

Barriers and Opportunities To Women's Executive Leadership

Results and Strategic Recommendations from Dial Groups

Presented by



Preface

The White House Project (WHP) is a national nonpartisan organization dedicated to enhancing public perceptions of women’s capacity to lead and fostering the entry of women into positions of leadership, including the U.S. Presidency. Since its beginning four years ago, the Project has launched a number of national research initiatives that have revealed important, new information about attitudes toward women’s leadership; identified barriers to women’s executive leadership; and tracked and studied public reactions to women who are running for office to examine general attitudes about female candidates.

Most recently, The White House Project launched this innovative initiative entitled “Barriers and Opportunities,” to assess voter response to images and messages of women running for executive office, as well as how those responses change depending on tone, visual presentation, setting, and context. This initiative was designed to move us from previously identified and documented problems facing women running for executive office to tangible solutions by measuring voters’ responses to a variety of male-female comparisons on the traits of leadership, effectiveness and strength. The primary goal of the research was to address the most critical problem facing women candidates running for executive offices, how to portray strength and effectiveness, using the most important medium in electoral politics, 30 and 60 second television spots. This report is intended to be of practical value to women running for executive office, to help them prevail at the polls.

As part of our “Barriers and Opportunities” study, The White House Project assembled a bipartisan team of pollsters, media, and general political consultants. We conducted an exhaustive review of nearly 400 television spots from political campaigns of women and men across the country and throughout recent political history. We also created a unique set of ads and visual stimuli to test – in a controlled setting – important variables like setting, style, language, tone and subject matter. We tested our material on voters in groups across the country, using state-of-the-art perception analysis and focus groups, while taking advantage of past quantitative research.

“Barriers and Opportunities” offers us critical insights and real solutions to addressing many of the challenges facing women candidates running for executive office. This new research project is the most comprehensive, systematic study of solutions to the single biggest problem facing women candidates running for executive offices – portraying strength and effectiveness without diminishing their appeal. These findings and others are being put to use across the country on behalf of women who are now seeking or will seek executive office.



Foreword by Marie C. Wilson

President, The White House Project

The conventional wisdom for women running for executive office is that she must be tough, but not too tough; smart, but not too smart; assertive, but not aggressive; and feminine, but not girly. As Newsweek Columnist Anna Quindlen put it at a recent White House Project event, "Voters want women to be as tough as nails and as warm as toast, all at the same time." As you know, this is a difficult tightrope for a woman candidate to walk.

Keeping conventional wisdom in mind, the White House Project focused on research to help women candidates navigate this contradiction. *Barriers & Opportunities* is a groundbreaking research project that has identified the images and messages women can use in political advertisements and campaigning to showcase their strength and effectiveness, while maintaining their authenticity.

Understanding voter behaviors is crucial for women candidates, especially those seeking executive office. The White House Project's *Barriers & Opportunities* research uniquely explores these behaviors and offers politically sophisticated solutions that go beyond conventional wisdom. It is our hope that this research will allow women's campaigns to address these challenges and deliver their messages in the most effective manner.

We are pleased to bring you this research now, when it is needed more than ever. In these difficult times, it seems more and more important to give women the tools and knowledge they need to negotiate gender barriers and win leadership positions. With so many challenges facing our country, it is imperative that we use all the talent and resources that women can bring.

Thank you for joining us in the critical effort to advance women's leadership.



The Research Team

The White House Project has put together a strong bipartisan team of people to design, conduct, and interpret the Barriers and Opportunities research.

The White House Project

The White House Project team is led by Marie C. Wilson, a visionary advocate of women's leadership for over thirty years, who co-founded The White House Project in 1998 to advance women's leadership in all spheres. The force behind Take Our Daughters to Work Day, she is also the President of the Ms. Foundation for Women. Executive Director Beverly Neufeld and Research Director Shauna Shames worked closely with Marie and the rest of the team to develop and conduct this groundbreaking project.

American Viewpoint AMERICANVIEWPOINT

Linda DiVall and Bob Carpenter come to us from American Viewpoint, one of the most widely respected public opinion research firms in the United States. Providing both quantitative and qualitative research, American Viewpoint specializes in survey research, public opinion polling, communications research, and focus group moderation and giving strategic advice to Republican candidates including Congresswoman Connie Morella, Congresswoman Nancy Johnson, Congressman Jim Talent, The WISH List and the Republican Pro-Choice Coalition.



