

## **Media Coverage of Women Political Candidates**

Women forging new political ground often struggle to receive media coverage and legitimacy in the eyes of the media and, subsequently, the public. According to some observers, journalists often hold women politicians accountable for the actions of their husbands and children, though they rarely hold male candidates to the same standards. They ask women politicians questions they don't ask men, and they describe them in ways and with words that emphasize their traditional roles and focus on their appearance and behavior.

As we approach subsequent election in the twenty first century, we find that media coverage of female and male candidates is mostly equitable in terms of quantity as well as quality, e.g., assessments of their viability, positive versus negative slant, and mentions of their appearance. However, the media continue to associate male candidates more often with "masculine" issues and images and female candidates with "feminine" image traits. Also, women candidates are more often than men described by the media in terms of their sex, children, and marital status, which can affect how voters view their ability to hold political office by stirring up stereotypical images of their responsibilities as mothers and wives.

The differences that remain in the media coverage of female versus male candidates may entangle with gender biases within the electorate to create an untenable position for women candidates. By reinforcing some of the traditional stereotypes held by the public about men and women and their roles in society, the media may have an impact on the outcome of elections and, thus, upon how the nation is governed.

Because women political candidates are often framed in stereotypical terms by the media, television advertising-- and the control it affords candidates over campaign messages about their images and issues-- may be even more important for female candidates. Over time, we find both differences and similarities in the ways in which female and male candidates use this campaign communication medium.

In the 1980s, female candidates' political ads were more likely to emphasize social issues, such as education and health care, whereas men were more likely to focus on economic issues such as taxes in their political spots. As far as image traits, women were more likely to compassion and men to stress their strength, although sometimes both sexes emphasized stereotypical "masculine" traits such as competence and leadership. In their nonverbal communication, men were more likely to dress in formal attire and women preferred "feminized" business suits and office or professional settings.

From the 1990s to the present, as more women ran for political office, we find that female and male candidates were strikingly similar in their uses of verbal, non-verbal, and film/ video production techniques, though some differences were discovered. In the terms of their verbal communication strategies, female and male candidates were similar in the use of negative spots, employing attacks in about one – third of their total ads. Female and male candidates were increasingly similar over time in the issues discussed in their ads, especially, in the image traits emphasized and appeal strategies used.

The similarities and differences that did emerge over the past fifteen years are interesting from a gender perspective. For example, although female and male candidates have been similar recently in their use of attacks, they differ in the purpose of the attacks and strategies employed. Both female and male candidates now use negative ads primarily to attack their opponents on the issues. However, the ads of women candidates are significantly more likely to criticize the opponent's personal character. And, although negative association was the preferred attack strategy in the ads of both women and men, the spots of women are significantly more likely to use name calling.

Attacking the opponent's character, rather than his or her stance on the issues, and calling the opponent names are seen as much more personal. Here, female candidates may be taking advantage of voter stereotypes, which portray women as more caring and compassionate. That is, female candidates may be given more latitude than male candidates to make personal attacks as they enter the race with the stereotypical

advantage of being considered kinder. Of course, defying stereotypical norms also may backfire for women candidates as they may be labeled as too aggressive, rather than assertive, by the media. Male candidates, on the other hand, may feel more constrained by expectations that they treat women with some degree of chivalry by refraining from attacks on the personal characteristics of their female opponents. So, instead, lash out significantly more often at their opponent's group affiliations, which is a more acceptable and indirect way to question their opponent's character as a member of certain organizations. Although female and male candidates are increasingly similar in the issues they discuss, image traits they emphasize, and appeal strategies they use in their ads, the differences that did emerge are interesting from a gender perspective. For example, the top issue in the ads by women candidates running for office between 1990 and 2002-and one that was discussed significantly more often in females' spots than in the ads for male candidates-was the stereotypically "Feminine" concern of education and schools....

