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# *Women Running “as Women”: Candidate Gender, Campaign Issues, and Voter-Targeting Strategies*

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Previous research has demonstrated that voter stereotypes about gender place certain strategic imperatives on female candidates. This study examines the effects of the interplay of candidate gender and campaign strategy using a new data set consisting of survey responses from U.S. House and state legislative candidates who ran for office in 1996 or 1998. We demonstrate that women gain a strategic advantage when they run “as women,” stressing issues that voters associate favorably with female candidates and targeting female voters. These findings suggest that one of the keys to success for female candidates is to wage campaigns that use voters’ dispositions toward gender as an asset rather than a liability.

*“Until women [candidates] know they can be who they are, act like they are, and sound like they are, we’re not going to make any progress.”* Carol Bellamy, New York City Council President, 1979

*“The word ‘campaign’ is a war term. So when you go into a campaign you just prepare to go to war. If you think this is an exercise in civic activity . . . then you are going to be surprised.”* Nancy Pelosi, Congresswoman from California, 1985

**I**n 1951, only 10 women held seats in the U.S. House of Representatives, one served in the U.S. Senate, 242 were in the state legislatures, and there were no female governors. By 2001, these numbers increased to 59 in the House, 13 in the Senate, 1,656 in state legislatures, and five governors. Albeit small proportionately, the number of women elected officials has grown as a result of several factors, including the strides women have made in education, in the workplace, and in other societal institutions. Female candidates have become more successful in the political arena as their roles in society have expanded.

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The increased number of elected politicians who are female raises questions about the methods used to win these offices. Generally, voters view women as better able to handle “feminine” issues, such as child care and education, but less able to handle “masculine” issues, including the economy and war (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; Shapiro and Mahajan 1986; Witt, Paget, and Matthews 1994). Because voters view female and male candidates differently, gender biases can affect women candidates’ electoral prospects. We argue that women can use these stereotypes to their advantage by stressing issues that voters associate favorably with female candidates and by targeting female voters. We test hypotheses about the impact of running “as women” at both the U.S. House and the state-house levels using a new data set that consists of a representative sample of candidates who ran for the U.S. House and state legislatures in 1996 or 1998.

### Women as Candidates

Most of the first female elected officials, especially for national office, were widows of a former incumbent (Deber 1982; Foerstel and Foerstel 1996). In the past, women were less likely to seek political office (Bledsoe and Herring 1990) and were more likely to run in “hopeless” races where the winner was preordained. Moreover, women were frequently unable to obtain sufficient political resources because they lacked political and occupational experience (Deber 1982). In addition, with the exception of women who sought to follow in their husbands’ footsteps, the available evidence suggests that the campaign organizations of female candidates were inferior to those assembled by their male counterparts. For example, women raised less money, hindering their ability to contact voters and win elections (Burrell 1994; Carroll 1995).

Most contemporary female candidates for state legislatures and the U.S. Congress bear little resemblance to their predecessors. These women are typically a member of the political or economic elite, are first elected to a lower level of office, and are encouraged to run for the legislature (Fox 2000). Female candidates also face fewer barriers than their predecessors and are no longer overrepresented in races that are impossible to win (Fox 1997; Witt, Paget, and Matthews 1994). Women garner equal funds as men (Biersack and Herrnson 1994; Burrell 1994), assemble similarly professional staffs (Dabelko and Herrnson 1997), and contact voters as frequently as do men (Darcy, Welch, and Clark 1994).

However, women’s and men’s campaigns often differ in strategy and issues because politicians respond to the fact that voters use gender to assess a candidate’s policy positions and potential performance in office in much the same way they use party identification and other traditional voting cues (McDermott 1997, 1998). Voters tend to perceive female candidates of both parties as more liberal than male Democrats and Republicans (Koch 2000). Voters also perceive women as more competent than males on certain types of issues and less competent on others. Significant gaps are found among voters on “force and violence” issues, such as capital punishment or nuclear war, “compassion” issues, such as income

redistribution, education, and programs to assist the poor, and “traditional values,” such as attitudes about the use of drugs, homosexuality, and prayer in school (Shapiro and Mahajan 1986).<sup>1</sup> Research also shows that while men and women agree on many of the “traditional” women’s issues, such as abortion rights and the Equal Rights Amendment, women are less supportive than men of war, more supportive of welfare and other compassion issues, and more accepting of the protection of traditional values (Delli Carpini and Fuchs 1993; Kaufmann and Petrocik 1999; Shapiro and Mahajan 1986). When candidates distinguish themselves on compassion issues, women voters are more likely to vote for the candidate perceived to have the “kinder and gentler” policy stance (Delli Carpini and Fuchs 1993). Female candidates, regardless of their position on compassion issues, are often seen as more sympathetic to these causes. “Warm and expressive candidates” are seen as better able to deal with compassion issues, whereas “instrumental” candidates are rated as more competent to deal with military and economic issues (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993).

