

From the Governors Guidebook Series

LEADING WITH AUTHORITY

THE BARBARA LEE FAMILY FOUNDATION

“Men are used to being in charge. Running for office is something they take as an entitlement. Women need to show ‘I have the right.’”

– FEMALE STATE PARTY OFFICIAL

INTRODUCTION

Four women ran for Governor in 2008: Governor Chris Gregoire (WA), then-Lt. Gov. Bev Perdue (NC), Speaker Gaye Symington (VT) and former Congresswoman Jill Long Thompson (IN). Two challenged popular sitting Governors, one competed for an open seat and the fourth was an incumbent whose race was largely viewed as a rerun of her historically close 2004 contest. The challengers lost, the incumbent and open seat contender won.

These contests were played out under the giant shadow of the most interesting Presidential contest in a generation; one that sapped media attention, volunteers and money. It set a tone and delivered a message of change that dominated every other race in the country. These gubernatorial candidates were measured against their Party's Presidential nominee as much as against their opponents.

Since there were fewer campaigns to learn from in 2008 and because the candidacies and their circumstances were so different, we cannot claim findings or draw broad conclusions as we have in past years. Instead, we have tried to bring to light new evidence of chronic problems and to look more closely at how they appeared. We also note new issues that may point us to a developing trend and report where there is a change in direction from the past or where an old problem appears to be solved.

METHODOLOGY

MEDIA

Between August 15, 2008 and November 30, 2008 we collected and reviewed news articles from the largest daily newspapers in each contested state, followed and collected liberal and conservative blog postings and website activity for the campaigns and their opponents. During that same period we reviewed and selected TV news coverage of each race, collected all available recorded debates, and reviewed and collected all candidate and Independent Expenditure TV ads that were available.

INTERVIEWS

Between December 2008 and February 2009, we interviewed and reviewed transcripts for the candidates, campaign managers, communications directors, finance directors, pollsters, media and mail consultants. We also interviewed a Party official, one member of the print and one member of broadcast press covering the race in each state.

POLLING AND FOCUS GROUPS

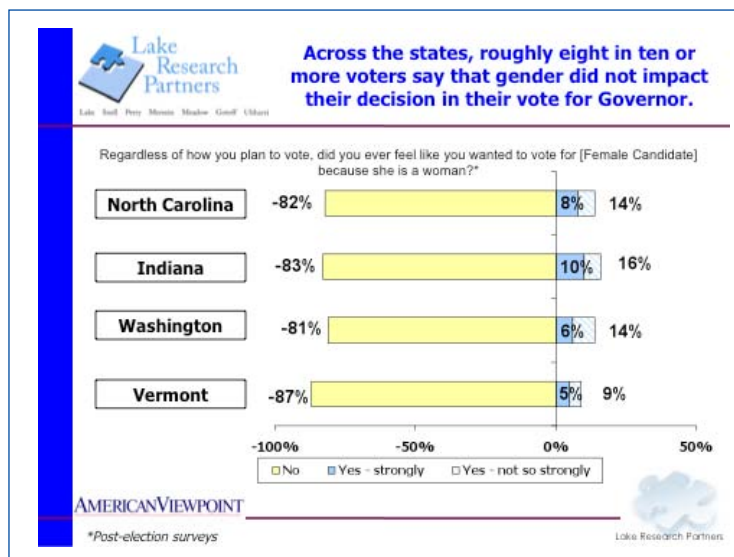
In 2008, Lake Research Partners, a Democratic firm, and American Viewpoint, Inc., a Republican firm, conducted four pre- and post-election surveys¹ in the four states where women were gubernatorial candidates: Indiana, North Carolina, Washington and Vermont. The research measured voter attitudes and perceptions of the candidates focusing on their leadership skills, issue identification and job performance.

We conducted a total of 18 focus groups pre- and post-election in each state. Participants were people ages 35 to 60, who said they were likely to vote in the 2008 general election, and who did not identify as strong partisans. Each group included a mix of occupations, marital and parental status, among other demographic characteristics. The same participants were included in the post-election focus groups. In North Carolina, there were also pre- and post-election African American focus groups.

