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Politics is Personal: Keys to Likeability and Electability for Women

A Barbara Lee Family Foundation Research Memo

INTRODUCTION

American politics can sometimes feel like a popularity contest. Questions like, “Who would you like to have a beer with?” or “But does she smile enough?” are par for the course.

Like it or not, likeability is a non-negotiable quality voters seek in women officeholders and candidates. At the same time, it’s an intangible quality. Voters have difficulty clearly defining what it means to come across as likeable. When it comes to articulating what attracts them to a candidate or officeholder, voters have an “I know it when I see it” mindset.

Likeability matters because it is a key component of electability along with establishing one’s qualifications. This research conducted by the nonpartisan Barbara Lee Family Foundation (BLFF) looked at two questions: 1) what makes a woman candidate or officeholder likeable to voters, and 2) how can one establish likeability and qualifications at the same time. Likeability and qualifications are the two components of electability that women must consistently balance.

Past research conducted by BLFF has repeatedly shown that women face a litmus test that men do not have to pass. Voters will support a male candidate they do not like but who they think is qualified. Men don’t need to be liked to be elected. Voters are less likely to vote for a woman candidate they do not like. Women have to prove they are qualified. For men, their qualification is assumed. Women face the double bind of needing to show competence and likeability.

A Shift in Conventional Wisdom

Our previous research on women officeholders and candidates showed that many of the attributes and qualities that establish qualifications also improve likeability for women. The two were linked – they rose and fell together. This current research reveals a shift in that conventional wisdom. Some of the factors that help establish likeability do not reinforce qualifications.

Another evolutionary change for women officeholders and candidates is an expansion of how they can relate to voters. Women shown in less formal, relaxed settings have more power than we realized. For example, photos of women elected officials seated by themselves behind mahogany desks – the traditional hallmark of executive leadership – are considered the least likeable. Voters respond positively to women meeting with people and engaging in conversation. In other words, doing the day-to-day work of an elected official.

Our research isn't meant to suggest that demonstrating likeability is a one-size-fits-all proposition. All candidates must stay true to who they are. Just as each woman running for office is unique, so is the combination of factors that contribute to her likeability. The findings are intended to provide a set of practical tips to help women candidates campaign more effectively – and to understand the specific obstacles and opportunities they face.

THE QUESTIONS

BLFF partnered with Lake Research Partners and Chesapeake Beach Consulting along with 76 Words to conduct qualitative and quantitative research designed to explore voters' perceptions of women officeholders.

We conducted focus groups among likely 2016 voters to explore what makes a woman leader likeable and to gather feedback on different leadership presentation styles and scenarios. Key scenarios tested include:

- Talking about accomplishments
- Taking credit
- Sharing a personal narrative

Following the focus groups, we conducted an online dial survey among likely 2016 voters on the importance of likeability when they vote. Respondents rated women officeholders' likeability based on photos and videos, two ways that elected

officials present themselves to the public. We also tested a few male officeholders as a control in our experiment.

For full methodology and select multimedia clips from this study, visit www.barbaraleefoundation.org/likeability

THE KEY FINDINGS

Voters, independent of their gender, overwhelmingly say it is important that they like an officeholder they support: 84% of men and 90% of women. People who hold strong partisan views, less educated voters, Latinas, and Southern women are the most likely to say it is very important to like an officeholder that they vote for or support.

What makes women likeable in the eyes of voters? There are two key components: presentation and track record. In other words, style and substance both matter. And confidence is key.

Opportunities: Things Women Can Control

- Appearing confident is essential. In this study, voters assessed a woman officeholder's confidence in less than 30 seconds. Confidence signals both likeability and qualifications.
- Voters like informal photos of women candidates engaging with children and in their communities more than photos in formal settings. To show likeability, a woman doing her job among constituents is effective.
- When touting accomplishments, it works to include personal elements, like why an issue is a particular passion, or how constituents have been positively impacted by the achievement.
- Voters like women officeholders who share credit with their teams, in addition to taking credit as an individual leader. A mix of solo and shared credit works best.
- It is possible to convey likeability while discussing seemingly mundane aspects of leadership and managing everyday issues, like sewers and snowstorms.
- Voters want to see that a candidate is working on issues that truly reflect her values.
- Voters like women candidates and officeholders who demonstrate a sense of humor and don't take themselves too seriously.

