



# Change Is Key: What's New (And Not) for Women in Politics

A Research Memo from the Barbara Lee Family Foundation

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The Barbara Lee Family Foundation has studied every woman candidate's race for governor on both sides of the aisle since 1998, producing nonpartisan, pragmatic guides for women to maximize their advantages and minimize the roadblocks to success.

Working with Lake Research Partners, Hughes & Company, and Chesapeake Beach Consulting to conduct polls, surveys, dial tests, focus groups, and interviews from 1998 to 2013, the Barbara Lee Family Foundation has highlighted shifts in voter perceptions of women candidates. **This memo outlines those changes—some concrete and some nuanced—and underscores the trends and themes those changes uncover.**

The progress is clear: When we began this research, only 16 women had ever served as governor. As of this writing, that number has climbed to 35 women in 26 states. **While women have lost some of the advantages voters afforded them early on, many obstacles are down.**

## LINE BETWEEN THE GENDERS BLURS

There has been a significant shift in the way voters perceive women candidates and their qualifications. In 2000, men solidly preferred a male candidate to a woman candidate, with 21 percent saying they prefer a man and 11 percent saying the same for a woman. In 2012 research, voters were more likely to think their *neighbors* would vote for the male candidate (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). **Voters will still admit that their friends and neighbors probably prefer a man.**

This distinction between what voters themselves say they prefer and what they think their *friends and neighbors* prefer is an important one. Voters used to outright say that they, themselves, preferred a male candidate over a woman candidate. They may still feel that way but do not directly portray it that way.

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%).

Men are now less likely to say they personally prefer a man and more likely to say a woman does not make a difference than in the past. In 2000, Democratic men and Independent men preferred a male by 17 and 15 points, respectively; Republican men preferred a male by 29 points.

— Voters used to have the sense that women could be change agents, were less tied to politics, and were more honest than typical male politicians. While women maintain the honesty advantage, the distinction between how men govern and women govern is not as clear.

— Because voters have seen more women govern, but they haven't seen changes in politics, they are cynical about women's ability to get things done differently. It is harder to overcome the "politics as usual" sentiment.

## OUTSIDERS IN AN INSIDERS' GAME

Women are less likely to be seen as outsiders today than they were a decade ago just because of their gender. Voters have gotten used to women on both sides of the aisle.

In 2000, voters automatically saw women candidates as novel: rare, outside the political process, and likely to reform it when they were on the inside. This advantage has waned. **Now more accustomed to seeing women in government leadership roles, most voters no longer automatically view women as outsiders or agents of change.**

A decade later, partisanship, more than gender, drove voter perceptions of who was an agent of change. Democratic candidates — both men and women — had a particularly difficult time being perceived as change makers. Voters, including Independent voters, saw men and women Republican candidates as being more likely to bring about change. Republican women enjoyed this advantage over both men and women opponents. Democratic women lost the “outsider” advantage they may have been granted before, but they had less of a disadvantage on being perceived as change agents than Democratic men.

➤ Women are more *symbolic* change agents than in the past.

➤ If a woman hasn't been a career politician, or challenges the status quo stance on an issue, she can be a change agent. But she is not a reformer based solely on her gender.

➤ In the past, voters believed that women were not as political as men and did not have all of the negative traits that go along with political ambitions. While voters still presume women to be more honest than men, they are much less likely to see women as novel than in the past.

## WORDS MATTER

Voters — and particularly women voters — used to generally agree that there are some traits and qualities that women tend to have that men candidates and elected officials did not. Now they tend to think that women are *slightly more likely* than men to possess those traits.

In 2000, voters gave a hypothetical Democratic or Republican woman governor an advantage over a male governor on dimensions of relating to people, working with others, and balancing all aspects of their lives — the themes around which women's political empowerment groups built their messages. But in 2012, we saw a shift.

➤ Instead of being bipartisan or cooperative, we found that it is better for women candidates to talk about being in touch, bringing Democrats and Republicans together to get results, or bringing men and women together.

➤ Voters now take it for granted that women can multitask and can build consensus, which used to be greater advantages for women. It remains important, however, for women to talk about their ability to build consensus.

## STRENGTH AND PROBLEM-SOLVING TRUMP TOUGHNESS

From the beginning, voters raised questions about a woman's toughness and related that to her ability to lead as an executive, her strength, and her ability to fight. It was among voters' top concerns about women candidates. Attitudes have changed, revealing a shift in the characteristics or qualities that are most important for a woman candidate to project.