THE ROLE OF GENDER IN 2008 CAMPAIGNS: GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

THE CLINTON-PALIN FACTOR

No one believed a race was won or lost because of gender. The candidacies of Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin were deemed to have no impact or a slightly positive one. This latter finding was among those who believed that having more competent women in the environment made it more likely voters would see other women candidates as competent.



Voters felt gender was not a factor in their vote for Governor and that not having a woman Presidential candidate did not make a difference either way in their vote for Governor. However, when asked to consider the issue of women in politics more generally, the majority of voters across the four states said it was important to the country to have more women in elected office. Women and Democrats tend to place greater personal importance on having more women in office.

Across the four states, women tended to be more likely than men to feel that having a woman gubernatorial candidate in 2008 would help women candidates in the future.

Interestingly, having top-of-the-ticket women in the political environment and on the ballot in states where women were also running for Governor may have given voters the impression that more women were running for office. Overall, the number of women running for all offices has stayed relatively flat.

¹ The pre- and post-election surveys were conducted by phone using professional interviewers. The pre-election surveys reached 500 likely registered voters in each state; the post-election surveys reached 350 voters in each state. The margin of error for each pre-election survey is +/- 4.4%. The post-election surveys reached a total of 350 voters in all four states, including 175 from the pre-election survey who were re-interviewed in post-election surveys. The margin of error for each post-election survey is +/-5.2%. Telephone numbers for the surveys were drawn using an RDD sample. The samples were stratified geographically in each state based on the proportion of voters in each region.

Multivariate analysis² revealed older women showed more support for the female candidates than younger women when we controlled for party identification. Being older predicted positively, being younger was neutral.

CAMPAIGN ORGANIZATION

The most effective and disciplined campaign team was gender balanced; the most stressful for the candidate was one with all male senior staff.

Experienced day-to-day campaign staff was difficult for these woman candidates to find.

INSTITUTIONAL AND PERSONAL SUPPORT

State parties easily abandoned challenger campaigns. The Presidential campaign provided an urgent obligation or a convenient excuse to do so depending on your point of view.

It appears that voters are more supportive of a female candidate than business, labor or party insiders. All four women candidates felt this in some form or other.

All candidates and some staff reported the importance of a support network for the candidate and all agreed that personal support was critical. Some valued the advice and connection to other women Governors, who were also helpful raising money and sending staff.

MESSAGE AND ISSUES

Change was the key dynamic in the 2008 elections. Yet women had a hard time establishing themselves as change agents and lost when they weren't perceived this way. Women also had trouble conveying that they were the candidates of change and effectiveness simultaneously. In focus groups, voters did not give women candidates an automatic advantage on representing change.

In 2008, voters identified the economy as by far the top issue they wanted to see addressed by the next Governor. However, the economy was a challenging issue for all the female candidates. This was true too with male and female voters. Ironically, being good on education and health care for women candidates did not increase their credibility on the economy, as it did for male candidates.

Women also had little credibility on non-traditional issues that would have communicated toughness on economic dimensions like fiscal responsibility.

Male consultants stated a preference to run women on issues of education and health. They believe that voters see women as having an edge on these issues. They don't believe voters readily accept a woman's competence on economic, budget and finance issues. Therefore, the downturn in the economy was viewed as treacherous by even the winning campaigns.

Stem cell research, school vouchers and choice were used in two of the four races to differentiate the candidates from opponents. These issues had declining resonance with voters as the economy collapsed.

Male candidates repeatedly charged that their female opponents would be bad fiscal managers. "Would raise your taxes." "Be for an income tax." "Fail to curtail runaway spending or weed out waste."

Certain leadership qualities are particularly important. If voters perceived a candidate to be a problem solver, a change agent, as having the right priorities or as effective, voters were also likely to see that candidate as good on the economy and were likely to vote for them.

