formal female candidate recruitment initiatives – Women2Win and Project Growing Republican Opportunities for Women (Project GROW), respectively – focused on increasing the number of right-wing women in the national legislature.

At the same time, however, these parties are known to actively reject "identity politics," the notion that different social groups have distinct political interests or perspectives. This ideological norm has made it difficult for women in right-wing parties, compared to those in left-wing parties, to campaign on the significance of their gender and to attain gender-based

resources that may help them win elections. In this article, we explore how women in these parties navigate the tension between their gender identity and right-wing ideology. We ask: How do right-wing women advocate for increasing women's representation within parties that explicitly reject group identity politics?

Through interviews with party elites and content analyses of press releases, news articles, and campaign materials, we analyze 1) the way party elites frame Women2Win and Project GROW and 2) the role that women play in each of these initiatives. Our intention is not to test the effectiveness of either of these programs. Rather, in our comparison of UK and US politics, we seek to produce a more nuanced understanding of the way right-wing women navigate the ideological and institutional norms of their party to advocate for women's political representation.

Ultimately, we show that women on the Right work as *strategic party actors* at the intersection of their partisan and gender identities. Despite their claims that women bring important gendered perspectives to the policymaking process (see also: Dittmar, Sanbonmatsu, and Carroll 2018), Conservative and Republican women nevertheless publicly frame and promote female candidate recruitment in ways they believe to be politically practical within the context of their individual parties. Our analysis shines further light on the relationship between gender identity, political ideology, and party politics cross-nationally.

Rejecting identity politics while investing in right-wing women

While structural differences exist between the UK Conservative Party and US Republican Party, one important similarity is their opposition to "identity politics." In the United States, the left-wing Democratic Party caters to an electoral coalition of "racial, religious, economic, and sexual minorities," while the Republican base is made up mainly of "social majorities or pluralities such as white voters, Protestants, suburbanites, and (heterosexual) married voters" (Grossman and Hopkins 2015, 125–126). The Democratic Party, then, embraces the idea of "group interests," while the Republican Party focuses instead on broad, ideological principles like individualism and personal responsibility (Grossman and Hopkins 2015, 2016). In the United Kingdom, the Conservative Party holds similar views on the relationship between social identity and political preferences, often explicitly emphasizing candidate "merit" over candidate group identity or affiliation (Bryson and Heppell 2010; Childs, Webb, and Marthaler 2009). In both cases, this aversion to identity politics is in contrast to the main left-wing party – the Labour Party and Democratic Party in the United Kingdom and United States, respectively – who embrace arguments about the importance of group representation and attention to discrimination on the basis of membership of an identity group as a priority.

Notably, this rejection of group identity politics has created electoral barriers for women on the right (Burrell 2014; Crowder-Meyer and Cooperman 2018; Elder 2012; Wineinger 2019). In the United States, Republican women have a harder time using their gender to attract campaign resources. Unlike Democratic women candidates, who benefit from effective women's organizations like EMILY's List, Republican women must rely on donors who place little value in a candidate's gender (Crowder-Meyer and Cooperman 2018; Kitchens and Swers 2016). As a result, they generally raise less money in their primary elections than both Democratic women and Republican men (Kitchens and Swers 2016). Similarly, while a number of groups and networks supporting the recruitment and election of women in the Labour Party have emerged in the United Kingdom (see Campbell and Lovenduski 2014), relatively little infrastructure existed for Conservative women before Women2Win.

These electoral challenges and the lack of structural support from outside groups suggests that, in order to increase women's representation, right-wing party organizations must make more conscious efforts to support women candidates. In some instances, we do see parties on the right engaging in what we call "feminized party strategies": party outreach strategies that focus specifically on women. As Freeman (1986) notes, while the Republican Party "officially ignores group characteristics … it is obvious that it does pay attention to them when it feels the need to cater to the interest of the voting public in a particular group" (336; see also: Valdini 2019). One such feminized party strategy can be seen in the Republican Party's showcasing of women speakers at their national conventions (Freeman 1997; Och 2018; Philpot 2007; Sanbonmatsu 2004). Women2Win and Project GROW, each formed during a time when the respective parties faced some sort of electoral defeat, are similar feminized party strategies focused on the recruitment of female candidates.

While previous studies have shown how political parties have engaged in feminized party strategies (Childs, Webb, and Marthaler 2009; Och and Shames 2018; Sanbonmatsu 2004), few have conducted a cross-national analysis of the way right-wing party elites – and women, in particular – negotiate the tension between advocating for women's representation and rejecting identity politics. Through an in-depth comparison of public statements made by party leaders in the United Kingdom and United States, we seek to deepen theoretical understandings of this ideological tension.

Right-wing women's role in feminized party strategies

In the same way that right-wing parties, despite their opposition to identity politics, do not shy away from feminized party strategies, neither do right-wing women function simply as gender-blind political actors. On the contrary, scholars have shown that women on the right possess a gender consciousness; right-wing women recognize their interests as women and work to defend those

interests (Childs and Webb 2012; Deckman 2016; Klatch 1987, 2001; Schreiber 2002, 2008). They may even draw political strength from traditional gender roles to combat feminist policies (Delegard 2012; Mansbridge 1986).

Within the context of the UK and US legislatures, we also see gender differences among right-wing representatives. On both sides of the aisle, women in the US Congress are more likely than their male colleagues to participate in floor speeches (Pearson and Dancey 2011a) and to reference women in those speeches (Osborn and Mendez 2010; Pearson and Dancey 2011b; Shogan 2001). In the UK Parliament, Conservative women are more likely than Conservative men to reference "women" or "gender" in written and oral questions (Bird 2005). In both cases, right-wing women speak about women in ways that align with their party's policies and ideology, by emphasizing motherhood (Bird 2005) or discussing issues like taxes and the economy (Shogan 2001).

We take a deeper look at right-wing women's roles and choices in feminized party strategies. In the cases of Women2Win and Project GROW, how do right-wing women attempt to convince their party's membership that supporting women candidates is an important endeavor? Given that they must work within the institutional norms of both their legislature and their party, we expect to find that right-wing women representatives work as *strategic party actors*, advocating for women's representation in ways that align with their party's ideological norms and electoral goals.

