

# Unlocking the Door to Executive Office: Essential Tips for Women Candidates



A Research Memo from the Barbara Lee Family Foundation  
November 2015

## Executive Summary

The Barbara Lee Family Foundation (BLFF) has tracked every woman's general election race for governor since 1998, and 2014 was no exception. With a goal to continually illuminate opportunities and obstacles for women running for executive office, BLFF worked with Dr. Kelly Dittmar and the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University to produce qualitative research on the 2014 gubernatorial elections with women candidates.

While the 2014 races for governor didn't break any records for the number of female candidates, nominees, or winners, nine women won their party's nomination for governor. Of those nine candidates, five won in the general election. A sixth woman, Governor Kate Brown of Oregon, was appointed early in 2015.

Findings show that gubernatorial candidates and their opponents in 2014 varied in the ways they used gender in their campaigns, with partisan and cultural contexts playing a significant role.

However, in evaluating all nine gubernatorial races with women nominees, some themes emerged that are informative for all women candidates for executive office, no matter the party or state.

## Key Findings

- 1. Preparation is Paramount**
- 2. Money (Really) Matters**
- 3. Compassion and Competence are Key**
- 4. Authentic Leadership is Important**
- 5. Relatability is Evolving**

## 1. Preparation is Paramount

Running an effective statewide campaign requires advance planning and anticipation of potential hurdles along the way. That planning requires time and resources, which not every candidate will have. However, in 2014, the candidates who engaged in significant pre-launch exploration entered their campaigns with a leg up and were met with far fewer surprises through Election Day.

*“Women have to prove more when they are running for chief executive.”*

— Strategic Consultant

### **ESSENTIAL TIP: Be a candidate of substance (and plan ahead).**

♀ Women do not have the luxury of allowing a campaign to ramp up: they must hit the ground running. Early planning for a gubernatorial campaign should include drafting strong and substantive policy proposals that demonstrate both credentials for the job and seriousness of candidacy. This degree of substance is particularly helpful for women candidates, from whom voters expect much more in order to consider them qualified.

---

## 2. Money (Really) Matters

It's important for any candidate to build a fundraising operation early in the campaign that draws upon their personal and professional networks, but it is critical for women. Although women candidates have traditionally been excluded from financial circles that include the wealthiest and best-connected donors, few of the 2014 candidates or campaign practitioners pointed to gender-based barriers to fundraising. Instead, they cited potential gender-based advantages in tapping into women's networks and support systems.

*“We had a smart strategy and we executed it well, but at the end of the day we were able to execute it well because she raised a ton of money.”*

— Communications Director

### **ESSENTIAL TIP: Understand the financial demands.**

♀ Money matters significantly in all campaigns, but particularly when waging a gubernatorial campaign. Allocating time and energy to fundraising and building a strong finance operation are crucial to competing and success.

### 3. Compassion and Competence are Key

Women candidates enter campaigns with eyes wide open to the fact that they can expect attacks on their qualifications, and that those attacks may resonate more for them than they do for their male counterparts. Voters expect women to prove they are qualified for the job, whereas voters assume men are qualified just because they are running.

However, proving qualifications alone is not enough for women candidates. While voters will vote for a man they do not like but think is qualified, they will not vote for a woman they do not like. The 2014 cases flipped what is typically assumed to be women candidates' chief challenge -- to appear gubernatorial enough -- by demonstrating that some women have to exert much more energy on appearing likeable than on appearing qualified. For example, one candidate described the challenges of the social conventions of greeting individuals, explaining how she still worries about whether or not and when hugs are appropriate over shaking hands -- a challenge that is likely unique to women.

*"Especially if you are running for executive office, it's incredibly hard to convince people that you are strong but also nice. It is much easier for men to be [both] leaders and kind, so you are going to have to find your own way to convey that you are strong but also kind."*

— Candidate

*"We had to earn every likeability point we got."*

— Campaign Consultant

#### **ESSENTIAL TIP: Minimize mistakes.**

♀ Qualifications and likeability are linked for women candidates; they rise and fall together. Mistakes hurt women more than men because mistakes diminish both her qualifications *and* her likeability with voters. The negative consequences of mistakes on the campaign trail can be magnified for women, something that seemed to be true again in 2014. Women again faced significant scrutiny for campaign missteps and struggled to regain their footing. Making the decision to run early enough to allow for planning and preparation, including testing the waters and building a strong campaign team and organization, can help women candidates avoid these mistakes.

