

Change the Channel: Ads That Work for Women Candidates

November 13, 2013

Executive Summary

Our past research has consistently shown that women candidates pay a higher price for going negative, even though all candidates must show how they differ from their opponents – it is a necessary part of campaigning. This qualitative research from the [Barbara Lee Family Foundation](#) offers evidence-based guidance on how women can successfully contrast with their opponents without paying a higher price at the polls and updates the research looking at whether women still pay a higher price.

Some women voters say they are disappointed when they see a woman go negative, because they hold women candidates to a higher standard, and they feel that engaging in negative campaigning brings them down to the same level as a typical politician. They feel women should use their strengths of compassion and being relatable to overcome negativity. “I expect more from a woman [candidate] than I do a man,” as one woman said, “because it used to be a man’s world and they always bashed, and I think a woman can have more tactfulness to not stoop to a man’s level.” Some women, especially women of color, worry if women can maintain their “femininity” and “compassion.” As one woman noted, “I just wanted to comment on the ads from the female politicians; to me they seemed a little masculine. They didn’t look soft or feminine.”

The Barbara Lee Family Foundation worked with a bipartisan research team, led by Lake Research Partners and Chesapeake Beach Consulting, to focus specifically on how voters perceive negative ads by women candidates. In this study, we focused on the impact on the candidate, because we know this factor can be unique and greater for women candidates. Women have an advantage on honesty and ethics, and it is important for them to maintain that advantage, even when they are contrasting with their opponents.

*“I expect more
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*Female focus
group
participant*

In addition to the work by Lake Research Partners and Chesapeake Beach Consulting, we assembled a bipartisan group of professional media consultants to review our methodology and findings. This allows the research to be pragmatic for women candidates themselves and also vetted by the experts who will produce paid media advertisements.

Although it has long been believed that women candidates “going negative” in ads during a campaign works, but also increases their own negatives, there are key strategies women candidates can use that are more likely to resonate with voters. While we would caution that in every campaign there are unique circumstances, women candidates can and do have to use contrast ads to win.

Some of these tactics are not reserved for women only. However, voters remembered negative ads from women candidates more than negatives from male candidates, all other things being equal.

Key Findings

- ◆ It works for a woman candidate to represent herself in an ad. Voters react more favorably to a woman candidate confidently speaking for herself and her positions.
- ◆ Voters respond well to negative ads when they feel the negative message is subtle and is delivered by a real person, as opposed to the candidate.
- ◆ Flipping conventional wisdom on its head, voters appreciate humor from a woman in a negative ad. Humor also added an element of the unexpected, which helped voters remember the ad.
- ◆ Voters want to hear what a candidate will do for them. Voters respond more favorably to negative ads if the candidate offers them a positive message about her plans, in addition to contrasting with her opponent.
- ◆ Women voters, especially, want to see and hear from a woman candidate because they “hoped” and “expected” more from women candidates.
- ◆ The most convincing ads are those in which a real person shares his or her story. Voters feel this helps the candidate's platform become more relatable and authentic and makes the negativity of the ad seem more subtle. This seems particularly powerful from women candidates whom voters believed would be more likely to bring the voice of real people to the dialogue and would be more in touch with real people's lives.

In open-ended conversations, voters seem less sensitive to the gender of the candidate delivering the negative than we have seen in the past.

What Works with Voters

When engaging in negative campaigning, the intent is to impress upon voters a negative impression of one's opponent. However, with women candidates, our qualitative research shows that this can sometimes have the opposite effect in hurting voters' impression of her likeability. Even more importantly, it can erode voters' perceptions of her qualifications – a vital component of winning. As we have repeatedly shown in our foundation's past research, women always have to worry about balancing being warm, competent, and strong – more so than men.

For many voters, there is little difference between female and male candidates engaging in negative campaigning – saying that many of the ads could have come from either a male or female candidate. However, after a more detailed discussion, there are some differences in their views, particularly between men and women voters.

