

War magnifies politicians' gendered behavior and public biases, research finds

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Women's participation in politics is essential to [advancing women's rights and contributes to countries' overall stability](#) and economic prosperity. According to a 2023 report by [UN Women and the Inter-Parliamentary Union](#), one-fourth of parliamentary positions worldwide are held by women. Although current representation is still far from

equal, it represents a significant increase [over the last 20 years](#).

However, a new paper from Washington University in St. Louis—published in the journal [International Organization](#)—shows that the progress [women](#) have made in politics is threatened when conflict strikes.

A team of WashU researchers led by Margit Tavits, the Dr. William Taussig Professor in Arts & Sciences, conducted an analysis of Ukrainian politicians' engagement on [social media](#) in the months leading up to and after the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine—a rare opportunity to observe the effect conflict has on politicians' behavior in real time.

Their research provides evidence that [violent conflict](#) pushes politicians to conform more strongly with [traditional gender stereotypes](#), so that men become more politically engaged than women, and politicians gravitate toward their respective gendered communication styles and issue spaces. They also show that gender biases among the public are magnified during war.

"Our findings suggest that women leaders' voices may be drowned out by their [male counterparts](#) during conflict, which is troubling," Tavits said. "We know that who engages, and how, in response to conflict can have significant consequences for how the conflict unfolds, how long it lasts, whose concerns are heard and represented and so on."

About the research

Tavits, along with WashU political science graduate students Taylor J. Damann and Dahjin Kim, analyzed more than 136,000 Facebook posts

made by 469 politicians over a seven-month period to study the effect that conflict had on politicians' public engagement.

Although the data were limited to a specific type of behavior—politicians' engagement with the public on social media—the researchers said this allowed them to observe how each [politician](#) engaged with the public on a daily basis.

Prior to the invasion, men and women Ukrainian politicians had similar levels of engagement on social media, the analysis showed. Although both increased their level of public engagement on social media with the onset of the conflict, women's engagement did not increase as much as men's. On average, men politicians were publishing one-half of a post more per day than women politicians in the early days of the conflict.

It wasn't just the quantity of posts that differed; the content was also different. The analysis showed women politicians were more likely to take on a more nurturing role, display positive sentiment in their messages and focus on traditionally feminine topics, while men politicians discussed the security issues more directly and depicted themselves as strong, protective leaders.

Finally, the analysis showed that the public's reaction to these posts changed, too. Prior to the invasion, social media posts made by men and women politicians received about the same number of reactions from voters.

Once the conflict began, though, social media posts made by men politicians received significantly more engagement from the public—a measure researchers say reflects increased gender biases among the public.

"There's a strong association between masculinity and combat," Tavits

said. "Combat and external threats are traditionally seen as 'men's issues.'"

During times of crisis, individuals are more likely to prefer men—who are expected to be aggressive and decisive—in [leadership roles](#). Meanwhile, women are expected to be affectionate and nurturing and are believed to be better suited for communal caregiving tasks.

According to the researchers, these stereotypes lead to biased expectations and preferences among the public, which may further motivate politicians' gendered behavior.

"It's not surprising to see individuals gravitating toward male leaders and politicians 'playing the part' in response. What is surprising, though, is how quickly we see this change occur in response to the attack," Tavits said. "The gendered effects of the conflict occurred almost instantaneously, both among the public and politicians."

Women's voices are needed

Women's voices are always needed in politics, but that is especially true in times of war, Tavits said.

"Our research shows women do engage with their publics during war, only with a different style and about different topics than men," she said.

"Women politicians' version of engagement, such as compassionately recognizing the human cost of conflict, is an important part of successful crisis management. And previous research has shown that women's leadership in post-conflict recovery decreases violence and helps usher postwar reconstruction.

"We need to amplify women's voices, not silence them," said Tavits.

Recognizing that gendered biases may increase during times of conflict is an important first step. Beyond awareness, there also are practical steps that could help achieve or maintain gender equality in wartime, the authors said.

"It might help to encourage women politicians to continue engaging with the public during war. Overall, providing training and support for women politicians to navigate the challenges of conflict and raising public awareness of the importance of women's leadership in times of crisis may prevent reversals in trends toward gender equality that accompany war," the researchers wrote.

More information: Taylor J. Damann et al, Women and Men Politicians' Response to War: Evidence from Ukraine, *International Organization* (2024). [DOI: 10.1017/S0020818324000080](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818324000080)

Provided by Washington University in St. Louis

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