

Pitch Perfect: Winning Strategies for Women Candidates

November 8, 2012

Executive Summary

We've all heard it: this perception that "I would vote for a 'qualified' woman," especially when a woman runs for major statewide office. The [Barbara Lee Family Foundation's](#) latest research helps to decode the idea of a qualified woman candidate. It reveals what makes a woman "qualified" in voters' minds, and how one establishes qualifications and likeability at the same time. On behalf of the Barbara Lee Family Foundation, Lake Research Partners conducted focus groups among likely 2012 voters, followed by a phone survey, and an online dial survey.

This research provides a clear road map for women who are running for major statewide office: how to introduce themselves to voters to demonstrate their qualifications; what language contributes to voters believing they are qualified; and how to present themselves in a way that conveys they are qualified.

"She is already fighting an uphill battle. She has got to get everything going for her that she can."

White man, age 25-65, Manchester, NH

We found:

- ◆ Voters continue to have high standards for what they consider a "qualified" woman candidate.
- ◆ Confidence is critical. Women candidates for major statewide office must come across as confident, qualified, and competent in their initial presentation.
- ◆ Women candidates especially need to tout their experience and track record, including taking on political insiders.
- ◆ Voters want assurance that women can get the job done in the largely male game of politics.
- ◆ For women candidates, there is a correlation between being qualified and being likeable. That is not the case for men.
- ◆ Because qualifications and likeability are so closely linked, there are dual negative consequences for women when they make mistakes on the campaign trail.

Voting for the “Qualified” Woman

In focus groups, voters explained that some people only want to vote for “qualified” women because a perception remains that women have to work harder and do more to achieve the same goals as men. Voters describe this as having extra hurdles or meeting a higher standard.

Even so, voters are interested in voting for a woman candidate for Governor or U.S. Senate (72% interested, 40% very interested). Women voters express more interest and more intense interest (79% interested, 45% very interested) than men voters (65% interested, 34% very interested).

Asking about friends’ and neighbors’ beliefs is a technique that can overcome voters’ desire to give a politically correct answer. We approached this question with that in mind: About one third of voters (34%) believe that their friends and neighbors find male candidates more qualified. This belief is particularly high among younger African Americans (50%), voters under age 30 (49%), younger men (44%), fathers (42%), younger Democrats (42%), younger Republicans (42%), and Latino men (41%)¹.

By wide margins, voters believe that it is harder for a woman candidate to appear qualified than a male candidate (79% say it is harder, 46% say much harder for a woman candidate to appear qualified). Women voters are more likely to hold this view than men (among women, 82% say it is harder for a woman candidate to appear qualified compared to 76% of men).

Voters also say that it is quite important for a woman candidate to include in her description that she is qualified (90% say this is important, 63% very important). It is slightly more important to women voters that a woman candidate use the descriptor “qualified.” Among women, two-thirds say this is very important (91% important, 66% very), compared to six in 10 men (88% important, 60% very important).

If a woman candidate is described as “qualified,” she gets a small bump in voter interest (78% interested, 46% very interested). She gets an eight-point increase in intensity among women (53% very interested) and a six-point increase in intensity among men (40% very interested).

Characteristics that Convey Qualifications

This research indicates that specific words and phrases work better than others to convey to voters that a candidate for major elected office is qualified. Most women who run for major office and most women who get elected to major office have these qualifications.

The key is to communicate with voters in the right way.

Voters already believe that most women running for major office in their states are hard-working, confident, organized, knowledgeable, compassionate, assertive, strong, and leaders. While these are all positive qualities, they do not all convey to voters that a candidate is qualified. The traits that well describe women who run for major statewide office and **convey qualifications** are confident, organized, and knowledgeable.

“When you have two candidates – a man and a woman – I think that the women have to do a few extra things, I mean whether it is to show that they are qualified or just to jump over extra hurdles that men don’t have to in other people’s minds.”

White woman, age 36-65, Chicago, IL

“I think people perceive that there is a higher standard which must be met for a woman to obtain office... I think it goes back to equality issues. Not even talking about politics. I think if you are looking at almost any job, a woman usually has to perform better to reach the same standards as a man.”

White man, age 25-65, Manchester, NH

Voters continue to have high standards for a qualified woman candidate. She must show she:

- ◆ Is knowledgeable (89% said it is very important for a woman candidate running for major office in their state to have this quality to show that she is qualified for the job)
- ◆ Is honest (87% very important)
- ◆ Will stand up for what is right (86% very important)
- ◆ Can get results (82% very important)
- ◆ Is confident (79% very important)
- ◆ Is organized (78% very important)
- ◆ Has a vision (76% very important)
- ◆ Is in touch (75% very important)

It is nearly **universally** important for a woman to have these traits (ranging from 97% to 96% important for each trait). Women candidates should have these qualities written into their introductions, editorials, and early descriptions, such as their websites, announcements, mailers, and stump speeches.