Lake Snell Perry & Associates

Celinda Lake comes to us from Lake Snell Perry & Associates, Inc., one of the Democratic party's leading strategists, serving dozens of incumbents and challengers at all levels of the electoral process, as well as a wide range of advocacy organizations, non-profit organizations, and foundations. Their clients include The Sierra Club, Planned Parenthood Federation of America, the AFL-CIO, and the Kaiser Family Foundation. In the 2000 elections, LSPA helped to elect Senator Debbie Stabenow of Michigan, Governor Bob Wise of West Virginia, and Governor Gary Locke of Washington in his bid for re-election.

The Research Team (continued)

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The Farwell Group

The Farwell Group

James P. Farwell brings to communications a strong and unique blend of media, business and legal skills and experience. In 1991, he was named by Campaign & Elections Magazine among the "rising stars" in the United States as a national media consultant and film producer. This year, the magazine named him one of the campaign industry's "Movers and Shakers." The Farwell Group served as media consultant to House Speaker Newt Gingrich and Senator Craig Thomas, and in this cycle is doing media for some major campaigns, including Congressman Greg Ganske for U.S. Senate in Iowa, Senator Mike Enzi of Wyoming, Oklahoma Lt. Governor Mary Fallin, Arkansas Lt. Governor Win Rockefeller, Kristine Cohn for Illinois Secretary of State, Ken Blackwell for Ohio Treasurer, as well as several Congressional races. Mr. Farwell is also a playwright, with a play scheduled to open in Britain.



Laguens, Hamburger, Stone

Dawn Laguens and Martin Hamburger of Laguens, Hamburger, Stone create winning messages and breakthrough media for Democratic candidates and a wide range of progressive organizations such as Planned Parenthood, the National Education Association and The Nature Conservancy. In 1998 they defeated two of the five losing Republican Congressional incumbents, and in 2000 helped elect Debbie Stabenow as Michigan's first female US Senator.

Page Gardner Consulting

Page S. Gardner has had twenty years of experience as a political and communications manager and strategist. Ms. Gardner has worked at senior levels for the most competitive Presidential, Senate, Gubernatorial, and Congressional campaigns in all parts of the country. Gardner also has managed some of the most hotly debated national public policy issue campaigns, including those related to reproductive rights, civil rights, national budget priorities, technology and trade. Gardner has served a variety of clients from individual corporations and non-profits, to party committees and individual candidates, including the Center for Reproductive Law & Policy, Emily's List, the Democratic National Committee, the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, and the National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL).

The Problem

Women candidates start out with a serious disadvantage - voters' tend to view women as less effective and tough. Recent events of war, terrorism, and recession have only highlighted these issues and increased the salience of these dimensions, but these problems are not new.

- Initially, voters give women candidates a mean score of 69.50, on a scale from 0 to 100 on likeliness of being tough. In September of 1999, only 68 percent of likely voters said women in politics and business often are tough (only 20 percent say women very often have the trait of toughness).
- **This disadvantage is especially true for women running for executive offices, such as governor.** Voter's hesitations about women candidates revolve around whether women can be tough, decisive and action oriented. They also tend to think that women are less likely to have proven records.
- The White House Project undertook this study to explore the dimensions of these problems and begin to offer tangible solutions. This research is the most comprehensive, systematic study of the single biggest problem facing women candidates running for executive offices – how to portray strength and effectiveness without diminishing their appeal.

Research Design

- After examining 400 ads, we tested 25, looking at a variety of issues and themes, formal and informal settings, as well as the use of a voice-over to straight to camera.
- In addition, we filmed six generic ads, varying setting, gender, age, and broad issues. We also created sample interview segments using both male and female “candidates.”
- In the dial groups, we tested ads on two dimensions – effectiveness and appeal.
 - The first dial set consisted of ten ads – five male candidate ads and five female candidate ads, interspersed to simulate a real campaign atmosphere.
 - The second set of ads consisted of 15 ads for female candidates – from various parts of the country, representing both parties, and representing various techniques.
 - The next set of ads consisted of the six simulated ads and interview segments. The six ads consisted of an older woman in a formal and informal setting, a younger woman in a formal and informal setting, and a man in a formal and informal setting.