- ◆ **People respond well to negative ads where the negative message is delivered with greater subtlety and by a real person.** Voters are less likely to admit there is a difference between men and women in negative campaign ads, but they tend to agree that women can be somewhat more effective in ads featuring real people when they are addressing issues that are more relevant to women.
- ◆ In the past, conventional wisdom has suggested humor does not work as well for women. We did not find that. **The right kind of humor often helped create a bond with the voter and added an element of the unexpected. That helped voters remember the woman candidate.** The men and women in the groups responded well to humorous ads, but they also wanted the humor to pivot to a serious message. Staying too long in the humor did not work with voters who wanted to hear what the candidate would do or how she differed from her opponent. People appreciate a negative ad being delivered in a humorous frame, but caution that a candidate can come off as “cheesy” if it is not delivered well. In the humorous ads that worked for women, they were often delivering a serious statement as well as humor and were often the “straight” person in the humorous situation. Women were not presented out of the role of the candidate or in the comic situation themselves. Women have to always be careful not to diminish their credibility.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, the men in the groups believed it is easier for a woman candidate than a male candidate to be humorous, because male candidates are not humorous. They believe men “ridiculing” women would be seen as bullying the female, rather than being effective.

- ◆ **People respond more favorably to negative ads if the candidate offers them a positive message about her plans, in addition to a negative attack on her opponent.** No matter the gender of the candidate, voters want to hear what a candidate will do for them once in office. Female candidates stand out more than male candidates to the voters. Therefore, early contrast ads from women may be effective in raising awareness about the candidate—especially for women voters—earlier in the campaign. Even if candidates have been introduced early, after weeks of negatives, voters respond to being reminded of the positive alternative the candidate offers.

- ◆ **It works well for a candidate to represent herself in the ad and not just endorse the commercial.** Voters react more favorably to a woman candidate speaking for herself in a confident manner. This helps protect against the decline in perception of whether the woman was qualified and likeable, which are key components to electability.
- ◆ **Voters respond much more positively when shown a contrast in a negative ad.** This allows them to gain a better understanding of why they should vote for the candidate, rather than only why they should *not* vote for the opponent.
- ◆ **Voters really want a woman candidate to talk about herself and her positions.** That is true for all candidates and is a reaction we get to all negative ads. However, women voters especially “hoped” and “expected” more from women candidates. Women voters were especially hungry to see the woman and hear from her directly.
- ◆ **The topic of the negative ad matters.** The ads in which it was most effective for a woman candidate to present herself were often issue based; more than personality, background, or politically based. This kind of contrast seemed less “negative” to voters and also helped the woman cross the greater threshold of being informed, showing she knows what she is talking about, and that she is competent and qualified.
- ◆ **Women delivering the negative also often worked better in a response ad or as a counter attack.** This kind of ad created a sense of the woman candidate as serious and thoughtful. It helped show strength and leadership, which women have a harder time showing. Women can also sometimes push back with greater moral authority and implicitly suggest their opponent is a bully. That is difficult for a man.
- ◆ **Women voters generally pay more attention to women candidates in ads.** We found women voters really studying the disclosures, for example, and responding to whether they seemed appropriate. They paid attention to how the woman was presented - whether she smiled, what was her family situation, how she related to people. Women voters liked disclaimers that included something positive about the candidate or a statement in a positive contrast such as, “I approve this ad, because I’ll always vote to protect Medicare.”
- ◆ **Voters also felt that it was revealing and appropriate for a woman candidate to use ads with real people’s stories,** because they felt women candidates were often more accessible and more in touch with real people’s lives. In the current anti-political environment, this can be a powerful asset. For both men and women in the focus groups, issue-based ads in which a real person delivers a negative message against an opponent candidate are among the most convincing. Voters say that seeing a real person share his or her story is effective, because they feel the candidate’s platform becomes more relatable, authentic, and avoids being too negative initially, as the negative message seems more subtle. Voters also view these ads as less “bashing,” as many termed it, because they say the ads express a clear contrast between where the candidate and her opponent stand on an issue.

When presented with ads showing everyday people discussing where a candidate stands on a real-life issue that affects them—such as Medicare or unprocessed rape kits—voters felt the ads may have been more effective because they were done by a female candidate. Both men and women see a potential difference between male and female candidates. They feel the ads on topics like this may not have been as effective if they were done by a male candidate. They also express that it may be easier for a woman candidate to use an emotional angle to resonate with voters on an issue by using an individual's personal story.