Data and methods

Case selection

A comparison of Women2Win and Project GROW allows us to explore our theory of right-wing women as strategic party actors. Both the similarities between the initiatives *and* the differences between the electoral systems and political contexts in which those initiatives exist provide an opportunity to examine how right-wing women navigate "identity politics" within the institutional context of their political parties. The United Kingdom and United States are both advanced industrial democracies, with a similar history of feminist movement activity and a developed discourse on the importance of gender equality. While there is certainly not a consensus on what gender equality should look like, in both cases it is a broadly accepted policy goal (Burns and Gallagher 2010; Inglehart and Norris 2003). Both political systems are dominated by two main parties, with the key cleavage in politics being the perspectives these parties offer.

Despite these similarities, important differences exist between our cases. First, differences in political culture in the United Kingdom and United States (see for e.g., Halfmann 2011; Nash 2009; Stetson 2001) and ideological intensity between Conservatives and Republicans are evident. For instance, while both the Conservative and Republican parties reject group identity

politics, the Conservative Party is more moderate than the Republican Party. Figure 1 shows the estimated position on the left-right ideological spectrum for the two main parties in each country based on their election manifesto for elections between 2000 and 2017.[2] The left-right ideological score is a composite variable, using the Laver and Budge's (1992) definition of the left-right cleavage and taking multiple measures within the Manifestos Project for each party (Volkens et al. 2019b). Positive scores indicate the party's manifesto has more policy positions associated with right-wing ideological principles, and a negative score indicates that more are left-wing. As Figure 1 shows, both the Republican and Democratic parties are to the right of their ideological counterparts in the United Kingdom, with the Republican Party being significantly to the right of all UK parties throughout this period. These differences in ideological intensity may have important implications for the frames and strategies adopted by the respective party initiatives, as explored later in the article.

Second, structural differences in the electoral systems are important to consider. In the United Kingdom, national political parties play a much larger role in the candidate selection process than in the United States. The Conservative Party, for example, selects candidates for the general election via votes of dues-paying party members in each constituency, without input from the wider voting public. While technically run by local associations, the national party plays a significant role in these candidate selections by establishing rules and determining eligibility for candidacy via an "Approved Candidate List"
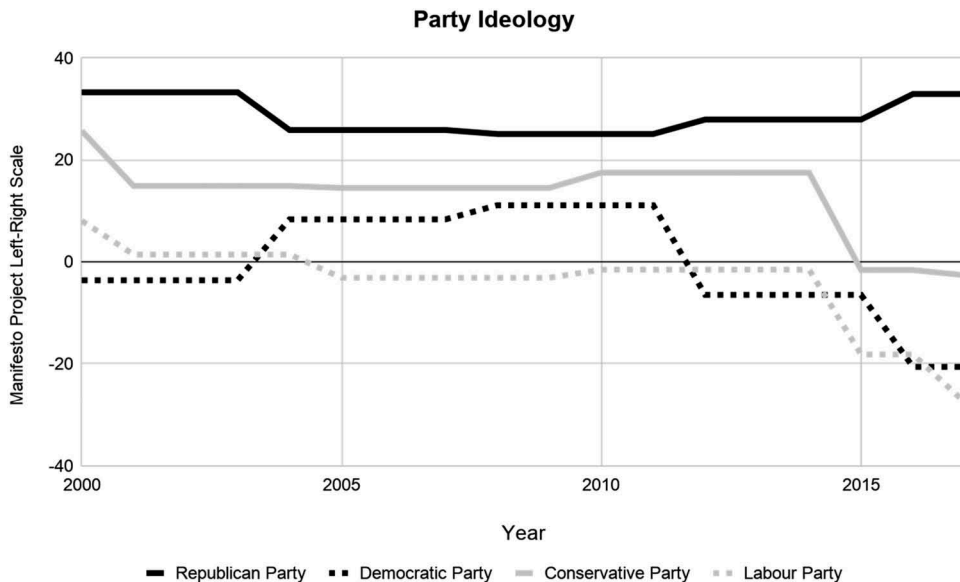
Figure 1. Ideology of Major Left- and Right-Wing Parties in the United Kingdom and United States, 2000–2017 **Data source**: Manifestos Project (Volkens et al. 2019a).

(McIlveen 2009). By contrast, the US Republican Party holds primary elections that may be open to all registered voters, only to voters affiliated with the party, or somewhere in between, depending on the state party's preference.[3] As a general principle though, national party organizations, like the National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC), do not endorse or support candidates in primaries.

This difference in the role of parties in candidate selection has important implications for the strategies implemented by Women2Win and Project GROW. While both programs had the same goal of increasing right-wing women's representation through candidate recruitment efforts, Women2Win was able to play a larger role than Project GROW in influencing candidate selection. The push to create an "A-List" of priority candidates that included women, as we will discuss further, is an example of the work done by Women2Win at the candidate selection stage of the election. In the US case, because they were not allowed to "play in primaries," strategies for the NRCC's Project GROW were mainly limited to candidate recruitment, messaging tactics, and some financial support for competitive female candidates in the general election.

We argue that these specific similarities and differences present an opportunity for rich comparison. In particular, we are able to better understand nuances in the way women in right-wing parties (of varying ideological intensities) negotiate their gender and ideological identities. Beyond that, we can also shine new light on the strategies that right-wing women implement to represent women within the electoral and institutional context of their party.

Content analysis

We conducted a content analysis of public statements – including press releases, campaign materials, and quotes in news articles – to examine how party elites were framing 1) the problem of women's underrepresentation and 2) the solution of women's candidate recruitment/support.

For the UK case, we collected and analyzed Women2Win's press releases from archived versions of its Web site during the first two years of the campaign's existence, from late 2005 to the end of 2007. This limited period was chosen to mirror the length of time being evaluated in the US case, and, as in the US case study, to capture the construction of the case for women's representation in the context of a right-wing party in the early stages of the campaign. Fourteen press releases, as well as "About Us" and "Objectives" sections of the campaign Web site, were gathered. In addition, all news articles referencing Women2Win in which party leaders were quoted – a total of 17 – were gathered using Access World News and Factiva. We also drew on Women2Win's video campaigns. The total number of sources was 35.

For the US case, we gathered all campaign and news articles related to Project GROW in 2013 and 2014 (the year of inception through the end of the first election year). Again, we chose this time frame to determine how party elites were building the case for the existence of a women's recruitment initiative. A video released by the NRCC announcing Project GROW and three press releases related to the initiative were collected. We also used Access World News and Factiva to collect every news article related to Project GROW in which party leaders were directly quoted. The total number of sources was 19.