Research Design (continued)

- The research was designed to test and explore one particular dimension that often eludes women candidates running for executive office – *effectiveness*.
- It was an examination of competing factors: showing a woman in a light that makes her personally appealing, while also showing that she had the kind of strength needed for the job she is seeking.
- These strategic findings offer women suggestions to help them appear more effective and strong, but they need to be put into the context of the actual campaign and other competing strategic considerations.
- Voters' hesitations around women candidates tend to revolve around whether women can be tough, decisive, and action-oriented, particularly in the face of a financial downturn or other crisis.
- This research was intended to move the dialogue from identification and documentation of the problems women face to tangible solutions.

Key Findings

- **Women candidates, especially for executive office, are often judged differently and more harshly than male candidates.** A challenging double standard exists for women, especially on the dimension of effectiveness and strength.
- **A woman cannot be presented in the same way a man is presented and achieve the same level of effectiveness.** It is clear that voters start out with more questions about effectiveness, toughness, and proven records for women than for men and are much more judgmental about presentation on this dimension.
- **Appealing presentations do not necessarily lead to impressions of effectiveness** for either men or women.
- Conversely, communicating effectiveness does generate appeal.

What, Where, How...

The way women candidates speak, where they speak, and what they say are critical to showing effectiveness.

WHAT

Women need to provide a proven record with specific policies, goals, and achievements. Voters start out less likely to believe that a woman candidate has a proven record and are more skeptical of her presentation. Women candidates need to show tangible examples of toughness and making a difference, not just mouth the words.

Energetic presentations and active verbs prove to be effective tools for women.

The issues female candidates talk about are as important as the words they use to talk about them. Voters do not want female candidates talking just about expected “kitchen table” topics like education and health care.

WHERE

Formal settings do more to enhance credibility than informal settings.

Women candidates need to show a seriousness of purpose – if they come across as too sexy, too casual, or too glamorous, then they undermine their credibility as an effective leader.

HOW

Concrete, specific statements are better than vague and future-oriented statements.

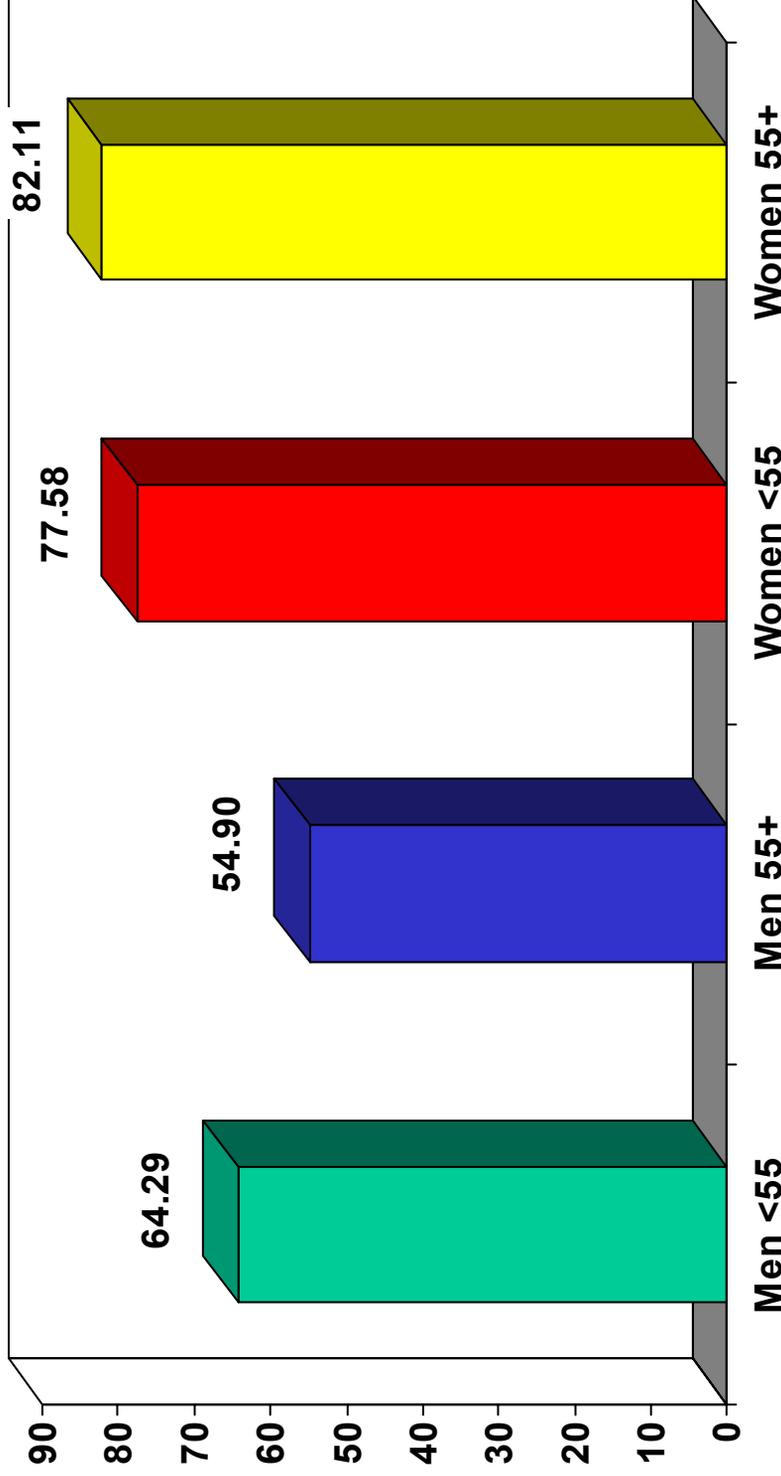
Voters want to hear from the women candidates directly. They respond to energetic, forceful presentations that are made straight to the camera.

