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## Modern Family:

How Women Candidates Can Talk About  
Politics, Parenting, and Their Personal Lives

Spring 2017

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## Barbara Lee

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# How Do I Respond to Questions About My Personal Life?



**“Like many expectant first time mothers, I had many fears and insecurities but as a high profile politician I couldn't voice any of those.” – Former Governor Jane Swift**

**“I announced my campaign for the U.S. Senate when my daughter was just a few months old and was asked time and again how I would make it work.” - Senator Tammy Duckworth**



**“The press couldn't get their heads around it—was I a no-nonsense businesswoman or a warm and fuzzy mom? My question to them was always, ‘Why can't I be both?’”- Governor Gina Raimondo**





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# Research Highlights: 6 Key Findings

1. Voters express concern about the ability of women candidates and elected officials to balance the competing priorities of their families and their constituents.
2. It is important for women candidates – no matter what their family situation – to talk to voters about their personal lives.
3. While men candidates are able to recover from critiques about their ability to manage family and public office, some women are not able to recover from those same critiques.
4. It is more challenging for a woman candidate or elected official who has young children, whether she is married or single.
5. Voters expect that questions about a candidate's role as a mother will be part of the campaign discussion. They recognize a double standard for moms, but they also actively participate in it and are conscious of doing so.
6. Some voters also worry that a candidate or elected official who has never married and does not have children will not be able to truly understand the concerns of families.



**Celinda Lake**

President, Lake Research Partners



@celindalake



**Bob Carpenter**

President, Chesapeake Beach Consulting

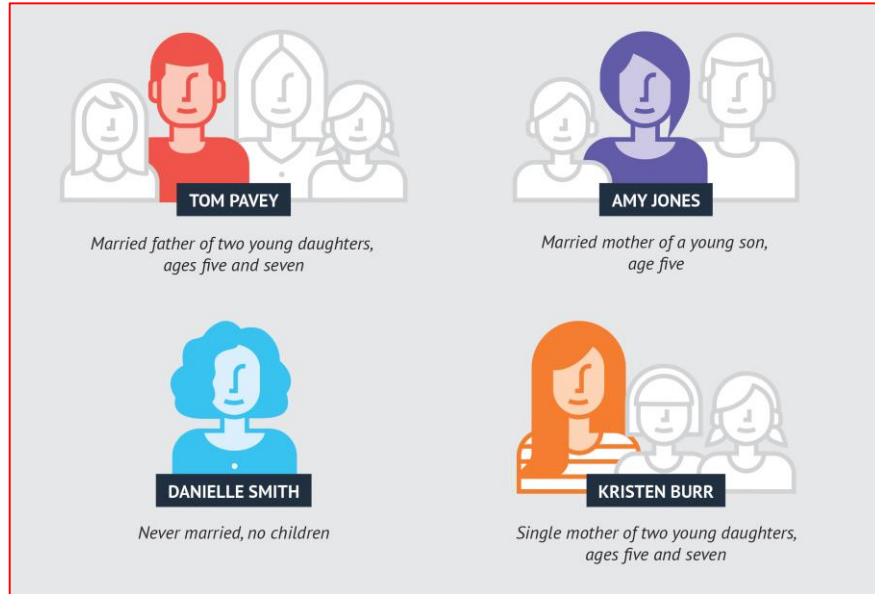
# Methodology

- Lake Research Partners and Chesapeake Beach Consulting:
  - Conducted eleven focus groups with men and women in March and April of 2016.
  - Held Bulletin Board groups May 17 through the 19 among 60 recruited respondents nationwide.
  - Designed and administered a dial survey that was conducted online from August 1 – August 9, 2016.

## *Focus Groups*

Cleveland, OH March 21	White Women Homemakers
	Mixed Minority Men
Minneapolis, MN March 22	White Senior Women
	Millennial Women
	White Men with Children Younger than 5
Atlanta, GA April 7	African American Women
	White Men
Kansas City, MO April 14	White Women Workers Outside the Home
	Millennial Men
Denver, CO April 18	White Women with Children Younger than 5
	Latinas

# Family Models Tested



**STEP 1:** Voters were presented with profiles of fictional candidates for governor in the form of newspaper articles.

**STEP 2:** Voters heard critiques of each of the candidates which focused on their ability to manage their family life and at the same time be effective office holders.

**STEP 3:** Voters read how the candidates responded to the critiques.

- In focus groups, we also explored reactions to:
  - **Divorced** – Voters deeply resented critiquing a candidate based on their divorce.
  - **Lesbian** – If a candidate is a mom and lesbian, people feel reassured that the mom role will be filled by her partner or spouse.
  - **Dating** – Voters do not want to know about a single woman candidate's dating life.



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# Types of Critique Responses

- We tested two different types of responses:
  - **The Accomplishments Response:** These responses focus on the candidate's previous track record of results either in elected office or previous professional experience.
  - **The Modern Partnership/Support Response:** These responses acknowledge that the candidate's family support system is different from the traditional "nuclear family" of a dad, mom, and two kids. For example, this type of response could include childcare support from grandparents or other extended family.

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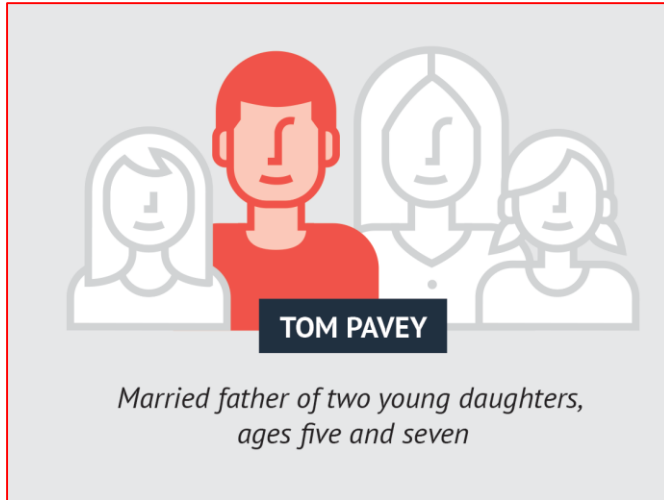
# Summary: Topline Family Model Findings

- Overall, there is not a lot of differences in voters' ratings of the effectiveness or relatability of the candidates. The two ratings are more highly correlated for women than men.
- The responses are most effective for the married dad, and increase his ratings beyond his initial ratings.
- The critique has the most impact on the single woman without children.
- The responses have limited impact for the married mom's ratings.
- The responses work for both of the unmarried women, but bring them only part of the way back to where they were initially.



# Tom Pavey

MARRIED FATHER, TWO YOUNG DAUGHTERS



*\*Full findings on Tom Pavey can be found in the research memo*

- Used as a control in this study.
- Initially, Tom Pavey starts out the survey rated lowest of all the candidates tested on relatability, effectiveness, and vote likelihood.
- It really pays off for Tom to respond to the critiques that question his ability to parent and govern.
- His are the strongest out of all the responses we tested, with the highest relatability and effectiveness ratings.