² Multivariate analysis identifies which messages and motivations drive or predict a vote. We often find in a survey that messages receiving the most positive responses (e.g., the highest percentage of respondents saying a message is "convincing") are not the messages that actually move people to act. Regression analysis can pinpoint the various outreach strategies or specific media of message delivery that best predict likelihood to vote.

Campaign teams for women candidates found a silver lining in the economic downturn: fairness. In tight financial times, voters believed that a woman would be more fair in managing scarce resources.

Negative charges that contain an element of moral laxity were the favorite against women after fiscal incompetence. Being too lenient on sexual predators was the alternative charge of choice in two of the four races. An additional accusation of being a deal maker and getting a pay-off also carried that moral dimension.

VOTER COMMUNICATION

Consultants noted that older white women and non-college educated women were important voter targets for women candidates. They viewed older women voters as likely to vote for women candidates and younger women voters as not as reliable.

Inexperienced staff presumed that women voters generally leaned toward the woman candidate despite polling evidence to the contrary.

More often, male candidates spoke directly to camera in most of their TV ads, while female candidates shared the focus with others in their ads.

Independent expenditure ads used women surrogates to attack women candidates and male candidates defended and counter attacked using women in their ads.

PRESS AND TV COVERAGE

One of the most pronounced differences in the campaign landscape in 2008 was the changing nature of the press. Once a clearly defined institution, the press is now multi-headed and in transition. Consultants observed that print press is cash-starved and contracting, making it less read and less persuasive. TV news, while also resource poor, hustles to compete with online outlets. And online media are re-orienting the public to receive information in new ways. The effect on women's campaigns appears to be a positive one.

Some consultants believe that broadcast better reflects the messages the candidates want to reach voters (i.e. there is less filtering of the message). This is also true for those who aggressively use the Internet well.

Campaign teams showed outright hostility toward some reporters as "incompetent," "lazy," "not doing their jobs." Candidates complained of the press' inability to stay with a story for more than a day.

For women candidates, these changes in media coverage meant fielding a more aggressive press operation and going up against "pack" preconceptions.

In states with few large metro media markets Capitol press set the tone for coverage of the Governor's office. Several consultants cited the propensity of the Capitol press to write stories that would create a horse race or said that they displayed a bias toward or against making a change. Several campaigns noted that a Capitol press corps becomes part of the political establishment and is, therefore, less likely to hold a sitting Governor accountable, especially if they judge the challenger as unlikely to succeed. Campaign teams believed these same reporters are more likely to question the underdog woman candidate closely and critique her plans more particularly.

TV news reporters appeared to be gender balanced, and stations were fair about measuring equal time, but women reporters appeared to show greater energy and excitement when reporting on a woman candidate.

Participants on weekly political talk shows were overwhelmingly male. Local political science experts who often appear as analysts when polls are announced or to comment on newsworthy developments are almost always male.

Successful women candidates appeared on TV in motion with other people, often greeting them or touching; losers were often alone and standing still. Successful women candidates and their teams were prepared for predictable press opportunities:

- Campaign Announcement/Kick-off
- Debates
- Third Party Polls
- Issue Position
- Bio/Profile
- Ad Watch/Truth Box
- High Profile Endorsements/Visitors
- Filing of a Lawsuit/Official Complaint
- Filing Financial Reports

Voters believed that the media treated women candidates fairly. In a surprising turn, losing women candidates were more likely to believe they got fair press coverage than the winners.

MONEY

A result of Hillary Clinton's candidacy was that less money may have been available for gubernatorial candidates among women donors, suggesting that the universe of national women donors could be vastly expanded.

No campaign believed it had fully mined the Internet for donors, or even that they fully understood its capacity/potential as a fundraising tool for women.

In a tough economic environment, both labor and business opinion leaders appeared to hold women challengers to a higher standard on their knowledge of finance and ability to handle the budget. This appeared to affect their giving.

THE ROLE OF GENDER IN 2008 CAMPAIGNS: CHRONIC CHALLENGES

TOUGHNESS CONTINUED TO BE A MAJOR ISSUE FOR WOMEN CANDIDATES.

