

## Women Candidates and their Campaigns

Campaign resources and favorable political opportunities have traditionally shaped women's election to office, and those factors remain essential today. Women are strategic about where, when, and how they run for office.<sup>1</sup> While all candidates need campaign resources, having encouragement and sufficient support seem to be even more important to women than to men.

Most current research about gender stereotypes is optimistic about voter support for women candidates.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, women candidates continue to navigate "gendered terrain" when they campaign.<sup>3</sup> The gendered terrain that women face can vary with political party and the type and level of elective office. Moreover, gender intersects with other factors, such as race/ethnicity.

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### WOMEN'S ELECTION TO OFFICE

Voter prejudice against women candidates does not appear to be a major factor in limiting women's election to office. Instead, studies of women's election to office often emphasize the structural constraint of incumbency: because most incumbents are male, the advance of women in politics depends on the existence of open-seat opportunities.<sup>4</sup>

Most studies of the performance of women candidates demonstrate that women generally fare the same as, if not better than, their male counterparts in similar types of races.<sup>5</sup> The finding that women candidates are

equally competitive with men provides support for the notion that "when women run, women win." Therefore, it is the scarcity of women candidates rather than the poor performance of women candidates that seems to explain the lack of gender parity in officeholding.<sup>6</sup>

However, several other recent studies argue that when we look below the surface of women candidates' success rates, gender seems to shape election results in indirect ways—ways that put women at a disadvantage. Kathryn Pearson and Eric McGhee found that women congressional candidates appear to be more strategic than men in their entry decisions due to perceptions that they must be more qualified; they find that women are more likely than men to run with prior electoral experience.<sup>7</sup> Sarah Fulton introduced a new measure of candidate quality and argues that it is a missing variable in analyses of women's success rates.<sup>8</sup> She found that female incumbent congressional candidates must be more qualified in order to achieve the same vote share as male candidates.

Studies of women's success rates are based on the success of women candidates *where women have run*; but women are not equally likely to run in all districts.<sup>9</sup> Gender, race, party and geography interact to create more (or less) favorable electoral conditions for women candidates, and these factors affect women's entry decisions. For example, Barbara Palmer and Dennis Simon found that districts "friendly" to electing white Democratic women to Congress were more liberal, urban, diverse, and wealthier than the districts that elect white Democratic men.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, women of color were usually elected from majority-minority districts.<sup>11</sup> The state mattered as well; women state legislators were more likely to serve in states with multimember districts, more likely to serve in states with liberal voters, and less likely to serve in states with strong political parties.<sup>12</sup>

# Women Candidates and their Campaigns

Why does geography matter? The nature of the political career ladder, whereby lower level office becomes a credential for higher office, means that the pool of candidates for statewide office is shaped in part by the presence of women in state legislative and local office. After all, half of women in Congress are former state legislators.<sup>13</sup> And geography matters because voters' characteristics differ across states and districts; regions such as the South with more traditional gender roles have typically elected fewer women than other regions of the country.<sup>14</sup>

## VOTER ATTITUDES TOWARD WOMEN CANDIDATES

In the most recent national public opinion survey about women leaders in government and business—conducted by the Pew Research Center—the vast majority of the public believes that both men and women make equally good leaders. But some key differences are evident. Women were slightly more likely than men to believe that women make better political leaders, and Democrats who expressed a view tended to think that women make better leaders, while Republicans choose men. Democratic women were the most enthusiastic about seeing a woman—perhaps Hillary Clinton—in the White House in their lifetime.<sup>15</sup> In past research, Republican voters, more conservative voters, less educated voters, and older voters have been less likely than others to express a willingness to support a woman for president.<sup>16</sup>

Voters' traditional gender-role beliefs reduce support for women in politics. Such beliefs are on the decline.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, though, most research reveals that gender stereotypes about women politicians persist; these range from stereotypes about the positions of candidates and their ability to handle issues to their personality traits.<sup>18</sup> In public opinion surveys and laboratory experiments, women are typically seen as better at education and health care and men are seen as better able to handle defense and foreign policy issues;

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in terms of traits, men are generally perceived as more emotionally suited for politics than women. The issue context can increase the importance of certain gender stereotypes; changes in issue salience can create an environment that favors women's perceived strengths or vice versa.<sup>19</sup> Studies also show that factors such as political party and parental status interact with candidate gender to shape voter attitudes.<sup>20</sup>

Two new books find positive news for women candidates regarding stereotypes. In a 2009 national experimental study using an internet survey, Deborah J. Brooks found little evidence that voters penalize women candidates due to gender stereotypes.<sup>21</sup> For example, Brooks failed to find gender bias in her experiments when examining voter response to news stories about candidate experience and candidate displays of anger; crying; toughness; lack of empathy; and knowledge gaffes. In one of the few examples of disadvantage for women candidates, Brooks found that women respondents were more critical of the female candidate than the male candidate in the crying experiment. She posits that the female respondent may be seeking to distance herself from the crying female candidate. Because male respondents were more likely to penalize the male candidate for crying (though to a lesser extent than female voters penalize female candidates), Brooks concluded that the net effect was not harmful to women. Brooks sees her research as encouraging news for women candi-

# Women Candidates and their Campaigns

dates and evidence that public opinion has undergone significant change.