Active verbs connote effectiveness and toughness, as well as demonstrate a proven record – all of which are dimensions that are important for women to relay to voters.

Women are more likely than men to see generic women candidates as likely to be tough, with men 65 and over being the harshest critics.

“I want you to tell me how likely it is that a woman candidate for Governor would have that quality, using a scale which goes from 0, not at all likely, to 100, extremely likely.”

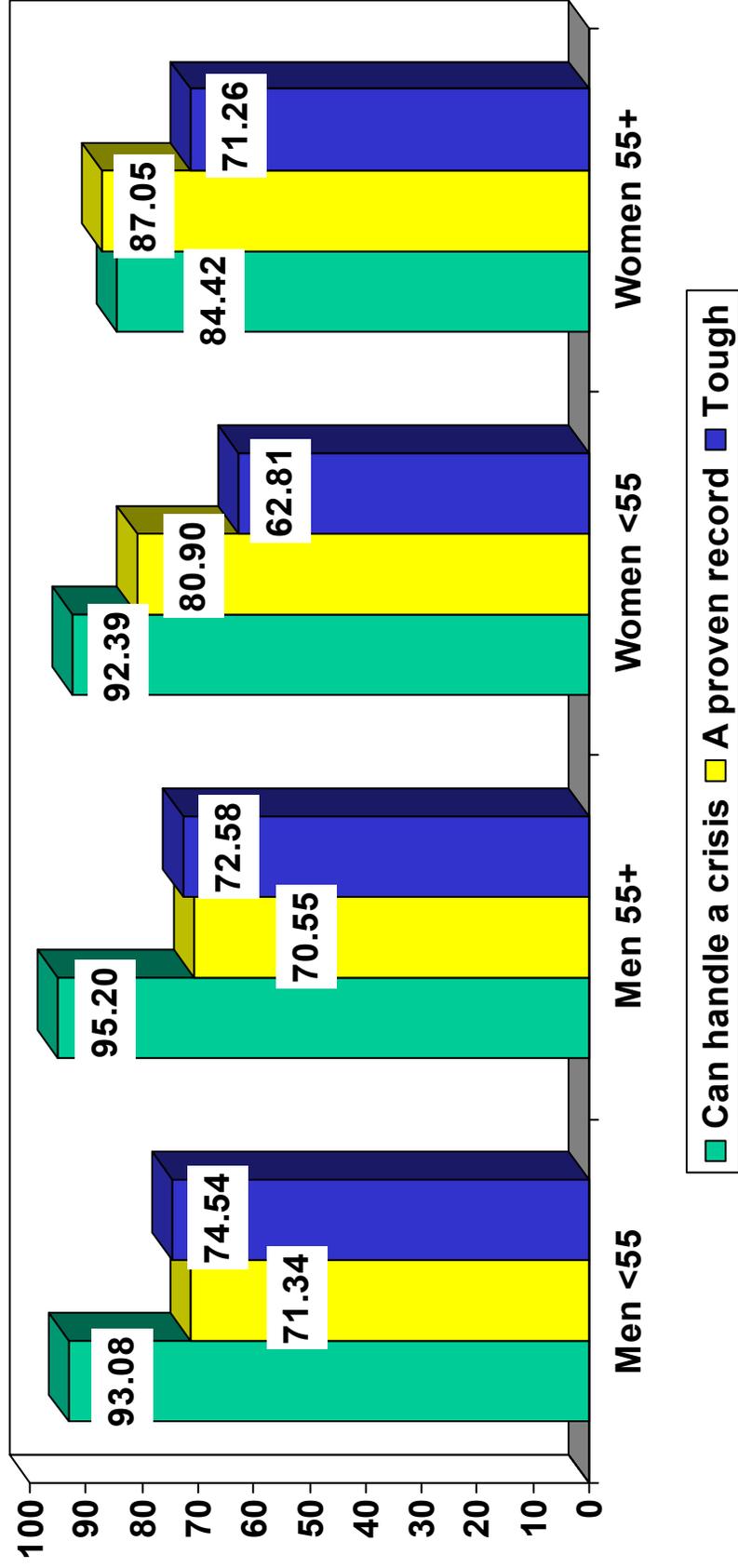
Toughness



***Please note: this is not survey data, but ratings from the dial groups. Similar results were found on having a proven record.**

Men also tend to rate handling a crisis and being tough as *more important* than female voters.

