



WOMEN MAYORS NETWORK LUNCH

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What Women Candidates Need to Know

Insights and Strategies From 20+ Years of Research



KEY TAKEAWAYS:

Obstacles for Women Candidates



QUALIFICATIONS.

Voters expect women candidates to demonstrate their qualifications to the highest degree, something they don't expect from men.



LIKEABILITY.

Voters will support a male candidate they do not like but who they think is qualified, but the same cannot be said for women.



HONESTY + ETHICS.

Voters put women on an ethical pedestal, expecting women to be more trustworthy than men.

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

Opportunities for Women Candidates



360-DEGREE CANDIDATE.

Women now have a broader range of opportunities to connect with voters. They can use the whole of their experiences.



STRENGTH V. TOUGHNESS.

It is more important to be a problem solver and show strength than to be “tough.”



SENSE OF HUMOR.

Voters like women candidates and officeholders who demonstrate a sense of humor and don't take themselves too seriously.

BY THE NUMBERS

CONGRESS: 124

Women hold **124**, or **29%**, of the seats in the House.

SENATE: 25

Women hold **25**, or **25%**, of the seats in the Senate.

GUBERNATORIAL: 12

Twelve women are serving as U.S. Governors. This is a new record, set in the 2022 elections.

MAYORAL: 421 (Cities > 30,000)

Women hold **421** mayor's offices--**26%** of these 1,617 leadership roles.



VOTER PERCEPTIONS:

DO MEN & WOMEN LEAD DIFFERENTLY?

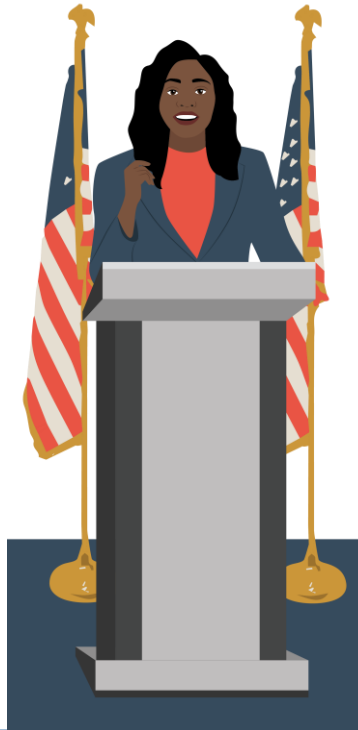
Believing that men and women are different when they serve in elected office has been one of the strongest predictors that someone will vote for a woman.

- Women leaders have become more common in politics.
- In our most recent research, 45% of survey respondents said that men and women are not different types of leaders, and about half say they are.
- Women are seen as equal to men in terms of their ability to govern.

THE “IMAGINATION BARRIER”

BLFF research has repeatedly shown that voters picture a man when they are asked to imagine a hypothetical executive-level leader. This “imagination barrier” exists because of decades or centuries of men—usually white men—holding roles such as Mayor, Governor, and President.

When a woman runs for executive office, voters need more convincing that she is up for the job. **This is doubled for women of color.** Voters still hold a woman to these standards even in races without male candidates, and if she is currently holding elected office.



Voters hold higher standards for women in two key areas: **qualifications** and **likeability**. It is essential that women come across as confident and competent. Voters punish women for issues such as staff turnover or disorganization, which they see as on-the-job learning.

DEEP DIVE:

Executive Leadership

Research shows voters are more comfortable seeing women serve as members of a legislature than they have been electing them to executive offices—positions where they will have sole decision-making authority.



HERE'S WHAT WORKS FOR WOMEN CANDIDATES:

- **BE ACTION ORIENTED.** The top traits voters identify as important for electability at the executive office level are “can handle a crisis” and “gets results.”
- **REMEMBER THAT WORDS MATTER.** “Confident, organized, and knowledgeable” convey qualifications to voters, and should appear throughout campaign materials.
- **HIT THE GROUND RUNNING.** How the campaign is run is an opportunity for the candidate to show she has her act together, is a good leader, and an effective manager.

DEEP DIVE:

Discussing Family

Despite sweeping societal changes, traditional gender roles remain powerful, influencing what voters perceive to be acceptable and appropriate behavior for men and women.