For each case, we read every source and extracted statements made by party elites that pertained to either 1) the general problem of Republican women's underrepresentation or 2) the recruitment initiative itself. In the UK case, we found 23 references to the problem of women's underrepresentation and 16 references to Women2Win. In the US case, there were 18 references to women's underrepresentation and 46 references to Project GROW. We also coded for the gender of each speaker. There were 8 total speakers in the UK case (4 women, 3 men, 1 other[4]) and 20 total speakers in the US case (17 women, 3 men). We then reread each of these statements and used a general inductive approach (Thomas 2006) to identify and code for specific rhetorical frames, which are further discussed in the findings section.

Elite interviews

Our content analysis of public statements is paired with semistructured, in-person interviews with party elites. Although these interviews were conducted as part of two separate projects, the responses provide useful insight into the way Conservative and Republican elites navigate tensions between their gender and partisan identities.

For the UK case, nine semistructured interviews were conducted with current and former Conservative politicians (seven MPs and two Members of the House of Lords) in late 2017 and 2018. Seven men and two women were interviewed, and the average interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed. The sample was intentionally nonrepresentative: current and former politicians who were actively engaged in policy or party political efforts toward gender equality and women's underrepresentation were selected for an interview in order to gain maximal insight into the processes and dynamics of interest. This purposive sampling method meant that actors central to the creation of Women2Win were interviewed, including two of the cofounders.

For the US case we used semistructured interviews with Republican congresswomen conducted during the 114th Congress (2015–2017) as part of a larger project by the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) at Rutgers University.[5] The response rate among Republican women in the

House of Representatives was 73% (16 of 22), and interviewees included prominent actors in Project GROW. The average interview lasted approximately 30 minutes, and interviews were recorded and conducted on the record (although members could choose to go off the record).

These interviews provide additional context for our content analysis. Specifically, they are used to understand nuances in the way right-wing women grapple with advocating for women's representation within a party that rejects group identity politics. Through these in-depth interviews, we begin to understand the motivation behind the use of certain frames as well as other strategic decisions that are not evident solely through public campaign statements.

UK: The Conservative Party and Women2Win

After the 1997 election, the number of women in the House of Commons doubled from 60 to 120, a change almost entirely due to the Labour Party's contingent of women going from 37 to 101 (Uberoi et al. 2019) following the party's landslide electoral victory and the introduction of an internal party gender quota policy, "All-Women Shortlists" (AWS). In 1997 there were only 13 Conservative women MPs, and though the subsequent elections saw modest increases in the proportion of women in the Conservative Party, their number continued to lag significantly behind the Labour Party in terms of women's representation.

The resounding electoral success of the Labour Party in the 1997 and 2001 elections and the changes that Labour had undergone to position themselves as the party on the side of women, led to attempts from some within the Conservative Party to "modernize" and "feminise" the party (see: Bryson and Heppell 2010; Hayton 2010; Heppell and Seawright 2012). This so-called "feminisation" of the party came as part of a broader attempt to expand electoral appeal – particularly but not only with women voters – and to shed the stereotype of the Conservative Party as the "Nasty Party" (Buckler and Dolowitz 2009). The process of party modernization included both policy and messaging changes. This era of modernization was most notably felt with the election of a new party leader, David Cameron, in 2005. Cameron shifted focus toward a number of relatively left-leaning positions: a focus on climate change, articulations of "Compassionate Conservatism," and explicit discussion of the need to diversify the party in terms of gender and race. In Cameron's first speech as leader at the Conservative Party conference he discussed the need to create a party that looked more like the country, and announced "decisive steps" to "increase dramatically the number of women" elected as Conservative MPs.[6]

Women2Win was a direct result of these party political circumstances: the significant and continued electoral defeat for the Conservative Party, losing to a Labour Party that had made significant strides in terms of women's representation. The campaign was founded by now-Baroness Anne Jenkin – a longtime

party activist and the wife of Conservative MP Bernard Jenkin – who had been frustrated by the party's slow change (Jenkin 2015). Following conversations with now-Prime Minister Theresa May MP and a number of other party activists and MPs, Women2Win launched in November 2005 to provide "support, advice and training to [Conservative] women who wish to enter Parliament or get more involved in politics."[7] The organization was attempting to replicate some of the traditional, often informal, male networks that facilitate male candidacy. Women2Win thus held social events to generate interest among women running for office (one such gathering was held in a shoe store in London, with champagne and a 20% discount on shoes to sweeten the deal),[8] organized training workshops for women interested in standing for elected office, and recruited MPs to mentor prospective candidates. The methods chosen for Women2Win were chosen in the context of a strong feeling among Conservatives that the Labour Party's approach of All-Women Shortlists, or any other quota system, would be wholly misguided.

In addition to providing training and mentoring programs, Women2Win served as an internal source of pressure for the Conservative Party, pushing for change in the selection procedures for parliamentary candidates to ensure more women were selected. A key example of structural reform was the "A-List" (Campbell and Childs 2018; Hayton 2010), which the Conservative Party used for candidate selection for the 2010 general election. The A-List, or "priority list," was a list of 100–150 approved parliamentary candidates who were promoted by Conservative Central Office for winnable seats (McIlveen 2009). Though the full list of the A-List candidates was not made public, the intention (and reality, according to interviewees) was that the list was at least half women. Women2Win has been active since its creation in 2005 and is often credited (and claims credit) for the increase in women's representation in the party, from 9% in 2005 to 21% in 2017 (Uberoi et al. 2019).