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# Amy Jones

## MARRIED MOTHER, YOUNG SON



- Starts off strongest out of all the candidates on vote likelihood, effectiveness, and relatability.
- Women voters start out more likely than men voters to believe that she would be effective.
- Loses ground on critiques about her family life, even though over three-quarters of voters say they have few doubts about her.
- Does not recover the ground she loses in effectiveness, relatability, and voters' likelihood to vote for her.



# Amy Jones

## VOTER CRITIQUES



Dani33 - Did you see State Senator Amy Jones is running for governor? And she has that little boy! I am torn. I don't think being a family person herself will keep her from being a good leader. Most elected officials are married. But the downside is she has a very young son. These are the years when he needs his mother's presence.

16

Alex16 - It does make me wonder how she will be able to raise her son if she is taking on the pressures of an office like the Governor. Yes, men do it all the time, but women are nurturers, and we are needed especially when children are very young.

12

Mary604 - She needs super powers to handle things if she wants to be both a mom and a governor. It is a huge responsibility... It is a matter of what she is willing to give up because she cannot have both all the time.

11

Matt83 - I am not holding it against her, but the fact of the situation is that she is taking on a lot and her kids are missing out on the motherly presence during her time away.

9

Erica9 - She is going to be busy raising her family and it will be hard to focus.

6

No comments are powerful to me

46

# Amy Jones

## REACTIONS TO CRITIQUES

AMY JONES | Married mother of a young son, age five

***“We don’t make any males running for office explain what’s happening with their children.”***

*“Just because she has kids doesn’t mean she wouldn’t be effective and couldn’t do her job.”*

***“How is she balancing this?  
How is she doing all this?”***

*“Family issues are closer to [her] than somebody who is single and doesn’t [have kids].”*

*“Somebody is going to suffer. It is either going to be her office or her kids”*

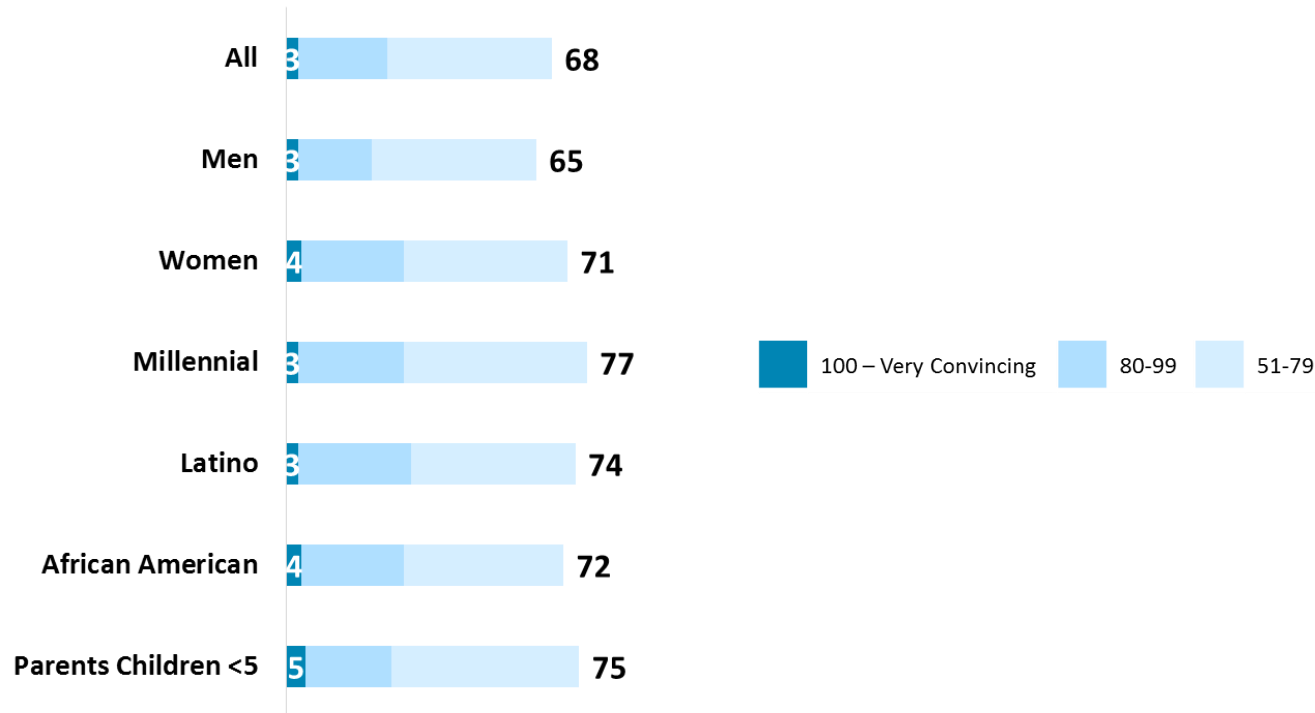




# Amy Jones

## ACCOMPLISHMENTS CRITIQUE RESPONSE

### How convincing did you find this message?



#### TEXT

I've been getting a lot of questions about my personal life. Yes, I do have a child and I have a job. I love my son and I love my job, and I'm good at it, too. I hear from my constituents every day that things are tough. That's why I can't wait until my son is older to serve. Our state has urgent problems that need solutions now. Through my work as a state senator, I have been able to help communities, and if I am elected Governor, I'm excited for the opportunities to help communities across our state. I'd like to refocus the conversation on issues that matter most to our communities, like good schools, jobs that pay well, and safe streets that help all our families.

#### WHAT WORKS

- ✓ "Yes, I do have a child and I have a job."
- ✓ "I hear from my constituents every day that things are tough"
- ✓ "need solutions now" (solution language works well)
- ✓ "help communities"
- ✓ "good schools, jobs that pay well, and safe streets"

