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## What Female Candidates Need to Know: Current Research on Gender Effects in Campaigns and Elections

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WHAT FEMALE CANDIDATES NEED TO KNOW: CURRENT RESEARCH  
ON GENDER EFFECTS IN CAMPAIGNS AND ELECTIONS

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Mass Communication

in

The Manship School of Mass Communication

by  
Lauren M. Leist  
B.A., Louisiana State University, 2012  
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The topic of my thesis is, in of itself, a testament to the many people who have inspired and empowered me to reach the point I am at today. First and foremost, I thank my family. I know I've always been fiercely independent, but my parents were the ones who made sure I knew that being a girl doesn't limit me from being able to do whatever I want or be whoever I want. I thank my grandparents who taught me to do it "my way" and, may I say, not in a shy way.

It may not be traditional to acknowledge people from my high school years in a graduate thesis, but as this thesis proves, I'm not afraid of challenging the status quo. Therefore, I would like to acknowledge my high school English teacher and speech and debate coach Anita Boyd. Thanks for encouraging my writing and introducing me to the life-changing world of forensics. And while I'm on the topic of forensics, thanks to all who have been involved with the LSU Speech and Debate Team – especially those who coached and challenged me: Austin, Chas, Eddie, and Erik. I'd also like to thank Mark Thornton and Jim Cegielski for taking a chance on a high school student. They taught me more about journalism and running a newspaper than any journalism school ever could (sorry, LSU, but it's true).

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## ABSTRACT

Studies show that the vast majority of people have no problem voting for a woman and that when women run they win as often as men, yet female representation remains startlingly low in the U.S. Women are 50.8 percent of the U.S. population, but they account for merely 19.4% of the 535 seats in Congress, 24.5% of statewide executive positions, 24.2% of state legislatures, and 17.6% of mayors in cities with populations over 30,000 (Center for American Women and Politics 2015).

There is certainly much research dedicated to gender and politics. But what is missing from current literature is an organized compilation of relevant research that can be easily used for practical purposes. While many books and articles have been written on various pieces of this puzzle, there is not a comprehensive manual for practical use drawing from a range of research. I intend to build on existing literature by organizing it in topical categories and presenting the findings of current research with some practical implications. My hope is that it can serve as a reference guide tailored to both researchers and practitioners.



## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Ned said, "Nancy Drew is the best girl detective in the whole world!"  
"Don't you believe him," Nancy said quickly. "I have solved some mysteries, I'll admit, and I enjoy it, but I'm sure there are many other girls who could do the same."  
- *Nancy's Mysterious Letter*, by Carolyn Keene

Over the past three decades, media outlets have been hungry to dub elections as the “year of the woman” or the definitive moment when women have “made it” in politics. It happened in 1992, the original “year of the woman,” when women ran for office in record numbers. In 2008, Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin were the faces of a new groundbreaking year for women. And now, after the November 2014 election, the number of women in Congress exceeds 100 for the first time.

As women continue to make history in politics, there is room to argue that the effect of gender in campaigns and elections is diminishing. Studies show that the vast majority of people have no problem voting for a woman and that when women run they win as often as men, yet female representation remains startlingly low. Women are 50.8 percent of the U.S. population, but they account for merely 19.4% of the 535 seats in Congress, 24.5% of statewide executive positions, 24.2% of state legislatures, and 17.6% of mayors in cities with populations over 30,000 (Center for American Women and Politics 2015). The new record number of women in Congress is merely an increase from 99 seats last year. Women in the House of Representatives didn't even get their own restroom until 2011. And until 2008, the Senate swimming pool was “male only” to accommodate the male senators who preferred to swim naked.

And, of course, a woman has yet to be elected as president or vice-president.

The increase of female elected officials in America has been staggeringly slow compared to other nations. As of the World Economic Forum's 2014 report, the United States ranks 20<sup>th</sup> out of 142 countries for gender equality. Several of the countries ranking ahead of the United

States, including Rwanda and Nicaragua, are considerably less developed economically. While the United States ranked high for economic opportunity and educational attainment among women, it was ranked 54<sup>th</sup> in the political empowerment category.

Clearly, there is a problem, but researchers have disagreed about why growth has been so gradual. There are two distinct generations of literature on gender and politics just within the past three decades. After the surge of female candidates in 1992, researchers declared that “when women run, women win” (Seltzer, Newman, Leighton 1997).

And then came 2008. Hillary Clinton became the first woman to nearly clinch a major party nomination. Sarah Palin became the second women to run on a major party ticket for vice president, nearly 30 years after Geraldine Ferraro became the first. When neither candidate ended up in the White House, researchers revisited the role gender plays in campaigns. If women really do win when they run, then why – when the stage was set better than ever before – did a female victory not happen? If blatant sexism no longer plays an explicit role in vote choice, do gender stereotypes play an implicit one?

There is conflicting research on the extent of the role stereotypes play in campaigns. While many agree that stereotypes have negative effects, others have found empirical evidence suggesting that stereotypes have minimal or sometimes even positive effects (Huddy and Capelos 2002; Dolan 2006; Dolan 2014).

Increasingly, current research suggests that the underrepresentation of women in political office is due to a lack of women running. Therefore, it’s not that women can’t win; it’s that many chose not to run because of institutional forces or doubt in their qualifications. Another recent study (Kanthak and Woon 2014) found that women are less likely to volunteer for roles if they know they are going to be judged by others. A 2014 study from the Pew Research Center

found that 47% of women and 28% of men believe that women are held to higher standards than men in high political offices.

One conclusion that most all researchers agree on is that women do win and should run. However, they should also understand what research suggests and how it applies to their prospects when running a campaign. Not all female candidates are the same. Gender does not play an identical role in each campaign. This was especially evident in 2008. While media dwelt on Palin's attractiveness and questioned her responsibility to her family, Clinton was criticized for not being feminine enough. The challenges they faced were not the same, and yet they derived from the same root – gender. As Anne Kornblut notes, “They may not have lost because they were women...but their sex played an outside role in the year's events, coloring every decision they made, every public perception, and every reaction by their campaigns.”

There is certainly much research dedicated to gender and politics. But what is missing from current literature is an organized compilation of relevant research that can be easily used for practical purposes. While many books and articles have been written on various pieces of this puzzle, there is not a comprehensive manual for practical use drawing from a range of research. I intend to build on existing literature by organizing it in topical categories and presenting the findings of current research and some practical implications. My hope is that it can serve as a reference guide tailored to both researchers and practitioners.

This research is important for both academic and professional purposes. First, there is an abundance of research on gender and politics, but the literature lacks studies that make pivotal connections between both quantitative and qualitative findings and case studies. Second, this research has important practical applications. As previously noted, women hold more seats in Congress than ever before yet still account for less than 1 in 5 of the total number of seats. In the

South, the number of states with no female congressional representative is particularly notable. My own home state, Mississippi, is now the only state to have never had a female governor or member of Congress. (Delaware and Vermont are the only other two states to have never sent a woman to Congress, but they have had female governors.) Louisiana has the lowest proportion of women in state legislature, and since Mary Landrieu's recent defeat, no female in Congress. Other states with no women in the current Congress are Arkansas, Georgia, Idaho, Kentucky, Montana, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and South Carolina.

While these numbers may reflect the fact that fewer women run for office than men, more comprehensive research on the roles gender may play in the campaign process could not only help women seeking election or re-election but also equip more women with the knowledge needed to consider a run for office. With the strong possibility that a woman will be a viable candidate in the forthcoming presidential election, this research is as relevant as ever.

### **Experimental Considerations**

There are several important factors to note when considering these studies I present. First, they employ a wide range of methods and measurements that might pose unique benefits or limitations. For instance, surveys are a great way to sample a wide range of voters and test a variety of scenarios, but questions about hypothetical candidates and campaigns may not reflect the way respondents react to real candidates. However, when studying actual candidates, it can be difficult to take into account all the factors that could make one woman's campaign experience drastically different than another woman's experience.