What Does Not Work with Voters

- ◆ **People do not like ads where they feel the candidate is “bashing” the opponent.** These include “pointing out all the bad points of your opponent” or “the nasty and rude, lying. It’s one-sided, it’s single words in bold print that’s all negative.”
- ◆ **Listing a litany of claims against an opponent does not test positively with voters.** Voters find this to be confusing and are more likely to tune out the commercial, and consequently, the candidate. Voters respond more to ads that tell a story. They respond to multiple proof points of the same concept, not just a list of negatives.
- ◆ **Voters do not respond well to ads that are too “busy”** and that trigger sensory overload. Voters find these to be confusing and prefer a clear, concise delivery.
- ◆ **Voters respond negatively to what they view as “scare tactics”** where music and tone are used to evoke a sense of drama to scare voters of the consequences of electing the opposing candidate. They push back on music that is too sinister, as well as exaggerated images. They tend to rate these ads as more negative than ads that are less dramatic and sinister, and this seemed even more true for women’s campaigns.
- ◆ Media consultants often put the candidate’s required disclaimer at the beginning of the ad against the opponent to distance their candidate from the negative. People in the focus groups likely paid more attention to the disclaimer than viewers watching at home, because of the methodology we used. However, voters appear to have figured out this tactic and do attribute the negative to the candidate.

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Recommendations for Women Candidates

While every candidate and campaign is unique, here are key strategies for women candidates to contrast with their opponents:

- ◆ **Consider having a woman candidate speak for herself in her negative commercial.** It is important for voters to hear her stance on issues and what she will do, not only the negative attack on her opponent. As one woman said: “What if this is the only ad I see? Every ad should give me some information about the candidate.”
- ◆ **Be sure the woman comes across as confident and warm.** In a campaign, it is important to reinforce and protect that she is likeable and qualified, even when delivering the negative. Contrary to conventional wisdom, we found that women can preserve voters' perceptions of these traits. Voters want some reassurance that she isn't a typical politician. **We know that negative attacks on a woman can dramatically impact her likeability and the sense that she is qualified.**
- ◆ **Be genuine. Voters want authentic facial expressions that are appropriate for the topic being discussed.** Voters, especially women, pay a great deal of attention to how women candidates come across, even in the disclaimer at the beginning or end of the ad.
- ◆ **Use real people** to deliver a negative by sharing their personal stories.
- ◆ **Be simple and concise.** Do not use overly busy, distracting images or music in commercials. Voters want to be able to leave a commercial understanding where the candidate stands on issues.
- ◆ **Cite sources and provide links for voters to follow up when looking for more information on a candidate and her platform.** Voters like being able to look at the facts and the candidate's own plan.
- ◆ **Use a fresh or unexpected approach, such as humor, in a candidate's delivery of a negative.** Voters are more inclined to view and listen to a candidate's message if delivered in this frame. Humor works for women, but it's also important to pivot to the serious side.
- ◆ **Respond to a negative ad by the opponent.** Women candidates were particularly effective when appearing in a response, contrast, or counter attack.
- ◆ **Think about the interaction of the woman candidate and the topic.** Women were especially strong in ads on social and domestic issues like rape and Medicare. Women were more effective contrasting on issues than focusing on their opponents' personality, political issues, or background.

Methodology

Lake Research Partners & Chesapeake Beach Consulting conducted five expanded focus groups with 25 people each among registered men and women voters in September 2013, segmented as follows:

- September 18 – Oak Brook, IL: one group among swing female voters and one group among swing male voters.
- September 30 – Richmond, VA: one group among swing female voters, one group among swing minority female voters, and one group among swing male voters.

We simulated a campaign between fictional candidates Jane Smith and Dan Jones, and tested voters' reactions to negative campaign and response audio ads by both candidates. Initially Dan Jones has a 2 point lead over Jane Smith but by the end of the survey Smith has an 8 point lead over Jones. Despite this shift among voters toward Jane Smith, voters see both candidates as less qualified by the end of the survey, particularly the female candidate. When just given a neutral description of both candidates, voters rate each as equally qualified. After hearing a negative attack on the female candidate*, voters are much less likely to see her as qualified, while half of voters still rate the male candidate as qualified. Interestingly, among voters who initially heard a similar attack against the male candidate*, the female candidate is also seen as less qualified than the male candidate.

When the female candidate responds to the negative attack against her*, voters do not believe she is any more qualified. Voters continue to rate the male candidate as more qualified after her response. Among voters who heard the initial attack against the male candidate, when he responds*, voters rate him equally as high as initially, but rate the female candidate as even less qualified.

*split sampled

ⁱ On behalf of the Barbara Lee Family Foundation, Lake Research Partners and Chesapeake Beach Consulting conducted qualitative research to discuss with voters their reactions to negative campaign ads when a woman candidate is involved. Though not a perfect methodology – voters were only shown negative ads, it was not in the context of a full campaign buy, i.e. without the benefit of positive ads introducing the candidate and their views, and the candidates would be better known in the actual campaign – we did gain insights into voters' views toward negative ads and the tactics that seem to work better with voters, especially in the current environment.