The Obstacles: External Factors

- While the interaction of racial and gender stereotypes is not the focus of this research, we found that voters paid particular attention to women's appearance and race. This is especially true of women voters.
- Voice and tone matter. Voters are sensitive to women officeholders sounding "shrill," "loud," and "boring."
- Sharing personal stories contributes to the perception of likeability, but does not necessarily convey qualifications.
- Voters rated images of the more attractive officeholders more likeable, and found younger officeholders more attractive.

"Because women are judged more harshly on their appearance than men and so you have to make sure that she is wearing things that no one will say anything about."
— White Man, Columbus

"Don't overdo it on the makeup and the jewelry and stuff." — White Senior Woman, Denver

"She was very expressive and she had good eye contact with the interviewer. And her hands were kind of making points. They were kind of emphasizing things she was saying." — White Senior Woman, Denver

"Whenever I'm talking to somebody I want the person to look me in the eye to show that they care, um, and that they actually are paying attention and not just, you know, reading what someone has written for them." — Millennial Woman, Raleigh

A NOTE ON APPEARANCE & Demeanor

In focus groups, voters acknowledged that women's style and appearance is highly scrutinized.

Voters react to every aspect of a woman's presentation style, including her appearance, demeanor, and tone of voice. They volunteer that people are still more judgmental about a woman's appearance than a man's. Participants said if they were giving advice to a woman candidate, they would make sure her wardrobe, makeup, and appearance are impeccable.

Voters are also drawn to candidates who demonstrate passion and authenticity. They want to see a candidate who makes her values clear, who knows who she is and what she stands for. And, they like it when a woman uses humor and presents herself in a way that doesn't come across as taking herself too seriously.

FOR CANDIDATES AND CAMPAIGN TEAMS

- **Be prepared.** Voters expect a woman to be prepared and do her homework.
- **Be confident.** Appearing confident is essential. This research and past Barbara Lee Family Foundation studies make clear that for women candidates, confidence signals both likeability and qualifications. Portray confidence through maintaining good eye contact, gesturing naturally, and speaking evenly and strongly.
- **Beat the odds.** Relate to voters by showing how you have overcome an obstacle or succeeded as an underdog. Everyone struggles in some way and can relate to this narrative.
- **Highlight your sense of humor.** Combining humor with issue experience works for women.
- **Engage with voters.** In photos and videos, be sure to showcase how you converse with voters – listening to their concerns, not only talking to them.
- **Keep it real.** Voters respond well to photos of women officeholders in informal settings, particularly in their communities, with children and constituents. In other words, show voters what it really looks like to do your job as a candidate or elected official.
- **Make it personal.** When touting accomplishments, share personal elements, like why an issue is a particular passion, or how the achievement has helped constituents.
- **Show you are one of them.** Demonstrate your connection to the community by showing you are familiar with constituent concerns.
- **Qualify solutions.** Offer your solution and acknowledge that others may not agree.
- **Share credit.** The best formula is to mix team and solo credit to balance likeability and qualifications. It is essential to demonstrate working with others as well as solo leadership.

Candidate Statements That Worked

*"...I said I've got to do something, I can't not try to do something."
— Former Mayor*

*"...I learned it's not what you say, it's what you do."
— Current Governor*

*"I can imagine that not everyone is in favor and change is difficult..."
— Current Governor*

*"It is the responsibility of both parties to offer up real solutions and have an honest debate."
— Current Governor*

What Voters Think

*"She said I hear from people all the time. So she is obviously out there or having real conversations to say that, so that's important."
— White Boomer Woman, Raleigh*

*"I think the fact that she said I understand that not everybody's gonna like this but you have to understand where I'm coming from. [That's] helpful in understanding her view."
— Millennial Woman, Raleigh*

*"Leadership, knowledge, education, integrity, honesty all go into making a candidate likable."
— Latina in Raleigh, NC*

THE AREAS WE TESTED

Talking about Accomplishments

Focus groups and past research reveal that voters are cynical about the current political landscape—they think things are as bad or worse as they have ever been in politics. In this environment, it is harder for a woman officeholder to talk about accomplishments without seeming like a typical politician trying to score points. However, it is critical that women candidates talk about their accomplishments in order to establish their qualifications. This is the double bind: the need to establish qualifications while maintaining likeability.