Second, the dates of a study and the data collected are significant indications of the real world political and cultural circumstances that could influence voters at that time. For example, traditional gender roles have dramatically changed in just the past decade (Lawless, 2014).

Therefore, what might have been true for women candidates in 2004 elections may not be the same for women running in 2016. I attempt to keep these distinctions clear in my discussions.

### **Preview of Thesis Chapters**

The purpose of this project is to make sense of existing literature on how gender affects women in politics. I intend to organize this information in a focused, useful way that breaks down the disadvantages and advantages a range of women may face when running for office. Each chapter will address information candidates should consider under various conditions. Chapter II will address party affiliation and how women face different circumstances depending on if they run as a Republican or a Democrat. This chapter also includes research on political ambition because of the large party imbalance among female candidates. Chapter III deals with appearance. It explores cues voters infer from gendered physical traits and the femininity/competence double standard faced by many female candidates. Chapter IV builds on the appearance chapter by looking specifically at age and how older female candidates are often viewed differently than older male candidates. Finally, Chapter V considers how electoral context impacts women's chances of winning an election. The factors I cover include incumbency, primaries, and geographical trends.

### **Conclusion**

Above all, my goal for this project is to empower women by organizing the available research in a useful and usable way. The fact that so few women hold elected office in this country does not reflect a lack of qualified women to fill those seats. I want more women to run for office. I want to discredit some of the fears they believe handicap their electability. While I will not shy away from acknowledging challenges that may still exist, my hope is that women

will be motivated to run in spite of potential hurdles and that the information provided here will equip them with the knowledge they need to win.

Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg once said, “So now the perception is, yes, women are here to stay. And when I’m sometimes asked when will there be enough [women on the supreme court]? And I say when there are nine, people are shocked. But there’d been nine men, and nobody’s ever raised a question about that.” It has been nearly 100 years since being an American voter stopped meaning that you were a man. Therefore, it’s time for more women to run and win. And hopefully one day soon, there will be no more *female* candidates - just candidates.

## CHAPTER 2: REPUBLICANS AND DEMOCRATS

Partisanship is the most consistent predictor of vote choice and the most commonly exercised voting shortcut, and this also applies to female candidates. “Far and away, the most important determinant of whether a voter will choose a woman candidate is whether that voter shares her political party” (Dolan, 2014). In fact, the increasingly hyper-partisan nature of American politics suggests that party affiliation is more important than ever before. There is no doubt that party plays a pivotal role in the way voters assess candidates, and some studies have found that perceptions of female candidates differ based on their party affiliation.

Another important reason to study how party affiliation impacts female candidates is that there is a pronounced gender gap in the partisan breakdown of elected officials. Of the 20 women in the current Republican controlled Senate, 14 are Democrat and 6 are Republican. In the House, 62 of the female representatives are Democrat and 22 are Republican. Therefore, it is important that we take a closer look at party identity, question the two dominant parties’ unique relationships with women as elected officials, and analyze scientific research on the effects of party and gender in political campaigns.

I begin this chapter by addressing why there is a disproportionate number of female Democrats in office as opposed to female Republicans. Next, I look at current research on gender and party stereotypes. Finally, I draw some implications from research.

### **The Gender Gap Between Parties**

One of the primary reasons for why the number of Democratic women in office is significantly greater than the number of Republican women is the disproportionate number of women in the Republican candidate eligibility pool, meaning successful women in professions that most often precede a political career (Lawless and Fox, 2010). The most basic reason for

there being fewer eligible Republican women is that there are simply more Democratic women than Republican women. The Pew Research Center has consistently found that women are significantly more likely than men to identify as liberal or progressive. In fact, after the November 2014 elections, Pew found that the gender gap in vote preference is wider today than at any point in the last 15 years. Based on exit poll data, women were ten points less likely than men to support Republican candidates in 2014. Women are also more likely to prioritize “women’s issues” (abortion, education, health care, gay rights, and environment) in at least one of their policy agendas (Lawless and Fox 2010). These are issues more commonly associated with the Democratic Party.

Despite the disproportionate number of women associated with the two major parties, the eligibility pool is not solely to blame because there are still plenty of qualified women on both sides of the political spectrum who choose not to run for office. An increasing body of work focuses on the gender gap in political ambition. Repeated national surveys from the Citizen Political Ambition Studies (Fox and Lawless 2014; 2010; 2005) show that women are less likely than similarly qualified men to “consider running for office; less likely to run for office; less likely to believe they are qualified to seek office; less likely to receive encouragement to run for office; and more likely to perceive a competitive, biased electoral environment” (Fox and Lawless, 2014).

While all women are less likely than men to receive encouragement from party leaders to run for office, Democratic women have more of a chance for recruitment because of women’s organizations (Lawless and Fox, 2010). Over the past decade, numerous organizations have emerged with the intent of getting more women elected to office. But because the majority of these organizations have progressive policy agendas, their support overwhelmingly goes to



Democratic women. According to 2008 survey data analyzed by Jennifer Lawless and Richard Fox in *It Still Takes a Candidate: Why Women Don't Run for Office* (2010), 45 of 107 newly recruited Democratic women for various elected offices between 2001 and 2008 reported contact with a women's organization. Among Republicans, only 8 of 23 newly recruited women reported contact with a women's organization. Women's organizations influence local, statewide, and national elections. The EMILY's List Political Opportunity Program is one of the leading women's organizations dedicated to training and funding pro-choice Democratic women in all levels of office. In 30 years, Emily's List has played a role in the successful elections of 11 governors, 19 senators, 110 representatives, over 700 state and local officials (emilyslist.org). However, there has yet to be an equally successful organization actively recruiting Republican women to run for office.

### **Party and Gender Stereotypes**

One reason voters may react differently to male versus female candidates is because of commonly held gender stereotypes regarding women (Krupnikov and Bauer 2014). Females are stereotypically characterized as being "affectionate, helpful, kind, sympathetic, interpersonally sensitive, nurturing, and gentle" (Eagly and Karau, 2002, p. 574). Research varies on the influence of gender stereotypes on candidate evaluation and vote choice. While most agree that stereotypes do exist, researchers disagree on if gender-based assumptions help or harm women's image and electability. These stereotypes include beliefs that women are more liberal, less capable of handling "tough" issues such as national security and the economy, more emotional, better at handling social issues such as education and health care, more trustworthy and compassionate, and better at working out compromises.

However, some recent studies have begun to shift their position on the relevance of gender stereotypes after finding little or no evidence of stereotypes affecting voters. There are several reasons for this shift. First, with more women both working and having a family, there are fewer assumptions about gender roles than in past decades. Conventional wisdom suggests that family obligations make it difficult for women to get into politics. However, Lawless (2014) found from a 2011 Citizen Political Ambition Study that family roles do not affect a woman's decision to run for office. According to the study, men are about 40% more likely than women to consider running for office, but household and childcare responsibilities are not the reasons for gender gap. Even more recently, a 2014 Pew Research Center survey found that merely 17% of respondents said that family responsibilities were a major reason why there aren't more women in high political office. If family responsibilities do not prevent women from running for office, traditional gender stereotypes may not be as reliable when assessing candidates.

**Party Stereotypes.** The second reason why there is so much discrepancy on the affects of gender stereotypes is because party stereotypes may be stronger since intense partisanship causes voters to rely on party stereotypes more than gender stereotypes. There are numerous stereotypes associated with the two major parties. Currently, the Democratic Party is typically associated with intelligence and the Republican Party with competence (Brooks, 2013; Hoegg and Lewis, 2011). Recent Democratic candidates such as Bill Clinton, John Kerry, and Barack Obama have been portrayed as intellectual elite, and recent Republican candidates such as George W. Bush, Ronald Reagan, and John McCain evoke the "common man" image and hold decisive strength and traditional values (Hoegg and Lewis, 2011; Brooks 2013).