One woman staffer interviewed spoke about her candidate with frustration, saying, "Oh she's tough, but not the right kind of tough." This issue continues to confound. What are the elements of "the right kind of tough" for women candidates? For those running against sitting Governors in 2008 the issue also seemed to be: Could you be an effective challenger without being an aggressor?

Being seen as a tough female candidate was a strong negative for voters, along with running a negative campaign and being too partisan. Toughness is seen as separate from effectiveness. This was true for male voters who have traditionally cared about toughness the most. For women voters, perceptions of toughness had no impact on their vote.

Focus group research showed that toughness was the most difficult trait to display while maintaining likeability among voters. Particularly, women candidates had to show strength in ways that are not off-putting to men. In the 2008 research, likeability became an even more significant indicator of success.

The issue of toughness was raised frequently as campaigns weighed what is too tough or not tough enough. **In our research, "too tough" was defined as unapproachable and cold, which, as seen in the past, quickly translates to unpleasant and not likeable.**

There appear to be many different shades to the right kind of toughness. For some, the right kind of toughness was deemed to be that which required people to take you seriously. **Strength of leadership is a key dimension for women.** "Exhibit edge." "Command respect." "Evoke anxiety from those who might cross you." Conversely, when people were describing the absence of toughness, they said, "no real zingers," "not a real arm twister."

For others, toughness is strongly correlated with competence: “She knows her stuff.” Some consultants and staff believed that voters admired candidates who exhibited a personal capacity to respond and counter-attack and saw that as evidence of toughness.

The newest ingredient mentioned for the “right kind of toughness” is competitiveness. Specifically, it’s the type of competitiveness that good sports exhibit – a game quality that enables a skilled player to take a risk.

Aggressive criticism of an opponent translated into “negative” campaigning.

The opponents of women candidates were eager to tag female challengers as negative campaigners. That was a dangerous perception – seen as very partisan, which was unpopular with voters.

In general, the winning mix was a combination of competence, clarity, efficiency and decisiveness as presented by the candidate personally and by a campaign which mirrored her precision. Third party validation also helped here.

Affect – or candidate favorability – was the strongest predictor of voting in the gubernatorial elections. Traits that predicted positive affect included being honest and ethical, solving problems, being likeable, having the right priorities and working with the state legislature. Negative predictors included running a negative campaign, being too partisan and being seen as a typical politician.

APPEARANCE CONTINUES TO BE A STUMBLING BLOCK FOR WOMEN CANDIDATES.

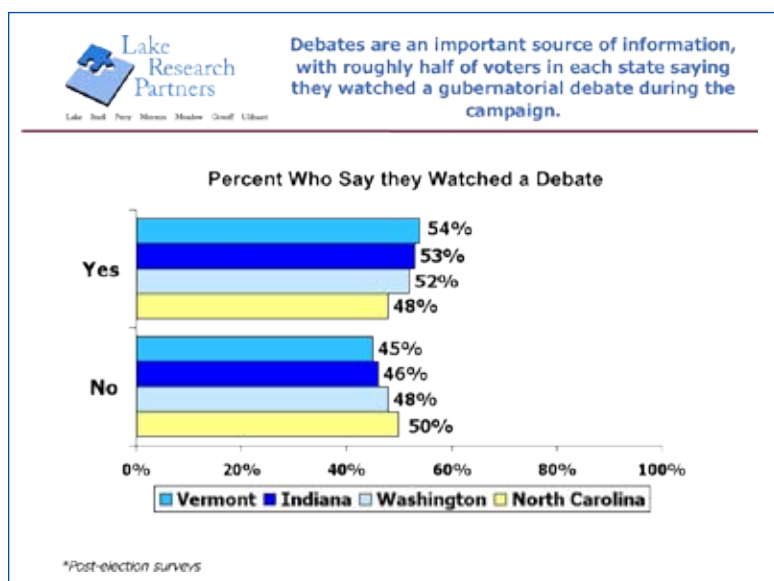
This is particularly true of those candidates who were not fully prepared for scrutiny before stepping into the spotlight. Female journalists, both print and broadcast, were particularly aware of the challenges that hair, clothes and make-up presented for women candidates and men candidates did not have those same challenges.