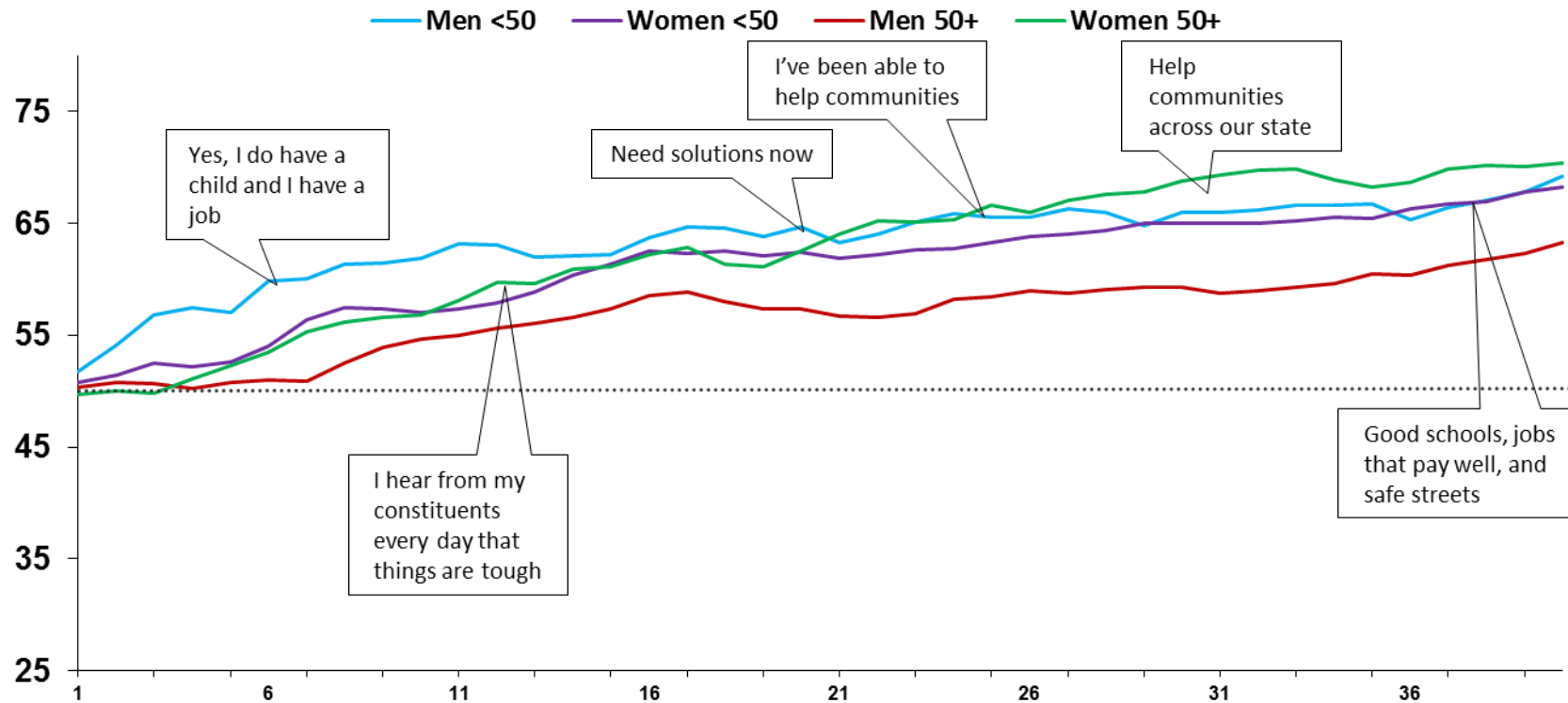
#### WHAT FALLS SHORT

- X I'm excited (may be too emotional)
- X Urgent problems (urgency may backfire by elevating voters' concerns about the woman's ability to deal with the problems)



# Amy Jones

## ACCOMPLISHMENTS CRITIQUE RESPONSE



- Voters respond with a consistent upward trend to Amy's answer that talks about her professional and parental roles.
- They especially like acknowledgements of constituents and communities. Older men are holding back this response.

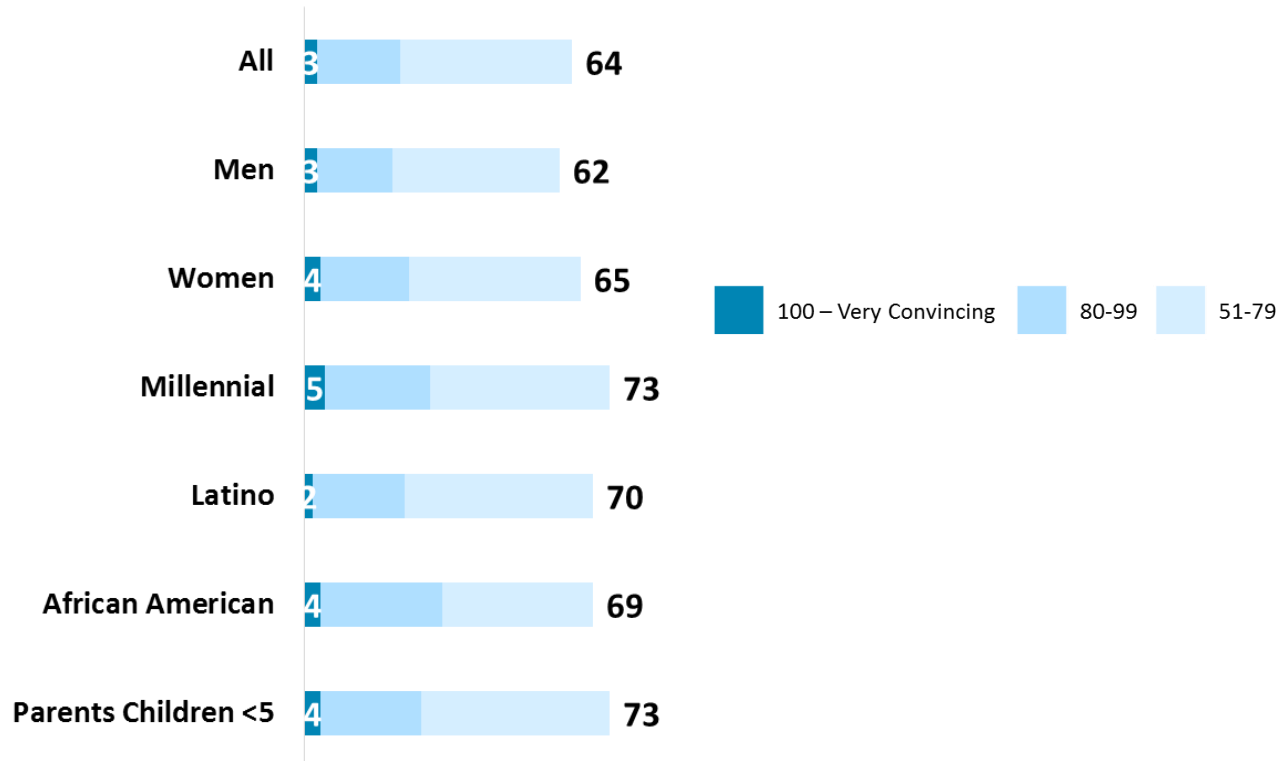




# Amy Jones

## MODERN PARTNERSHIP/SUPPORT CRITIQUE RESPONSE

### How convincing did you find this message?



#### TEXT

I've been getting a lot of questions about my personal life that I want to address. Families work in all kinds of different ways, but this works for us. Both my husband and I are equally responsible for raising our son. I kiss just as many boo boos as he does; he does just as much laundry as I do. We try to sit down for family meals so we can talk about our days and our son's day. I help with homework and my husband runs our son's bath. Our family makes time for play and stories and then my husband and I get back to our jobs after our son goes to sleep. That is how we make things work.