Kathleen A. Dolan’s panel study of actual voters in 2010 reached similarly optimistic conclusions about the current electoral environment for women candidates, although she found that voters do still hold gender stereotypes about women candidates.<sup>22</sup> These stereotypes are both positive and negative and affect public support for women’s officeholding. However, Dolan found little evidence of stereotype effects on voting for women congressional and gubernatorial candidates. Instead, she found that party and incumbency are much more important than candidate gender in understanding voting behavior.

However, another recent study argued that voters can simultaneously hold explicitly egalitarian views about women candidates while also harboring implicit bias against women. This new study by Cecelia Hyunjung Mo was based on 2008 original survey data from one state (Florida), selected because its level of women’s representation is average. A new measure of implicit bias was introduced in this study: the “Gender and Leadership Implicit Association Test (IAT)” that experimentally measures the extent to which voters associate gender with the concepts of “follower” and “leader.”<sup>23</sup> Mo found that voters who expressed a preference for male leadership did not support fictitious female candidates—even when the female was more qualified than the male candidate. On a more encouraging note, Mo found that those who implicitly preferred male candidates but were explicitly egalitarian voted for the more qualified candidate regardless of the candidate’s gender.

Sarah A. Fulton found that independent men seem to prefer male candidates, other factors being equal, while independent women did not express a similar preference for female candidates.<sup>24</sup>

Researchers may have reached different conclusions about stereotype effects because campaigns differ from one another. For example, Nichole M. Bauer argued that stereotype reliance will only occur when stereotypes are activated during a campaign.<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, what voters learned about candidates may depend on candidate gender itself: Tessa M. Ditonto and her coauthors showed that the type of information voters search for about candidates depended on the gender of both the candidates and the voters.<sup>26</sup> Information about the competence of female candidates was especially likely to be sought.

## CAMPAIGN STRATEGY

As Ruth B. Mandel showed years ago in her landmark book *In the Running: The New Woman Candidate*, the existence of stereotypes leads women to strategize about gender in their campaigns.<sup>27</sup> For example, Kelly Dittmar’s 2010 national survey revealed that both Democratic and Republican campaign consultants believed that voters see gendered areas of issue expertise and that presentation styles and themes may work differently for candidates depending on gender. A plurality of consultants of both major parties saw “strength/toughness” as a more effective theme for men, while a majority of both parties’ consultants viewed “compassion” as a more effective theme for female candidates.<sup>28</sup>

Using interviews with campaign insiders from mixed-gender 2008 and 2010 statewide races, Dittmar found that beliefs about gender stereotypes shaped campaign decisions about the candidate’s physical appearance, use of negative campaigning, portrayal of family and children, and trait and issue emphasis.<sup>29</sup> In the views of some of the pollsters in Dittmar’s study, a campaign—if conducted well—can neutralize the disadvantages associated with being a woman. And women candidates work to take advantage of stereotypes that work in their favor.

# Women Candidates and their Campaigns

Dittmar estimated that women are only 25% of consultants working on federal and gubernatorial campaigns. She argued that they typically bring different perspectives to their jobs than men. Were more women to work behind-the-scenes on campaigns, gender dynamics and portrayals of women candidates might change.<sup>30</sup>

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Studies of campaign output (e.g., advertising, websites) are consistent with gender differences in campaign strategy. For example, Kim Fridkin Kahn, as well as Dianne Bystrom and her coauthors, found that women were more likely to be dressed professionally in their advertisements and were less likely to picture family members.<sup>31</sup> Women candidates were more likely to emphasize their credentials, and they conveyed masculine traits in order to assure voters that they were capable of the job.<sup>32</sup> In a study of television advertisements in 2000 and 2002 House races, Virginia Sapiro and her coauthors found much more evidence of similarity than difference in the candidates' self-presentations.<sup>33</sup> But, consistent with past studies, they found that women were more likely to emphasize toughness.