The top traits for men candidates are similar to those of women candidates, though intensity for quite a few of these traits is lower. In order to show that he is qualified for the job, it is very important that a man be honest (88% very important), show he will stand up for what is right (87% very important), be knowledgeable (84% very important), get results (78% very important), be confident (74% very important), be organized (74% very important), be in touch (72% very important), and have a vision (70% very important).

We ran factor analysis for these traits, and we discovered that when voters think about whether a woman candidate is qualified for the job, two dimensions emerge. The dominant dimension is being results-oriented, and the other is being charismatic and likeable. However, for men candidates, there are four dimensions and all have equal weight. These dimensions illuminate that for women candidates, not making a mistake is part of being likeable. For men candidates, not making a mistake is part of being organized and getting results. **This means that when women candidates make mistakes, they pay double the price – raising doubts about their likeability and their qualifications.**

“The men, they don’t really have to say anything. You know they just know it and you can see that in the person how they are humble and they are confident...”

*Mixed race, young woman,
age 18-35, Chicago, IL*

The Importance of Likeability

The connection between likability and qualifications is particularly troubling because previous research² on women candidates by the Barbara Lee Family Foundation found that voters were perfectly willing to vote for a male executive they thought was qualified but did not particularly like. However, we found that they would not vote for a woman they found unlikeable even if she were qualified.

² From the Barbara Lee Family Foundation’s 2010 report “Turning Point:” Likeability — whether a candidate is viewed favorably by voters — has become the single most important predictor of the vote for women. In 2010, the more likeable candidate won in nine of the ten races in which women ran for governor. Likeability appears to be more important in races with women candidates — either woman vs. man or woman vs. woman — than in all-male races.

In the latest research, we found that a candidate's likeability is especially important to women voters; 90% of women say that it is important to like a candidate they support.

We tested a number of presentations of women candidates to see which best communicated qualifications and likeability, and we found that voters ranked the examples of being qualified and the examples of being likeable almost identically. In fact, we found a strong tie between being qualified and being likeable.

The examples that are seen as most likeable and most qualified include:

- ◆ Bringing Democrats and Republicans together to get things done
- ◆ Standing up in a debate
- ◆ Starting the campaign with a listening tour
- ◆ Pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps
- ◆ Answering tough questions from a reporter
- ◆ Issuing an economic plan
- ◆ Being a single mom who succeeds in business

Some of these examples are a matter of wording. For example, rather than illustrating how a woman candidate has worked across the aisle, it tests better to bring men and women or Democrats and Republicans together.

The Double Bind

Because qualifications and likeability are so closely linked, there are dual negative consequences for women

when they make mistakes on the campaign trail. This research found that performing poorly in a debate, getting angry in public, choking up in public, and having a mistake in the candidate's economic plan all reduce both her qualifications AND her likeability.

"She has to be very strong and confident to be able to do that job."

White woman, age 36-65, Manchester, NH

"If you are confident and you want people to believe in you, then people will have belief that you can do things. I mean if you don't look like you believe in yourself, then there is not a way that things can happen."

Mixed race, young woman 18-35, Chicago, IL

We know no one can run a perfect campaign. **However, women do not have a lot of room to make mistakes.** When women do make mistakes, they need to work quickly with their campaigns to engage in crisis communications. We

have found that women are often perceived as letting mistakes linger for too long. This is devastating to both their likeability and their qualifications.

This research uncovered one potential strategy for women to employ when they do make a mistake: respond quickly with a succinct, straight answer and then introduce validators who can reinforce the candidate's qualifications. This strategy worked even better for women candidates than for men candidates.

The Candidate's Introduction: Putting the Best Foot Forward

Women need to tweak the ways they introduce themselves to the voting public. First, women must immediately establish themselves as qualified. **We found that it is imperative for women to get a running start prior to launching their campaigns. To help women relay their qualifications, they should focus on both the presentation and content of the introduction. Women should lead with their issue expertise and accomplishments as well as their experience and track record before sharing their personal stories.** Voters punish women for on-the-job learning and campaigns that ramp up; this erodes the sense that they are "qualified." **Women often start their campaigns with their personal stories, which makes them likeable and in touch, but often does not do much to establish their qualifications and credibility.**

Women candidates for major statewide office must come across as confident, qualified, and competent in their initial presentation. They also need to maintain that confidence, as it is critical to appearing qualified. Voters hone in on perceived weaknesses immediately, so women do not have the luxury of beginning their campaigns looking anything but qualified and confident. When voters consider how women present themselves, it is most important that a woman be prepared and polished and speak intelligently and knowledgeably. It is also important to answer tough questions early and speak with authority.

In focus groups, voters told us that it is critical for women candidates to present themselves as strong and confident. **Women candidates pay a high price when they fail to appear confident.** A candidate using verbal and non-verbal cues to relay confidence to voters shows them that the candidate is qualified and capable of handling the job.

In talking about the importance of a confident presentation, voters also distinguished between women candidates and men candidates. They reiterated their broader belief that women in general have to work harder and jump over more hurdles to achieve the same goals as men.