HERE'S WHAT WORKS FOR WOMEN CANDIDATES:

- **BE MATTER-OF-FACT.** Address questions about family life directly and confidently without being defensive or using excuses.
- **STRIKE THE RIGHT BALANCE.** Sharing too much information 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 tradeoffs made in order to manage both.
- **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.

DEEP DIVE:

Economic credentials

This area is generally perceived as a weakness for women candidates, and voters want to know that a woman can handle budgets, taxes, and the economy.



HERE'S WHAT WORKS FOR WOMEN CANDIDATES:

- **BE SPECIFIC.** Having a detailed economic plan and budget priorities that are in touch with their community help women candidates establish credibility.
- **WEAVE EXPERTISE INTO ALL COMMUNICATIONS.** Building private-public partnerships to create jobs and new businesses, having a written economic plan endorsed by businesses and labor, bringing state funding to the community, and being a business owner who created jobs and balanced budgets are all ways to convey that a woman candidate is very qualified and very likeable.
- **HIGHLIGHT ACCOMPLISHMENTS.** Less traditional financial experience can help level the playing field.

DEEP DIVE:

Losing a race

For voters, losing does not need to be the end of a woman's political career; it can be the beginning of the next chapter. Encouragingly for women who lose their races, voters did not give negative ratings to losing women candidates on their qualifications or their favorability.

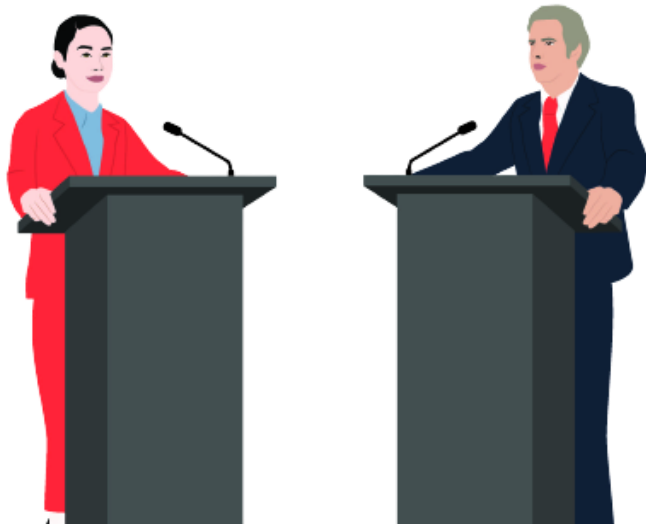


HERE'S WHAT WORKS FOR WOMEN CANDIDATES:

- **FOCUS YOUR MESSAGING ON VOTERS.** You can start launching your next campaign as soon as your concession speech or statement. Highlight listening to your community, continuing to fight for your ideals, and getting things done for voters.
- **BE FORWARD THINKING.** Don't dwell on the past - voters are sensitive to any perceived whining or blaming.
- **STAY ENGAGED IN THE COMMUNITY.** What a woman candidate chooses as her next step after losing an election matters. Work on an issue that was big in the campaign, build political skills, and network with other leaders.

DEEP DIVE: Handling Sexism

Sexism in politics can take many forms, from double standards for women, to undue criticisms of appearance, voice, or clothing. The decisions of whether and how to address sexism can be complex to navigate—involving questions about electability, personal offense, and messaging.



HERE'S WHAT WORKS FOR WOMEN CANDIDATES:

- **SPEAK UP ABOUT SEXISM IF YOU GENUINELY FEEL YOU SHOULD.** If you connect your response to your personal values, your authenticity will resonate with voters. Have confidence that 72% of voters are concerned about the impact of sexism and they support candidates who act in line with their values.
- **CONSIDER THE RISK OF STAYING SILENT.** There is a blowback risk if you are perceived to be ignoring or turning a blind eye to a sexist incident your constituents view as serious. Your constituents will support you speaking out if you do so in a way that shows your leadership, backbone, and electability.
- **BE CALM AND CONFIDENT AND STAY FOCUSED ON THE JOB AT HAND.** When you respond, do so calmly and confidently, striking a tone of professionalism that demonstrates the severity of the incident and also shows that you can handle any tough scenario.