The appeal strategies used in female and male candidate ads were closely related to the traits they emphasized and, thus, also are interesting from a gender perspective. Both female and male candidates were equally as likely to use all of the elements of "feminine style," which is characterized by an inductive structure, personal tone, addressing the audience as peers, relying on personal addressing the audience as peers, relying on personal experiences, identifying with the experiences of others, and inviting audience participation. Male candidates did rely on statistics-a "masculine" strategy-significantly more often than female candidates, and female candidates were significantly more likely to make gender an issue in their ads, an indication that at least some women are campaigning as female candidates and not political candidates who happen to be women. The fact that both women and men candidates used elements of feminine style in similar proportions may suggest that this style works best for thirty-second spots on television.

In the nonverbal content of their television ads, it is interesting to note that female candidates were more likely to dress in businesslike, as opposed to casual, attire and to smile significantly more often than men did. Both of these nonverbal characteristics reflect gender-based norms and stereotypical expectations. For example, the choice of businesslike attire reflects the gender-based norms that society imposes on women as they face the challenge of portraying themselves as serious and legitimate candidates. In their everyday life, smiling is regarded as a nonverbal strategy that women use to gain acceptance. Perhaps women candidates are more likely than men candidates to smile in their ads for the same reason-to gain acceptance from viewers in the traditionally male political environment.

Because society's gender stereotypes more often associate women with families and children, it is interesting to note who is pictured in female and male candidate ads. Interestingly, women candidates distanced themselves from their roles as wives and/ or mothers by picturing their families in only 9 percent of their ads, while male candidates showed their families in 20 percent of their ads between 1990 and 2002. In picturing their families or not, both male and female candidates are confronting societal stereotypes. Women candidates may want to show voters that they are more than wives and/ of mothers and to dismiss any concerns voters may have over their abilities to serve in political office due to family obligations. Men candidates, on the other hand, may want to round out their images beyond business and politics by portraying themselves as loving husbands and/ or fathers.

When female and male candidates are compared by their political party affiliation, differences also emerge in their television advertising strategies. For example, television ads tended to be more negative in races between female Democrats and male Republicans than in races between female Republicans and male Democrats. Female Democrats were more likely than other candidates to use negative advertising, to attack the opponent's personal qualities and background, and to discuss education and school issues, taxes, and health care. Male Democrats were more likely than other candidates to attack their opponents' issues stands and group affiliations; voice their dissatisfaction

with government; and emphasize their experience in politics, leadership, and past performance. Female Republicans were more likely than other candidates to discuss the economy and emphasize their toughness/ strength and qualifications. Male Republicans were more likely than other candidates to talk about crime/ prisons and emphasize their trustworthiness....

Based on the research, then, women candidates should be advised to emphasize both stereotypical "feminine" and "Masculine" images and issues in their television commercials. Voters will perceive a woman candidate as more honest and trustworthy than a man, and just as intelligent and able to forge compromise and obtain consensus. However, especially in a climate of international terrorism, homeland security, and the war in Iraq, a woman candidate will need to emphasize her ability to lead the nation during a crisis and to make difficult decisions.

Issue emphasis will vary with the context of the campaign. In the 1992 through 2000 elections, the economy, education, and health care were the top issues. According to survey research, voters rate female candidates about the same as, or more favorably than, male candidates on these issues. However, women candidates are considered less able to handle such issues as law and order, foreign policy, and governmental problems. In elections like those of 2002 and 2004, when war and terrorism emerge among the top voter concerns, women candidates must demonstrate their competency on such issues. Clearly candidates like U.S. Senator Patty Murray (D-WA) and U.S Representative. Katherine Harris (R-FL) were successful in demonstrating that they could handle these issues, though from opposite political viewpoints, in winning re-election in 2004.

An examination of how female and male candidates are presented in their campaign news coverage, political advertising, and web sites perhaps suggests more questions than answers. Nonetheless, there are several recurring trends that help to guide our expectations for the future role of gendered campaign communication.