Personal presentation is still dissected. Voice, hairstyle, height, seating and posture were all mentioned more often referring to women candidates in the press. Women also believe they get more unsolicited advice than men receive and on much more personal aspects of their candidacies.

In the focus groups, there was a lot of commentary on the way women look. **Men and women were paying attention to how women looked and came across, and there was heightened visibility and criticism.**

DEBATES ARE COMPLICATED EXERCISES THAT CAN DERAIL A GOOD CAMPAIGN AND DIVERT GOOD CANDIDATES.

While television and radio ads and news coverage and editorials are the most common sources of information for voters, significant proportions of voters in each state also report watching the debates.



Voters were critical of the female candidates debate performances. In the focus groups, women candidates were not coming across positively and were expected to look gubernatorial. Women had trouble appearing confident, competent and likeable. Being comfortable and confident is important and women are critiqued when they are perceived as lacking in this area.

Debates are viewed as “high risk” events rather than an opportunity to score points with voters. This is true even when the female candidate is a challenger.

For women candidates, debates absorb a great deal of campaign time internally: prep time, study time, practice time.

Women candidates make debates a focal point of their anxiety, requiring hours of prep time and coaching, meticulous policy papers and briefing books. The net effect is that while some women candidates perform well and convey competence, they often do not project likeability or warmth in debates.

As one candidate said, “Every podium in America is made for a 6-foot man,” suggesting the whole exercise is slightly rigged against women.

Words often used to describe candidate debate performances: “nervous,” “unsure,” “tough,” “negative.”

There is a not-so-subtle sexism conveyed by male candidates to female candidates that becomes apparent in debates. It has a mocking or dismissive quality and has the effect of belittling the women. Men use phrases like “so many misstatements, so little time,” “she didn’t have her facts straight.” Or a male candidate will mock a trait like collaboration by saying, “We can’t make a decision without gathering round and singing kumbaya” or he will question her seriousness, “I’m not sure where she’s getting her data from.”

One woman candidate described her opponent’s attitude toward her in debates: “...that I didn’t know what I was talking about ... and he would do it the way a man tries to diminish a woman’s comment, you know, ‘so many lies, so little time,’ something like that.”

Male candidates are more likely to correct an opponent’s point than outright disagree with them. A man will suggest that his female opponent misunderstands an issue when she has questioned his position.

Men use their physical size to establish presence and command of the debate space. Women do not tend to fill up the space even behind their own lectern.

Some women candidates found that personalizing an issue before launching into the facts and figures of the policy connected them to a debate audience and made them more comfortable. Their advisors believed it conveyed warmth.

CONFIDENCE IS A CRITICAL ELEMENT IN PERFORMING ALL ASPECTS OF CAMPAIGNING.

Yet even the best women candidates experience self doubt. Communicating confidence is key to showing leadership in successful debates and public presentations.

Some observers thought that candidate confidence grew with improved performance; others believed that a confident candidate could improve her performance. Confidence is critical to creating the presence that audiences expect in a “star driven” culture.

Some women candidates made decisions that seemed to undercut their own confidence: dressing differently or changing their appearance; campaigning on issues that were not their passion and which they did not believe were critical to their voters.

At some point in their quest to be Governor, many female candidates lose their sense of themselves and struggled to recover their authenticity.

“I had to struggle because I was not me. I should have had a strong woman with me from day one in all my prep sessions and in all my decisions...”

“I was never centered. I felt like I was an employee.” Referring to a reporter who covered her race, one candidate described his attitude toward her: “I didn’t provide the leadership, the showmanship he believed was necessary.”

When asked what women candidates need to know or learn, a female journalist had an extraordinary answer that went right to the heart of confidence: “I think it’s embracing gender and not being afraid of it, not making it an issue either. I think there’s something that women bring to the table that is wonderful and to some degree unique. And I don’t think we should shy away from that. I think that can be used and celebrated and be part of the discussion. As a woman, what do I bring to governance and how I am going to look at these issues and lead? And I think it’s different and I think it’s good. And I think too many women are still wanting to lead in a traditional way or say they are ...”