US: The Republican Party and Project GROW

In the United States the 2012 election was an overall loss for Republicans. Democratic President Barack Obama was reelected to a second term, and while Republicans retained control of the House of Representatives, Democrats gained seats in both chambers of Congress. A prominent characteristic of the 2012 campaign environment was the claim that Republicans were engaged in a "war on women." Democratic National Committee (DNC) Chairwoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz began using this term consistently in 2011, arguing that Republican policies harm women.[9] In the months leading up to the election, controversial comments about rape and abortion made by male Republican candidates like Todd Akin and Richard Mourdock further contributed to the idea that Republicans were actively opposed to women's rights.[10]

To combat this perception – and in the hopes of winning future elections – Republican Party leaders made efforts to reach out to women voters across the country. The Republican National Committee (RNC) released an "autopsy report" in 2013 entitled *The Growth and Opportunity Project*, which described recommendations for mobilizing women and minority voters.[11] That June, the NRCC's Project GROW was launched as part of the party's Women on the Right UNITE program – a national effort led by six party organizations dedicated to electing more Republican women to office (Och 2018). Along with NRCC Chairman Greg Walden, Project GROW was led by Congresswoman Renee Ellmers of North Carolina and Congresswoman Ann Wagner of Missouri. Other women members of the House Republican conference played a central role in the initiative, helping to recruit women candidates and train their male colleagues to effectively message to women voters.[12]

As an arm of the NRCC, Project GROW only supported female candidates in general elections and played no role in primaries (Och 2018). The initiative arguably helped six new Republican women win congressional seats in the 2014 election cycle. By 2015, however, Project GROW was absorbed into the NRCC's existing Young Guns program, which supports viable Republican candidates regardless of gender (Och 2018).

Findings

Framing the problem: Women's underrepresentation

We identified three main frames that party leaders used to describe the problem of women's underrepresentation. First, some claims described women's underrepresentation as an *electoral problem*, with past and potential future electoral failures attributed (in part) to the lack of women in the party. Statements were coded with this frame when claims focused on the ability of the party to attract voters or win elections. This frame made a largely pragmatic case that there was a problem that needed addressing.

The second frame we identified was diagnosing the problem of women's underrepresentation as primarily a *reflection problem*. Such framing did not contend that there was anything important about the women's perspectives in particular, but that as a matter of principle the legislature should look like the population it serves. In this formulation of the problem, as Congresswoman Ann Wagner said in a news article, the problem is simply that "it's not reflective of the electorate."[13]

The final frame identified was one of *conventional identity politics*, which draws on the idea that women have distinct life experiences and perspectives *as women* and as a result have something to offer that men cannot – such as a woman's perspective to the policymaking process, or serving as a role model to women and girls. This frame accepts the premise that women are a distinct group with meaningfully different interests that deserve to be

represented. Theresa May used the conventional identity politics frame when arguing that women "have different experiences to men,"[14] and this is relevant and important to questions of political representation.

Table 1 and Figure 2 show the proportions of each frame. In both cases, the breakdown of frames was remarkably similar, with the electoral frame used a majority of the time (see Figure 2). This finding makes sense given the tension (outlined earlier in this article) for these party actors between the individualism in right-wing ideologies and the group politics in conventional identity politics claims. The pragmatic reasoning in arguments related to electoral imperatives allows for a strategic framing of women's underrepresentation that does not concede any ground in terms of identity politics, making it an appealing frame for those making the case that women's underrepresentation is a problem and should be addressed by their right-wing political party members.

The strategy behind the decision to emphasize electoral frames over more principled claims about the value of women's presence in politics was described in interviews in both the United Kingdom and the United States. In the UK case, all of the Conservative actors interviewed cited electoral victory as their most powerful argument when trying to persuade colleagues that women's underrepresentation was a significant problem in politics, especially when talking with more right-wing or otherwise skeptical party members (which, again, is in line with our expectations that intensity of ideology on the right would be a key determinant of using frames that avoid identity politics). One senior Conservative MP who was involved in the launch of David Cameron's party leadership said of Cameron's inclusion of women's representation as a key issue that, "to be blunt, I think David Cameron saw this as a very big tactical ploy rather than something intrinsically justifiable."[15] Baroness Jenkin outlined a series of strategic arguments she and Women2Win commonly make to party members to gain support, centered on the party's electoral success, noting "You don't get into any of the kind of gender equality stuff which, you know, still a lot of my people don't like very much." Baroness Jenkin described an example of a strategic case she used instead: "One [point] is that women are generally speaking better at community engagement and that is increasingly what local people want […] The other point I want him to make is that there are no women involved in any of the current Sexminster[16] stuff … I mean if they want a safe option then they take a woman."[17] Here Jenkin is making the case that

Table 1. Framing of the Problem of Women's Underrepresentation in the United Kingdom and United States

	UK Conservative Party ($n = 23$)	US Republican Party ($n = 18$)
Electoral Problem	52%	50%
Reflection Problem	17%	28%
Conventional Identity Politics	30%	22%

Framing of the Problem of Women's Underrepresentation in the Party
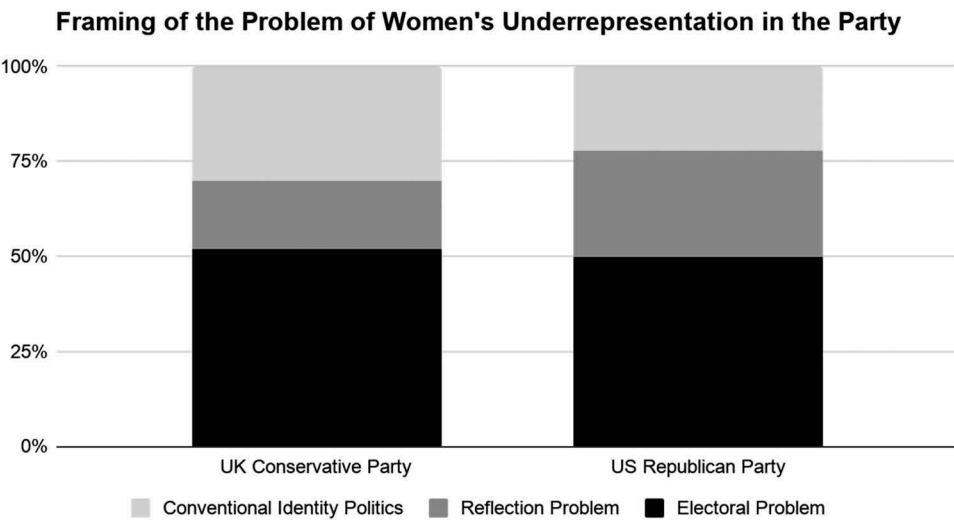
Figure 2. Framing of the Problem of Women's Underrepresentation in the United Kingdom and United States.

women candidates both can help the party gain votes and are less likely to be an electoral liability due to political scandal.