Taking into account research on party traits, Hoegg and Lewis (2011) studied "how Republican and Democratic candidates would be evaluated when they presented an appearance

that suggested competence versus one that suggested intelligence.” Three hundred twenty-seven participants completed an online survey for cash payment. The participants were shown a photo of a candidate with a fictitious name and the candidate’s party. The photos were selected based on previous research that had scored the photos high for perceived intelligence or perceived competence. They found that the Democratic candidates rated higher than the Republicans when they appeared intelligent, and Republican candidates were rated higher than Democrats when they appeared competent.

**Overlap of Party and Gender Stereotypes.** The importance of party identification and the assumed characteristics of both parties can sometimes rely on gender stereotypes, however. Some scholars determined that sex and party intersect to create an image of the candidate in the minds of voters (Dolan 2005; King and Matland 2003; Sanbonmatsu and Dolan 2009; Winter 2010). Party identification may be the more important category, but gender contributes to the stereotypes attributed to a particular party. In other words, “voters assess the two major political parties through a gendered lens” (Dolan, 2014). Specifically, Democrats are associated with traditionally more feminine issues like abortion, education, and health care, and Republicans focus on more masculine issues like national defense and the economy.

### **Effects of Gender and Party Stereotypes**

The important question here is not whether these stereotypes exist. Stereotypes will always exist about categories of people. The question is whether or not party and gender stereotypes influence vote choice and the way voters evaluate candidates. For the purposes of this paper, the primary issue is if voters react to female Republican candidates and female Democratic candidates differently because of their gender in a particular party.

One study supporting that gender stereotypes affect Republican and Democratic women differently was Kira Sanbonmatsu and Kathleen Dolan in 2008. Using data from the 2006 American National Election Studies Pilot Study, they found that respondents evaluated the competency of female candidates differently based on their party. Their data showed that 26 percent of Democrats responded that Democratic women can handle education better than Democratic men whereas just under 20 percent of Republicans said that Republican women can handle education better than men of the same party. For the traditionally masculine cued issue, 35 percent of Republicans believed that men of their own party are better able to handle crime than Republican women. The same statement was 14 percent for Democrats.

Dolan found much different results, however, in a 2014 study that employed data from a large-scale two-wave panel survey of 3,150 U.S. adults during September, October, and November of 2010. What made this study distinct from the previous one is that the survey questioned voters about real specific candidates during an election season. Her results suggest that people's abstract gender stereotypes (such as whether men or women are better at handling certain policy issues) do not affect evaluations or vote choice in this more realistic setting. The most dominate influence on vote choice was by far political party. In an analysis by party, respondents holding beliefs that women are more capable of handling female issues like education and health care were less likely to vote for the Republican woman. However, when the measures of specific candidate evaluations were added, stereotype impact was no longer present.

Danny Hayes' 2011 study of how candidate gender interacts with candidate party affiliation found that gender stereotypes are not near as salient as party stereotypes. He examined how voters assessed the personal attributes of candidates in 2006 elections from CCES

data and media content analysis. His results revealed that both Democratic men and women were perceived as more compassionate and empathetic than both Republican men and women. Therefore, the gendered party stereotypes are present, but they affect party perceptions and not gender perceptions.

### **Implications for Republican Women**

Based on what we know about gender and party stereotypes, there are several potential implications for Republican women. Since the Republican Party is stereotyped by more masculine issues and traits, women Republican candidates may feel the need to assert their toughness. Considering the rise of the far-right, they may also choose to take extremely conservative positions on issues in order to discredit the stereotype that women are more liberal.

**Rise of the Tea Party.** A recent study by Danny Hayes and Jennifer Lawless analyzes local newspaper coverage and survey data from the 2010 midterms. Like previously mentioned studies, they find that coverage and attitudes focus on partisanship, ideology, and incumbency rather than the sex of the candidate. These results hold when they control for sex and party affiliation.

They do, however, cite the emergence of the Tea Party as one potential explanation for the absence of gender differences in media coverage because women running on Tea Party platforms ran campaigns that might have been atypical of other female candidates since women are stereotypically more progressive. They explain how Republican Vicky Hartzler, who defeated longtime Missouri Democrat Ike Skelton, “could hardly be more conservative.” She opposed hate crime legislation and the Affordable Care Act, and she backed a bill that would have prosecutors to charge women who obtained late-term abortions with murder.

Many women of the GOP have followed the ultra conservative formula for success in recent years. Because the parties have become so polarized, women running in the GOP are significantly more conservative. Women running on far right ideologies are 13 times more likely to run for office than moderate Republican women (Timm, 2014).

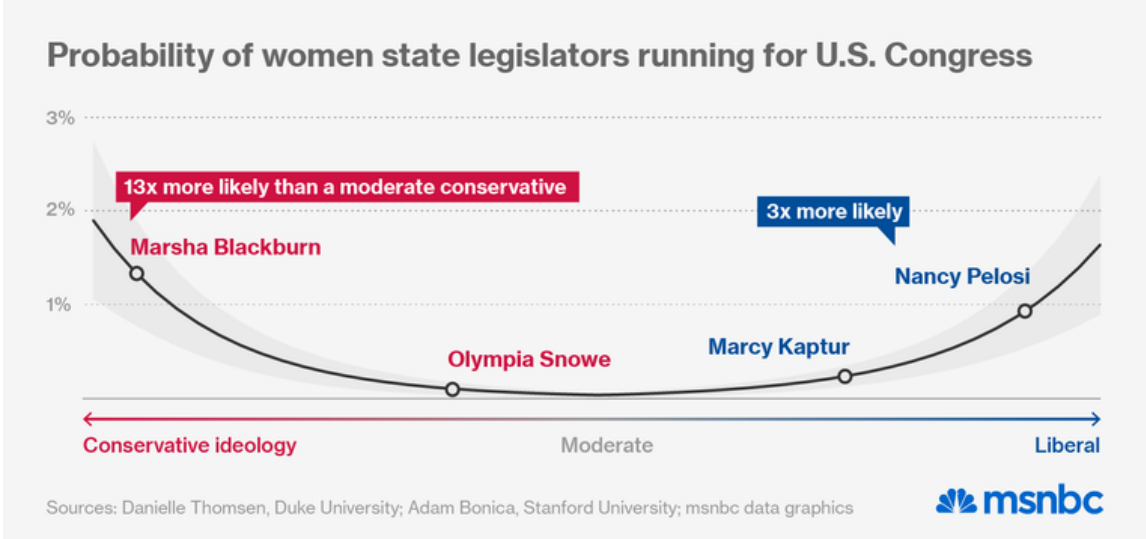


Figure 1: Probability of women state legislators running for U.S. Congress  
Source: MSNBC

Conservative women who take bold measures are often recognized for their actions. Conservative website Right Wing News (2014) praised newly-elected Texas Republican state Rep. Molly White for requiring Muslims entering her office on Texas Muslim Capitol Day to “publicly announce allegiance to America.” Several newly elected women on the 114<sup>th</sup> Congress also ran on far-right Tea Party platforms. Utah’s Mia Love, the first African American Republican woman in Congress, became a Tea Party darling for her anti-big government statements. Iowa’s Joni Ernst advocated for personhood amendments (stating life begins at conception) and state power to nullify federal laws. Her campaign image was also built on more masculine images. She was a lieutenant colonel in the Army National Guard, rode a motorcycle in several ads, and gained much attention for reminiscing about castrating hogs while growing up on a farm (*Washington Post* 2014).

**Republican Primaries.** While partisan loyalty may override other factors in a general election, Republican primaries may be grounds for gender to play more of a role. According to the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP), Republican women win House primaries 31 percent of the time, and Democratic women win House primaries 50 percent of the time. Bratton (2004) examined all major party primary Congressional candidates from 1996-2000. She also found that Democratic women win primaries more often than Republican women.

