

# The Glass-Cliff and USA Politics: Are Women Set Up for Failure?

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## **Abstract:**

This study investigates the hypothesis that the glass cliff exists in Senate races for the United States in 1998, 2004, 2010, and 2016. It compares the effects to anecdotal situations focusing on Brexit. The results of the study find validity in glass cliff hypothesis.

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## 1.0 Introduction

The glass cliff is a phenomenon that has come into popular rhetoric as women and other minorities continue to shatter the glass ceiling. The latter is a concept relating to the “artificial barriers to the advancement of women and other minorities” that occur when those individuals climb higher on the hierarchical scale (Cotter, Hermsen, Ovadia, & Vanneman, 2001). It identifies the residual differences that cannot be explained using job-relevant characteristics of the employee. This theory shows that women and other minorities are not treated the same within the workforce simply because of their identities and not because they are any less capable than their majority counterparts at completing the job.

This study aims to enhance the understanding of the glass cliff, a theory that “holds that women tend to be appointed [in positions of power] in precarious situations” (Elsaid & Ursel, 2018). The objective is to see if this holds true around the world for political power of the highest kind. The United States Congress resides over the flow of money in this country. They collect taxes and distribute funds through the many budgets that they oversee. The duty is to pay down America’s debt, provide common defense to its citizens and the protect and enhance their general welfare.

The major problem that arises in Congress is that it is not a truly representative body. According to the Census Bureau, the United States has about a 1-to-1 ratio females to males. It’s noted that this shifts to a 2-to-1 ratio, females to males, in the older generation of Americans. However, in Congress women only make up 23.7% of the total seat, 25% of Senate and 23.4% of the House of Representatives (Rutgers, 2019). The

quest becomes, how can we represent the needs of 50% of our population if they do not have the proper representation in our government?

## **2.0 Women as a Scapegoat Worldwide**

The Harvard Business Review conducted their own survey of 119 college students that asked them to appoint a new CEO to a company that's current CEO was retiring (Bruckmuller & Branscombe, 2011). Their options were of equally qualified personal, one being male and the other female. The support material focused on the same company, however, one group's material stated that the company was growing and the other stated that company was failing. Their results showed that under the condition where the company was doing well 62% of the student chose the male candidate while 69% chose the female candidate when the company was showing signs of distress.

An interesting aspect of the study identified the notion that the glass cliff phenomenon did not exist in organizations with a history of female leaders. This shows that normalizing women in leadership positions makes other more likely to choose the next potential candidate based on merit rather than gender, regardless of the health of the company.

An article published in Forbes magazine makes the glass cliff out to be as alluring as the poison apple and women as doe eyed as Snow White (Barratt, 2018). Women are used as the scapegoat for failing companies because they are willing to expose women to the face of failure. Women are presented these positions as if they are the most amazing opportunity the potential candidate could ever imagine. Women are then lured into this

position and presented with a completely different rhetoric, specifically, that the current failure within the company is of her own doing.

It is important to note that this article does highlight the problematic assumptions within this theory. Specifically, that women are mindless and incapable of seeing deception, willing to blindly walk to the edge of a plank. Moreover, that she is willing to internalize the failures of the company as her own without asking questions. It is essential to understand all of the societal pressures that women have to endure, meaning that they may lack the confidence to efficacy for themselves in those situations because she believes her musings will fall on deaf ears.

One of the most poignant circumstances of instability today is the Brexit deal currently removing the United Kingdom from the European Union. The Times wrote an article highlighting the criticism that Theresa May is facing as she tries to navigate the small group of countries through this situation with as little damage as possible (Ryan & Haslam, 2018). Many of her critics blame her for the instability created without taking a moment to look back at her male predecessors with suspicious eyes.

Many of May's critics are outraged by how much she has delayed the full split of the United Kingdom from the European Union. They direct their frustrations toward Theresa May as the one that is putting the entire deal on pause. Few are turning toward the complex political climate that she must navigate to ensure that the separation does not create more chaos for both the UK and the EU. European Union Council President, Donald Tusk, has granted an extension until October 31, 2019. This extension came with the pointed message to the nation's leadership asking them not to waste the time given.

Many believe that May is doing nothing more than wasting time as she tries to navigate the many nuances that comes with such a historical and radical political change.