#### WHAT WORKS

- ✓ "Families work in all kinds of different ways"
- ✓ "I kiss just as many boo boos as he does"
- ✓ "We try to sit down for family meals"
- ✓ "Get back to our jobs after our son goes to sleep"

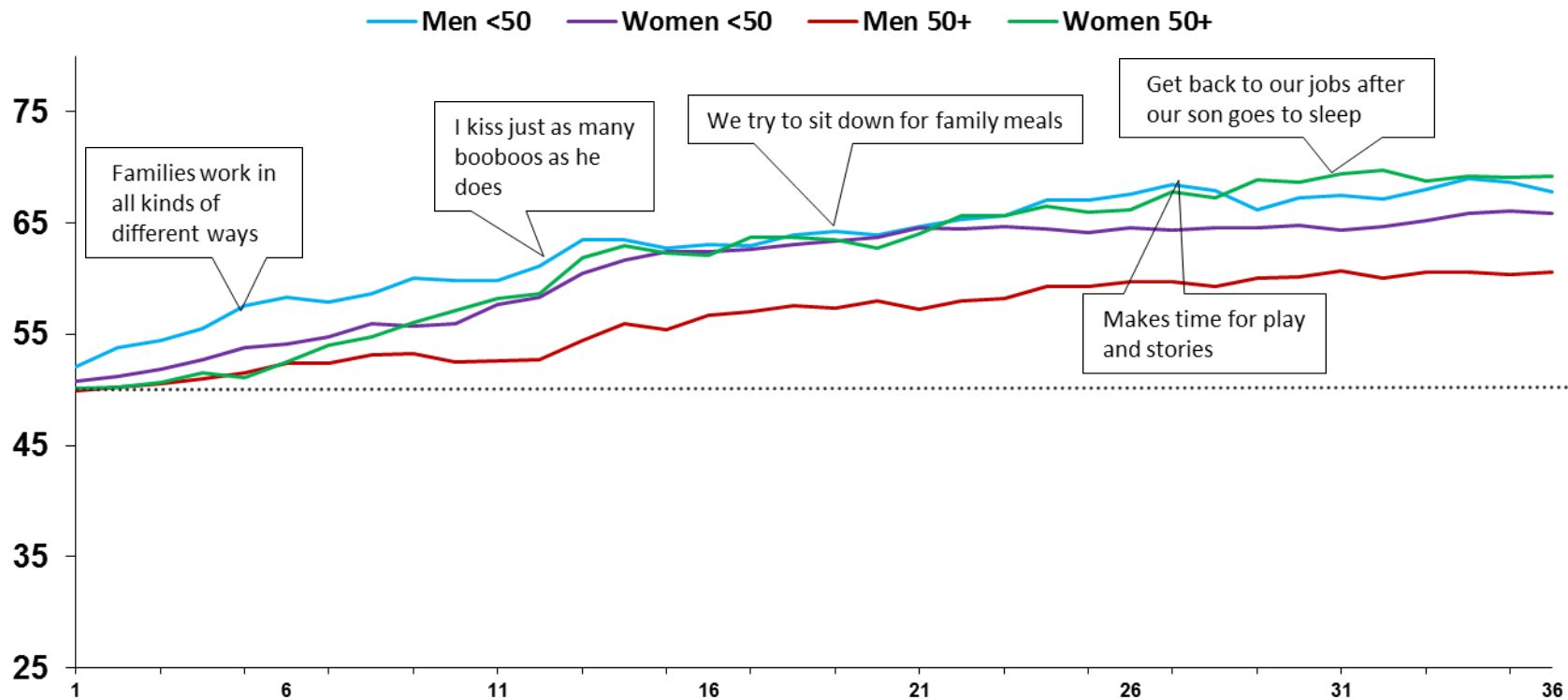
#### WHAT FALLS SHORT

- X "Our family makes time for play and stories"
- X Voters respond more to caregiving and teaching values than playing.



# Amy Jones

## MODERN PARTNERSHIP/SUPPORT CRITIQUE RESPONSE



- Voters respond well to Amy's description of her partnership with her husband; they dial up consistently.
- Older men are more reserved than their younger and female counterparts.