In this environment, voters claim to value a fresh perspective and disdain political insiders. **Candidates may want to be perceived as outsiders, yet this research shows that women are already perceived somewhat to be outsiders. Voters want assurance that women can lead and get the job done in the largely male game of politics. Women candidates especially need to tout their experience and track record, which can include taking on political insiders.**

[One can portray confidence in] "their demeanor, the way they stand, the way they carry themselves, the way they speak."

White woman, age 36-65, Manchester, NH

"When you are talking, you have to present yourself in a way that is strong and believable, and you know if you are not confident in what you're talking about I guess it just comes across as weak."

White woman, age 36-65, Manchester, NH

In our research, the profile example that most effectively creates a sense of a qualified candidate focuses on her issue expertise and her accomplishments in that issue area. The next most effective profile type centers on the candidate’s previous experience in elected office. In order to increase voters’ perceptions of a candidate’s qualifications, we recommend leading with these types of profiles, and then introducing voters to the more personal side of the candidate: her family, her important developmental experiences, and her educational background. Other profiles can create affect and empathy, but these communicate qualifications.

Profiles	Female Candidate	
	Very Qualified	Total Qualified
<p>Issues Mary Jones is known in the state legislature for her strong voting record on issues like health care reform, education, and economic development. She has successfully passed a number of bills to help our state including getting money to improve our schools and creating thousands of jobs while imposing tough fiscal discipline.</p>	62%	93%
<p>Elected Office Jan Smith served one term on city council, was mayor, and is currently in her third term in the state legislature. Currently she serves as a ranking member of the Finance committee, as well as on the Governor’s Economic Task Force to create jobs.</p>	56%	90%
<p>Work Kathy Green successfully owned her own small business before climbing the ranks of a Fortune 500 company. She knows how to create jobs, meet a payroll, and manage a company budget.</p>	39%	80%
<p>Personal Joan Smith grew up in a working class neighborhood, the daughter of a police officer and a teacher, where she learned the value of hard work and discipline. She graduated at the top of her class from a State University.</p>	21%	63%

Action-Oriented Language

In the online dial tests, **voters responded well to descriptions of women candidates taking action.** We found that voters react positively to accounts of women candidates:

- ◆ Pulling themselves up by their bootstraps
- ◆ Starting a successful business
- ◆ Standing up to an opponent in a debate
- ◆ Refusing to back down
- ◆ Answering tough questions

These action-oriented descriptions increase voters' perceptions of women candidates as qualified. Voters also remembered these kinds of take-charge actions and cited them as something specific that stood out to them.

Recommendations

While there is no silver-bullet solution—one quality or characteristic that makes voters think that a woman candidate is qualified—there are some strategies that women can employ:

- ⇒ **Use the Qualified Label:** When writing a candidate's biography, include the word "qualified" in her description. If possible, include words like assertive, knowledgeable, confident, leader, and long-term elected official, which also convey qualifications.
- ⇒ **Maintain Confident Presentation Styles:** The most important factor is for women to introduce themselves in a confident manner and to maintain that confidence. The use of media consultants for presentation should begin before the announcement. Women should avoid making early mistakes, and they should prepare to answer tough questions.
- ⇒ **Incorporate Action-Oriented Phrases:** Voters respond well to phrases like "refused to back down" and "stood up in the debate." Voters' perceptions of a woman candidate being qualified are bolstered when she appears pro-active.
- ⇒ **Tap Into Third-Party Validation:** Voters respond well to phrases like "the business community praised her for her experience" and "she has been endorsed by business and labor leaders." Third-party validators who attest to a woman candidate's qualifications help her. If a woman makes a mistake, while she employs crisis communications, she should make sure a third-party validator reaffirms her qualifications.

Methodology:

Focus Groups: Lake Research Partners conducted four focus groups in August 2012 segmented as follows:

Chicago, Illinois August 8, 2012

White women, age 36-65

Mixed race young women, age 18-35

Manchester, New Hampshire August 9, 2012

White women, age 36-65

White men, age 25-65

Participants were recruited to reflect a mix of age, party identification, and education level.

Phone Survey: Lake Research Partners designed and administered this survey, which was conducted by phone using professional interviewers. The survey reached a total of 1001 likely registered voters nationwide. The survey was conducted September 11 – 16, 2012.

Telephone numbers for the survey were drawn using a voter file sample. The samples were stratified geographically based on the proportion of voters in each region. Data was weighted by gender, education, party identification, age, region, and race to reflect the attributes of the electorate. The margin of error for the survey is +/- 3.1%.

Online Dial Survey: Lake Research Partners designed and administered this survey which was conducted online. The survey reached a total of 1000 registered likely 2012 voters nationwide. The sample was drawn from an online panel and respondents were screened to be registered and likely voters. The survey was conducted October 4 – 9, 2012.

Data in the sample were weighted slightly by gender and party identification to reflect the attributes of the actual population. The margin of error for the overall survey is +/- 3.1%.