These stereotypes affect the substantive issues that female candidates emphasize in their campaigns. Women candidates and officeholders have traditionally focused on issues that are perceived to be “women’s” issues (e.g., Thomas and Wilcox 1998; Witt, Paget, and Matthews 1994). However, in the past female candidates avoided highlighting those differences. Instead, they downplayed differences voters perceived between male and female candidates by emphasizing issues traditionally thought of as best handled by men. In her race for governor of California in 1990, Dianne Feinstein emphasized her support for the death penalty, and as a vice presidential candidate in 1984, Geraldine Ferraro accentuated her tough stance on crime (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993). Women campaigning for the U.S. Senate between 1982 and 1986 were more likely than men to appear in their own ads and to dress formally in their commercials to convince voters of their legitimacy and professionalism (Kahn 1996).

However, in 1992, a growing number of female candidates emphasized female stereotypical strengths and adopted campaign strategies that emphasized their greater competence in handling women’s issues (Kahn 1996). For example, in 1992, the “Year of the Woman,” female candidates televised campaign ads emphasizing their “feminine image traits” (Williams 1994). This was an important change in strategy because voters are more likely to recall a female candidate’s family and appearance than her campaign activities, whereas they remember male candidates’ campaign activities (Hitchon and Chang 1995). In 1992, the only year for which systematic data on candidates and campaign issues are available, majorities of House candidates of both sexes stressed economic issues, but women were significantly more likely to emphasize social issues, including women’s issues, than were men (Dabelko and Herrnson 1997).

In this study, we use the concept of “gender issue ownership” to investigate whether women who run on gender-owned issues and target women voters do

<sup>1</sup> Like Shapiro and Mahajan (1986), we also believe that these dimensions do not apply to all women, but rather that different issues are important to different types of women.

better at the polls than do other women. The theory of gender issue ownership draws from the theory of party issue ownership (Petrocik 1996). That theory holds some issues are positively associated with one party. When voters focus on issues that are “owned” by a party, that party’s candidates derive significant benefits at the polls (also see Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994). The theory of gender issue ownership draws from research demonstrating that voters are more likely to perceive female candidates as more competent than male candidates on issues traditionally associated with women, including compassion issues and traditional values (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993). Women are also more likely to use gender-related issue positions in their vote choice and are more likely to vote for female candidates (Dolan 1998; Williams 1994). In light of these findings, we contend that female candidates who run on these issues and target female voters are significantly more likely to win.

### Data and Methods

This study relies on a new data set collected from a nationwide sample of candidates who ran for statewide, U.S. House, state legislative, local, or judicial offices between 1996 and 1998 (Herrnson 2000a). The survey was conducted during the spring of 1999 and yielded responses from 1,798 major-party general election candidates, of whom 22 women and 66 men were U.S. House candidates and 248 women and 585 men were candidates for state legislatures. The survey includes 882 state legislative districts that span 44 states and 277 U.S. House districts that span 43 states.<sup>2</sup>

The respondents closely approximate the underlying population on candidates’ gender, party affiliation, office, region, incumbency, competitiveness, and election outcome (see the Appendix and Table A-1 for more information on the survey design and sample). There are almost twice as many female Democratic candidates as female Republican candidates in both the sample and the underlying population, whereas the number of male Democrats and Republicans in the sample is roughly equal.<sup>3</sup>

To test whether women gain a strategic advantage when they run as women, we examine the impact of strategic factors on female and male candidates’ electoral prospects. Our dependent variable is whether the candidate won or lost the election. Because it is dichotomous, we use logistic regression (Aldrich and Nelson 1984). We hypothesize that female candidates who run on women’s issues and target their political base—women’s groups or social groups—garner more electoral support.