Women candidates' conscious efforts to display both masculine and feminine traits and overcome voters' gender stereotypes may explain the findings of studies about voter evaluations of the traits of actual—*not* hypothetical—candidates. For example, Danny Hayes

found that candidate gender did not play a very influential role in shaping voters' feminine and masculine trait evaluations of 2006 U.S. Senate candidates.<sup>34</sup> In an analysis of 2006 women senators, Kim Fridkin and Patrick Kenney did not find evidence that voters' evaluations of women suffered from gender stereotypes; instead, they found that women senators were viewed more positively than were men senators.<sup>35</sup> They also found that women were viewed in stereotypical ways—as more competent on health care and more honest and caring than male senators.

Women candidates also strategize about media coverage and must decide how to respond should they receive biased coverage or sexist attacks. A study by Celinda Lake of Lake Research Partners for the project "Name It. Change It." using an online survey in 2010 demonstrated that women candidates can combat sexist media treatment. Lake recommended that women candidates acknowledge and respond to any mistreatment.<sup>36</sup>

Studies have reached mixed conclusions as to whether women and men campaign on different issues—no doubt because issues vary year to year and because women candidates campaign on their party labels.<sup>37</sup> The Democratic and Republican parties campaign on different platforms, offering different policy positions and issue emphases. In an analysis of 2010 congressional candidate advertisements and websites, Dolan largely found that party is more influential in choice of campaign issues than gender.<sup>38</sup> Also, Dolan argued that the issues that dominate a particular campaign year are more important than candidate gender.

At the same time, some studies have found gender effects and an interaction of gender with party. For example, in a study of 2000 U.S. Senate races, Brian Schaffner found that Democratic women are even more likely than Democratic men to campaign on education, health care, and childcare—traditionally considered

# Women Candidates and their Campaigns

women's issues. Kristen la Cour Dabelko and Paul S. Herrnson found few gender differences in campaigns, using surveys of 1992 congressional candidates and staff; among the differences, women were more likely than men to campaign on women's issues.<sup>40</sup> Democratic women were more likely than Democratic men to campaign on social issues and on abortion, while Republican women were more likely than Republican men to campaign on abortion. And Herrnson and coauthors argued that women candidates in the late 1990s who ran for a range of offices (including statewide, congressional, and state legislative office) were advantaged when they campaigned on women's issues (measured by compassion issues, traditional values, and traditional women's issues) and targeted women's groups or social groups.<sup>41</sup> They concluded that a woman candidate can benefit from campaigning as a woman. Indeed, practical advice from the Barbara Lee Family Foundation, offered in "Turning Point: The Changing Landscape for Women Candidates," argued that women candidates are more advantaged by their gender today than in the past.<sup>42</sup>

Experimental research has been used to help identify the effects of different campaign strategies. For example, Kim Fridkin and her coauthors used a 2006 experiment conducted by telephone with a nationally representative sample to analyze the effects of negative advertisements.<sup>43</sup> They found that negative commercials hurt male candidates more than female candidates, perhaps because gender stereotypes lead voters to discount attacks on women candidates.

Krupnikov and Bauer used an online experiment to examine whether negative campaigning interacted with candidate gender.<sup>44</sup> The results were complex but sug-

gested a note of caution for female candidates: voters were more likely to punish the female than male candidate if the candidate "going negative" was not of the voter's party affiliation. They also found that gender stereotypes mediate the relationship between candidate gender and voter evaluations, but only for female candidates. They name the contingent nature of stereotype effects "conditional stereotype use."<sup>45</sup>

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And Monica E. Schneider showed that "gender-bending" strategies can help women overturn gender stereotypes.<sup>46</sup> In her study, a female candidate was perceived at being competent on women's issues regardless of her strategy. But by pursuing a "male-stereotypical issue," the female candidate was less polarizing than a female candidate campaigning on a "female-stereotypical" issue.

One of the challenges facing women candidates is that the category "female politician" is less defined than other categories in voters' minds, such as "men," "women," or "male politician," according to Monica C. Schneider and Angela L. Bos.<sup>47</sup> They contend that women in politics do not seem to benefit from the positive stereotypes that the public ascribes to women as a group; meanwhile, the image of "male politicians" overlaps to a greater extent with the image of "men" as a group.

# Women Candidates and their Campaigns

## CONSERVATIVE WOMEN'S CAMPAIGNS

Conservative women candidates are of special interest to scholars—particularly in light of the persistence of the Democratic edge among women elected officials. As the country is increasingly trending Republican and the Republicans made historic gains in the 2014 midterms, the question of Republican women's underrepresentation is especially important. The problems facing Republican women in seeking office merit special attention.<sup>48</sup>