Among the *electoral problem* frames, a subset of statements focused on one specific aspect of electability: the underrepresentation of women as a problem because it constitutes missed talent. Almost half of the electoral frames in the UK case (and none of the US frames) took this form, with claims such as "There is a huge pool of talented women that we have ignored for too long."[18] In some instances, the argument about missed talent has drawn on analogous contexts and the ways that expanding the pool to consider women can improve quality, arguing that selecting more women could improve the party and politics "just as the promotion of able women has improved the quality of management and decision-making in other professions, in commerce and industry, and elsewhere in public life."[19] These frames were categorized as electoral when the concern with missed talent focused on the electoral consequences therein, and when the missed talent was a result of an untapped pool of potential candidates in general, rather than women's talent being particular on account of their gendered life experiences. Now-Prime Minister Theresa May MP described in an interview how she attempted to persuade Conservative colleagues to engage on the issue of women's representation:

> On the issue of women, one of the problems the Party has is that some people think it's just about political correctness. One of the things I've always been very keen about is to show two things; first of all that it is to assure the Party that it is taking advantage of all talent available to it; that it has a political advantage for the Party in that we need to win the women's vote and I'm sure that one of the reasons

we've been sitting back in the women's vote is because women look at the Party and see that it is predominantly male. That's the past, I hope that they are now seeing that it is changing.[20]

The framing of women's underrepresentation as a *reflection problem* was more frequent in the US case, but constituted a small number in both cases. Unlike the conventional identity politics frames, this is a relatively neutral strategy – allowing the actor to simply state facts about women's underrepresentation and lay out general principles of representation, while deemphasizing the idea of a minority interest and any particular women's interests. Framing women's underrepresentation as a problem of reflection does little to make the *positive* case for action to improve women's representation. This frame accepts women as a significant identity cleavage worthy of consideration when thinking about the representativeness of a political body. As such, it is perhaps unsurprising that it is used less commonly than the positive case for electoral imperatives.

Finally, the *conventional identity politics* frame was present in both cases (30% and 22% in the United Kingdom and United States, respectively), and more present in the case of the UK Conservative Party – an outcome in line with expectations, given the difference in ideological intensity between the Republican and Conservative parties (see Figure 1). Despite the relatively infrequent use of conventional identity politics frames, interviews in both countries suggest that the prioritization of electoral frames over identity politics is a strategic choice on the part of women, rather than a result of their personal motivations and beliefs. Unlike in public statements, right-wing women in interviews, particularly in the United States, often drew on a more conventional identity politics framework, suggesting they may be personally motivated by a sense of the value of women's identity in politics but strategically refrain because they understand the ideological context.

The CAWP interviews (expounded upon in Dittmar, Sanbonmatsu, and Carroll 2018) describe a number of ways that Republican women frame arguments using some form of conventional identity politics. Often this wasn't about specific issues, but rather, as Congresswoman Diane Black said, "I think we [women] approach problems just in a different way,"[21] – with the implication being, as Congresswoman Kay Granger noted, "If there were more of us, it'd make a big difference."[22] Similarly, Congresswoman Jackie Walorski argued that women are more likely to focus on problem-solving: "I think in general … because women are driven by passion … we are more willing to sit down and come to a consensus on how we can move forward … It's the desire to actually be able to sit down and move forward on something and actually get to a solution."[23]

Many right-wing women believe that women bring something important and different to the policymaking process, and we argue that the relative lack of this identity-based frame in public statements and campaign outputs is no accident.

Rather, even if personally motivated by a conviction that women are different and positively change politics, right-wing women know that arguments related to electoral imperatives are more likely to persuade right-wing party actors, and thus those are the frames they more often chose to use. While the "real" motivations of political actors are virtually impossible to confirm with any certainty, the difference here between statements made in interviews and those made in public campaign materials is notable.

Framing the solution: Women2Win and Project GROW

We also identified three overarching frames used by party elites when describing Women2Win and Project GROW as the solution to women's underrepresentation. Similar to the way they framed the problem of women's underrepresentation, party elites used both electoral and conventional identity politics frames to advocate for candidate recruitment initiatives. In framing these initiatives as *electorally beneficial*, party elites emphasized that investing in women is essential for the electoral success of the party. The second frame, *conventional identity politics*, was considered to be used when party elites noted Women2Win or Project GROW could address the specific concerns or interests of women as a group. One example comes from Congresswoman Diane Black, who said, "Women have to be asked. Not like males who will make that decision on their own. Women want to be asked."[24] In this frame, there is a recognition that political campaigns and the decision to enter politics are distinctly gendered (see also: Carroll and Sanbonmatsu 2013; Dittmar 2015; Lawless and Fox 2010) and that Project GROW could remedy this.

We also identified a third frame that we call *defensive arguments*. This frame included claims in which party elites argued that Women2Win and Project GROW were different from left-wing initiatives engaged in identity politics. Under the umbrella of *defensive arguments*, we identified three specific subframes: i) *equality of opportunity*, ii) *candidate quality*, and iii) *majority group interests*. The *equality of opportunity* frame was a defense against the perception of engaging in affirmative action; these claims described Women2Win and Project GROW as being about equal opportunity for women rather than guaranteeing an equal outcome. The *candidate quality* frame was a defense against the idea that recruitment based on a candidate's social identity comes at the cost of candidate quality; these types of claims ensured that Women2Win and Project GROW would recruit only the best female candidates. Finally, the *majority group interests* frame was a defense against the perception of representing special interest groups, stressing that reaching out to women is simply a way to engage the majority of the populace rather than "pandering" to a minority group.

Table 2 shows the breakdown of the frames used in each case. Once again, of the three main frames, *conventional identity politics* was used least often (13%) in both the United Kingdom and United States (see Figure 3). As argued in the previous section, while right-wing women have told us in interviews they believe women bring important gendered perspectives to politics, they have not been quick to use this frame in their public statements related to Women2Win or Project GROW. This suggests, once again, that women frame these initiatives as strategic party actors.

The *electorally beneficial* frame was the frame used more frequently in the US (at 39%), although it was also used often in the UK, comprising 25% of all frames used (see Table 2). Given that the impetus for both of these programs was a significant loss in the previous election, it is perhaps unsurprising that this was the dominant frame in both countries. In the United Kingdom, all of the Conservative Party actors interviewed who had been active in Women2Win cited the party's electoral losses as a key determinant of their getting involved in the efforts to increase more women.