“I want you to tell me how important it is, in terms of your vote, for candidates for Governor to have that quality, using a scale which goes from 0 to 100, where 0 means not at all important and 100 means extremely important.”

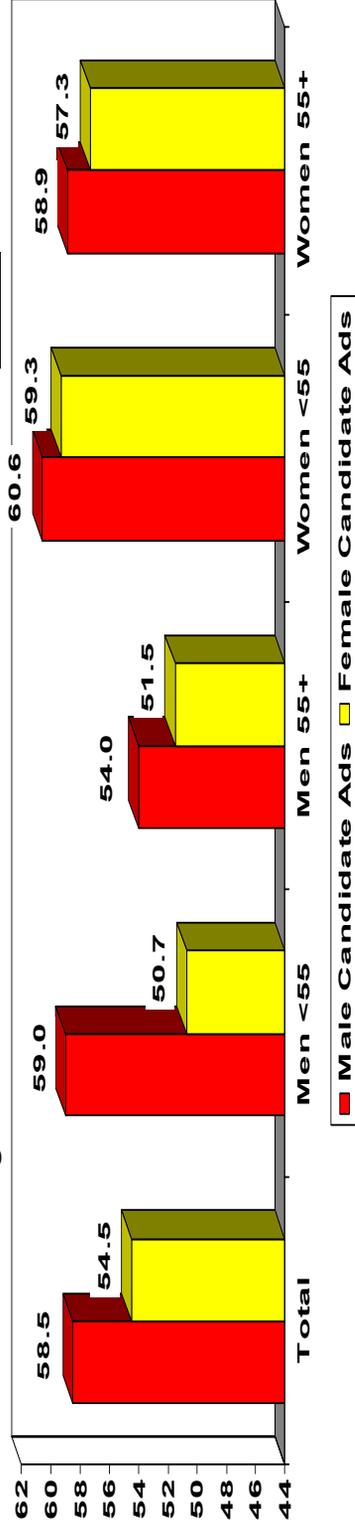


***Please note: this is not survey data, but ratings from the dial groups. In this research women tend to give more weight to having a proven record which needs more research.**

Means and Peaks

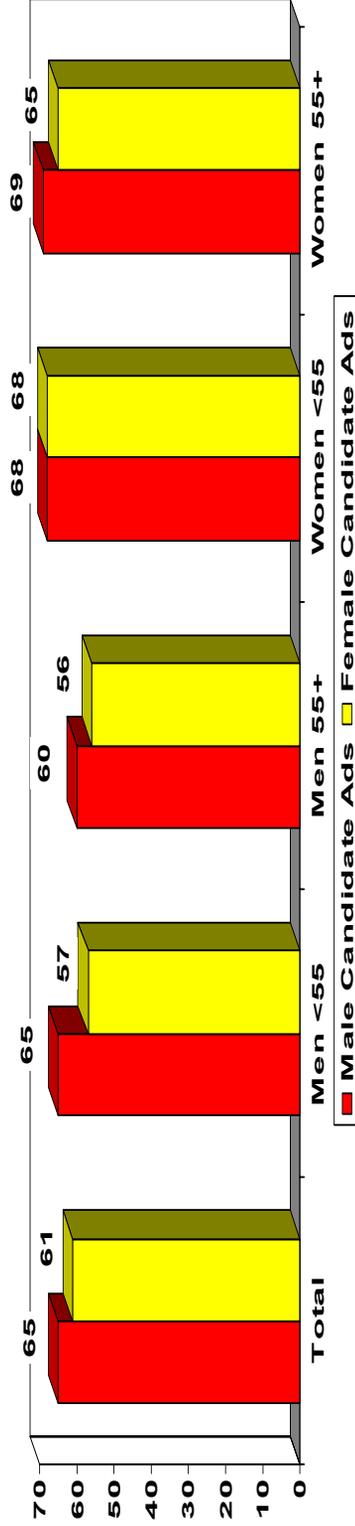
"Now we're going to be watching some video clips that show candidates. As we watch these clips I want you to tell me with your dials if what you are seeing makes you think that the candidate is showing strength and is an effective leader. Zero means no strength, or not effective, and 100 means a great deal of strength or very effective."