Research on conservative women in American electoral politics has become more common in recent years, and some studies have focused on Sarah Palin's vice

presidential candidacy specifically.<sup>49</sup> In a recent analysis, Ronnee Schreiber examined the websites of 2010 women congressional candidates.<sup>50</sup> As Schreiber notes, there are more efforts underway to help elect Republican women to office. But Republican women confront various dilemmas as they seek office, given the intersection of gender and party stereotypes.<sup>51</sup> They also are presented with opportunities to benefit from their status as female candidates, particularly as many seek to follow Palin's lead of a "Mama Grizzly" image. Interestingly, while most of the women congressional candidates who were mothers mentioned their status as mothers on their websites, only a minority of mothers articulated a link between their parental status and their issue positions.<sup>52</sup>

## *Future Research Directions*

All candidates need resources for their campaigns. But women may need even more assurance than men that they will have adequate resources for their campaigns. In the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) 2008 Recruitment Study, women state legislators perceived gender inequalities in fundraising. And women legislators reported having more encouragement, recruitment, and training compared with men.<sup>53</sup> Research by Jennifer Lawless and Richard Fox showed that women in the eligibility pool—citizens with the credentials to seek office—were more concerned than men about their qualifications and campaign skills and more likely to perceive sexism in politics.<sup>54</sup> Women's perceptions that they will face inequalities on the campaign trail can deter women from running.<sup>55</sup> Thus, promises of resources and support seem to be critical to women's candidacies.

One limitation of some past studies is the small number of women candidates examined due to the small number of women candidates running in a given year, for

gubernatorial and Senate races in particular. Scholarly efforts to understand the relationship between candidate gender and party continue to be hampered to some extent by the relatively small numbers of Republican women candidates. The geographic pattern of women's candidacies also means that research has been limited in its ability to generalize about the entire country; researchers study actual women candidates, and therefore the findings reflect those geographic areas that have been most likely to see women candidates.

We also know little about how women's representation at one level of office affects women's representation at other levels of office, and whether a "pipeline" is necessary from local office to higher levels.<sup>56</sup> One area of research that would help resolve this debate is additional data collection on women's local officeholding. Recent studies show a renewed interest in women's participation in local politics, which is an important but neglected area of scholarship.<sup>57</sup>

# Women Candidates and their Campaigns

Research is expanding about how gender intersects with other categories, though much more research is still needed in these areas. For example, Nadia Brown finds that the experiences of Black women state legislative candidates in Maryland cannot be understood with respect to gender alone; instead, their campaign experiences are inherently intersectional. Black women differ from both nonblack women and from Black men in the challenges and opportunities they face as candidates.<sup>58</sup>

Pioneering work by Donald Haider-Markel and Chelsie Lynn Moore Bright on lesbian candidates suggests that

lesbian candidates are not disadvantaged by being open about their sexual orientation, due to the fact that they typically run as Democrats.<sup>59</sup> As more lesbian candidates seek office, more cases will be available for scholarly analysis.

Research is also underway that examines the consequences of “new media” for women candidates. To date, it appears that Twitter is more commonly used by female candidates than male candidates.<sup>60</sup> Scholarship will have to continue to adapt as campaign technology evolves.

## Further Reading

Carroll, Susan J. and Richard Logan Fox, eds. 2014. *Gender and Elections: Shaping the Future of American Politics*. Third Edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The latest edition of this comprehensive edited volume provides an accessible and detailed account of the role of gender in elections with a focus on the 2012 elections. Chapters examine the topics of women voters; the gender gap; women’s candidacies for presidential, congressional, statewide, and state legislative office; parties and interest groups; media coverage and political communication; Latinas; and African American women. The book situates the contemporary role of gender in elections in historical context and provides original empirical analysis.

Dolan, Kathleen. 2014. *When Does Gender Matter? Women Candidates & Gender Stereotypes in American Elections*. New York: Oxford University Press.

This book uses original national panel survey data to provide a comprehensive account of voters’ gender stereotypes and whether and how they affect elections. The analysis focuses on congressional and gubernatorial contests in 2010. Dolan finds that voters hold

both positive and negative stereotypes about women candidates. These stereotypes affect abstract support for women’s officeholding and in some cases, impact candidate evaluation. However, stereotypes are typically insignificant in predicting vote choice; instead, Dolan finds that party and incumbency are far more consequential in understanding voting behavior.

Dittmar, Kelly. 2015. *Navigating Gendered Terrain: Stereotypes and Strategy in Political Campaigns*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

In this book, Dittmar advances the idea that campaigns are gendered institutions replete with masculine norms and expectations that affect the strategic decisions that women and men make when they run for office. Using a national survey of campaign consultants and extensive interviews with candidates and their campaign teams, this book breaks new ground in the study of campaigns. Dittmar contends that even when gender differences may not be apparent in campaign output, gender affects campaign considerations earlier in the process as candidates make decisions about message, image and tactics. The book largely focuses on men and women who competed for senatorial and gubernatorial office in 2008 and 2010.

# Women Candidates and their Campaigns

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# Women Candidates and their Campaigns

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