*Women’s issues* and *women’s groups or social groups* are dummy variables that measure whether a candidate focused on women’s issues (which include

<sup>2</sup>Our data do not include state legislative districts in Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Montana, New Jersey, and Virginia, and U.S. House legislative districts in Alaska, Arkansas, Delaware, Montana, South Dakota, Virginia, and West Virginia.

<sup>3</sup>Female Republicans comprise 39% of the women candidates in the sample and 40% of the candidates in the underlying population.

compassion issues, traditional values, and traditional women's issues) and whether a candidate specifically targeted women's or social groups. Our data show that 49% of female candidates focused on women's issues, and 24% targeted women's groups or social groups. In contrast, 37% of male candidates focused on these issues, and 16% targeted these groups.<sup>4</sup> These differences are reinforced by the findings from our focus groups and interviews, which support the notion that female politicians perceive that there is something unique about their candidacies and campaigns.<sup>5</sup>

We include several control variables in the model. *Expenditure advantage* (candidate spending minus the opponent's spending) measures how much candidates spend in comparison to their opponent.<sup>6</sup> *Campaign professionalism* is an additive measure that records the candidates' reliance on paid staff and political consultants for campaign management, media advertising, press relations, issue opposition or research, polling, fund-raising, direct mail, mass telephone calling, get-out-the vote activities, legal advice and accounting.<sup>7</sup> *Newspaper endorsements* is a binary variable that measures whether a candidate received the greatest number of endorsements. We hypothesize that candidates that enjoy a spending advantage, wage professional campaigns, and attract more endorsements than their opponents have a greater probability of winning than do others, regardless of gender. We also include dummy variables to control for candidate status (*incumbent, challenger*), and party affiliation (*Democrat*).<sup>8</sup>

Finally, we test for interactions among the independent variables that we expect to have synergistic effects. The first interaction tests our hypothesis that female candidates who focus on women's issues and who target women's or social groups perform better than other female candidates and male candidates. Other interactions are used to test for the combined effects of gender and candidate status. As is sometimes the case with models that include several interactions, multi-

<sup>4</sup> Both sets of results are statistically significant. Issues:  $\chi^2 = 9.991, p < .01$ ; Targeting:  $\chi^2 = 6.983, p < .01$ .

<sup>5</sup> We conducted four focus groups of Democratic and Republican candidates in May 1999. Participants included candidates who lost or won their bid for political offices, including governor, U.S. Senate, U.S. House of Representatives, state senate, state house, city council, and public service commissioner. Focus groups took place in Atlanta, Sacramento, and Washington, D.C. Five in-depth, personal interviews were completed with candidates for U.S. House of Representatives, state senate, and statehouse.

<sup>6</sup> Some studies include both candidates' expenditures. However, inclusion of these variables often results in multicollinearity. We avoided this problem by using expenditure advantage. Campaign finance data from the survey were comparable to those found in Federal Elections Commission and state governments' campaign finance disclosure reports.

<sup>7</sup> Empirically, the scale ranges from 0 (none of the campaign activities were performed by paid campaign aides or political consultants) to 11 (all activities were performed by paid campaign aides or political consultants).

<sup>8</sup> Open-seat candidates and Republicans are the base values for these variables. We also tested models that included control variables for region and an interaction between region and party. Neither variable approached statistical significance, and the inclusion of these variables did not affect the results.

collinearity emerged in several of our empirical analyses. The variable for female candidates was highly correlated with some of the aforementioned interaction terms. As such—and because we are primarily interested in the impact of women running as women, not the effects of gender in and of itself—we dropped the *female* variable from the model.

### Candidate Gender and Campaign Strategies

The findings in Table 1 demonstrate that female candidates do indeed gain a strategic advantage when they target women's or social groups and stress issues

TABLE 1

#### The Impact of Strategic and Substantive Factors on Women's and Men's Electoral Success

Women's issues	.202 (.234)
Women's or social groups	-.607* (.326)
Female X women's issues X women's or social groups	1.15* (.603)
Incumbent	1.92*** (.309)
Challenger	-2.51*** (.300)
Female X Incumbent	1.69* (.856)
Female X Challenger	.093 (.424)
Female X Open-Seat candidate	-1.10** (.366)
Expenditure advantage	.005*** (.002)
Campaign professionalism	.041 (.044)
Newspaper endorsements	1.07*** (.260)
Democrat	-.059 (.224)
U.S. House	-.812 (.722)
Constant	.283 (.252)
(N)	915
Log-Likelihood	-290.030
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.05426

Notes: Estimates are logistic regression coefficients. Standard errors are in parentheses.