### **3.0 Literature Review**

#### *Situational Overview*

Taking a step back, one can see that there is a major discrepancy in the hiring, electing and appointing women into positions of power. In traditionally masculine positions, which tend to be those with power, women are placed under far more scrutiny and are seen as less effective than their male counterparts (Eagly, Karau and Makhijani, 1995). This lack of trust creates a type of stressful environment where a woman's successes are credited to external happenstances and her failures are credited to her personal capacity for leadership. Women are held to unjustly high standards and face more pressure, making each of their decisions evaluated under a microscope. This requires them to manage the workload and normal pressures of the job as well as the additional pressures placed upon them by those that they work with.

In the following article, the glass cliff is referred to as the "second wave" of discrimination (Ryan & Haslam, 2007). It highlights that women are placed in positions that are inherently at a greater risk for failure due to instability not related to the person in the position. Ryan and Haslam, has done continual research in this field, in 2005, they analyze the situational factors that impact the ability for women to succeed in their position. Their analysis includes leadership appointments and company performance to understand the time and position within the organization when women are appointed to leadership positions.

As of January 24, 2019, there are 24 female CEOs on the S&P 500 list, or 4.8% of the list is made up of female CEOs (Women CEOs of the S&P 500, 2019). This issue is also extremely prevalent in politics; evidence shows that women are selected to run for seats that have different characteristics than the ones that their male counterparts run for (Ryan, Haslam, & Kulich, 2010). These characteristics make the winnability of the seat far less likely. These factors include those eluded to in the article written in the Harvard Business Review. Women are encouraged to run for seats that have long been held by the opposing party and gender. Attempting to overturn the party in power is hard as there is a history that can be difficult to overcome in the minds' of constituents. When she inevitably fails in her mission to acquire the position, it is her merit that is discredited not a basic analysis historical context.

Under this phenomenon, women are also used as a figurehead, depicting a brighter future without the ability to turn that image into real substance. Kulich, et al., studied the effects of women as a figure head in Iceland after the most recent financial crisis. The minister was quoted saying, “after the 2008 financial crisis, Icelandic banks appointed female leaders to ‘clean up the young men’s mess’”. Women in these positions offered nothing more than a visual break in trend. The former male leaders in those positions brought banks into some of the riskiest territory in history. Woman were expected to restore confidence in the banks’ customer base because of their gender identity and not because of their work.

#### *Appointment and Election Data*

Ryan and Haslam (2005), studied the relationship of FTSE 100 stock market value compared to the time of newly appointed male and female executives. They tracked

the companies' performance five months prior to the appointment up until three months after. Their data found that when the stock value was relatively low and the company was not performing well the appointment of a woman could prove fruitful. Before appointment the companies' monthly performance was negative four to negative six percent relatively. After appointment monthly performance spiked to a positive six percent and leveled at a positive four to five percent relatively.

This design was also replicated under controlled conditions in order to better understand the reasons as to why women were appointed in precarious situations. Under these conditions Haslam and Ryan (2008), found that women were not placed into these positions because they were seen to be as more qualified but because the men were seen as less qualified. In this study, 86.4% of the participants ranked women as who they would choose to fill a leadership position if the company was in decline. In this sense, the leadership chosen was who was the most qualified but rather who was the lesser of two evils. A woman's merit does not come into consideration during the decision making process.

#### *Retention Data*

A survey conducted across 23 medical schools assessed the retention of women through programs that promote the protection of women in the workforce (Carr, Gunn, Raj, Kaplan, & Freund, 2017). This study analyzed the existence and effectiveness of programs that support women in the medical schools. These programs include: search and promotion committees, tracking, child and elder care, spousal hiring, programs to promote women, formal support mechanism, academic community, policy, and search committee training. In the end, the study noted that the number of institutions lacking

these formal programs is very concerning. It is so important to understand that diversity does not happen if there is not a conscious effort to make it happen. One aspect of the study highlighted training against unconscious bias. Without these types of trainings people have a tendency to hire those that look, think and act like themselves without considering the positive implications of diversity in the workplace.

### *Women in Politics*

The qualities of a “good” politician are highly subjective, however, many prefer to stick to what they believe to be the “status quo” (Murray, 2015). The criteria of a “good” politician describes the characteristics of a white, cis-gender, heterosexual male from a high socio-economic background. There is very little room in politics for the perspective of minority groups in any of these categories. This again ties into the findings of the Harvard Business Review. The mental schema for “politician” and “woman” have very few characteristics that overlap. This makes it far more difficult for women to break into politics.