# Danielle Smith

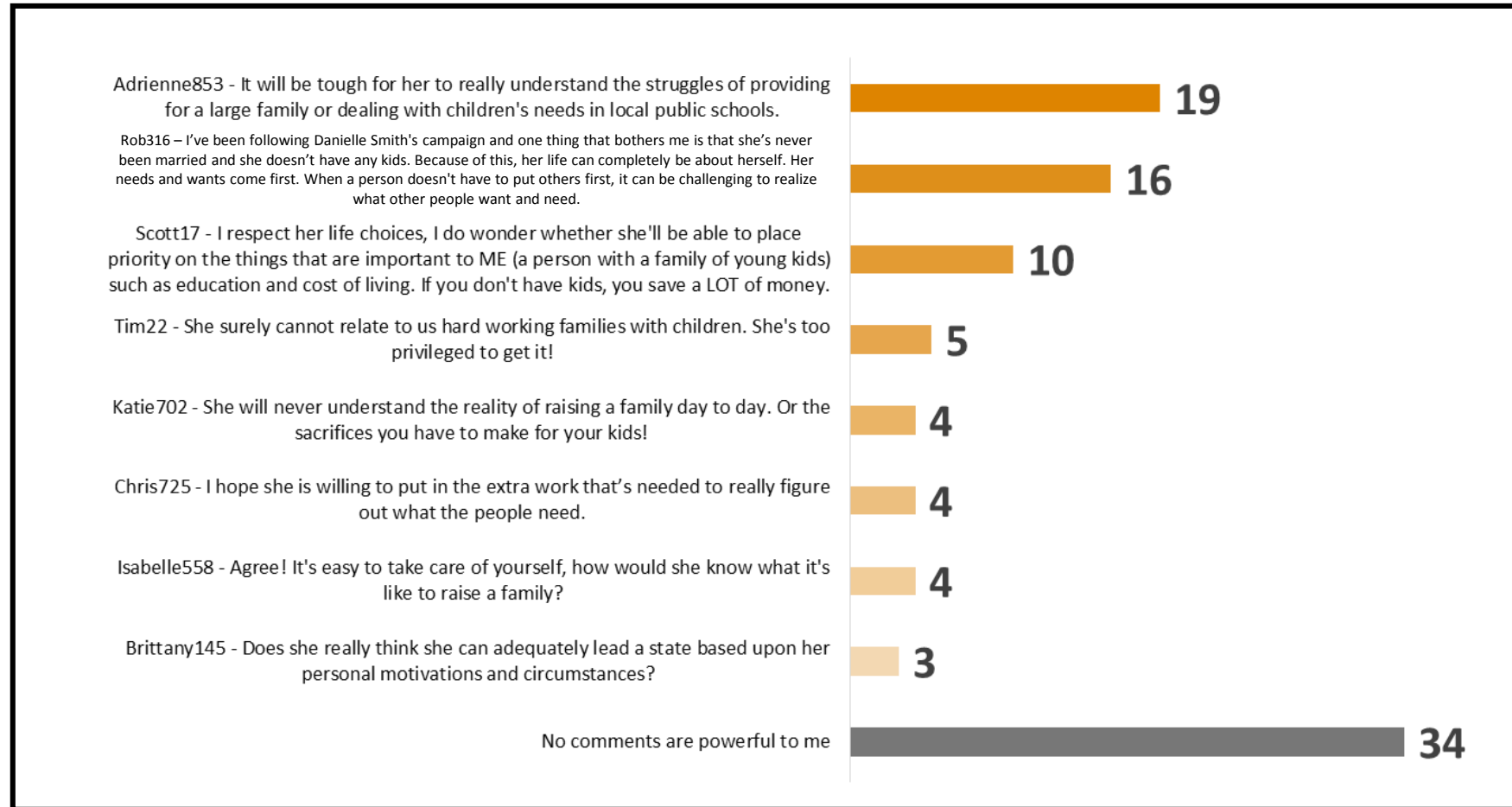
*SINGLE, NO CHILDREN*



- Danielle starts off as relatable and effective to nearly three-quarters of voters; the same number of voters also initially say they are likely to vote for her.
- Compared to the other candidates, Danielle starts off competitively on relatability and effectiveness.
- Voters rate her slightly lower on their likelihood to vote for her than they do the two women candidates who have children.

# Danielle Smith

## VOTER CRITIQUES





# Danielle Smith

## REACTIONS TO CRITIQUES

DANIELLE SMITH | Never married, no children

*"I find it offensive that someone would think that just because this candidate is not married and without a family cannot relate to those who are married and have families."*

***"Not having children does not evaluate competency for being a governor"***



***"How can she know what we, as parents, are thinking and what we need done?"***

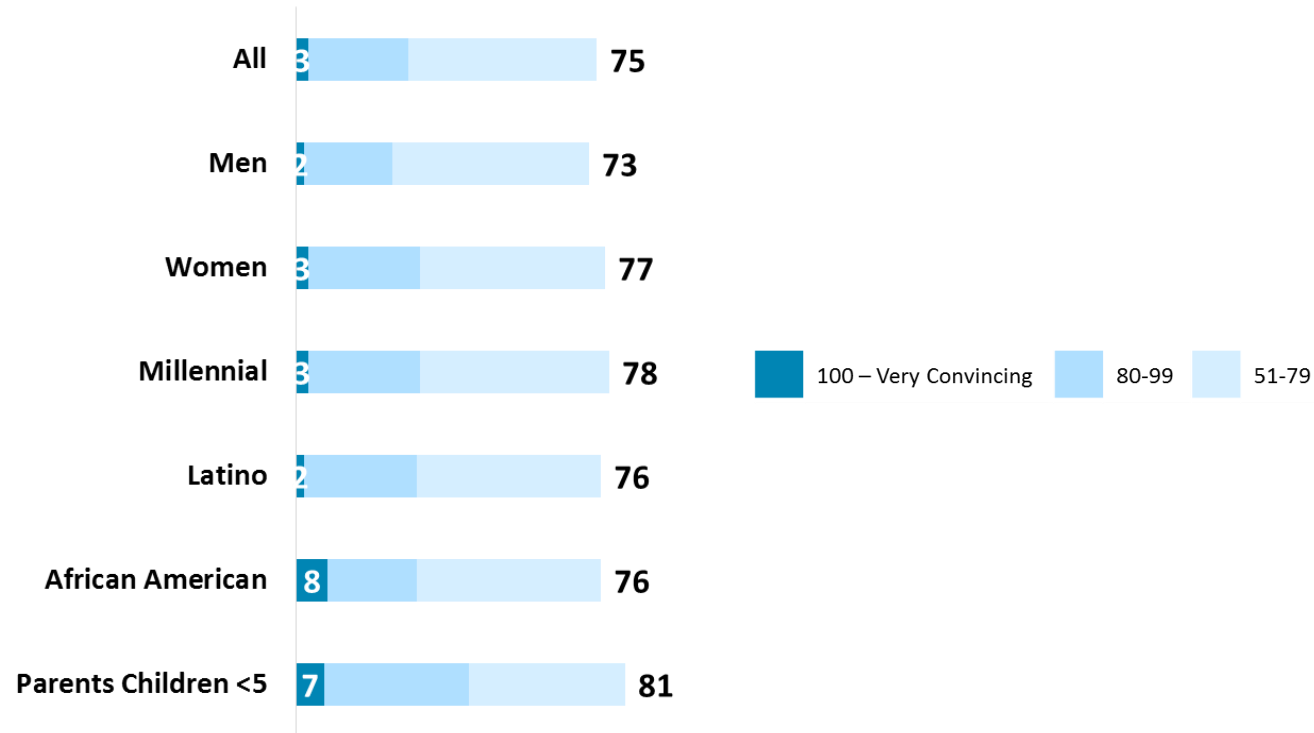
*"I wouldn't vote for her simply because her interests and values couldn't be the same."*

*"I tended to lean towards the people that were single because when I'm voting, I'm voting for that person not for their family."*

# Danielle Smith

## ACCOMPLISHMENTS/PARENTS CRITIQUE RESPONSE

### How convincing did you find this message?



#### TEXT

I have been getting a lot of questions about how I can relate to people with kids. It is true that I don't have children of my own, but I want to make it clear that I value the mothers and fathers in our state. I see that having kids is hard work. I stand with them and the families in our communities by working for good paying jobs and high quality public schools. It took me five years, but I got a bill passed that made sure that all kids in our state have access to quality early education opportunities.

#### WHAT WORKS

- ✓ "how I can relate to people with kids."
- ✓ "I value the mothers and fathers in our state"
- ✓ "I see that having kids is hard work. I stand with them"
- ✓ "high quality public schools"
- ✓ "quality early education opportunities"

