

HOW VIEWS ABOUT GENDER SHAPE U.S. ELECTION CAMPAIGNS

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Although female candidates do as well as males, they face distinct realities in navigating election campaigns. Can female contenders “run as women,” scholars and practitioners ask, and how must they adapt their campaigns in response to stereotypical expectations about gender and candidacy? This debate has raged for many years and highlights the complexities of gender in U.S. political campaigns, which have hardly been neutral playing fields for men and women. To cast light on the persistent underrepresentation of women in U.S. politics – and to better understand the ways in which gender informs today’s campaign strategies and decision-making – I fielded a national survey of campaign consultants in 2010 and conducted just under 100 interviews with candidates and campaign practitioners active in 2010 and 2011.

Gendered Expectations

Gender is embedded in the expectations for and behaviors of political candidates. In the most basic manifestation, people routinely refer to campaigns in the masculine vocabulary of “wars” or “battles” to be waged and won. Because politics and campaigns are rooted in masculinity and have long been the territory solely of men, women enter electoral politics as deviations from the norm. Simply put, expectations about masculine strength and what it takes to be a successful electoral candidate line up for men, but women confront extra challenges in fulfilling voter expectations about proper feminine behavior at the same time they meet standards for strong election candidates. As a result, the “rules of the game” in political campaigns are different for women and men.

The Perceptions of Campaign Professionals

As they campaign for office, male and female candidates typically navigate gendered expectations under the guidance of campaign professionals – practitioners and consultants who make their livings by planning, running, and advising campaigns. To better understand how campaign professionals view gender dynamics in campaigns, I conducted a survey to get at their views of voters’ gender stereotypes and to learn more about how their sense of gender stereotypes shape the strategic and tactical advice they offer to candidates.

- Campaign consultants presume that certain gender stereotypes are especially strong among the electorate. Voters, they say, are more likely to view female candidates as emotional and compassionate and male candidates as assertive. Consultants also presume that voters see female candidates as experts on social programs, education, health care, and family policies, while expecting male candidates to know more about national security and defense.
- Republican consultants were less likely than Democratic consultants to identify gender-based differences in voter perceptions of candidates, instead reporting that voters view the traits and expertise of men and women candidates through a similar lens.

- Consultants who see voters as having gendered expectations are the ones most likely to take gender into account in shaping campaign themes and tactics. For example, consultants who reported that voters see female candidates as ethical and male candidates as more prone to corruption were also likely to recommend that female candidates stress honesty in campaigns.

How Gender Influences Campaign Strategy

Candidates and campaign professionals note that gender is among the least influential of the many factors shaping electoral wins and losses. The political climate, party affiliations, money, and other realities matter more. However, my interviews with candidates and professionals involved in statewide campaigns where at least one contender was a woman reveal that campaigns take gender into account to ensure that it will not be decisive in victory or defeat.

- Amid voter demands for tough, strong candidates, practitioners looked for ways for female candidates to capitalize on gender-based advantages by displaying traits of honesty, authenticity, and a capacity for bringing political change.
- Presuming that female candidates would have to go the extra mile to demonstrate credentials for office, campaigns often looked for extra ways to validate female preparedness to serve.
- Male and female candidates often use family differently, or with different objectives, in campaign images and messages. Women candidates also get extra scrutiny over family physical appearance, so campaign professionals take extra care in considering them.
- With both parties understanding the importance of women voters, female candidates look for ways to amplify their perceived advantage with these voters, while male candidates facing female competitors often look for ways to compensate for what they (correctly or incorrectly) imagine could be their disadvantage with female voters.
- Negative attacks against opponents are tricky, but campaign strategists factor gender into plans to “go negative.” With care about tone, female candidates can use negative attacks to display toughness. Male candidates can attack female contenders, but to avoid perceptions of bullying or sexism, they tend to be cautious about the settings, style, and substance of such attacks.

Campaign Decisions Can Shift the Gender Status Quo

Naturally, candidates and practitioners care first and foremost about winning campaigns for office. To ensure success, they usually avoid challenging cultural expectations about gender and focus more on meeting or adapting to voter expectations about male and female traits and behavior. Nevertheless, the strategic decisions of campaigns can make a difference in society, because candidates who challenge established gender norms can alter voter expectations for the men and women who run for office next time. In this way, election campaigns have effects beyond winning or losing. The strategies and tactics campaigns use can contribute to longer-term shifts in the playing field for all candidates, creating opportunities for men and women to run for and win public offices on their own terms, rather than under the shadow of traditional gender expectations. In turn, loosening the hold of traditional gender stereotypes – where candidacy for public office has been aligned with expectations about masculine strength – will enlarge the pool of willing candidates and help reduce women’s underrepresentation in U.S. politics.

Read more in Kelly Dittmar, *Navigating Gendered Terrain: Stereotypes and Strategy in Political Campaigns* (Temple University Press, 2015).