It is certainly reasonable to hypothesize that gender stereotypes may disproportionately hurt Republican women in primaries. A group of Republican pollsters and leaders recently issued a report warning female Republican candidates against saying they like compromise (ABC News 2015). According to Republican pollster Nicole McClosky of Public Opinion Strategies, the belief that women are less conservative is a liability to women candidates in Republican primaries. “Their voting records are as conservative as any man, yet there is a lingering perception that perhaps women candidates are more moderate,” she stated. According to the report, Republican women should downplay a penchant for compromise and other attributes typically associated with women if they wish to have more success in Republican primaries.

This would certainly explain why so many Republican women have succeeded running on Tea Party or far-right platforms, but research rarely focuses on primaries rather than general elections. More research would need to be done to further explore why Republican women are more successful in general elections than in primaries. This topic is also explored in a later chapter on electoral context.

## **Conclusion**

The majority of this research indicates that women in the GOP may face more hurdles than Democratic women. Stereotypes that women are more liberal may play a role in why Republican women do not win primaries as often as Democratic women. Party and gender stereotypes could also be detrimental since the GOP is associated with more masculine issues and recent hyper-partisan trends frown on compromise, a trait associated with women.

However, Republican women should not be disheartened because they are exactly what the GOP needs right now. There is no denying that women are statistically less likely than men to vote Republican. Democrats have successfully accused the Republican Party of waging a “war on women,” and numerous male Republican representatives made statements worsening their party’s relationship with women, such as Missouri’s Todd Akin’s “legitimate rape” remarks. However, the war on women accusation is less effective with more women running as Republicans.

Female Republican candidates should take advantage of the fact that they have a lot to offer the image of their party. And Republican party leaders need to start actively recruiting more women to run. However, Republican women considering a run should be cautious of the level of partisanship in their districts. Because of stereotypes about women being more liberal, Republican women need to very carefully plan their positions on issues like abortion and education. Those with more moderate stances on “women’s issues” will need to be very careful about the focus of their campaigns.

Because Democrats are more likely to be associated with empathy and social issues, Democratic women should not shy away from the “female” issues associated with their party. According to a 2014 report from the nonpartisan Barbara Lee Family Foundation, voters believe



female politicians are better at supporting education, entitlements, and access to birth control and contraception.

Democratic women considering a run for office should also contact women's organizations such as Emily's List. While recruitment is an issue in both parties, there are more progressive-minded organizations than conservative organizations seeking to help elect women. Take advantage of those resources and opportunities.

## CHAPTER 3: APPEARANCE

On September 13, 2008, Tina Fey and Amy Poehler posed as Sarah Palin and Hillary Clinton to deliver a “non-partisan message” in a *Saturday Night Live* skit.

Poehler (Clinton): “...sexism can never be allowed to permeate an American election.”

Fey (Palin): “So, please, stop Photoshopping my head on sexy bikini pictures!”

Poehler (Clinton): “And stop saying I have cankles!”

Fey (Palin): “Reporters and commentators, stop using words that diminish us – like pretty, attractive, beautiful.”

Poehler (Clinton): “Harpy, shrew, and boner shrinker.”

The sketch may have been intended for entertainment, but it was a fairly accurate representation of the contrasting media attention focused on Palin’s and Clinton’s looks in the 2008 election. While Clinton was being mocked for her pantsuits and scrunchies, Palin became the sexualized topic of every media outlet. News channels aired footage of Palin in beauty pageants, “Hottest VP” became a popular campaign button, and Larry Flynt produced a porn parody with a Palin look-a-like (Kornblut 2009). But was Palin too attractive to be perceived as a serious candidate? Was the positive attention to her physical appearance more of a liability than the harsh negative comments made about Clinton’s appearance?

There is little doubt that superficial factors can influence voters and that they respond more positively to attractive male candidates (Hayes et al. 2014; Barrett and Barrington 2005). Researchers have also largely agreed that voters make inferences about a candidate’s competence based on his or her physical or facial appearance and that these judgments can affect the outcome of an election (Hayes et al. 2014; Lenz and Lawson 2011).

However, the impact appearance has on female candidates is more complex. Researchers have often found that female facial features are typically associated with lower competence and power but greater warmth and approachability (Praino et al. 2014; Olivola and Todorov 2010; Chiao et al. 2008). Additionally, female candidates receive more appearance-based news

coverage. Whether that coverage is complimentary or critical, it can be especially troublesome for women candidates wishing to focus attention to their brains instead of their beauty.

In this chapter, I explore the role appearance plays in campaigning for female candidates. I begin by discussing the role of media in starting and fueling conversations about appearance, and I present research on how this coverage uniquely affects women. Finally, I explain and discuss the femininity/competence double bind women may experience when crafting their image.

### **Appearance and Media Coverage**

On September 26, 1960, Massachusetts Democratic Senator John F. Kennedy faced Republican Vice President Richard Nixon in the first nationally televised presidential campaign debate. Forty-three-year-old Kennedy appeared calm, confident, and well-groomed. However, forty-seven year old Nixon, who had just recently been released from the hospital, appeared tired and pale. He had a light beard and wore a wrinkled untailored suit that made him appear older than he was. Those who watched the debate on television had a different opinion of who won than those who listened to the broadcast on the radio. While radio listeners found Nixon to be the stronger candidate, television viewers tended to favor Kennedy.

The rise of television was just the beginning of campaigns having to pay more attention to appearance. Now that the Internet and social media are intricately involved in the spread of news and information, any aspect of a candidate's appearance can quickly become a news story, a trademark, or a reflection on some aspect of a candidate's life.

While media coverage of male and female candidates is more balanced than in previous years (Bystrom 2010), media are still likely to more frequently reference a woman candidate's physical traits (Dunaway, et al. 2013; Heldman et al. 2005; Carlin and Winfrey 2009). Referred

to as the “hair, hemlines, and husbands” problem, news coverage of female candidates tends to focus more on what they wear and how attractive they are. A focus on appearance can be troubling to women wanting the public to know more about their policy positions than their favorite suit brands. Additionally, female politicians may be held to higher attractiveness standards than their male counterparts (Olivola and Todorov 2010). But of even more concern is whether a focus on appearance undermines their competence and hinders their electability.

Hayes et al. (2014) studied how candidate appearance and gender affect elections and found that only negative coverage influences voters and that the results are the same for both male and female candidates. However, it is important to remember that while negative coverage may affect male and female candidates equally it is likely that women will receive more criticism on their appearance than men do. In a 2013 study using Mechanical Turk (MTurk), 961 adult subjects were exposed to news articles about two hypothetical congressional candidates (one male and one female). The articles varied in the gender of the candidate and description of appearance. Two articles had no mention of appearance and the other six had either a positive, neutral, or negative clause about what the candidate was wearing.

They find that negative appearance coverage decreases favorability but at the same rate for both the male and female candidate. Favorability was also the same for both sexes based on the neutral and positive cued articles. “At least in terms of overall favorability, women do not pay a higher price than men for coverage of their appearance” (2014, p. 1202).

This study reiterates previous research stating that appearance does matter – to at least some degree - in elections. While they find that men and women are harmed equally by negative appearance coverage, there are several limitations. First, the study tested one-time exposure to the news articles. In a real setting, a voter could be exposed to repeated stories mentioning

female appearance by more than one news outlet and through multiple types of media (print, broadcast, Internet). Additionally, the study exposes voters to an equal amount of appearance information for both genders. It does not account for the possibility that women may be physically criticized more often than men.

Other researchers believe that any coverage of physical appearance is harmful to women candidates. Research in 2013 by Name It. Change It., a joint project of the Women's Media Center and She Should Run, found that media coverage focusing on a female candidate's appearance had detrimental effects on her viability as a candidate. The researchers from Lake Research Partners and Chesapeake Bay Consulting designed and administered an online survey of 1500 likely nationwide voters with an oversample of 100 young women voters between the ages of 18 and 35. Respondents read a profile about two hypothetical candidates and then heard a series of news stories about each. By segmenting the subjects into subgroups, they tested neutral, positive, and negative descriptions of the woman candidate's appearance. The neutral descriptions included generic observations of what the candidate was wearing. The positive descriptions were that the candidate is fit and attractive, looks younger than her age, and was dressed in smart fashionable clothes. The negative descriptions stated that the candidate wore a heavy layer of foundation that had settled into her forehead lines and had fake tacky nails. A control group was not exposed to a reference of the female candidate's appearance.