SHOULD A WOMAN CANDIDATE STAY **SILENT** ON SEXIST INCIDENTS?

There's a misconception that silence is a strong response to a sexist incident—our research suggests otherwise. **Silence can be perceived as a leader failing to address a serious problem and in fact can have negative consequences.** Ignoring or turning a blind eye to serious incidents of sexism can result in blowback since constituents want to see electability, leadership, and backbone.



When posed with hypothetical situations in which women candidates face sexism, 25% of respondents across scenarios say **they would lose confidence in the candidate if she ignored the incident**, citing her complacency and weakness in failing as a leader to address a serious problem. This is especially true with Democratic and younger voters.

DEEP DIVE:

Woman vs. Woman Races

Our research found that in an election between two women candidates, gender biases are still prevalent, and voters hold both women to a higher standard than they hold male candidates.



HERE'S WHAT WORKS FOR WOMEN CANDIDATES:

- **LEAD WITH QUALIFICATIONS.** When introducing yourself to voters, first share your resumé—what is your record as a leader, and what have you achieved on behalf of voters? Issue expertise, accomplishments, and plans can signal qualifications. Showing you are qualified is one of the most important factors to voters who are deciding between two women candidates.
- **DEMONSTRATE ISSUE KNOWLEDGE.** Voters say that your knowledge of issues is the most important consideration in an election. A total of 89% of respondents said that issue knowledge was either "very" or "extremely important."
- **BE MINDFUL OF YOUR ELECTORATE.** *Shared Hurdles* found that political party — a candidate's party and the voters' party — plays a substantial role in voters' perceptions. Voters will give you advantages based on whether you are running as a Democrat or Republican.

DEEP DIVE:

Appearance

Appearance plays a role in likeability for women candidates in a way that it does not for men. It affects views of professionalism and approachability and reveals unconscious biases.



HERE'S WHAT WORKS FOR WOMEN LEADERS:

- **BE AUTHENTIC AND APPROPRIATE:** Develop a look and style that works for you, and dress for the occasion.
- **BREAK OUT OF THE POWER SUIT:** Women's power-dressing has evolved past feminized men's suits to more colorful jackets over sheath dresses and pants. This change reflects the evolution of work wear in general but is particularly applicable to politics.
- **KEEP IT SIMPLE:** As the saying goes, "Dress poorly and they remember the dress. Dress well and they remember the woman." Cultivate a collection of go-to outfits that convey power and are also practical.

OUR LATEST FINDINGS ON APPEARANCE:

In our most recent research, we asked focus group participants to react to photos of hypothetical women candidates. Focus groups:



- **Immediately made judgments** of women regarding their race, their clothing, and appearance, including traits like hair, posture, and clothing.
- **Inferred meaning into every element of an image.** Participants crafted narratives about the candidates' agendas and political parties. Participants regarded settings and objects in photos, such as computers, as intentional. Having people in the background, for example, can convey that a woman has many supporters.
- **Responded negatively if a woman's appearance was disheveled.** There was no tolerance for things like a wrinkled shirt or flyaway hair. However, a rumpled collar imbued a different meaning depending on if it was an official campaign image or a photo of a woman moving about her day.
- **Cared about the ages of women and many preferred those who look older.** Voters connect age to experience and positive traits such as polish, knowledge, and pragmatism. Voters want women to be old enough to look experienced but not “too old that they should step aside for younger candidates.”



DEEP DIVE:

Going Negative

BLFF research has consistently found that women pay a higher price with voters for “going negative” than men, and it can jeopardize likeability, which is a must-have for women.



HERE'S WHAT WORKS FOR WOMEN LEADERS:

- **UNDERSTAND VOTERS' PERCEPTIONS:** Voters expect more from women, and they feel that by engaging in negative campaigning, a woman is reduced to the status of "a typical politician."
- **THE FIRST WOMAN TO ATTACK COULD PAY A PRICE WITH VOTERS:** When two women are debating, the first woman to attack her opponent may face a stronger negative reaction from voters.
- **STRATEGICALLY CONTRAST:** Showing how you differ from an opponent can be necessary, even if voters could receive it as “negativity.”



QUESTIONS?

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