When they do achieve the role, breaking the figurative glass ceiling they are then held to different standards than their male counterparts, much of the time labeled in a negative context when they advocate for the rights of women.

## **4.0 Data and Empirical Methodology**

Empirical data for this study comes from the nonpartisan, independent and nongovernmental organization, Open Secrets. The data is regressed using a fixed and random effect ordinary least squares analysis. The random effect

The model could be written as follow:



$$PercentofVotes_{Winners} =$$

$$\alpha + \beta_1 Gender + \beta_2 Incumbency + \beta_3 PartyAffiliation \\ + \beta_4 AmountRaised + \beta_5 AmountSpent$$

$$PercentofVotes_{Losers} =$$

$$\alpha + \beta_1 Gender + \beta_2 Incumbency + \beta_3 PartyAffiliation \\ + \beta_4 AmountRaised + \beta_5 AmountSpent$$

The dependent variable in the study is the percentage of votes won. The independent variables that impact this variable include: gender, incumbency, party affiliation, amount of funds raised for the campaign, and amount of funds spent on the campaign.

A large portion of the independent variables that are included are legitimate aspects that should be considered when a person is running for office. Incumbency is a term used to describe a person running for an office they are currently holding. Party affiliation describes the political organization who shares the same values as the candidate and supports them in their race. The United States has a bipartisan system meaning a majority of the candidates will affiliate with the liberal group, Democrats, or the conservative group, Republicans. Campaign financing will be broken into the amount of funds raised and the amount of funds used. This is the money that the candidate uses to run events, ads, etc. to spread awareness of their goals in office and increase their visibility.

The final independent variable of interest is gender. This is simply the gender identity of the candidates running for office. Within the model, the significance of this

variable will highlight the level of difficulty there is to winning a seat simply because of a candidates' gender. The significance, relationship and magnitude of this variable will be used to understand effects of the glass cliff and its impact on women in US politics.

## 5.0 Results

The empirical results can be found in Exhibit 1 and include the output from the fixed and random effects regressions for the winning and losing senators. The regression for the winners, fixed effect (WF) and losers, random effect (LR) are significant at a 99% confidence level. For the output for the loser, fixed effect (LF) is significant at 95% confidence level and the output for the winners, random effect (WR) does not include a significance. Between the models for winners and respectively for losers, the sign, size and magnitude of each of the variables stays consistent. Each model is as follows:

$$PoV_{WR} = 0.635 - 0.045Gen - 0.005ParA + 0.040Inc + 2.40e - 11Ara - 6.09e - 09Asp$$

$$PoV_{WF} = 0.643 - 0.047Gen - 0.024ParA + 0.039Inc + 2.36e - 11Ara - 5.90e - 09Asp$$

$$PoV_{LR} = 0.341 + 0.011Gen - 0.009ParA + 0.015Inc - 2.196e - 09Ara + 6.76e - 09Asp$$

$$PoV_{LF} = 0.354 + 0.014Gen - 0.025ParA + 0.17Inc - 4.01e - 09Ara + 7.60e - 09Asp$$

### *Winner Models*

As you can see in the winner models, the gender variable is negative. Meaning that under the fixed effect, where the innate differences between states are held constant, and the random effect, that controls for the variance between the years, being a female has a negative impact on the percentage votes that you win. In the random effect model, gender is significant at a 90% level and reduces the number of votes won by 4.5%. While gender does not remain significant in the fixed effects model it does act as a robustness check that reinforces the magnitude and negative impact on the percentage of votes won. Under the fixed effect, gender accounts for a loss of 4.7% of the votes.

Variables that relate to the impact of the glass cliff include incumbency, party affiliation and the amount spent during campaigning. This is because, as seen in past literature, women are put in a position to run for hard to win seats. These seats are those held by incumbents as well as previously held by candidates from the opposite gender or party.

The incumbency variable is significant at the 95% in the random effect and is not significant in the fixed effect. In both models the variable has a coefficient of about .04. This shows that being an incumbent increases the percentage of votes received by 4%.

The variable for party affiliation is not significant in either model but does provide an understanding that being democratic in the bipartisan system will negatively impact the percentage of votes received by 0.5% in the random effect and 2.4% in the fixed effects.

The variable for amount spent during campaigning is significant at a 99% level in both models. While the magnitude of this variable is small it shows that the amount spent on a campaign can reduce the percentage of votes received. Therefore, those with an ability to raise more money are more likely to win.