In the United States, Republican women similarly promoted Project GROW as a way for the party to win and retain control of Congress. In a press release, Congresswoman Renee Ellmers was enthusiastic about her role in the program, praising it as a way "to expand our House Republican majority."[25] Congresswoman Ann Wagner further argued that Project GROW would contribute to the broader electoral success of the party: "Up and down the line, we are walking the walk and making sure that we grow our majority not just in the House, but our majority among women."[26] This argument that Project GROW would be electorally beneficial for the party stems from the idea that in order to appeal to a broader range of voters it is imperative to address, as Ellmers stressed in an interview, "the visual appearance of the Republican Party being older, graying, white men."[27]

Notably, we find evidence that women work as strategic party actors in that they understand and exploit their party's specific electoral circumstances. Republican women, for instance, have made it clear that Project GROW is an important tool for contesting Democratic claims of a "war on women." At the launch of Project GROW, Congresswoman Diane Black said,

Table 2. Framing of Female Candidate Recruitment Initiatives in the United Kingdom and United States.

		UK Conservative Party (*n* = 16)	US Republican Party (*n* = 46)
Electorally Beneficial		25%	39%
Defensive Arguments	Candidate Quality	25%	22%
	Equality of Opportunity	38%	13%
	Majority Group Interests	-	13%
Conventional Identity Politics		13%	13%

Framing of the Solution (Women2Win and Project GROW)
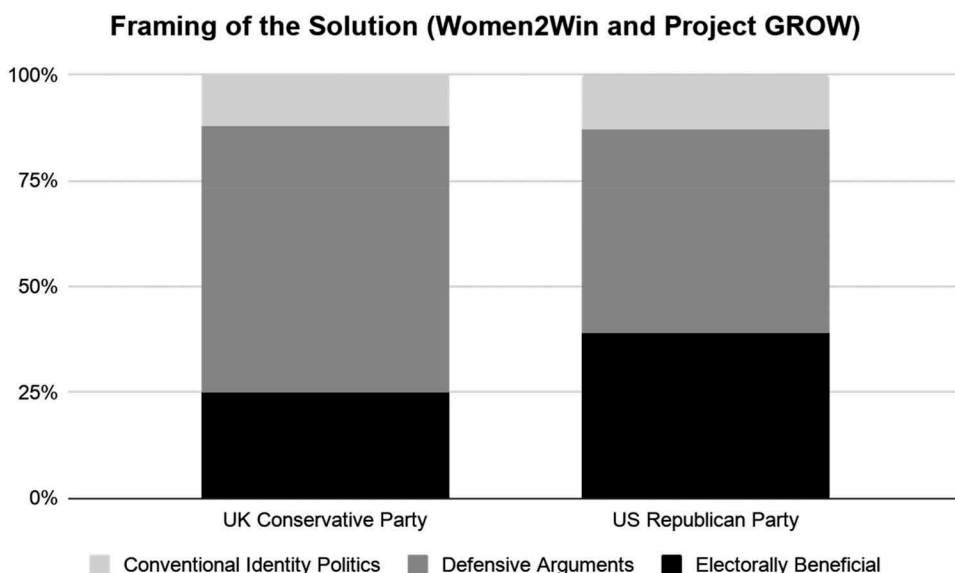
Figure 3. Framing of Female Candidate Recruitment Initiatives in the United Kingdom and United States.

"The fact is that President Obama's policies are really, truly the war on women, and we're going to fight back against that."[28] As discussed earlier, Democrats used "war on women" rhetoric most often to highlight what they saw as Republican attacks on women's health and reproductive rights. When talking about the issue of abortion, Congresswoman Cynthia Lummis said in an interview that some of her Republican male colleagues "feel so passionately about this issue and came to Congress specifically to address this that they find it difficult to turn over the reins of the debate to women."[29] While Lummis said she does not believe her male colleagues are "gender insensitive," she nevertheless contended, "It's better if they let go [of the reins]" so as not to perpetuate the image of a gender insensitive Republican Party.[30] This belief that recruiting women and putting them in positions of leadership can help to combat Democratic attacks is further evidence that Republican women are working strategically within the context of US electoral politics.

Taken together, the *defensive arguments* frame comprised 63% of the UK frames and 48% of the frames in the United States (see Figure 3). In the United States, party elites at times used a *majority group interests* sub-frame to argue that focusing on women through Project GROW was not the same as catering to a small subset of "special interest" voters. At a press conference, Congresswoman Jaime Herrera Beutler used her racial identity to highlight the point that this initiative was outside of the realm of identity politics: "As a woman of Hispanic descent … It is not about the coalitions; it's about engaging the majority of Americans to help us make policy that best serves our families, our communities, and our nation."[31] By painting Project

GROW as a way to reflect the interests of a majority of Americans, Republican women denied engaging in group identity politics while simultaneously advocating for an increase in women's political representation.

One notable difference in our cases is the proportion of *equality of opportunity* and *candidate quality* frames in the United Kingdom and United States (see Table 2). We theorize that structural differences in the candidate selection processes, discussed earlier in the article, help to explain the larger percentage of *equality of opportunity* frames used in the United Kingdom (38% compared to 13% in the United States). Given that one of the goals of Women2Win was to secure A-Lists that prioritized women candidates, and that the Labour Party initiative, AWS, was not popular among Conservatives, party elites may have worked to frame their initiatives in ways that distinguished them from the Labour Party's more radical approach. Indeed, in interviews with Conservative Party elites, Women2Win was described as an inherently meritocratic program. Brooks Newmark, one of Women2Win's original cochairs, explained it like this:

> I think that's a Conservative approach. You know, if you look at our approach to welfare it's one of giving people a hand up not a hand out. And I think the same thing when it came to political selection – we wanted to give people a hand up and we wanted to give people support, but I think there was a pretty strong feeling not to have a handout – not like All-Women Shortlists.[32]

This emphasis on simply giving women an opportunity – or a "hand up" – rather than a guaranteed seat neatly aligns with the Conservative Party's ideological stances; Newmark's explicit comparison of Women2Win to the party's position on welfare also helps position the program as a legitimate policy alternative to progressive politics.

