Gender Attitudes in Liberia: The Sirleaf Administration

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Abstract

As the first woman president in Liberia and in Africa the effectiveness of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's administration had come into question. How much has her gender affected attitudes toward her? While gender attitudes can create a negative spotlight for female politicians, within the post-war Western African context it can be seen as a positive. I show that when taking into account Model 1 and Model 3 in Table 1 gender attitudes show that women predict evaluations of Sirleaf at 0.111 and 0.112 times higher than men on a scale of 1-5. This implies that gender is not largely significant factor when assessing Sirleaf.

Introduction

In January of 2006, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was sworn in as head of state for Liberia. She was the first modern female president on the African continent and in Liberia. Her election was particularly noteworthy as Liberia is poor and female executives are typically associated with more economical stable countries (Inglehart and Norris, 2003).

While Sirleaf proved to be a supported candidate largely during her time as head of state, African societies are still highly patriarchal. This introduces questions of how women as leaders are viewed in these male dominated communities. This research aims to answer the question of how Liberian citizens assessed the Sirleaf Administration (2005- 2018)? Is there a correlation between how women are viewed in Libera and how the people viewed Sirleaf as the head of state?

This study proposes three theories (1) Gender attitudes had a negative influence on how Liberian citizens assessed Sirleaf. (2) Gender attitudes had a positive influence on how Liberian citizens assessed her. (3) Gender attitudes had no influence. The results Liberians are voting based on Sirleaf's ability to perform as president, with no correlation between gender and gender attitudes and their opinion of Sirleaf. The findings of this study were contradictory to the existing literature on the ideals of women in politics, which generally show that there is a gap between men and women where women are usually under represented (Fraile & Gomez, 2017).

Theory

This study proposes three theories (1) Gender attitudes had a negative influence on how Liberian citizens assess the administration of former president. (2) Gender attitudes had a positive influence on how Liberian citizens assess the administration of former president. (3) Gender attitudes had no influence on how Liberian citizens assess the administration of the former President.

When considering gender in society, it is common for societies to be led by men, also known as patriarchal societies. This type of community is also common in West Africa, where men control most aspects of life such as social, financial, and political (Grewal, 2013). These patriarchal views allow for the creation of stereotypes were men are dominant, stronger, and smarter. Men and boys are expected to lead and women are expected to exercise less power. These ideals transfer to politics because men are usually the individuals that control the working aspects of civilization which is attributed to their access to political knowledge (Fraile & Gomez. 2017). This can also be seen in the Afrobarometer Round 5 (2011) which support how women are more then often treated unfairly by courts and police[2].

Gendered attitudes within politics are found all over the globe, even in democratic societies. These attitudes can be negative which can lead to biases that bar women from entering political spheres; these attitudes can be severe enough that countries have responded with gender quotas, which force gender representation in elected government. which have led to gender quotas. The presence of gender quotas can be taken as a sign that policymakers recognize societal bias against female candidates. Since many African countries have gender quotas, this suggests that women are a marginalized and their accomplishments in politics are not well known (Bauer, 2012).

In most sub Saharan African countries, women are the marginalized group in social settings and this extends to politics. In regards to African women in the political sphere, the number had increased to women holding 22.4 percent (IPU, 2014) in national legislation, and while this number exceeds the national average of 21.8 percent (IPU, 2014) this is still a lower percentage of women in government. This is an ongoing trend in specific countries such as Uganda 17.6 percent, Rwanda 56.3 percent, and Tunisia with 26.7 percent of women in legislation and a wide range of African countries implementing legal measures to allow more women to enter into government (Bauer, 2012). This trend seems to be on the rise particularly in war-stricken country such as Liberia.