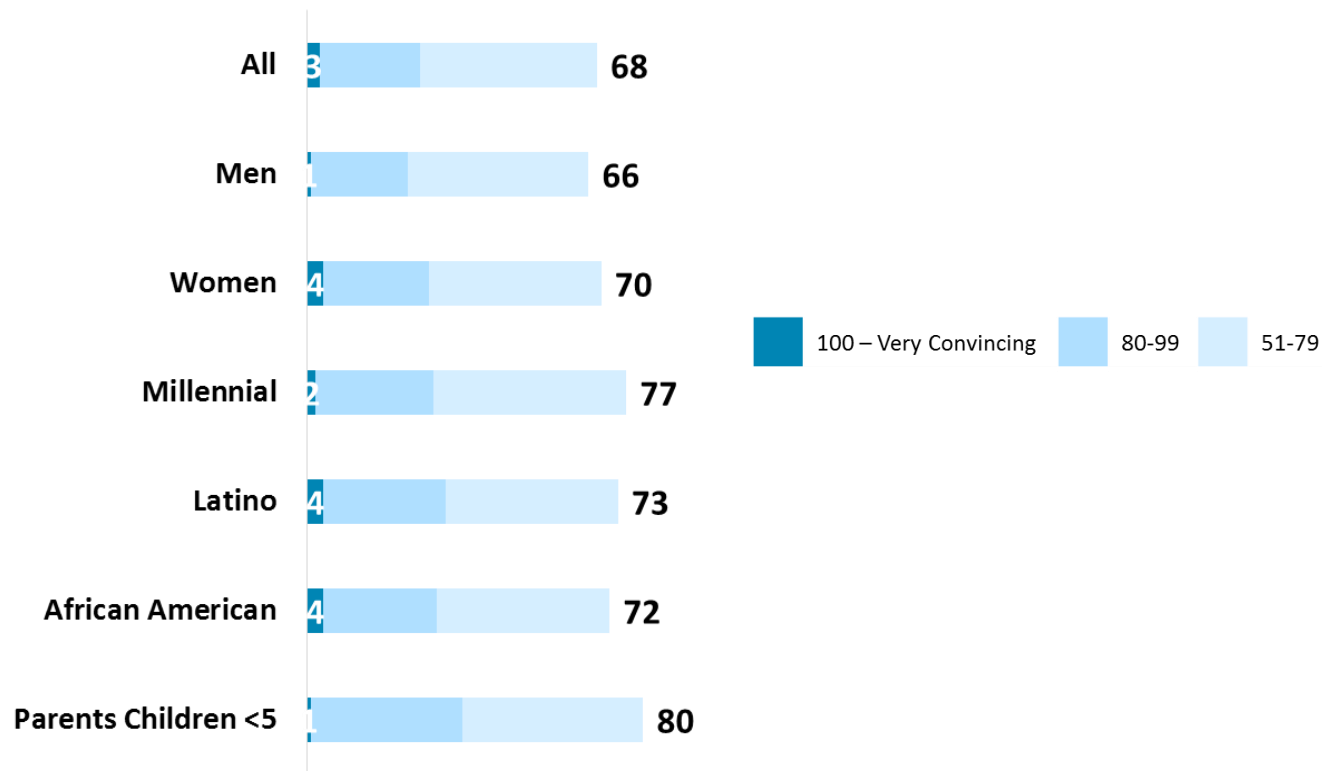
#### WHAT FALLS SHORT

- X "I got a bill passed that made sure that all kids" (absolute language like "made sure" often does not work)
- X Slow start

# Danielle Smith

## ACCOMPLISHMENTS/CHILDREN CRITIQUE RESPONSE

### How convincing did you find this message?



#### TEXT

Though I do not have any children of my own, I am actively involved in the community and with children, volunteering in our local schools and as a mentor for Big Brothers, Big Sisters. I am fortunate enough to have an extended family of nieces and nephews, all of whom I love dearly. I think about my nieces and nephews and the young girl I mentor, as well as the other children in our community and their futures every day. I want to ensure our policies reflect their best interests – be it increased funding for our public schools or ensuring our community is safe.

#### WHAT WORKS

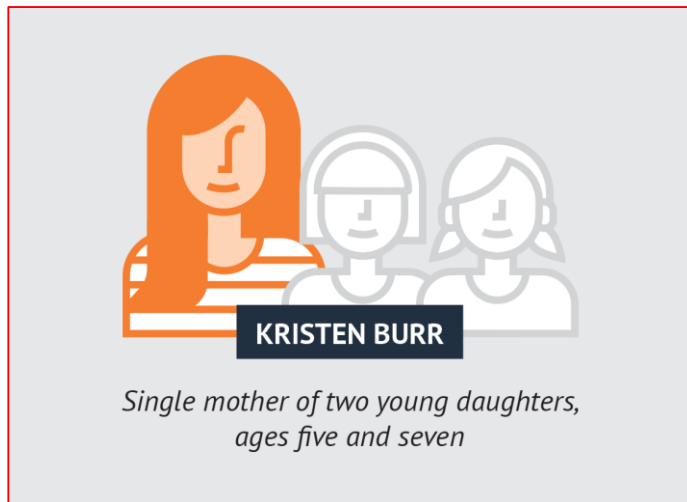
- ✓ “mentor for Big Brothers, Big Sisters”
- ✓ “extended family of nieces and nephews”
- ✓ “I want to ensure our policies reflect their best interests”
- ✓ “ensuring our community is safe”

#### WHAT FALLS SHORT

- X “I am actively involved in the community”
- X “I think about my nieces and nephews and the young girl I mentor...” Voters do not accept analogies to parenting.
- X Slow start