Averages of the five female ads and five male ads: Means



"Now we're going to be watching some video clips that show candidates. As we watch these clips I want you to tell me with your dials if what you are seeing makes you think that the candidate is showing strength and is an effective leader. Zero means no strength, or not effective, and 100 means a great deal of strength or very effective."

Averages of the five female ads and five male ads: Peaks



A Proven Record

- **Demonstrating a proven record is key for female candidates to show they can be effective leaders.**
- **Documenting a record of proven results is important to voters.** For both male and female candidates a proven record enhances credibility when claiming effectiveness.
 - **It is best to use concrete examples** when discussing a proven record.
 - **The use of titles helps impart effectiveness.** Using titles of elective office such as Mayor, Lt. Governor or titles of leadership such as board chair or civic organizer all helped reinforce experience and a track record.
 - **Using personal biography may be a good way to set up a proven record** for female candidates, but cannot be relied on alone. Rather, biography needs the language and images that prove results and demonstrated accomplishments.

“They didn’t have any experience. They were just coming in off the street and they were saying, ‘I am going to run for governor because I am this and I am that.’”

-Senior man in Missouri

“State your gains, your track record as best you can because for women there is not much there.”

-Younger woman in Missouri

“I thought she was very effective and I thought she was pointing to her record and saying, ‘This is what I did as mayor and this is what I’m going to do as governor.’ She was putting her mouth where her feet had been. And I like that.”

-Senior man in Maryland

Concrete results-oriented language
works best to show effectiveness

People dialed up on the following phrases:

“Strongest economy in decades”

“Cut taxes”

“Streamline bureaucracy”

“New HMO protections”

“Steel foundries reopened”

“Children have more access to health care than any other state”

Substance matters

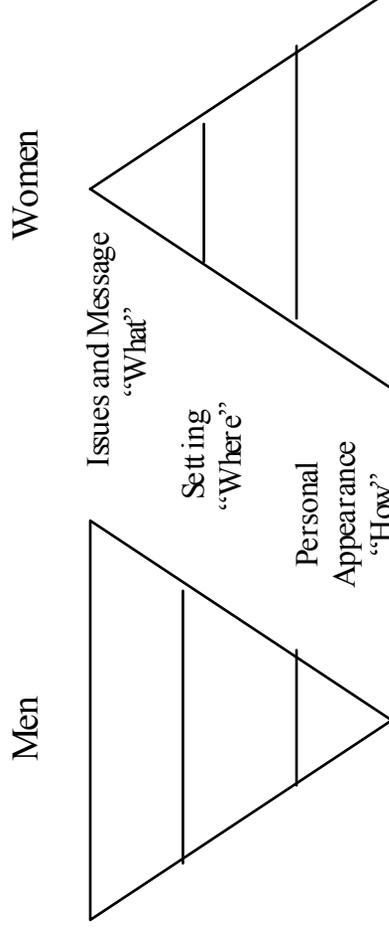
- **The issues female candidates talk about are as important as the words they use to talk about them.**
 - **It is clear from the focus groups that voters want to hear women talk about non-traditional policies and issues.** They do not just want female candidates to talk about the traditional “kitchen table” issues of education and healthcare. They also want to hear about the issues that are both important to their lives and are likely to demonstrate toughness and effectiveness: the economy, taxes and crime.
 - **Crime proves to be one of the best issues for women to gain credibility.** Women and men both receive higher ratings when they talk about crime with specific references to policy proposals. This approach works best when women demonstrate a specific, relevant connection to the issue that enhances their credibility.
 - **Taxes as an issue works well for women candidates.** When female candidates talk about cutting taxes, voters dial up on effectiveness.
 - **The economy is the third issue that women can use to demonstrate effectiveness,** but this has more mixed results. Voters are more judgmental about women running on the economy than men. Women are more successful when making specific, concrete economic claims and proposals rather than only broad statements.
 - **When discussing more “soft” or traditional “women’s” issues,** (such as education), male and female candidates get high ratings on appeal, but neither receive particularly high ratings on effectiveness.