Fortunately, there are ways women can achieve both simultaneously. Voters respond to women's records of accomplishment in a way that maintains likeability when achievements are framed in terms of values and real people's experiences. An example of this combination of qualifications and likeability is depicted in a news interview with a Congresswoman talking about involving young people in politics. (In this study, voters rated clips of various women officeholders, evaluating them on how likeable they seem and how qualified they seem.)

This video tested well because the Congresswoman demonstrated her record, talked about an issue, and tapped into real-life experience, which voters find relatable and likeable. It combined aspiration and problem solving.

Connecting political and professional accomplishments to the needs, hopes, and concerns of constituents makes an officeholder more likeable. Likeability is reinforced when accomplishments are shown to be in service of something or someone else. Voters notice when officeholders take credit and cite statistics about their success, without translating those numbers into results for real people in their community.

Fixing a problem and demonstrating passion make an officeholder seem both likable and qualified even if their agenda is not that popular or prominent. For example, voters in this study responded positively to a video of a Mayor describing how she overhauled her city's sewer system. She took a seemingly mundane issue and connected it to a real-life concern about the quality of drinking water.

Demonstrating existing familiarity with constituent concerns builds the perception that an officeholder is connected with her community. People like it when officeholders talk about the real-life experiences of constituents and take action on issues that were raised by constituents.

Voters also appreciate a woman acknowledging her critics while putting forth her plan to solve a problem. Voters want to hear solutions – and it helps to give a nod to the fact that solutions are not always universally well-liked. For example, voters responded positively to a Governor who made clear in an interview that her plan to bring down energy costs may not please everyone, but that it was necessary.

Candidate Statements That Worked

"I hear from people every day..." — Current Governor

*"We need more young people to be involved in the political process."
— Former Mayor*

*"I've never known what it's like to not be the underdog... to have people underestimate me."
— Current Governor*

*"I always grew up not wanting to be a label."
— Current Governor*

Sharing Personal Stories

There is an important distinction to make about the effectiveness of personal stories for women candidates or officeholders. The personal narrative can boost likeability, but it is not as effective when it comes to establishing qualifications. Past BLFF research has found that candidates for executive office should establish qualifications first by focusing on their track record and then share the biography.

Personal stories that highlight resilience and overcoming tough odds resonate with voters and reinforce likeability. This type of narrative is particularly powerful because people can understand it from the perspective of facing their own struggles – voters consider it "real" and "relatable."

What Voters Think

“She seemed normal and middle class and it didn't sound like this was her original profession...she decided to jump into it because she cared about an issue.” — White Man, Columbus

*“She was just very relatable. I mean she was just talking like a person to person and not necessarily from a podium or a formal speech. She was just talking about her story. She just seemed like a friend ...”
— Conservative White Woman, Columbus*

*“She seemed very human and wants to make a difference...Involving her husband and children. But she's still kind of portrayed that go-get-itness.”
— White Senior Woman, Denver*

*“She seems to be running for genuine reasons. Not for self-promotion, but for concern of the community. She was a concerned citizen and decided to do something about it.”
— Millennial Woman, Raleigh*

*“Being likable to me means really connecting with constituents. I think that is an important factor.”
— Millennial Woman, Raleigh*

This is a significant but not surprising finding, as our past research shows voters respond positively to messages about women being in touch with real life.

In this study, voters responded most positively to a video depicting a Governor sharing her personal story, as it underscored her resilience, underdog status, achievements, and personable style. Focus group members commented on her smiling and the way she relates to people.

While family dynamics for candidates and officeholders were not the focus of this study, the findings strongly suggest that when women candidates talk about their family and include members in their campaigns, this can contribute to relatability. Parents believe that they can relate to a fellow parent, according to focus groups.