\* Significant at  $p < .05$ ; \*\* Significant at  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* Significant at  $p < .001$ .

TABLE 2

## Conditional Effects of Women's and Men's Electoral Success

Women's issues	NS
Women's or social groups	-5.8*
Female X women's issues X women's or social groups	11.3*
Incumbent	25.8***
Challenger	-36.5***
Female X Incumbent	17.8*
Female X Challenger	NS
Female X Open-Seat candidate	-10.6**
Expenditure advantage	99.7***
Campaign professionalism	NS
Newspaper endorsements	11.2***
Democrat	NS
U.S. House	NS

*Note:* The numbers in the table represent the maximum differences for each explanatory variable when other variables are held constant at their mean. NS indicates the variables were not statistically significant.

\* Significant at  $p < .05$ ; \*\* Significant at  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* Significant at  $p < .001$ .

that voters associate favorably with female candidates. The variable for focusing on women's issues is positive and statistically insignificant, whereas the variable for targeting women's or social groups is negative and statistically significant. This demonstrates that candidates, in general, do not benefit from these strategies. However, the interaction term that measures the impact of being female and using both of these strategies is both positive and statistically significant. The conditional effects in Table 2 demonstrate that women who use these strategies have an 11% higher probability of winning than do other candidates.<sup>9</sup>

Most of the control variables are in their expected directions and statistically significant. As expected, incumbents are substantially more likely to win than are open-seat candidates, and challengers are less likely to win than either incumbents or open-seat contestants. The interactions between gender and the incumbency variables show that female incumbents are more likely to win than are male incumbents, female challengers are equally likely to win as male challengers, and female open-seat candidates are less likely to win than are male open-seat candidates. Expenditure advantage and media advantage are both positively related to electoral success. The coefficient for campaign professionalism is positive, but falls short of reaching statistical significance. The final two variables control for partisanship and the level of office. Neither has a significant effect on the results.

<sup>9</sup> This figure is based on the difference between two probabilities: the probability for women who focus on women's issues and target women's or social groups ( $-5.8 + 11.3 = 5.5$ ) and the probability for men who focus on women's issues and target women's or social groups ( $-5.8$ ).



## Conclusion

So, can women run “as women” and win? Our results show that being a female candidate can be an asset. When women choose to capitalize on gender stereotypes by focusing on issues that are favorably associated with women candidates and targeting women or other social groups, they improve their prospects of electoral success. Carol Bellamy was correct in pointing out that women can never truly be equal in the campaign process until they employ their identity as a strength rather than camouflage it as a weakness. Campaigns are wars, as Nancy Pelosi states, but not all wars are among equals. Women have made important strides in the political arena, increasing their numbers in governors’ mansions, the U.S. Congress, state legislatures, and numerous other elective offices. Our study suggests that one of the keys to success for female candidates is to continue to mount campaigns that turn voters’ dispositions toward gender into an asset rather than a liability.

## Appendix

### *The Survey*

The survey was designed to accomplish three overall objectives: (1) to generate a sufficiently large and representative sample for scholarly analysis, (2) to increase the number of respondents who completed the questionnaire who were actual candidates—not campaign aides, consultants, or others involved in the election, and (3) to maximize the number of candidates who were aware of the survey and the larger research project of which it is a part. These objectives required us to deviate from procedures typically used in surveys that ascertain the views of the general public.

We sent questionnaires to 17,000 candidates who came from a pool drawn primarily of major-party candidates who faced major-party opposition in the general election. We under-sampled minor-party candidates and primary losers to minimize responses from fringe candidates who had little impact on the general election. We used no follow-ups to pursue our goal of maximizing the number of candidates who were aware of our study, but as we anticipated, it resulted in a response rate significantly lower than those typically recorded for general population surveys with multiple mailings.

