Does exposure to news coverage that emphasizes the “horserace” in elections make women less interested in running for office?

Media Coverage and the Gender Gap In Political Ambition
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Theory & Hypothesis
• Previous research has shown that women are less likely to run for office because of an aversion to the competitive nature of electoral politics.
• I expect that “horserace” coverage of elections will widen the gender gap in political ambition, while coverage focused on policy issues will narrow the gender gap and increase the likelihood that a woman would run for office.

Experimental Design
• I virtually distributed a set of three “newspaper articles” and a survey to a group of 1,083 respondents who were recruited through Amazon.com’s MechanicalTurk service.
• Respondents were randomly assigned to read one of three versions of a newspaper article about a local election:
  • Horserace
  • Policy
  • Control
• Following the article, respondents were asked to answer questions about their attitudes towards running for office, perceived qualifications, and perceived likelihood of winning an election.

Excerpts of Treatment Stories

Policy
“Next week The Oakland County Literary Society & Debating Union will be hosting the election’s first debate, where the candidates will get the opportunity to engage one another about topics important to the community. A representative of The OCLSD has said that the debate topics will range from district-specific concerns, like the loss of blue collar jobs, to national issues such as gun safety.”

Horserace
“Initial polling data released by Bowman’s campaign shows that he is currently trailing Sharp by 4 percentage points – 44 percent to 48 percent – a victory for Bowman’s campaign, which expected to face much tougher numbers in a district with a strong majority of Republican voters. The poll of 400 likely voters conducted earlier this week carries a margin of error of 4.9 percentage points.”

Sample Description

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Percent of Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>50</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Percent of Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Perhaps this is different for college students?
• I conducted a similar experiment with college-aged students and found varying results.
• College-aged women were less likely to want to run for office when exposed to the policy treatment, less likely to think that they would be qualified to run for office, and less likely to believe they would win if they ran.
• This may be because policy treatment made young women feel that they needed to possess an unachievable level of policy expertise before running for office.
• More research is needed to explore why college-aged respondents may react differently to the experimental treatments.

What does this mean?
If the media play a role in reinforcing misperceptions that women lack the qualifications to run for office, that may help explain the persistence of gender inequality in American political institutions.