Women candidates remain reluctant to use all the strengths they have to win. Campaign teams agree that women candidates today enjoy greater voter acceptance of their whole lives. Mother, wife, professional, care giver, athlete are all features of a well-rounded leader that can be used to good effect. Yet, these women candidates tended to make use of only a few of their roles/personas.

TRACKING TRENDS

Many of our earliest findings have shifted over the decade.

Women candidates are no longer perceived as making a feminist point. Those interviewed do not believe voters see women candidates as novel or distinct. The most often recognized advantage of being a woman candidate was in debates when there are multiple male candidates and only one female candidate on the stage or at the podium.

Women candidates are no longer seen as agents of change. We first noticed this shift several cycles ago, but campaign teams now see their candidates as almost gender neutral, planning and developing strategies quite apart from gender. Any “virtue advantage” tied to being an outsider and not part of the problem has also disappeared.

As more women Governors are elected and re-elected, the issue of executive leadership and whether women can embody a leadership style appropriate to the office have disappeared. Questions do persist about leadership style: “consensus-driven versus decisive” still comes up for some candidates. Interestingly, when asked a follow-up question as to whether this quality is related to gender, the answer is often “not really about gender, but personality.”

There is still a strong and persistent notion that women are less well-qualified or prepared to manage money, particularly in a financial crisis. This notion may also contribute to the overall confidence challenge for candidates.

Older women are more loyal voters for women candidates than younger women voters – a trend that has held for the past few election cycles, but a complete turnaround from the 2000 election cycle.

While some campaign staff presume that women voters will ultimately choose a woman candidate, campaigns and candidates are beginning to see younger women voters as ideological voters first.

NEW DEVELOPMENTS

Here are three developments worth tracking in coming cycles:

Independent Expenditures used many women in their ads against women candidates. Women were also used to launch tougher charges in negative ads.

Several interviewees spoke about a candidate’s “performance” qualities. In a reality TV world, voters expect the person with the microphone to entertain them, regardless of whether the context is politics or fashion. Reporters and some Party interviewees believe “showmanship” is an essential quality for political success and critiqued candidate performance in terms

of the ability to produce a quick quip, or sharp wit. This tendency, if it continues, could be very treacherous for women who have worked hard to escape frivolous definitions and replace them with substantive, serious ones. This anecdotal data regarding the emergence of personality as a more powerful quality for voters coincides with survey and focus group research that show likeability to be a powerful predictor of success.

Opponents appear to be succeeding more than in past cycles at getting voters to see a woman candidate as the one who is responsible for the “negative campaigning.” This coincides with the fact that voters no longer accord women a moral advantage.

CONCLUSION

While voters are coming to see women candidates as the norm in Governors races, they continue to judge women candidates differently; sometimes according them advantage and sometimes penalizing them. For example, voters believe women are not as well prepared as men to manage a financial crisis, but they also view women as more fair in divvying up scarce resources. As more women govern, it will be interesting to see whether these presumptions drawn from gender stereotypes dissolve.

Today, women candidates appear more willing to be themselves, to use traditional female strengths strategically: personalizing an issue to convey empathy or demonstrating their inclusive, consensus-oriented styles. Yet some women candidates refrain from using the full range of their experiences to connect with voters and many woman candidates express discomfort with the head-to-head competition of debates and media scrutiny. Taking public risks, demonstrating strength without being aggressive, conveying competence and likeability; these challenges persist for women candidates.



This guidebook would not have been possible without the vision and hard work of our political consultants and their teams: Mary Hughes, Celinda Lake, Christine Stavem, Bob Carpenter and Pat Carpenter.

The Barbara Lee Family Foundation supports progressive initiatives in two program areas: women in politics and contemporary art. We are dedicated to engaging women fully in the American democratic process and promoting their participation at all levels of government.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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