Some studies analyzed how male and female candidates are represented in the media, one in particular focused on the 2006 political campaign in Liberia in which the difference in media representation between Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and her running opponent, George Weah (Anderson, Diabah, & hMensa, 2011). The researchers pulled excerpts from articles in various news sources such as *The Washington Post*, *The New Zealand Harold*, *BCC News*, *CNN*, and *The Ghanaian Times*. Within these articles, reporters focused mostly on Sirleaf was a "mother, grandmother, and widow" even when speaking about her educational background and political platform while Weah's personal life as a husband and father are never reported (Anderson, Diabah, & hMensa, 2011).

In this context, identify with these titles of "mother, grandmother, and window" could create the idea that Sirleaf is not fit to lead the country because her roles as "mother, grandmother, and widow" are of more importance and she is more dedicated to the expectations of these titles, then leading the country.

These biases sometimes manifest themselves in media and harp on the idea that women are ineffective leaders, do not belong or are a novelty in politics. Clothing and style are two componence that are usually discussed when covering Sirleaf especially after she was elected as president. News reporters refer to her style positively and attributing her clothing to her national identity while there are not articles that directly address Weah's attire at all (Anderson, Diabah, & hMensa, 2011). While the reference is positive, in mentioning Sirleaf's clothing in the reports it takes away from the issues she may have been addressing or focuses less on her education and experience (Anderson, Diabah, & hMensa, 2011) which could work to strip her authority as a leader for the viewer.

All of this seems to support the first theory introduced in the study: (1) Gender attitudes had a negative influence on how Liberian citizens assess the administration of former president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

However, there is also reason to believe that gender may have worked to her advantage, particularly in the Liberian context. While the bias ascribed to women can extended negatively to politics, women especially Sirleaf, could use these biases to propel their political platforms. Ellen Johnson may have been able to utilize the image of "womanhood" and "motherhood", two terms that are not usually synonymous with leadership, to win two consecutive elections (Moran, 2012). This ideal is completely different from the claims of (Bush, 2011) which focus on the use of quota implementation. In the study, Moran explores the implication of political affiliated women whom identify with these roles, also known as "motherist" politics (Van Allen, 2001).

Moran (1989) explains the constructs that defines a woman in West African context such as giving birth and being a mother, which are enforced not only by the men but also women "for their physical protection and for the protection of their own sets of values and definitions" (Moran, 1989). A commonality in Grebo culture is to have complementary political leadership roles where the male and female elders that compose a council and judge issues within the society, the female council is referred to as "bio nyene". This term translates loosely to head of state, which means that in this space women can be leaders which is highly dependent on their status as a mother and woman, but this power is extends solely to issues involving women (Moran, 1989). As explained by Moran (1998) women with this society are utilizing their womanhood to further issues that only affect women not all of society.

As stated before, in traditional West African societies it is not uncommon for women to be leaders, specifically dealing with the problems that impact women but this has transition to more modern governments particularly in post war societies like Liberia. Rwanda is one example of this, women's organizations within Rwanda have taken a leading role in rebuilding society and the lives of women (Burnet, 2008). In Rwanda women's organizations became an integral part of the political sphere from 1994-2003, their work included rebuilding networks for families that were torn apart, build social support systems that were formerly lost, and helped the vulnerable people of Rwanda. Women are more likely to fund programs and pass laws that deal with society building and social welfare (e.g., Bolzendahl & Brooks, 2007).

Also, women's movements and involvement usually changing current gender relations and allow for a return to politics (Hughes & Tripp, 2015).

All of this particular literature stands to support the second theory introduced in this study: Gender attitudes had a positive influence on how Liberian citizens assess the administration of former president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

The literature that has been provided before has been contradictory stating the negatives and positives associated with women and leadership, but some literature suggests a balance between to the two extremes, also known as dual-sex societies. This "dual-sex" society allows women to control affairs concerning women (Okonjo, 1976). These duties are practiced in a traditional context, when practiced and applied to state politics, the idea of the "mother" or "grandmother" begins to a line with leadership and power. According to Sofola (1998), "the dual-sex system of socio-political power sharing fully developed by African peoples and based on the following perceptions of womanhood 1) as the divine equal of a man in essence, 2) as a daughter, (3) as a mother; (4) as a wife". This explanation frames womanhood as an advantage instead of a downfall which is the reason female leaders continue to be of value particularly in Western African societies.