Candidates do not have complete control of how the news media decide to cover their campaigns. In the past, female candidates have suffered in this particular genre of campaign information. However, it appears that the stereotypical news coverage trends of the last century are no longer dominant. In more recent campaign cycles, female candidates have achieved sufficient status as candidates to be given equal and sometimes greater coverage in newspapers than their male opponents. In fact, in 2000, female U.S Senate candidates received more total coverage than males. Since 1998, women candidates have also been getting their share of positive coverage, and there are no longer great differences in the viability or electability quotient accorded to female candidates.

There are some areas where news coverage remains troublesome for female candidates. The tendency to emphasize candidate sex, appearance, marital status, and masculine issues in news coverage still haunts female candidates. Candidate sex is still mentioned more frequently for women, reporters still comment more often on a female candidate's dress or appearance, and journalists still refer to a female candidate's marital status more frequently.

Although neither male nor female candidates can directly control news coverage, they can have considerable influence on it. For example, by focusing on a mixture of "masculine" and "feminine" issues, a female candidate can achieve a balance that helps to ensure the media will not leave her out of a discussion of "masculine" issues. Female candidates also can use their controlled communication media-television ads and web sites-to influence their news coverage. For the past three decades, particularly since the 1988 presidential campaign, the news media have increased their coverage of candidate television advertising. So women candidates can influence their news coverage by producing high quality ads that will attract media attention. It is also likely that, as web campaigning becomes more popular and more developed, news media will expand their coverage of candidate web sites as part of the campaign dialogue.

Television commercials and web sites also provide female candidates with tremendous opportunities to present themselves directly to voters, without interpretation by the news media. Political television advertising is still the dominant form of candidate

communication for most major level races in which female candidates must compete with male opponents. However, female candidates are successfully establishing their own competitive styles of political advertising. For example, women candidates have overcome the stereotypical admonition that they must avoid attacks. Even as challengers, they have been able to adopt strategies typical of incumbents to give themselves "authority." Female candidates who win also seem to have been successful at achieving a television "videostyle" that is over positive, emphasizes personal traits of toughness and strength, and capitalizes on the importance of "feminine" issues such as education the economy and defense/ security. Winning female candidates also top their male opponents by keeping their attire businesslike and their smiles bright. When it comes to self-presentation in the newest campaign medium, the Internet, research shows fewer differences between male and female candidates. Both men and women candidates' web sites are characterized by significant amounts of issue information. And, unlike the balance between "feminine" and "masculine" issues observed in their television commercials, web sites for both sexes seem to focus on "masculine" issues. Both female and male candidates also focus on past accomplishments on their sites.

Perhaps the "newness" of this medium has not provided sufficient development of different styles for female and male candidates. Neither sex has taken full advantage of the web's ability to provide message segmentation for different types of groups. Although the 2002 campaign web sites provided some additional use of links to solicit contributions and volunteers, both sexes are still lagging behind commercial development trends in providing interactivity and personalization on their web sites.

The web may be the best venue for female candidates wanting an equal competition with male candidates, especially in situations where resources are limited. A female candidate can do much more for much less on the web than through television advertising. Female candidates should develop sophisticated web sites that provide more specialized messages to specific groups, use innovative types of interactivity, and generate a more personalized presence with voters (e.g., through audio/ visual presentations by the candidate and by providing opportunities for citizens to "tune in" for personal chats and question-and-answer sessions with the candidate or campaign representatives).

Despite continuing stereotypes held by voters and the media, women candidates can manage campaign communication tools in ways that improve their chances of success. Women candidates who present themselves successfully in their television ads and web sites may be able to capitalize on these controlled messages to influence their media coverage for a synergistic communication effort.

## Note

1. Dianne G. Bystrom, Mary C. Banwart, Lynda Lee Kaid, and Terry Robertson. 2004. *Gender and Candidate Communication: Videostyles, Webstyles, Newstyles*. New York: Routledge. Throughout this chapter, references to specific findings and statistics, unless otherwise referenced, are from the research in this book.
2. Bystrom, Bamwart, Kaid, and Robertson 2004.