In the United States, the most commonly used *defensive arguments* subframe was *candidate quality* (see Table 2). Republican women were adamant that gender did not trump quality, and they often took time to describe the highly qualified candidates they were recruiting. At a press conference, Congresswoman Ann Wagner placed a physical list of women candidates on the podium, saying, "Let me just tell you a little bit about the women that we're recruiting. They are veterans, they are businesswomen, they are child advocates, they are cardiologists, they are people in their state legislatures, they are former teachers, attorneys, financial service workers, nurses, I'm looking at more teachers, I'm looking at mayors – multiple mayors … "[33] Even after the 2014 election, in which six new Republican women were elected to the House, Elise Stefanik (R-NY) emphasized, "We had *high-quality* women added to our conference this last election cycle" [emphasis added].[34] Again, we speculate this frequent use of a *candidate quality* frame can be attributed to the fact that Project GROW was focused mainly on candidate recruitment, given its limited role in the electoral process and its inability to support women through their primary elections.

In framing Women2Win and Project GROW, party elites in both the United Kingdom and United States focused on electoral benefits and right-wing defenses more than arguments of conventional identity politics. The differences that do exist between our cases suggest that right-wing party elites navigate the tension between advocating for women's representation and rejecting identity politics in ways that are consistent not only with their ideology (confirming our expectations that right-wing tension with identity politics is directly related to ideological intensity), but also with their electoral systems and political environments. In the following section, we highlight differences in the use of messengers to shine further light on the role that women play in these initiatives as strategic party actors.

Gendering the messengers

While in many ways party leaders in both the United Kingdom and United States used similar rhetoric when speaking about female candidate recruitment efforts, we find a notable difference between our two cases: the role of right-wing men. In public statements and interviews we find that Conservative Party women prioritized using prominent men as messengers for Women2Win, while Republican women preferred to have women as the face of Project GROW. In both cases, women made politically practical arguments for these preferences, further supporting our thesis that conservative women function as strategic party actors.

In the UK case, findings suggest that Women2Win has always considered men as important, and sometimes even primary, messengers. The key reason given, reiterated by all Conservative interviewees, was the necessity to get men in the Conservative Party on board in order to make real change; as Baroness Jenkin said, "You won't get anywhere unless you get buy in from the men" (Jenkin 2018, 235). This perceived necessity was the reason that Women2Win has, from the start, chosen to have two cochairs comprising of one man and one woman. As Jenkin put it in an interview: "we don't want this simply to be a 'women's campaign.' [We have got to] show that this is something both men and women care about. So we decided to have a co-chairman."[35] And in a speech accounting the history of Women2Win, Baroness Jenkin went to great lengths to describe the role that men have played in the organization, describing an early male supporter, Andrew Griffths MP, as "the Godfather of Women2Win" (Jenkin 2015).

Using men as spokespeople is evident in all aspects of Women2Win's activities. Multiple interviewees cited prominent men in the party – mostly MPs – being recruited to help with Women2Win's efforts (by mentoring women, speaking at events, or helping to persuade local selectors to consider a woman), with such service seen as politically advantageous for career progression within the party. Bernard Jenkin MP – a senior Conservative

who was both involved in Women2Win and Conservative Party Deputy Chairman with responsibility for candidate selection in the mid-2000s – explained: "I was using senior male MPs […] to go and warm up each association and to explain to them why it was in the party's interest and the national interest that they should consider choosing a woman candidate."[36] Given the profile of grassroots party members who make up local associations – with especially conservative tendencies and over 70% male membership (Bale, Webb, and Poletti 2018; Buckler and Dolowitz 2009) – right-wing men are a key target of Women2Win's message. As Baroness Jenkin argued, male messengers are necessary "to bring the party with us, because at the end of the day, we still have a system where our members select their candidates."[37]

Conservative Party interviewees recognized that, given it is such a male dominated party, men hold both gatekeeping power and the ability to lend legitimacy to a cause. One of the cofounders of Women2Win described the use of men as a useful source of credibility: "I think it just sends a good signal to the other male MPs that this isn't just a kind of – you know, extreme feminist, politically correct claptrap as some of them might say. So we've always tried to involve [men]."[38] Evidence of this strategy of male messengers to legitimize the cause was evident in Women2Win's campaign output. The two key campaign videos created by Women2Win, shown extensively at the Conservative Party conferences as well as on their social media channels, prominently showcase male supporters. Analysis of the sex balance of speaking time in the video "About Women2Win,"[39] which was launched in 2011, finds men constitute a majority – 51% – of the speaking time in the 5 and a half minute long video. One of the most prevalent male speakers was, perhaps unsurprisingly, then-prime minister and Conservative Party leader David Cameron, but he was joined by five other male MPs speaking. A subsequent video, "Daughters,"[40] was even clearer in its messaging by and to men. The short three and a half minute video includes clips of male MPs talking about women as daughters, speaking about the hopes they have for their own daughters. Former Party Chair Andrew Feldman said in the video: "It's very important to me that my daughter believes there's no door that's closed to her." The video includes eight male MPs and just one woman MP, and men made up almost two-thirds of the speaking time. Even the lone female speaker, then-Prime Minister and Women2Win cofounder Theresa May, focused on the theme of women as daughters – in addition to talking about the importance of women in politics, May framed herself as the daughter of her father, recalling: "My father encouraged me, whatever job I did, just to get on with it and do my best … And he always encouraged me to see no boundaries, no barriers, just go out there and do the best that you can and aim high."

Unlike Conservative Party women who appear to find it advantageous to use men as key and sometimes primary messengers for women's representation, we found little evidence of such strategy in the US case. Republican women often argued that they themselves are the most effective messengers for their party. Project GROW's campaign output prioritizes women as the primary, and often sole, messenger. Greg Walden, then-NRCC Chair, was the only male Republican identified as playing the role of messenger for Project GROW – in contrast to Women2Win's promotional videos, the five minute Project GROW launch video included eight different Republican congress-women speaking about the significance of women's representation, and Walden, who made a brief appearance at the very end of the video to deliver a single line: "Women aren't a coalition; women are a majority."[41]

We argue that this difference in choice of messengers can be understood as a result of differences in both ideology and structure. First, on ideology: as Figure 1 shows, the Republican Party is consistently more right-wing than the Conservative Party in the United Kingdom. This makes the tension between identity politics and right-wing ideology at play in discussions of women's underrepresentation in politics more acute for the Republican Party, and thus the likelihood and willingness of party elites to talk about women-specific recruitment efforts reduces. It may be, then, that the personal connection that women party elites and members of Congress have becomes significant when choosing to engage in identity politics. Congresswoman Elise Stefanik described the connection women feel to the cause in an interview: "I think we [Republican women] understand the importance of reaching out to women voters very effectively and are trying to make sure that, frankly, all of Congress is focused on continuing to engage women in the process."[42] NRCC executive director Liesl Hickey described it thus: "We've had tremendous support from our women members of Congress through our Project GROW initiative."[43] In contrast, Republican men have no such personal connection or internal mandate to act in this case, and ideological tension makes engagement in initiatives like Project GROW even less appealing.