# Kristen Burr

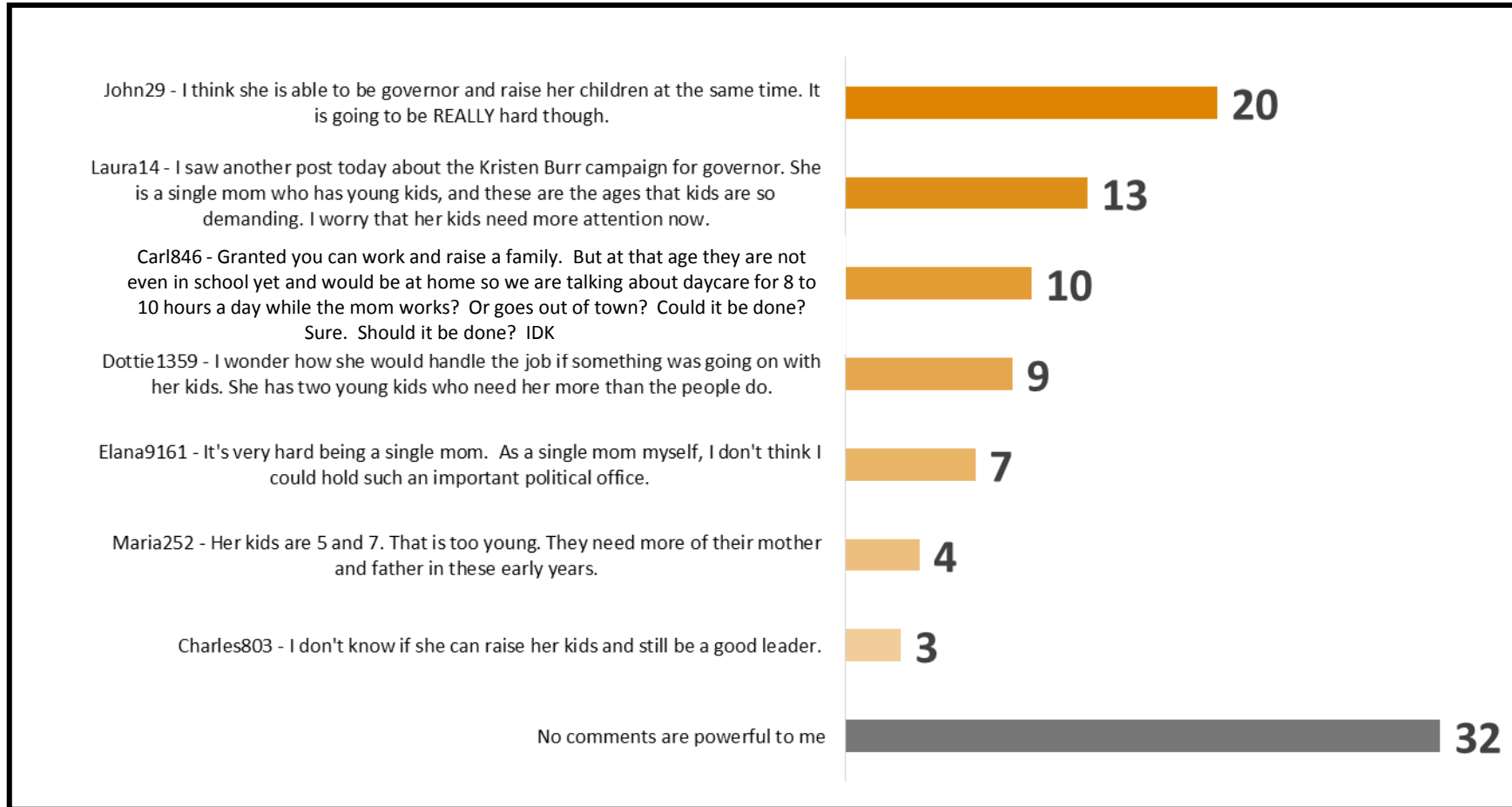
*SINGLE MOTHER, TWO YOUNG DAUGHTERS*



- Over seven in 10 voters initially find Kristen relatable and would vote for her.
- Kristen starts off the survey competitive on relatability, effectiveness, and vote likelihood when compared to the other candidates.
- There is not much movement throughout the survey on Kristen's effectiveness; it is the most stable characteristic for her.

# Kristen Burr

## VOTER CRITIQUES



# Kristen Burr

## REACTIONS TO CRITIQUES

**KRISTEN BURR** | Single mother of two young daughters, ages five and seven

*“How do you really have the energy to commit to being a governor?”*

*“I think half of America is divorced and people are managing their lives just fine.”*

*“Lots of people are in the same shoes... being a single mom shouldn’t make a difference.”*

*“Shouldn’t matter that she has kids if she is running for office. It’s about the support she has behind her.”*

*“She may be able to dedicate herself to her professional role, but I just don’t think she should.”*



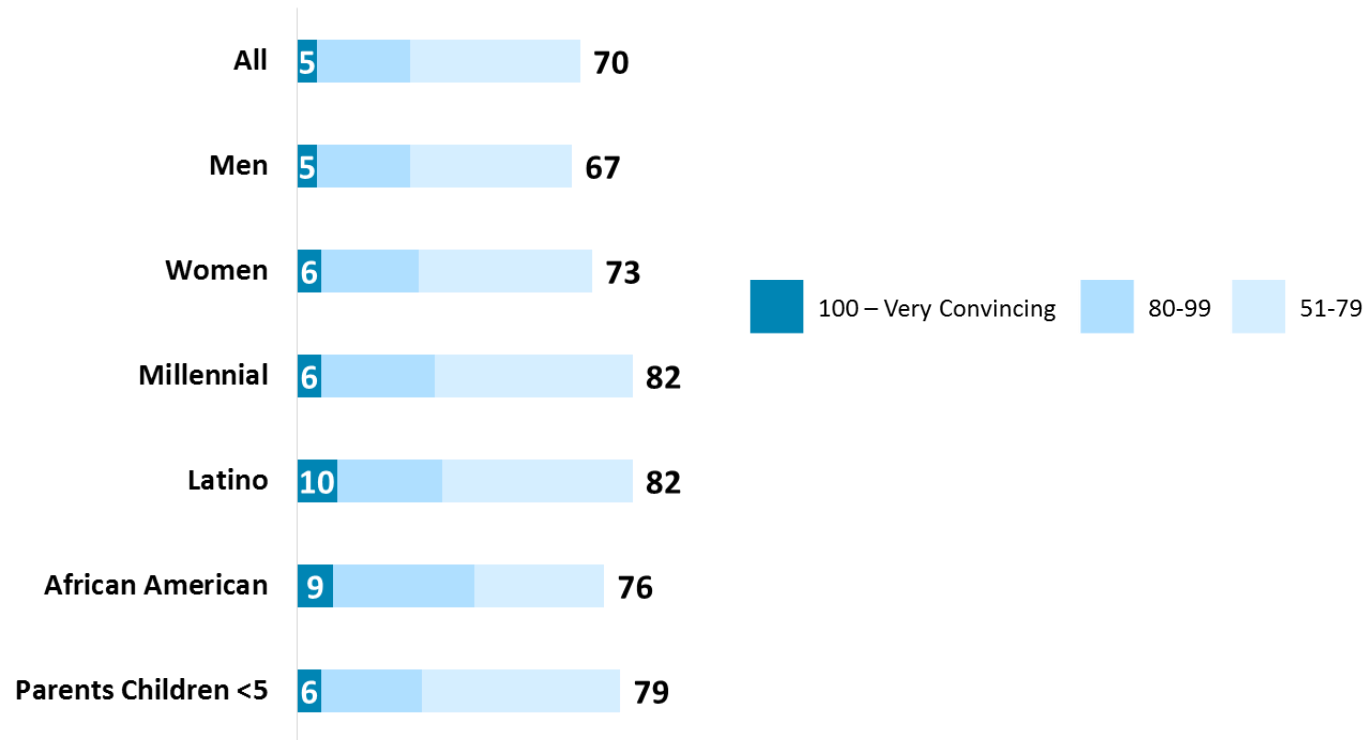


KRISTEN BURR

# Kristen Burr

## ACCOMPLISHMENTS CRITIQUE RESPONSE

### How convincing did you find this message?



#### TEXT

I've been getting a lot of questions about my personal life. I have found that as a single mom, life itself involves constantly managing between work and family priorities. That's why I support paid sick days for all families, including those taking care of a sick child, spouse, or parent, and whether they are married or unmarried, or with and without children. That is why I led the fight to raise the minimum wage and sponsored legislation to improve the quality of retirement savings plans. I admit, it is difficult to raise children on my own, but mine is not the only family doing this juggling act of life and work. This is something most families experience.