This type of dual-sex political system could be seen in the Yorba tribe which is located in Western Africa, where the tradition describes the female King, Oba and other influential women with in the culture. Women such as Ivalode Aniwura and Morenike who served as political leaders in their tribes and saved their people from war through political diplomacy are also important in Yorba history (Ikpe, 2004, pp. 19-28; Agaba, 2007, pp. 73-89; Aiyede, 2007, pp. 182-199, Ojiakor, 2009, pp. 142-151). While I have explained this type of system when discussing motherist politics (Van Allen, 2001), within the context of dual-sex societies explained by Sofana (1998) women can govern for issues that affect both men and women, not just women alone. This literature provides insight of pre-colonial African leadership hierarchy were gender is not a detriment.

The idea of dual-sex societies, along with the negative biases that bar women from politics, and the positives that propel women's political platforms causes contradiction. This contradiction leaves space to wonder which of the two extremes will describe the correlation of gender attitudes in politics in Liberia. The literature on women in politics expresses contradiction as stated before, which leads to the third theory proposed in this study: Because West Africans are used to seeing both women and men in positions of equal power, gender attitudes had no influence on how Liberian citizens assess the administration of the former President, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

Methods

In this study, data collected from Afrobarometer Round 5 (2011), will be examined in order to test how gender attitudes on women effect how Liberians viewed the Sirleaf administration. The data used in this study focuses on public attitude surveys with topics related to politics, government, economy, and overall society within Liberia. The sample size of this data is chosen randomly and consist of 1,200-2,400 participants with a sampling margin error of =/- 2.8% - 2.0%. The participants are given in person interviews. The subjects who participate in the study are of legal voting age, which is 18 in Liberia.

To determine whether gender is affecting attitudes toward Sirleaf, I looked for a relationship between gender attitude and evaluations of Sirleaf's performance. Specifically, I use a question that asks voters men only as leaders vs. women leaders ok. If Sirleaf's gender is affecting how people see her, we should see a correlation between how voters perceive her and how they feel toward powerful women in general. Similarly, to the extent that women are less biased against other women, there should be a correlation between respondents' gender[1] and their attitudes if their assessment of Sirleaf is gendered.

To ensure that I am not inadvertently picking up the effects of other variables correlated with gender attitudes, I control for age, partisan, education, living environment such as city or rural, socioeconomic status, gender, and ethnicity focusing particularly on the ethnicities that are closely related to Sirleaf such a Gola and Mandingo. In Model 2, I add controls for food and water insecurity, trust of the ruling party, corruption, and women empowerment and in Model 3, I add unfair treatment of women by traditional leaders, unfair treatment of the courts and police, and honesty. These controls isolate respondents' perceptions of outcomes and policies under Sirleaf, which allow evaluations of Sirleaf's presidency to be correlated with specific aspects of her performance.

Women leaders in this chart represents the question inquiring if responds prefer men or women leaders. Treatment in the chart refers to question of how often women are treated unequally by traditional leaders. Empowerment refers to how people handling empowering women. Courts and police treatment refer to the question of how often are women treated unequally by the police. Food insecurity ask respondents how often do they go without food and water insecurity refers to how often respondents go without clean water. Both of these questions control for the socioeconomic status of the respondents because those who are poor generally will often go without food and water.

Sirleaf linage suggests that she is from the Gola tribe so this study controls for respondents who answer that they are part of the Gola ethnic group/tribe. Education in the chart asks for the respondent's highest level of education which ranges from no formal schooling secondary/high school completion. Party trust in the data chart is the question which ask respondents how much they trust the current ruling party. The question of how corrupt respondents believe the president is, is stated in the chart as corruption.