➤ Strength differs from toughness. The distinction that voters draw may lie in the difference between the personal and the political. *Strength* is seen as a function of character, while *toughness* is demonstrated through actions in the political arena. In the past, toughness was one of the strongest predictors of the vote and the most difficult trait for women to demonstrate while maintaining their likeability, a key component of electability.

➤ In most recent surveys, toughness was replaced by strength as a top predictor. Now, it is more important to be a problem solver and show strength, a much easier job for women.

➤ Voters now believe these descriptors fit most women running for major office in their states: hard-working, confident, organized, knowledgeable, compassionate, assertive, strong, and leader.

**Women went from not being “tough enough” in 2000, to needing to actively demonstrate toughness, to needing to demonstrate strength in 2012.**

In the past, voters saw strength and toughness as interrelated and necessary qualities for successful candidates. By taking on a big entity like oil, insurance, or utility companies on behalf of consumers — “slaying a dragon” — women candidates showed strength and toughness without seeming “too tough.” That is a fine line to walk. Things have improved, though. Strength is now more important than toughness, and there are a variety of ways to show strength: showing accomplishments, having strong stands on issues, solid debate performance, and standing up to reporters in contentious situations.

Still, some women candidates believed voters hold women to a higher standard when it comes to strength. As one candidate explained, “[Voters] require management experience and strength. And voters, not just men voters, but women voters, too, give men an edge as a starting place.”

The ways women could demonstrate their strength to voters have also evolved:

➤ Slaying a dragon—taking on a big challenge and winning—has diminished as a way to demonstrate strength.

➤ Demonstrating moral character and conviction, showing managerial skill, being decisive, standing up for people, and *getting results* are ways women candidates can show strength in action. This is helpful for women, as showing strength is an easier feat than demonstrating toughness.

## ON THE ISSUES

Women now get as much credit as men for being good on the economy when they are good on other issues. This is good news for women, as the majority of voters rank the economy as the issue most important to them, according to a January 2014 Rasmussen Reports poll.

➤ In 2008, if voters perceived a male candidate to be good on health care and education, they presumed he was also good on the economy. A woman candidate who voters viewed as good on healthcare and education, however, was not similarly presumed to be good on the economy; she had to prove that competence in some other way. This is no longer the case.

➤ **Today, being good on education and health care help both men and women be seen as good on the economy.** However, these two issues alone don’t automatically mean that voters perceive men or women candidates as being good on the economy overall.

➤ While the economy is consistently high on the list of voters’ concerns, education is emerging as an important issue. **Education has the potential to be a major asset for women candidates since voters often presume that women, especially Democrats, are good on education.**

## THE 360-DEGREE CANDIDATE

An evolutionary change over the years – first seen in 2010 – is the emergence of women as the well-rounded, 360-degree candidates. In earlier election cycles, women candidates were reluctant to share much of their personal lives, fearing that it detracted from their seriousness and electability. That reserve appears to be dissolving.

- Women candidates now make progress with voters by using messages that convey, “I am like you. I am on your side.”
- By equaling men in professional and government management experience and besting them in managing personal issues and relationships, **women now have more opportunities to connect with voters than they did in the past.**

A campaign manager interviewed for our research spoke about a woman candidate’s ability to “use everything” including her personal experience. In his view, that made her more “relatable, knowing a family budget, about school and work-life balance...the advantage is you can play both sides.” Another campaign manager spoke in similar terms, noting, “You can be tough and policy-minded and still talk to people about your kids.”

## CONTRASTING—OR GOING NEGATIVE—WITH OPPONENTS

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. While it remains true that contrasting with an opponent is important for women, how to do that has shifted.

- In the past, conventional wisdom has suggested humor in negative ads does not work as well for women as it does for men. That is no longer true.

- In most recent research on the topic, we found that the right kind of humor helps create a bond with the voter and adds an element of the unexpected. That helps voters remember the woman candidate.
- In focus groups, men and women responded well to humorous ads, but they also wanted the humor to pivot to a serious message. Women still must always be careful not to diminish their credibility.
- Also flipping conventional wisdom on its head, it works for a woman candidate to represent herself in a contrasting ad. Voters react more favorably to a woman candidate confidently speaking for herself and her positions.

## LOOKING AHEAD: WOMEN IN 2014

At 53 percent of the electorate, women are targeted as a critical voting bloc for the 2014 mid-term elections and gubernatorial races. But they are not only a key piece of the election-year dialogue because of their voting power—women are candidates in races for Congress, Senate, Governor, and many other offices at the state and local level.

Despite the changes we’ve seen over the past 15 years conducting this research, this fact remains: Voters believe women must do more to reach the same goals as men. We’re sure to see women on both sides of the aisle navigating that reality as the 2014 races continue.

### 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.

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