What works less well

- **Endorsements may not necessarily be the silver bullet that many of us would expect.** Endorsements from newspapers, “regular people,” and other leaders all fail to increase effectiveness in this experimental design, although we should note that by definition these voters are not familiar with the third party endorsers. It is important to remember, however, that the dial group respondents do not have the luxury of being acquainted with the endorser – it is not *their* hometown newspaper, *their* governor, or *their* neighbor.
- **Additionally, it appears that a male voiceover, or a male endorser may overshadow the female candidate.** It is important that she appear strong and effective by speaking for herself.
- **While they may have many other uses in campaigns, gimmicks cut against demonstrating effectiveness,** especially in the current environment.
- **Issuing written plans does less for establishing effectiveness than conventional wisdom suggests.** Voters do not dial up on effectiveness and tend to have low recall of the plans.
- **Statements that are vague, future-oriented, emotive or that do not show proof of record,** such as “will appoint,” “one of my concerns is,” “the budget will be,” “worked with the system for change,” and “solves problems,” often rated high on appeal but not on effectiveness.

Triangles of Perception

The triangle diagram below is a simple illustration of one of the challenges women candidates face when being evaluated by voters. The downward pointing triangle represents the evaluative framework that voters apply to male candidates. The average viewer spends a small amount of time assessing the personal appearance of a male candidate, moves quickly to evaluate setting and surroundings and finally spends the most time focused on what the male candidate is saying. The upward pointing triangle represents the very different framework that our research suggests voters apply to female candidates. The time spent on each category is opposite, with viewers spending the significantly more time considering a female candidate's personal appearance, then similarly evaluates the setting – suggesting that there is then less time to consider what the woman candidate is saying.



How

The first thing a viewer/voter notices about any candidate is their visual appearance. This includes the overall look of the candidate, including clothing, facial expressions, body language, and level of formality. For women this can mean additional questions about age and the role of family.

Where

The setting in which a message is delivered is the next characteristic noticed by a viewer. Where a candidate is, whether the setting is an office, out with ordinary workers on the job site, or in an even more informal setting such as kitchen or a living room. The people surrounding a candidate are also factored into this stage of evaluation.

What

Last a viewer focuses on what is being said, the actual topic matter and the tone and style of the presentation.

Presentation

- **Voters judge women by how they look, what they say and where they say it.** While men have to be aware of their visual presentations, women have to be even more vigilant about how they present themselves.
- **Formal settings and attire show women as serious and right for the job.** When presented this way, women received higher effectiveness ratings.

The need for a formal setting and attire is most obvious in the generic created ads. The formal female ads rated higher than the informal ads among every voter group.

The younger and more attractive the candidate, the more important a formal setting.

“With [candidate X] standing up there as an executive, in all of the pictures if you take a look at her and at the girl [candidate Y], you’ll see [candidate Y] is in blue jeans and [candidate X] has been in a business suit the whole time. I thought a whole lot higher of [candidate X] than I did [candidate Y]. [Candidate Y] didn’t look like she was governor material. [Candidate X] looked a little bit better.”