We received responses from 2,951 candidates, a response rate of 17%. The survey yielded a representative sample of respondents that closely approximated the underlying population on candidates’ gender, party affiliation, office, region, incumbency, competitiveness, and election outcome (see Table A-1). Our response rate is lower than those typically reported for public opinion surveys. However, this is typical of surveys of elite populations. A response rate of 15% is considered acceptable in marketing research that targets business executives rather than consumers (Baldauf, Reisinger, and Moncrief 1999; Tomaskovic-

TABLE A-1  
The Representativeness of the Sample

	Unweighted Sample (%)	Weighted Sample (%)	Population (%)
Gender			
Female	21	29	30
Male	79	71	70
Party Affiliation			
Democrats	48	53	53
Republicans	52	47	47
Office Sought			
U.S. House	17	7	8
State Legislature	83	92	92
Region			
Northeast	24	26	26
South	25	32	32
Midwest	29	24	24
West	22	18	18
Incumbency			
Incumbent	50	40	45
Challenger	31	41	45
Open seat	19	19	10
Competition			
Competitive	34	36	35
Uncompetitive	66	64	65
Election Outcome			
Winners	60	50	50
Losers	40	50	50
(N)	(917)	(915)	(7,424)

*Note:* Figures for competition and incumbency are for U.S. House races only. Competitive elections were decided by 20% or less of the two-party vote. Uncompetitive elections were decided by more than 20% of the two-party vote.

Devey, Leiter, and Thompson 1994). Response rates among officeholders tend to be particularly low because they receive many survey requests, and they believe there is some risk that their answers might be used to harm their interests (Dexter 1964; Groves, Cialdini, and Couper 1992, 483). Previous studies of campaigns also report response rates lower than those typically received from surveys of the general public.<sup>10</sup>

Slightly more general election winners than losers responded to the survey. To compensate for this, we weighted the cases by dividing the actual population percentage by the non-weighted sample percentage for candidates' party affiliation, gender, office, and region. The weighting had virtually no impact on the results.

<sup>10</sup> Herrnson's campaign questionnaires (1988, 1995, 2000b) achieved overall response rates of 52%, 42%, and 44%. They included responses from candidates, campaign managers, and other members of the campaign. The response rates among only congressional candidates were 23%, 17%, and 13%, respectively.

To calculate the population percentage for both state legislative and U.S. House candidates, we used Federal Election Commission data and information provided by the Center for the American Woman and Politics (1999, 2000a, 2000b). The weighted  $N = 915$ .

### *The Coding of Variables*

**Campaign Issues.** Candidates were asked what were the most important issues in their last campaign. Based on candidate responses, the following classification of issues was created:

*Women's issues:* issues candidates specified as "women's issues," abortion rights, marriage, lesbian and gay issues, religious groups, gun control, education/school finance, health care, social security, right to life versus assisted suicide, welfare reform, working poor, and elderly/senior issues.

*Economic issues:* taxes/tax reform, the economy, jobs/benefits, government debt/budget, regulation/deregulation, business issues, and spending/fiscal responsibility.

*Government reform:* constitutional issues, reducing the size of government, incumbency issues/term limits, personal values/ethics/character, campaign reform/finances, privatization of government services, integrity/honesty, candidate qualifications/background, judicial fairness/concerns, accountability, active representation, full time vs. part time politician, electoral reform, negative campaigning, presidential scandal, impeachment, and raising voter interest.

*Local issues:* road and highways, rent control, transportation, and utilities.

*Partisan issues:* party affiliation and special interest groups.

*Miscellaneous issues:* racial issues, drugs and marijuana, civil rights, crime, military and defense, and other issues.

**Groups Targeted.** Candidates were asked to identify which groups their campaign targeted most heavily. Based on candidate responses, the following classification of groups was created:

*Women's groups* include groups that focus on abortion rights and other issues candidates specified as "women's issues."

*Social groups* are groups that focus on the following issues: guns, environment, homosexuality, religion, health care, family values, parents, teachers, and education.

*Partisan groups* are groups made up of the following constituents: independents, Democrats, Republicans, liberals, libertarians, and party regulars.

*Economic groups* are groups made up of the following constituents: homeowners, taxpayers, businesses, and middle class.

*Geographic groups* are groups made up of the following constituents: rural, urban, and local constituents.

*Other Demographic groups* are groups made up of the following constituents: whites, Hispanics, African Americans, minorities, elderly, students, and men.

*Occupational groups* are groups made up of the following constituents: blue collar, labor union members, farmers, and professionals.

*Miscellaneous groups* include gubered voters and other issue groups.

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