---

### 4. Authentic Leadership is Important

Executive leadership begins with the campaign. While listening to strategic advisors is important for all candidates, candidates must stay true to the motivation and goals of their candidacy. Interviews with 2014 candidates and team members made clear the differences between campaigns with strong and cohesive teams and those with discord or distrust among campaign staff or strategists. Some pointed to the negative consequences when candidates struggle to assert themselves as the primary decision-makers on their campaigns from the start.

#### **ESSENTIAL TIPS:**

- ♀ Put together a strong team that you trust. Be sure that you can find and hire experienced campaign professionals whom you can trust and who will provide leadership and stability on your campaign team.
- ♀ Be true to yourself and trust your gut. Authenticity and staying true to yourself are not only important in strategizing with your campaign team, but also in responding to pressures from outside interests and donors who seek to influence a campaign's organizational and strategic decisions.
- ♀ Ask for help/advice. Trusting your gut does not mean that you have to do it all on your own. In fact, candidates should ask a lot of questions of those women candidates or campaign professionals who have run statewide campaigns, leaning on allies who can make these connections

## 5. Relatability is Evolving

BLFF research has demonstrated women candidates' opportunity to be 360-degree candidates, using the entirety of their expertise, background, and personal experiences to connect with voters. Case-in-point: Women candidates today may frequently invoke motherhood on the campaign trail and in social and paid media to both connect with voters and demonstrate their motivation to serve their states.

Talking about her parents, the influence her family had in her life, and personal roots proved beneficial to candidates, exposing voters to the personal stories behind a candidate's political and policy positions. Whether this demonstrates gender progress or not, these cases may highlight that voters are willing to accept a greater diversity in the profiles of women candidates. Still, some candidates continue to face scrutiny over their personal lives in ways their male counterparts would not.

*"We were talking about policies, but we were also very cognizant of wrapping that into who she is as a person, to communicate it in a more compelling way."*

— Pollster

### **ESSENTIAL TIP: Use stories to demonstrate credentials and connect with voters.**

♀ Women candidates can effectively use storytelling from their lives or others' lives to communicate credentials while also connecting with voters. This approach often effectively navigates gender dynamics that force women to demonstrate masculine credentials of candidacy and feminine credentials of their gender.

Voters expect more from women running to be the chief decision maker. BLFF research has revealed that truth for nearly two decades – and that truth remains. While the most recent findings show us that many challenges for women persist, they also reveal subtle but significant shifts for women candidates and their campaigns to be CEO of their states.

**Perceptions of women candidates are evolving, and that is good news for everyone.**

#### **Methodology**

On behalf of the Barbara Lee Family Foundation, the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) at Rutgers University collected, analyzed, and archived qualitative data on nine gubernatorial campaigns during the spring, summer, and fall of 2014. The team of researchers archived press coverage, polls, debates, social media presence, and campaign output for each of the nine female gubernatorial nominees for governor in election 2014. Following the election, CAWP completed 46 semi-structured interviews with key members of each candidate's strategic team, as well as with the candidates themselves. All interviews were done confidentially, with individual quotations approved for use in this memo. Post-election interviews examined campaign organization, strategy, and success, with attention to any particular challenges or considerations of gender.

#### **About the Barbara Lee Family Foundation**

The Barbara Lee Family Foundation works to advance women's equality and representation in American politics through political research, strategic partnerships, and grants and endowments. The Foundation's work is guided by its core belief that women's voices strengthen our democracy and enrich our culture. For nearly two decades, elected officials, candidates, practitioners, and press have used Barbara Lee Family Foundation research to better understand the obstacles and opportunities facing women in politics, particularly those running to be CEO of their states or the country.