#### WHAT WORKS

- ✓ "life itself involves constantly managing between work and family priorities"
- ✓ "support paid sick days for all families"
- ✓ "married or unmarried, or with and without children"
- ✓ "it is difficult to raise children on my own"
- ✓ "juggling act of life and work"
- ✓ The combination of personal experience and policy works

#### WHAT FALLS SHORT

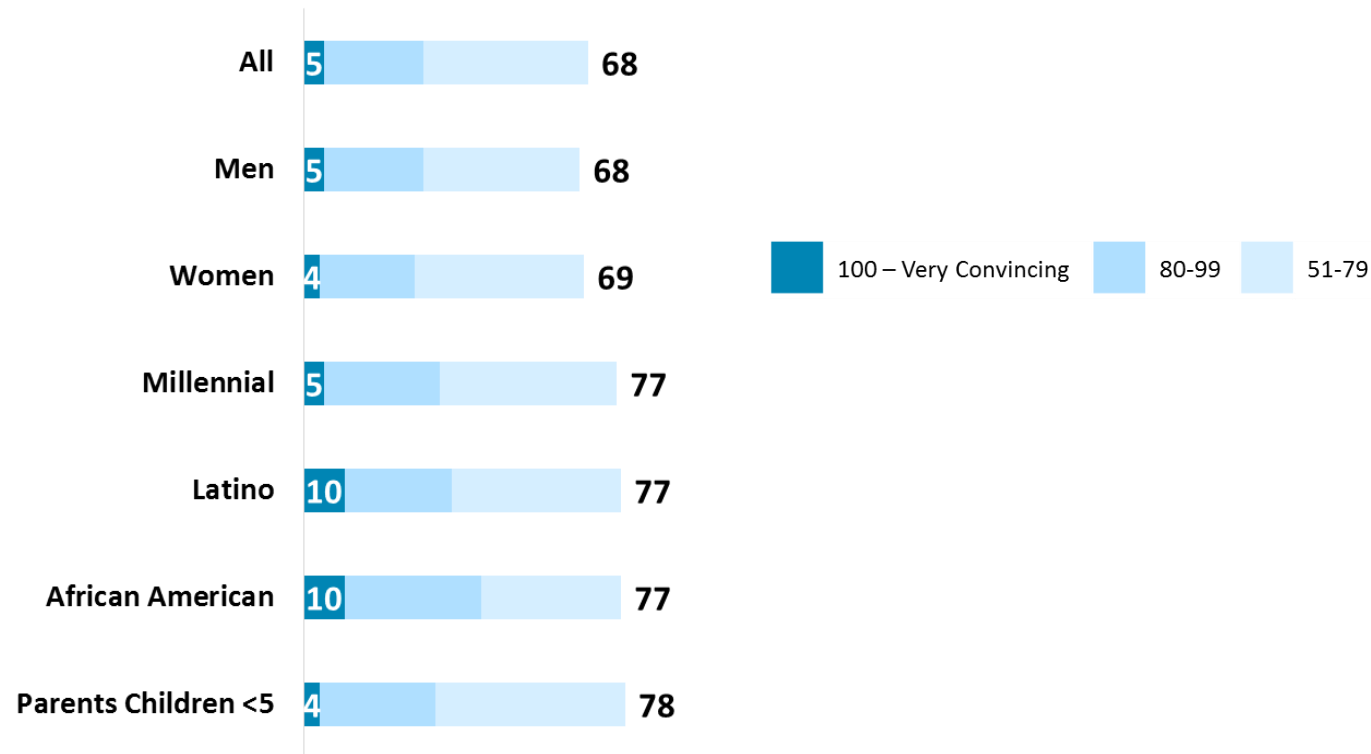
- X "led the fight to raise the minimum wage..." (This policy is more controversial.)



# Kristen Burr

## MODERN PARTNERSHIP/SUPPORT CRITIQUE RESPONSE

### How convincing did you find this message?



### TEXT

I've been getting a lot of questions about my personal life, so I want to share with you how I raise my children as a single mom. I am present for them, whether that is playing make believe, enforcing our family rules, or baking banana bread together. But as a state senator I have a job to do, too, and that sometimes takes me away from my daughters. Thankfully, I have wonderful parents who are able to step in and help. They regularly watch my kids after school and on weekends when I am working. With their help, I care for my family and get things done for all the families in the state.

### WHAT WORKS

- ✓ "how I raise my children as a single mom"
- ✓ "I have a job to do, too"
- ✓ "takes me away from my daughters"
- ✓ "watch my kids after school and on weekends when I am working"

### WHAT FALLS SHORT

- X Too much "I."

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# Recommendations: Messages

- **Make it about the voters.** Show how your experiences contribute to your work on behalf of voters.
- **Be matter-of-fact.** When sharing details about your personal life, do not be defensive. Do not be negative.
- **Be confident.** Acknowledge that all working families strive to manage children and work. Describe situations when you have successfully managed both parenting and politics. Avoid pointing out your weaknesses or failings, since voters take those statements literally.
- **Strike the right balance.** Sharing too much information about your family situation hurts as much as sharing too little information. People need reassurance that you have your professional and personal life under control, rather than substantive examples of the trade-offs you make in order to manage both.
- **Acknowledge your support system.** Talk about the role that a spouse, partner, grandparent, and other adults play in your children's lives. At the same time, avoid statements that may sound as though you are uninvolved.
- **Avoid excuses.** Reassure voters that your family life is under control and then pivot to your positions on family-friendly issues like education, safe communities, and paid sick days to show how your personal experience helps you understand what families are experiencing themselves.

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# Recommendations: Messages (cont'd)

- **Understand perceptions about wealth.** Voters believe anyone running for governor is likely to be wealthy. Voters reject a candidate “over-claiming” that they are in the same situation as ordinary voters.
- **Show, don’t tell.** It is more effective to describe concrete examples of your family life rather than vague assertions of “being there.”
- **Be real.** For parents, share snippets of your parenting experiences and explain your solutions for how to manage family and work. The most acceptable scenarios are traditional childrearing such as teaching children values or doing chores.
- **Give credit.** For non-parents, assert that you value parents and appreciate how hard they work. Showcase how you engage with extended family, such as nieces or nephews, and how you support children in your community by volunteering and championing public education funding to show your commitment.
- **Get back to the issues.** After sharing personal values and experiences related to family, show voters how you have and will continue to work on their behalf.

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# Images Tested

- Tested photographs of candidates with various family configurations.
- Included images of candidates of different races, as well as children of different ages.
- Voters judge candidates' images quickly and read a great deal into body language, clothing, and settings.

# Example Images

## Images That Don't Work



## Images That Work




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# Recommendations: Images

- **Be authentic.** All candidates must strive for images that are professional, natural, and authentic, without looking too staged.
- **Keep it (somewhat) casual.** Women candidates need to strike a balance between looking qualified and professional without looking too much like a politician. A posed shot in a casual setting is best to balance a woman's qualifications with her relatability.
- **Be careful about the kids.** Voters are extremely sensitive as to how a child is oriented in campaign photos. That is true for both male and female candidates. Without being prompted, voters notice if it seems like a candidate is paying too much attention to the child, or if the candidate seems too distracted from the child.

# Questions?

Questions may be asked within the  
webinar platform itself or via social  
media through @blff\_org 

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