### *Loser Models*

As you can see in the loser models, the gender variable is positive. Meaning that under the fixed effect, where the innate differences between states are held constant, and the random effect, that controls for the variance between the years, being a female has a positively impacts your ability to lose. While gender is not significant in either model it does act as a robustness check that reinforces the magnitude and negative impact on the percentage of votes won. It shows that being a woman contributes to the percentage of votes that losers receive. This shows validity for the glass cliff as candidates are placed into a position for winning but fall short due to their gender because winning is unattainable for women.

The incumbency variable is not significant in the random or fixed effect. In both models, the variable has a positive coefficient of about 0.02. The sign of this variable is interesting because it would seem that in some respects being an incumbent can play into a lack of winnability by 2%.

The variable for party affiliation is not significant in either model but does provide an understanding that being democratic in the bipartisan system will negatively impact the percentage of votes received by 0.9% in the random effect and 2.5% in the fixed effects. These findings are similar to that of the winning model.

The variable for amount spent during campaigning is not significant in either model. Moreover, magnitude of this variable is small it shows that the amount spent on a campaign can reduce the percentage of votes received. The sign does change from the winning model to the losing model as it goes from a negative to a positive. This shows that seats are being lost because of the inability to raise capital to promote a candidates campaign.

## **5.1 Discussion**

The overall lack of representation for women in all sectors of leadership provides further support for the existence of the glass ceiling. Women are prevented from reaching positions of power because of their gender and all of the negative stereotypes that accompany being a female leader. This not only an injustice to the women fighting to attain these positions but to all women nation-wide, if not globally. With a lack of representation there is no guarantee that a women's voice is present when women's issues are being discussed. These issues do include those of healthcare and childcare but also encompass all aspects of our economy, regulations on our industries, any and all aid to our people and nearly every other decision made. The time of men believing that they can speak on behalf of women and provide them the assistance that they need is over. The time for change is now.

Many have looked toward the women being appointed into power as of later as a sign of hope. It is important for all people to take a step back and be skeptical to ensure true equity is being afforded. In the area of business, it has been seen that women are being elected or appointed to power in times of distress for the company in both reality

and in control experimental settings. In politics, this effect seems to have an even more dastardly impact.

With the political turmoil surrounding the Brexit decision people have been calling for the resignation of Theresa May. They believe that her lack of action is a sign of her inability to lead rather than her attempt to maneuver the nation she leads toward a stable future after a vote of such drastic action. Taking a look within our own borders, we had the first female presidential candidate in history make it to the ballot in 2016. Hillary Clinton wanted to continue an era of peaceful progression for the future of our nation. She came after Barrack Obama, who was an extremely thoughtful and insightful president. Unfortunately, she lost to Donald Trump, a man running on a nationalist platform calling for the homogeneity of a country that is made up of millions of differences. If Clinton ran after a time of distress would she have achieved her goal of becoming the first female POTUS? We may never know.

The data found in this study shows validity for the glass cliff hypothesis. The United States Senate has historically consisted of straight, cis-gendered, white men from high socio-economic backgrounds. These are the incumbents that the women running for office are faced with challenging. Due to the historical trend within Congress the relative winnability of almost any seat is extremely low for women. Many senate races throughout the nation, especially those that include candidates from parties outside of the bipartisan system, are won by extremely narrow margins. The difference of 2-4.5% of the votes can mean the difference between being the victor and being the loser.

Continued support for the hypothesis comes from the raw data. States with female leaders seem to show trends of future female leaders as the relative winnability

becomes more attainable. This is seen especially in California where Barbara Boxer won the 1998 election and has been followed by women since. It will be interesting to see what the 2022 Senate elections hold as many people see a need for political change and feel as though this country is under constant political stress with the mere presence of the current administration.

Further research should also investigate the effects that gerrymandering has on the amount of women in Congress. Moreover, there should be a comprehensive understanding of how women are treated once they are elected into Congress, if their voice and votes are truly being heard. Finally, to truly understand the effects of the glass cliff future research should track the differences in elections on a national level considering the political and economic trends of the nation.