Honesty relates to measuring how honest respondents are when answering the survey's questions, this measurement is at the discretion of the interviewer. Those who live in urban areas of Liberia as opposed to the rural areas, have different types of access to government which is why this variable was included in the data chart. Respondents were asked whether they lived in rural or urban setting. Age in the chart accounts for the age of the respondents.

Table 1: Afrobarometer Round 5 2011

Presidential Performance			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Women as Leaders	0.056* (0.024)	0.021 (0.023)	0.013 (0.024)
Rural	0.016 (0.054)	0.005 (0.051)	-0.008 (0.052)
Female[1]	0.122* (0.055)	0.087 (0.052)	0.111* (0.053)
Gola Tribe	-0.359** (0.136)	-0.301* (0.129)	-0.391** (0.134)
Education	-0.000 (0.005)	0.001 (0.004)	0.006 (0.005)
Age	0.008*** (0.002)	0.005* (0.002)	0.004 (0.002)
Food Insecurity		-0.028 (0.023)	-0.029 (0.023)
Water Insecurity		-0.033 (0.020)	-0.028 (0.021)
Trust Ruling Party		0.314*** (0.023)	0.313*** (0.023)
Corruption		-0.135 *** (0.031)	-0.123*** (0.032)
Empowering Women		0.049 (0.026)	0.053* (0.026)
Tribal Leader Treatment of Women			-0.054** (0.018)

Courts and Police Treatment of Women[2]			-0.013 (0.025)
Honesty			-0.181 (0.109)
Constant	2.259*** (0.125)	2.114*** (0.162)	2.255*** (0.170)
N	1124	1004	923

Standard errors in parentheses
* $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$
DV: Presidential Performance
OLS Simple Regression

The regression chart above shows the answer data from the questions that were important pertaining to this study.

Results

The regression model illustrates that when the participant's gender is female the only two models that show significance is the first which controls for women as leaders, rural living environment, age, level of education, and Gola tribe affiliates. It can be concluded that when taking into account the first and third regression models gender attitudes show that women predict evaluations of Sirleaf at 0.111 and 0.112 points higher than men on a scale of 1-5. While this is significant, the value of gender is less significant than the other figures in Table 1.

The regressions show that there is substantial relationship between gender and assessment of presidential performance, there are other variables that exhibit a stronger relationship when measured against presidential performance and control for all of the other variables, which include individuals who identify as being a part of the Gola tribe, trust of the leading party, corruption, treatment by traditional leaders. This can be concluded because the values of coefficient for each of these values are higher than that of the value of gender[1].

In the third model when measuring Gola tribe affiants while holding constant all of the other variables, the value is -0.391, which explains that those who are of Sirleaf's tribe have a negative assessment of her. This could suggest that Sirleaf may not be providing the Gola community with extra resources or funding.

The next significant variable is trust of the leading party which is highly significant, especially when control for all the other variables in the chart. The value is 0.313, this most significant regression model within the chart which can suggest that when Liberians support a leader, they are more concerned with the party the leader is a part of as oppose to any other factors.

The last regression model for corruption when holding all other variables constant produce a value of -0.123. The negative relationship suggests that those who believe Sirleaf is corrupt will not support her, while it is only in relation to gender, this is a significant value and the assumption can be made that Liberian people are not afraid to speak out against the government. This purposes that Liberia may be moving progressively towards democracy because citizens are open to using their freedom of speech.

In conclusion, as stated before, the regression supports that gender bias does not largely influence how people assess Sirleaf's performance. This means that Liberian people are voting on the president's ability to perform, which is also supported by the negative relationship between the president performance and corruption, and the positive relationship between trust of the leading party and presidential performance. This research answers the questions of the relationship of politics in gender/ gender bias within the country which contradicts pervious ideals of women in politics.

This study also provides a different type of research on a leader that is completely new. Sirleaf's administration ended in 2018 and as stated prior she is the first female president in Africa. Studies on female leaders specifically at the presidential level is limitedly available making this study important in assessing women at high levels of leadership.

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