All types of appearance comments they tested hurt the female candidate's likability and decreased the likeliness of voting for her (including the neutral and positive descriptions). The traits with the greatest average losses were on being in touch, likable, confident, effective, and qualified. On the contrary, similar comments on the male candidate's appearance did not result in any significant effects.

There were, however, some positive results when it comes to combating media attention to appearance. The researchers found that the candidate may regain the ground she lost by saying that the coverage has no place in the media and that her appearance is not news. Even the respondents who had not been exposed to an appearance description responded positively to the woman candidate standing up for herself.

### **Femininity/Competence Double Bind**

As long as women have been in public office, the ability to prove their toughness has been, whether warranted or not, a concern. Geraldine Ferraro was plagued by the question “Are you tough enough?” throughout her 1984 vice-presidential bid (Jamieson 1995). In decades past, the winning formula seemed to be an “Iron Lady” image like that of Margaret Thatcher. Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright earned the nickname “Titanium Lady.” However, these nicknames are evidence that when women assert their toughness they are doing something out of the ordinary instead of merely being considered a strong leader as men are when they express similar toughness.

When women show aggression in a campaign, they are sometimes punished and labeled as mean while the same aggressive acts reward men (Herrnson, 2006; Kahn, 1994). For example, a study of the California gubernatorial race between Dianne Feinstein and Pete Wilson revealed that Feinstein’s use of attack ads was not as effective as Wilson’s use of them (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1997; Herrnson, 2006). In other words, an assertive female is often called a bitch instead of merely being tough, but if a female candidate acts more gentle and feminine, she runs the risk of not being seen as competent.

This is a conundrum Kathleen Hall Jamieson (1995) describes as the femininity/competence double bind:

The words commonly associated with the femininity/competence bind are “too” and “not...enough.” The evaluated woman has deviated from the female norm of femininity while exceeding or falling short of the masculine norm of competence. She is too strident and abrasive or not aggressive or tough enough. Or, alternatively, she has succumbed to the disabling effects of the feminine stereotype of emotionalism (p. 121).

This kind of dilemma was particularly troublesome for Hillary Clinton in her 2008 campaign. She chose to embrace her toughness in order to get the male vote, assuming that she already had the feminist vote. So, as Anne Kornblut (2009) notes, she ran like a man, using rhetoric that reinforced her willingness to fight. “I am not running because I’m a woman” became her mantra over the course of the campaign.

Toughness, however, had never been a problem for Hillary Clinton. It’s what set her apart from her First Lady predecessors and garnered her much controversy. Clinton was running on strength and experience in an election that became about change. Having a woman president certainly would have been a change, but she avoided making her gender a relevant aspect of her campaign image. As a result, she lost the votes from the one group of people she thought she could count on: women.

Bill Clinton’s presence on the campaign trail also reminded the media and the public of Hillary’s femininity by returning her to the position of First Lady (Schoebelen, Carlin and Warner, 59). Without former President Clinton in the spotlight, Hillary may have successfully continued to use “First Lady” as merely a resume booster. However, if Hillary legitimately had enough experience as First Lady to spotlight it in her presidential qualifications, then she could not have denied that Bill would have significant influence in the White House. Bill’s prevalence throughout the campaign confirmed this, driving Hillary to replace “Senator” for “First Lady.” As a senator, Hillary could have her own identity and distance the public eye from her husband. As a First Lady, she was merely a sidekick. “Bill Clinton’s presence on the campaign trail

relegated Hillary Clinton to the gender-normative persona of former First Lady” (Schoebelen, Carlin, Warner, 59).

Despite the work of independently successful first ladies such as Eleanor Roosevelt, the president’s spouse is still a female gendered role since only men have ever been president. No matter how powerful the woman, the First Lady association implies dependency on a man – especially since all first ladies have given up their careers once their husband was elected. There has never been a First Lady with a job outside the White House. The notable exception is 2<sup>nd</sup> Lady Jill Biden. Hillary overestimated the public’s ability to see her as both former First Lady and self-accomplished Senator. If her plan had worked and she had won the presidency with Bill actively campaigning, Hillary may have stifled the perceived competency of female politicians in the minds of some. “...if he pushes her to victory, then far from being a breakthrough, her victory will mean that a woman can only win the top job if there’s a man pulling the strings” (qtd. in Schoebelen, Carlin, Warner, 60). There is a double standard for Hillary Clinton. The “two for one” campaign was helpful for Bill Clinton but damaging to Hillary.

**Overcoming the Bind.** Unfortunately, the femininity/competence bind will probably not be broken until women are represented in elected office as often as men. But in order to reach this point, women must find ways to overcome the bind during their campaigns.

One of the most important tools for overcoming the femininity/competence double bind is having a firm understanding of the current political climate and the issues that are most relevantly important to voters. As I previously explained, Clinton lost some of the feminist vote in 2008 by being too masculine and downplaying her gender because voters were looking for a candidate representative of change, not the status quo.



However, a female candidate may need to play up her toughness if the election is during a war or time of heightened national security. Using the results of a *Knowledge Networks* national random sample survey, Lawless (2004) found that citizens consider men more competent at handling issues of national security and military crises and deem male leadership traits better for addressing security obstacles, such as those arising from the events of September 11, 2001. Numerous national polls also showed that willingness to elect a female president in the wake of September 11<sup>th</sup> was lower than it has been in decades. By the late 1990s, 95 percent of respondents to a National Opinion Research Council survey indicated willingness to vote for a female president. While the National Opinion Research Council did not include a question about electing a female president in their 2002 survey, only 65 percent of respondents to a 2002 *Knowledge Networks* survey expressed willingness to vote for a female president (Lawless 2004).

## **Conclusion**

While the negative results of some studies of media covering women candidates' appearances are disheartening, this research also provides important information on how to handle such comments. First, it shows that, yes, voters do care about appearance. Therefore, it is still important for a female candidate to choose her outfits for public events strategically. This means taking into account the nature of the event and the type of people who will be there. For example, a business formal suit with designer heels may not be the best choice for an outdoor campaign speech in a working-class town.

Second, the research suggests that candidates shouldn't be afraid to speak up in their own defense and call out sexist remarks. In fact, an appearance related comment could end up benefiting the candidate if she handles it in a way that makes her look strong and passionate.

The vast majority of people are repulsed by explicit sexism. So call it out and don't let implicit sexism fool voters.

Finally, it is especially important to understand the political context at the time of the election. What issues and/or current events are of most importance or concern to voters in a) your party and b) your district? As the Lawless (2004) study suggests, female candidates may be at a disadvantage during times of war or heightened national security. Therefore, it would be more important to establish a tough but trustworthy image. However, as we saw with Hillary Clinton in 2008, too much toughness can be detrimental – especially if the party wants change and support of domestic issues more than security or international ones.

## CHAPTER 4: AGE

On December 17, 2007, Rush Limbaugh discussed the possibility of Hillary Clinton being elected president on his talk show: “Will this country want to actually watch a woman get older before their eyes on a daily basis?” He goes on to say that “men aging makes them look more authoritative, accomplished, distinguished. Sadly, it’s not that way for women...”

As Kathleen Hall Jamieson addressed in *Beyond the Double Bind*, “if judging older people differently creates a double standard, adding gender to the equation multiplies the injustice.” As men get older, they are often viewed as more stately and dignified, maintaining the perceptions of their masculinity. Perceptions of women are not the same. “Powerful men are sexy, sexy women are powerful, and these propositions are not at all the same. If middle age can confer power and increased sex appeal on men, in women the reverse is held to be the case,” says Jamieson.