## Exhibit 1

### Winners, Random Effects

Random-effects GLS regression			Number of obs	=	132	
Group variable: ID			Number of groups	=	33	
R-sq:			Obs per group:			
within	=	0.2597	min	=	4	
between	=	0.2916	avg	=	4.0	
overall	=	0.2753	max	=	4	
corr(u_i, X) = 0 (assumed)			Wald chi2(4)	=	.	
			Prob > chi2	=	.	
PoV	Coef.	Std. Err.	z	P> z	[95% Conf. Interval]	
Par	-.0044718	.0163076	-0.27	0.784	-.036434	.0274905
Gen	-.0452287	.0230379	-1.96	0.050	-.0903822	-.0000751
Inc	.0400849	.0141824	2.83	0.005	.0122879	.0678818
Ara	2.40e-11	7.80e-11	0.31	0.758	-1.29e-10	1.77e-10
Asp	-6.09e-09	1.18e-09	-5.15	0.000	-8.41e-09	-3.78e-09
_cons	.6354712	.0193412	32.86	0.000	.5975632	.6733792
sigma_u	.05137626					
sigma_e	.06553551					
rho	.38064021	(fraction of variance due to u_i)				

### Winners, Fixed Effects

Group variable: ID		Number of groups =		33	
R-sq:		Obs per group:			
within	= 0.2683	min	=	4	
between	= 0.2238	avg	=	4.0	
overall	= 0.2441	max	=	4	
corr(u_i, Xb) = -0.0407		F(5,94)	=	6.89	
		Prob > F	=	0.0000	

PoV	Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P> t	[95% Conf. Interval]	
Par	-.0240472	.019779	-1.22	0.227	-.0633189	.0152245
Gen	-.0466418	.0288339	-1.62	0.109	-.1038922	.0106085
Inc	.0390936	.0150504	2.60	0.011	.0092107	.0689764
Ara	2.36e-11	8.18e-11	0.29	0.774	-1.39e-10	1.86e-10
Asp	-5.90e-09	1.35e-09	-4.38	0.000	-8.57e-09	-3.23e-09
_cons	.6428741	.0194472	33.06	0.000	.6042613	.681487
sigma_u	.0616605					
sigma_e	.06553551					
rho	.46956337	(fraction of variance due to u_i)				

F test that all u i=0: F(32, 94) = 3.18		Prob > F = 0.0000	
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## Losers, Random Effect

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Random-effects GLS regression              Number of obs   =       131
Group variable: ID                        Number of groups  =       33

R-sq:                                     Obs per group:
    within = 0.1987                               min =         3
    between = 0.4072                               avg =        4.0
    overall = 0.2608                               max =         4

Wald chi2(5) =       36.50
corr(u_i, X) = 0 (assumed)                 Prob > chi2      =       0.0000

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PoV	Coef.	Std. Err.	z	P> z	[95% Conf. Interval]	
Par	-.0087959	.0143672	-0.61	0.540	-.0369551	.0193634
Gen	.0112661	.015201	0.74	0.459	-.0185273	.0410594
Inc	.0150733	.0257755	0.58	0.559	-.0354458	.0655923
Ara	-2.19e-09	7.21e-09	-0.30	0.761	-1.63e-08	1.19e-08
Asp	6.76e-09	7.14e-09	0.95	0.343	-7.22e-09	2.07e-08
_cons	.341411	.0126984	26.89	0.000	.3165226	.3662993
sigma_u	.0403462					
sigma_e	.06045828					
rho	.30812226	(fraction of variance due to u_i)				

## Losers, Fixed Effects

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Group variable: ID                        Number of groups  =       33

R-sq:                                     Obs per group:
    within = 0.2088                               min =         3
    between = 0.2526                               avg =        4.0
    overall = 0.2199                               max =         4

F(5,93) =       4.91
corr(u_i, Xb) = 0.1362                     Prob > F         =       0.0005

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PoV	Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P> t	[95% Conf. Interval]	
Par	-.0249079	.0173271	-1.44	0.154	-.0593161	.0095004
Gen	.0149888	.0154913	0.97	0.336	-.0157737	.0457514
Inc	.0170847	.0265224	0.64	0.521	-.0355836	.069753
Ara	-4.01e-09	7.41e-09	-0.54	0.590	-1.87e-08	1.07e-08
Asp	7.60e-09	7.34e-09	1.04	0.303	-6.97e-09	2.22e-08
_cons	.3541203	.0112671	31.43	0.000	.331746	.3764946
sigma_u	.05973775					
sigma_e	.06045828					
rho	.49400561	(fraction of variance due to u_i)				

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F test that all u_i=0: F(32, 93) = 3.41                      Prob > F = 0.0000

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