Another example of this gender gap in interest and support was described at the launch of E-PAC – Congresswoman Stefanik's new political action committee focused on supporting Republican women in primary elections – where Indiana State Senator Erin Houchin described her run for office: "I went to the powers that be, if you will, party wise, and I made this argument that if you want to see the demographics of the Republican Party change, you have to support women in primaries. The answer I got was, go see if the women will help you. Which I did – and they did."[44] This statement also highlights the idea that Republican men tend to view recruitment and support of women candidates as "women's work," which may further explain

why Republican men are relatively absent from prominent messaging compared to women in the UK Conservative Party.

Moreover, the candidate-centered politics in the United States means that Republican women often recognize that they have an opportunity to hold highly visible roles in campaigns to engage women, which (in contrast to the UK's party-centered system that rewards party loyalty), can serve as an important advantage in advancing their own career and brand. In an interview, Congresswoman Susan Brooks said:

> I actually have found there to be more opportunities than challenges [for women in Congress] and I do believe that is because the leadership in both parties recognizes that we need more women in Congress … I think there is a lot of opportunity for us to take leadership roles and there is opportunity for us to be out communicating our party's messages or the House of Representatives' message to the country. I think we do have some great opportunities in that respect.[45]

The structural differences between the two parties also result in varying incentives for political actors in the two contexts. First, unlike the United States where candidates chart much of their own path, political parties in the United Kingdom control both candidate selection and advancement within the parliamentary party and government, meaning that party favor is extremely valuable currency. Thus, to the extent it is electorally beneficial, the Conservative Party has the capacity to more easily activate men as messengers (something that Bernard Jenkin alluded to in his interview as discussed above).

Further, differences in political structures in these two country contexts change the audience of the two campaigns. A key target for Women2Win is the local party associations that select candidates and tend to be majority male. Thus, the party-level imperative to engage men in the messaging is much stronger in the case of Women2Win. For the Republican Party, the aims of Project GROW (encourage more right-wing women to run for office), led Republican women to see women as the obvious messengers for the campaign. Ann Wagner, who headed Project GROW, told *The Atlantic*: "We have a message I think that reaches women, and we need to make sure that we're actively and aggressively telling that story. And there's no better way to do it than being a woman who talks about it."[46] Similarly, in interviews Republican women argued that they best understood how to communicate to women voters, and that their role as messengers would support the GOP's electoral interests. Congresswoman Ellmers, who believes the GOP needs to do more to push back against the perception of an antiwoman party, said, "When an older man is leading on an issue that affects women, it just doesn't connect. It tends to cause people to question, do they even understand that this is a woman's issue? Now, I maintain, and so do all my colleagues, that every issue is a woman's issue … And so it is very important that women … are out there having the discussions."[47] Without women in

party messaging roles, Ellmers argues, the GOP is at risk of appearing not to care about women voters.

In both the United Kingdom and the United States then, right-wing women made strategic decisions about who would be the most credible messengers for issues and initiatives pertaining to women – a product of the ideological context and the intended audience necessary to achieve progress in their own political structures.

Conclusion

Despite their general opposition to "identity politics", right-wing parties have engaged in feminized party strategies as a way to appeal to women voters. The Conservative Party's Women2Win and the Republican Party's Project GROW were two such strategies that worked to address women's under-representation through candidate recruitment and messaging tactics. Rather than test the effectiveness of these programs, our study centers on under-standing 1) the way party elites frame Women2Win and Project GROW and 2) women's roles in each of these initiatives.

Our analysis reveals, first, that right-wing party elites framed both the problem of women's underrepresentation and the implementation of their candidate recruitment initiatives in ways that de-emphasized conventional identity politics. Instead, Women2Win and Project GROW were framed in ways that aligned with right-wing ideology and emphasized the electoral benefits of recruiting women candidates. Differences in the proportions of frames used by party elites and in the use of gendered party messengers lend support to our theory that women in right-wing parties function as *strategic party actors*. In other words, they tactically advocate for women's representation within the specific contexts of their parties and electoral systems.

Our findings have three main implications. First, we expand understandings of the way right-wing women navigate the tension between their own social identity and their rejection of identity politics by showing how they work at the intersection of their gender and partisan identities. Given the dearth of women in right-wing parties across the globe, working to increase the number of right-wing women candidates through initiatives like Women2Win and Project GROW is essential if we are ever to see gender balance in legislative bodies. While the nature of right-wing parties can make such efforts challenging, our study shows right-wing women in particular can and do work to frame these initiatives in line with the ideological principles of the party.

Second, we show that electoral systems have implications for the way women candidate recruitment initiatives are both framed and implemented in right-wing parties. This finding serves as a reminder that policies and programs that aim to promote women in politics need to be cognizant of the institutional constraints and incentives, as well as the ideological landscape.

Finally, this article sheds light on potential future challenges for right-wing women's representation. One barrier to widening the pool of right-wing women candidates is the perception by more moderate women that they are not an adequate ideological "fit" for their party (Thomsen 2015). Indeed, Roosmarijn de Geus and Rosalind Shorrocks (this issue) argue that women candidates in right-wing parties may perceive a greater ideological distance to their party than male candidates. Our finding that party elites frame women's candidate recruitment efforts in ways that uphold, rather than challenge, right-wing ideological stances suggests that such efforts may perpetuate some of the electoral challenges faced by women on the right, even as they increase their efforts to attract female candidates.

Notes

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4. We used "other" when the statement was found on the Women2Win Web site with no specific person attached to it.
5. Interviews were conducted by CAWP researchers between September 2015 and February 2017 and were possible through funding from the Political Parity Project at the Hunt Alternatives Fund.
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