Candidate age is not a widely studied subject, but it regularly surfaces during campaigns. While an older person may be considered more qualified and competent, age also calls into question the candidate’s health and being out of touch with voters. This fact alone is enough to warrant a discussion on how a candidate’s age affects his or her electability. However, older female candidates are likely to face additional questions and criticism related to their appearance and family obligations. There is little research on the gendered differences of how age affects perceptions of male and female candidates. However, case studies, media coverage and national polls provide insight into this topic – at least in regards to high profile elections. The age card has a long history of use from both sides of the aisle, but when the subject is a woman, the language is different.

In this chapter, I look at age trends among congressional leaders and presidents. Next, I look at how age has played a role in past elections and the ways it can affect both male and female candidates. Finally, I show how the age-related language used to describe (or attack) female candidates differs from the language used to describe male candidates and their age.

**Age Profile of America’s Elected Officials**

Before I go any further in this discussion, it is important to have a clear picture of the average ages of elected officials in various levels of office. Once we know the norm, we can more easily identify the point age may become an issue for a candidate and in which levels of government age is more likely to be relevant.

**Congress.** The average age of members of Congress tends to be higher than that of presidents. For the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress, the average age of representatives at the beginning of the Congress was 57, and the average age of senators was 62. As of the beginning of 2015, the average age for governors was 59. While the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress is one of the oldest in history, the average age of Congress has not dropped below 50 since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and from 1789 to 1900, the average age ranged from 43 to 50.

Table 1  
Average Age of Members, 111<sup>th</sup>-114<sup>th</sup> Congress  
Average (mean) age at the beginning of the Congress

Congress	Representatives	Newly Elected Representatives	Senators	Newly Elected Senators
114th	57.0 years	52.3 years	61.0 years	50.7 years
113th	57.0 years	49.2 years	62.0 years	53.0 years
112th	56.7 years	48.2 years	62.2 years	52.1 years
111th	57.2 years	49.8 years	63.1 years	57.1 years

Source: Congressional Research Service, 2014

There are several reasons why Congress members are older now than in previous centuries. Life expectancy is longer and people are working later into life, which combined with a lack of term limits for senators and representatives makes it possible for an officeholder to keep his or her seat for multiple decades. The oldest current member of Congress, John Conyers (D-MI), is 85 and has served in the House for 50 years. At 81-years-old, Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) is the oldest serving Senator and has been in office for 22 years (in addition to offices held prior to the US Senate).

**President.** The average age of presidents at the time of their accession is 54 years old, and this average has remained relatively consistent since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The youngest president to take office was Theodore Roosevelt at 42, and Ronald Reagan was the oldest president to take office at 69 (and the oldest at the time of his retirement at 77).

Willingness to vote for an older presidential candidate has changed in recent years. According to the Pew Research Center, Americans are more likely to support presidential candidates in their 70s in 2014 than they were in 2007. The change is particularly notable among Democrats. In 2007, 60 percent of Democratic responders indicated that they would be less likely to support a presidential candidate who is in their 70s, but in the 2014 survey, only 44 percent of Democrats responded that they would be less likely to back a candidate in their 70s. This change is notable considering that in 2007 John McCain (who would have been 72 at the time of his inauguration) was a frontrunner for the Republican nomination. The increased number of Democrats willing to elect an older president coincides with predictions that Hillary Clinton (who would take office at 69) will be the Democratic nominee in 2016.

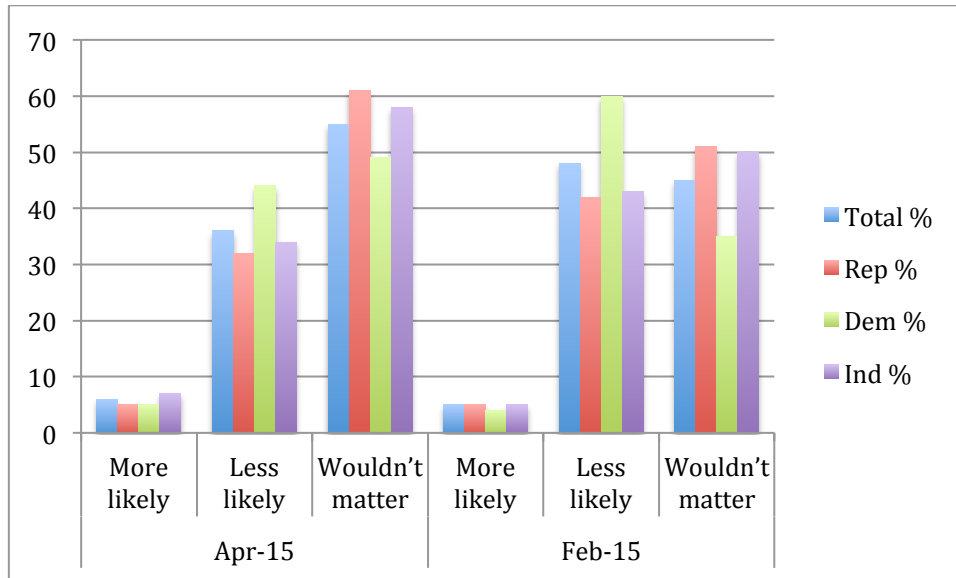


Figure 2: Likelihood of Supporting a Presidential Candidate in Their 70s  
*Would you be more or less likely to support a presidential candidate who is in their 70s?*  
 (Source: Pew Research Center)

As we can infer from these numbers, presidential campaigns are, by far, the most likely place for age to be an issue. After all, it is reasonable to expect a person seeking the nation’s highest post to be of sound mind and relatively good health. While those challenging the seat of a long time members of Congress often cue age by calling them out-of-touch and career politicians, incumbents still maintain an advantage, and age attacks are not as harmful when so many officeholders (from both major parties) are older. However, health is not the only concern in the age debate. As I will discuss next, age can also signal being considered out of touch with the public, and for women, there may be additional problems.

**Experience vs. Out-of-Touch**

In a 1984 debate with former vice president Walter Mondale, 73-year-old President Ronald Reagan famously quipped, “I will not make age an issue of this campaign. I am not going to exploit, for political purposes, my opponent’s youth and inexperience.” The zinger was made after Reagan rambled in a previous debate, and media were quick to question his mental state and whether he was out-of-touch with the public.

Being called out-of-touch is a problem that any older candidate may face regardless of gender. Obama cued McCain's age in numerous attack ads including the following (Kenski, Hardy and Jamieson 2010 p.62):

John McCain is blaming Barack Obama for gas prices? The same old politics.

John McCain: He's been in Washington for 26 years.

John McCain: Same old politics, same failed policies.

Lurching to the right, then to the left. The old Washington dance. Whatever it takes. A Washington celebrity playing the same old Washington games.

For 26 years in Washington, John McCain played the same old games.

McCain was also the target of many late night TV jokes targeting his age. Jimmy Kimmel joked, "Truth be told: John McCain is doing darn well for a guy who passed away 20 years ago." *Tonight Show* host Jay Leno made numerous quips about McCain's age and health. "And do you know John McCain does not use the Secret Service protection?" Leno said. "He has his own team. It's like, you know, what you call those six guys who surround John McCain all the time? Pallbearers." On another occasion, Leno reported, "John McCain got some good news today: *The Charleston Daily Mail* endorsed him... When they told him the endorsement was for only four years, McCain said, 'Four years – that's great. My doctor only gave me two.'" According to the Center for Media and Public Affairs, Jay Leno and David Letterman told 658 jokes about McCain with almost all related to his age while they made about 243 jokes about Obama (Kenski, Hardy and Jamieson 2009).

McCain was, however, an easy target for jokes about his health. The limited mobility in his arm and awkward gait may have been from injuries suffered in Vietnam, but to the American public, his physical limitations were reminders of his age. Of additional concern was the fact that he had twice battled skin cancer.