Candidate Statements That Worked

"I can tell you what I think I'll be remembered for..."
— Former Congresswoman

"I'm most proud of the team of people I was able to gather because the result of that was many, many accomplishments."
— Current Governor

What Voters Think

"She sounded genuine. She sounded believable. Like it wasn't a job to her; it was something that she loved doing. That's the way it sounded because of all the accomplishments and she felt good about it."
— Latina, Raleigh

"Well she said...People will remember me for this, but I would rather them have me thought of as the team that I built... I thought that was excellent. I mean you are only as good as the team that you build, and so if you recognize that you built a good team, I mean that [makes] me like the person a lot." — White Boomer Woman, Raleigh

"I think it's a lot harder for women than it would be for a man. They have more of an uphill battle in trying to get through to more people." — Conservative White Woman, Columbus

Taking Credit

There is a fine line on establishing accomplishments.

We suggest a woman officeholder take solo credit—it remains important to establish qualifications—but she also needs to acknowledge her team's contributions. In focus groups, people, especially millennial voters, noticed sharing the credit, and that style resonated with them as real and relatable.

Our past research found that women taking solo credit for their accomplishments—using "I" when talking about the results they achieved—helped to establish executive leadership and qualification. In current focus groups, participants responded positively to a combination of humility and purpose. They give women credit for acknowledging the role her team played in her accomplishments.

One of the most effective ways for a woman to demonstrate her likeability is to express pride in the work of a team. For example, "I'm very proud of the record that my team and I have accomplished since I've been governor, in very, very difficult times." Voters react positively to the combination of solo and shared credit.

Rather than a hard-and-fast rule to always take solo credit, this research shows that it helps women officeholders to occasionally acknowledge the team and occasionally tout accomplishments as their own.

THE TAKEAWAY

Likeability seems like a quality that would be desirable in any candidate or officeholder – male or female. And it is. But it is more important for women.

Our research continues to show that women have to do more and be more than men to be considered likeable. While there is no silver-bullet solution for cracking the code of likeability – it's not a one-size-fits-all concept – there are some approaches that work especially well for women.

For example, in our control study with two male candidates, we found that men sharing personal statements and sharing credit with their teams can boost both conscious and unconscious likeability ratings. However, these approaches were more effective for women.

As this research looked more closely at defining likeability in a practical way, we uncovered two significant but simple evolutionary changes for women officeholders and candidates.

First, voters reacted most positively to photos and videos of women interacting with people in informal settings. The mahogany desk shot – a traditional hallmark of executive leadership in countless paid media spots – is considered the least likeable. Formal photos are still an important component to establish qualification, but do little to demonstrate likeability.

Voters are looking for confidence in women but it can be demonstrated as they go about the day-to-day work of an elected official out in the community. Women can show leadership by listening to constituents talk about what's on their minds and by discussing everyday issues.

Secondly, it is in the best interest of women candidates and officeholders to pay attention to how they talk about their accomplishments. It remains necessary for women to establish their qualifications by articulating their ability to get things done and create positive results. And, voters notice when women give credit to the team that helped them get those results.

Clearly, some of the findings show women continue to face gender-based scrutiny. Other findings highlight a distinctive shift in the expectations voters place on women officeholders. This shift expands, rather than limits, how women's leadership looks and sounds. There's a lot to like about that.

METHODOLOGY

Focus Groups

Lake Research Partners and Chesapeake Beach Consulting conducted seven focus groups with men and women in September of 2015, segmented as follows:

Columbus, OH	Conservative White Women
September 14	White Men
Raleigh, NC	White Boomer Women
September 17	Millennial Women
	Latinas
Denver, CO	White Senior Women
September 21	Latinos

Participants were recruited to reflect a mix of age, marital status, parental status, income, and education. The findings use the term “participants” in reference to the participants of the seven focus groups.

Survey

Lake Research Partners and Chesapeake Beach Consulting designed and administered this survey that was conducted online from October 27 to November 9, 2015. The survey reached a total of 1,000 likely 2016 voters nationwide with oversamples of 100 African Americans, 100 Latinos, and 100 Millennials.

The sample was drawn from an online panel and respondents were screened to be registered, likely 2016 voters. The data were weighted slightly by gender, age, region, race, party identification, and education to reflect the attributes of the actual population. The oversamples were weighted down to reflect their actual proportion among the population. The margin of error for the total sample is +/-3.1%.