If it was reasonable to question McCain's age and be concerned about his ability to perform his duties if elected Commander in Chief, shouldn't the same questions be fair game for Hillary Clinton who if elected in 2016 will be the second oldest president in U.S. history? The problem isn't that it is considered inappropriate to talk about a woman's age. The problem is that when people start to talk about Clinton's age the criticism extends beyond the scope of the health of a potential president.

Anticipating a Clinton presidential run in 2016, Republicans have already begun commenting on issues of Hillary's age with Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal calling her an "old, tired candidate" and Sen. Mitch McConnell comparing her to *The Golden Girls* (msnbc, 2014). Republican strategist Karl Rove questioned Clinton's mental health by commenting on a mild concussion she suffered in 2012. "Thirty days in the hospital," Rove said. "And when she reappears, she's wearing glasses that are only for people who have traumatic brain injury? We need to know what's up with that" (politico 2014).

Comments about Clinton's age generate different images than similar comments about McCain. Age-related attacks on Clinton cue gender stereotypes such as the "old hag" image. The late Christopher Hitchens called Clinton "an aging and resentful female" in a column for *Slate* on January 7, 2008. Wesley Pruden wrote in a column for *The Washington Times*, "Hillary would be 69 on Inauguration Day 2017, not particularly old for a man not out of sight of his prime, but a woman in public life is getting past her sell-by date at 69."

Age combined with the femininity double standard is an issue that has withstood time even beyond the political realm. Hollywood has long added to the perception that older women are physically undesirable while their male counterparts become more distinguished with age. Older men are more likely than older women to be cast in leading roles. When older women are



cast, their sexuality is not usually central to the plot. And leading males in their 50s and beyond have a long history of playing opposite much younger women.

In folklore, the older woman is usually portrayed as a witch or hag while the older man a wizard or prophet. Jamieson (1995) says that in the 1980s “younger people cast older adults in one of three roles: grandmother [but not grandfather], elder statesman [but not stateswoman], and the uni-sex senior citizen.” While much of Clinton’s age-related criticism deals with her appearance and attitude, some have questioned whether her new status as a grandmother will prevent her from running in 2016. After Chelsea Clinton’s pregnancy was announced, headlines such as “Chelsea Clinton baby: Will Hillary Clinton be less likely to run in 2016 (*The Christian Science Monitor*)” became prevalent. However, Mitt Romney – who is the same age as Clinton – was never asked if having grandchildren made him hesitant to run. As Jamieson (1995) notes, “The grandmother is, of course, an extension of the wife and mother role traditionally held to be acceptable for women.” When Chelsea announced her pregnancy, media outlets were quick to extend the mother role to soon-to-be grandmother Hillary.

Increasingly, women politicians have embraced the grandmother image and portrayed it in a positive light. While attention to Clinton’s role as a grandmother may be more pronounced than being a grandfather has ever been to prior presidents, this cuing of gender may not be a bad thing for Hillary. In fact, she appears to be actively embracing the grandmother image. In a 2015 Tweet, she used the hashtag “#GrandmothersKnowBest.”

Clinton is a great case study in gender and age since she has been in the political spotlight for nearly three decades. Jamieson’s 1995 book highlights Hillary Clinton’s “stand by your man” and “cookies and tea” incidents as premier examples of the challenges young intelligent women face in politics. As First Lady, Clinton took a controversially active role in politics. She

abandoned pet projects for advocacy of healthcare reform and considers the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 as her proudest White House accomplishment. She is also the only first lady to have an office in the West Wing among the president's senior staff members. During his campaign, Bill Clinton often said, "My slogan might as well be 'Buy one, get one free'" (pbs.org, Frontline transcripts).

Ironically, the same woman known as "one of the most hated presidential wives in American history" (qtd. in Stokes, 127) was also the Gallup Poll's "most admired woman" for five consecutive years (Stokes, p. 127). This juxtaposition is due to a collision of stereotypes that both legitimized her 2008 candidacy and hindered her electability. Hillary Clinton was not the ideal 20<sup>th</sup> century First Lady. She was not as fashionable as Jackie Kennedy or as empathetic as Betty Ford. She challenged the traditional family image characteristic of the presidency. As First Lady, she did not provide a gentle balance to personalize the presidency, causing some public to despise her for appearing cold-hearted.

Yet as an older Senate candidate, she embodied the professional woman's drive for equality and success. In fact, the belief that women had achieved equality caused Hillary Clinton to lose some of the feminist votes in 2008. "In the 2008 campaign, one common media discussion was that Clinton's candidacy signaled, for once and for all, that women had 'made it'" (Stokes, 129). In addition, Hillary Clinton chose to emphasize experience as her edge over Obama, but it ultimately turned her into the status quo or establishment candidate (Schnoebelen, Carlin, Warner, 54). Progressives did not want experience; they wanted change, and that was what Obama promised. Therefore, women felt no urgency to vote for a female candidate who had already proven herself as a viable politician (Stokes, 129-130).

## **Conclusion**

Unless you are running for President, age – in of itself – is not going to play a significant role in your chances of winning. However, the advantages or disadvantages of age stereotypes should be taken into account when campaigning. Because of the gendered double standard of beauty and aging, older women should pay special attention to their appearance and potentially wear outfits that are shape-flattering and avoid colors that make them appear pale or boring. Bright colors can be particularly useful for older women candidates.

The grandmother card is one that should be used very strategically. Yes, the connection between the grandmother and the mother role is more likely to be made by media (especially in high profile elections). However, as Hillary Clinton has begun doing, you can control what that image says about you. After all, #GrandmothersKnowBest.

In hotly contested elections, being out-of-touch will likely be an issue the opposition strategically brings up (assuming the opponent is younger). There are many ways to combat this image, and these recommendations are applicable to candidates of both genders. First, be visible to the voters. If you are running for Congress, actively engage with citizens of the state. This may seem obvious, but attracting media coverage of interacting with voters can help dispel any out-of-touch allegations. Second, have a strong web presence and know how to use social media. Again, this is basic advice for any candidate, but it can be especially helpful for older candidates. Hillary's #GrandmothersKnowBest hastag insinuated that her age makes her wise and also that she is up-to-date on social media trends. In fact, her Twitter avatar is a humorous viral photo of her in sunglasses looking at her Blackberry. The photo inspired a series of memes called "Texts From Hillary." She responded with humor, and the photo likely helped dispel the out-of-touch problems she faced in 2008.

## CHAPTER 5: ELECTORAL CONTEXT

Details regarding the specific race can significantly shape aspects of the election and influence a female candidate's chances of winning. This chapter explores electoral context by considering various scenarios female candidates may find themselves in and how women have fared in similar circumstances. First, I look at differences between being the incumbent or a challenger. This naturally leads into a discussion of primaries and open seat elections. Finally, I consider how location can impact a woman candidate's chances. I describe what constitutes "women-friendly" districts and identify the places where women have struggled the most.

### **Incumbency and Primaries**

The American electoral system dramatically favors those already in office. In 2012, 91 percent of Congress was re-elected despite a dismal 10 percent approval rating of those who ran for re-election. In fact, it is rare for less than 90 percent of the House of Representatives or 80 percent of the Senate to be re-elected. While incumbents often have an edge on campaign funding, name recognition and party identification contribute more to the incumbency advantage. When faced with multiple options in primaries, those who turn out to vote are likely to choose a name they recognize over those they know nothing about. In general elections, the choices are significantly simplified to that of a Democrat and a Republican (and occasionally a third party option) and incumbent familiarity.

Since men have always held a massive majority of seats in elected office, women are more often than not the challenger. However, it is important to note that incumbency benefits women the same as it benefits men (Dolan 2004; Fox 2006).

Primaries are another important often overlooked stepping-stone in the electoral process. Depending on a district's partisan strength, the primary can be more important than the general

election. Unfortunately, there is not a lot of research focusing on primaries, and we know even less about how gender affects the dynamics of a primary. As noted in a previous chapter, Democratic women have been more successful in congressional primaries than Republican women, and Republican women are more likely to face primary opposition (Palmer and Simon 2001; Bratton 2004; Lawless and Fox 2010). There is also research suggesting that when there are more women in a primary the vote share for each woman decreases. Bratton (2004) noted this trend from examining all congressional major party primary candidates from 1996-2000. She found that there is a greater reduction in vote share for multiple women, regardless of party, in a primary than multiple men in a primary. There is not enough research on this topic to confidently speculate why women may split votes in primaries more than men. However, it indicates that female candidates are still commodities. While the ultimate implication of women being commodity candidates is that the playing fields are not yet level, uniqueness can actually work to their benefit in races with multiple male candidates.

Women are also more likely to run for open seats. Both men and women have more success running for open seats because of the elimination of the incumbency factor, but women appear to be strategically seeking out open seats (Ondercin and Welch 2009). While open seat races can be an excellent opportunity for women, they can also be difficult if many people enter the race (especially if there are multiple female candidates).

**The Confidence Gap.** One reason women seek out open seat elections is that women are more likely to doubt their qualifications for office, causing them to avoid facing already established candidates. Studies show that men tend to overestimate their abilities while women underestimate their own (Major 1989; Lawless and Fox 2013). According to Lawless and Fox (2013), men are 60% more likely to view themselves as “very qualified” to run for political

office, and women are twice as likely as men to perceive that they are “not at all qualified.” “These gendered perceptions existed despite women and men’s comparable educational and occupational backgrounds and professional success” (Lawless and Fox 2013, p.13).

### **Geographical Patterns**

Incumbency is a powerful force, but the makeup of a particular region can be an even stronger indicator of electoral success or defeat. For women, there are distinct geographical trends in female representation (or a lack there of). “As any map of women officeholders will demonstrate, successful women candidates are not equally distributed across the country” (Dolan 2015). The remainder of this chapter will discuss the pattern of characteristics in regions where women have had the most success and the areas of the country where women have struggled the most.

**“Woman Friendly” Districts.** Palmer and Simon (2006) studied the geographical patterns of places where women have had the most success being elected to Congress and introduced the term “women friendly” districts to describe these areas. One by one, they tested the impact of various demographic characteristics on the likelihood of a district electing a woman or an African American candidate. They found that women have more success in urban districts with ethnic and racial diversity and income and education levels above the national average. These districts tend to have Democratic partisanship. Republican women also have the greatest chance of winning a primary in these districts, although they are likely to lose the general election due to Democratic partisanship. Ondercin and Welch (2009) closely replicated this analysis and found that these women friendly districts have the most impact on women running in open-seat races.

Oxley and Fox (2004) found that women are more likely to run for statewide office in states with higher percentages of women lawyers, a career that frequently precedes a political career. This may explain why New England, a region with high rates of female professionals, has been a notable leader in electing female officeholders. In fact, New Hampshire was the first state to elect an all female congressional delegation as well as a female governor (Seeyle 2013). This is important considering findings by Ondercin and Welch (2005) that congressional districts with a history of successful female candidates are more likely to produce more women candidates in the future.

**The South.** In December 2014, Louisiana Senator Mary Landrieu, the last “Deep South Democrat,” lost a runoff race for re-election to Republican Bill Cassidy. Despite being a three-term incumbent, most gave her little to no chance of winning re-election. The Deep South is a prime example of the powerful relationship between an area’s cultural traditions and politics. Although Landrieu’s defeat appeared eminent in conservative dominated Louisiana, the fact that her seat will be held by a Republican for the first time in 132 years highlights the lasting influence of traditions in the South – in Landrieu’s case, the last lingering influence of Southern Democrats.

Landrieu did not lose because of her gender; she lost because of her party affiliation. However, her loss left Louisiana without any women in Congress. It also currently has no women in statewide elective executive positions, and it has the lowest percentage of women in state legislature (12.5%). Although Louisiana has had a female governor and several female senators or representatives in the past, they have all been Democrats. In other words, the future for women in elected office in Louisiana is grim unless more Republican women run for office or the electorate becomes more balanced ideologically.

The South has long been treacherous territory for women seeking office. Mississippi is now the only state that has never elected a female governor or congressional representatives. The South is also home to the majority of states ranked worst among state legislatures for the proportion of women (Louisiana is 50<sup>th</sup> with 12.5 percent; Colorado is 1<sup>st</sup> with 42 percent).

Traditional gender roles have more influence in the South on women's political ambition and chances of winning certain types of office. According to Lublin and Brewer (2003), women are more likely to run for and win statewide elections in the South for less desirable offices (such as state auditor or state treasurer) where fewer high quality men are running. In other words, offices in the South are seen to have more gendered qualities where "feminine" positions are more behind-the-scenes process oriented and "masculine" positions are more authoritative and decision making. This is also a reason for why there have been significantly more female lieutenant governors than female governors.

Traditional gender roles may also have additional religious implications in the Bible Belt. As discussed in previous chapters, family obligations are less likely now than ever to deter a woman from working or running for office. However, the fact that women in the South tend to be elected to more process-oriented state offices has an interesting similarity to many church leadership structures. Many of the nation's largest religious denominations still do not ordain women as pastor or elders/deacons. This is particularly true for many Evangelical churches (including Southern Baptists). With 50% of Evangelical Christians living in the South (Pew Research Center), more research should look at the relationship between willingness to elect a woman or for women to run and religious beliefs regarding women in leadership.



Table 2  
Women in Elected U.S. Office

	Percent of Women in State Legislatures			Women Governors				Women in Congress		
	>30%	20%-30%	<20%	Current only	Past only	Current and past	None	Past only	Current and past	None
Northeast	MD VT WA	CT DE MA ME NH NJ NY RI	PA	RI	CT DE MA NJ VT	NH	ME MD NY PA	PA RI	CT ME MD MA NH NJ NY	VT DE
Midwest	IL MN	IN IA KS MI MO NE OH SD WI	ND	OK	KS MI NE OH		IL IN IA MN MO ND SD WI	OK	KS IL IN MI MO MN NE NM ND OH SD WI	
South		AR FL GA NC	AL KY LA MS OK SC TN TX VA WV	SC	AL KY LA TX	NC	AR FL GA MS TN VA WV	AR GA KY LA SC	AL AK FL NC TN TX VA WV	MS
West	AZ CO MT NV OR	AK CA HI ID NM	UT WY	NM	AK AZ HI MT UT WY	OR WA	CA CO ID NV	ID MT	AZ CA CO HI NV OR UT WA WY	

Source: Center for American Women and Politics  
(Note: "Current only" field omitted from "Women in Congress" category for no current entries.)

## **Conclusion**

Female-friendly districts certainly exist. Women candidates should pay special attention to areas that are urban, lean progressive, and have a large minority population. Primaries should be taken extremely seriously, especially for Republican candidates. Female candidates facing same sex opposition (either in open seat races or primaries) may want to consider ways to distinguish themselves from another female candidate.

The fact that women win or lose at different rates geographically indicates that the playing field has yet to be completely level. Strategically running in districts where women have the highest chance of winning is smart and a great start for someone entering the political realm for the first time. However, women should never avoid highly competitive elections in any location because they doubt their qualifications or ability to win. Women may statistically win as often as men, but it is because although not as many women run, those who do tend to run where they have the best chance of winning (Sanbonmatsu 2005). As Dolan (2006) said, “The structural aspects of the electoral playing field will not be truly level until women of every type can contest for a full range of offices everywhere around the country.”

Women are typically excellent at running smart campaigns (Barbara Lee Family Foundation 2014), but don't be afraid to take risks. Be aware of the electoral contexts that favor female candidates, but don't base your decision to run for office on these factors. More women should run in the South. Republican women especially should consider running in the South. The playing field can't be evened without women daring to initiate change.

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