-younger woman in Missouri

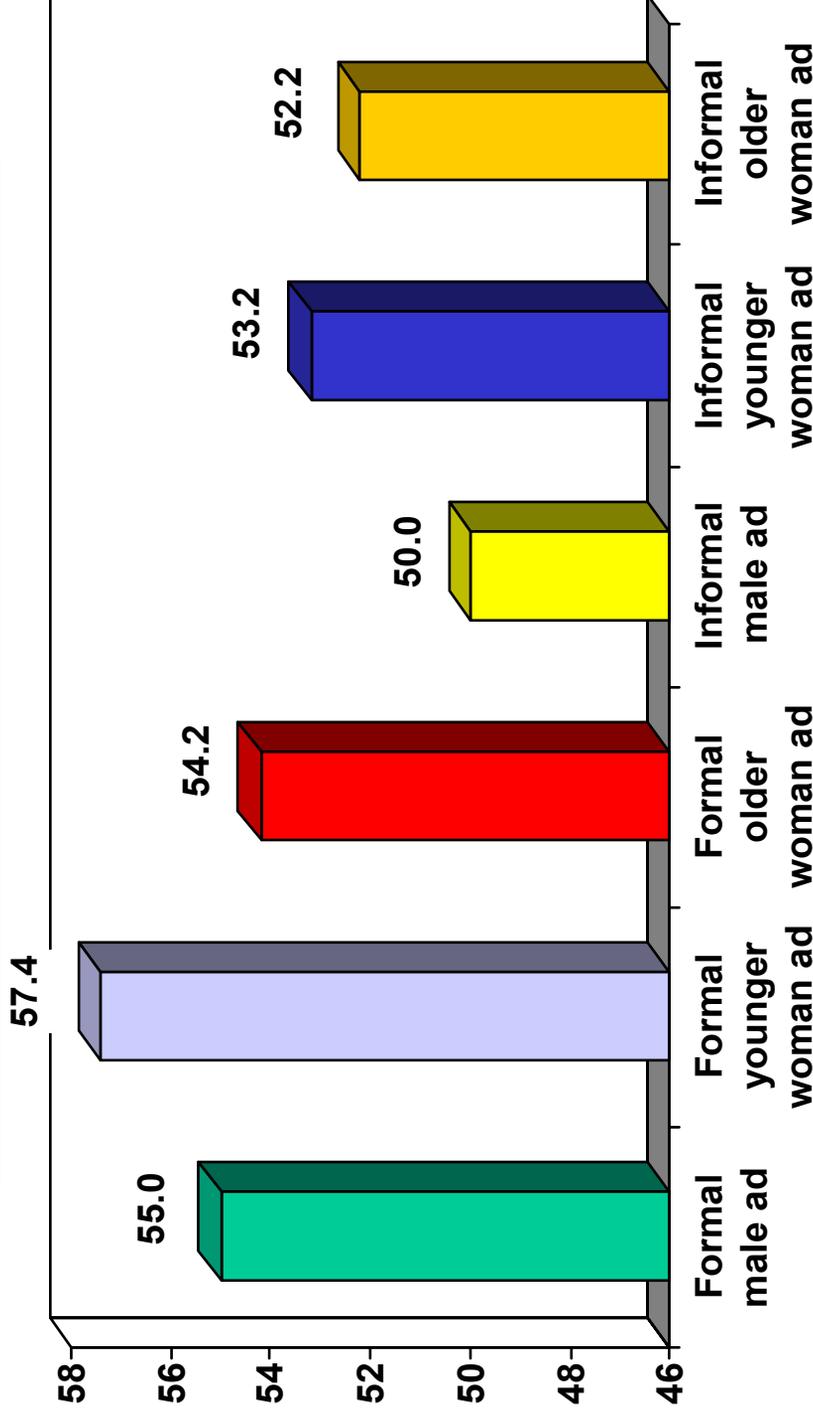
“Well, I was just going to say that I didn’t... it was a turn off to me when they were trying to get by with just looks and personality and real folksy stuff. I just didn’t like the way she looked.”

-younger woman in Missouri

In the created ads, the formal ads garner higher ratings than the informal ads.

“Now we’re going to be watching some video clips that show candidates. As we watch these clips I want you to tell me with your dials if what you are seeing makes you think that the candidate is showing strength and is an effective leader. Zero means no strength, or not effective, and 100 means a great deal of strength or very effective.”

Means of created segments



Formal settings best convey effectiveness.

- **Many informal settings can be appealing, but not particularly effective.**

For both male and female candidates, shaking hands, sitting with children, standing next to a child's desk, or standing in nostalgic settings, such as wheat fields, rate high on the appealing scale with voters, but do not rate high on effectiveness.

Sitting at a desk, standing at a podium, or being in a business or meeting setting work best for conveying effectiveness for the female candidates.

- **Voters are more critical of female candidates' appearances than they are of male candidates.**

Women candidates need to show a seriousness of purpose – if they come across as too sexy, too casual, or too glamorous, then they hurt their chances of being seen as an effective leader.

Voters, are much more likely to comment on the appearance of the female candidates than the male candidates.

“I think there is a matter of dress. It should not be about who has the best figure. Again, I thought that woman... was just abominable with the jeans and the tight suits and all that. I think there is a matter of sophistication and tastefulness that should be in their dress that makes them look professional and confident.”

- Younger woman in Maryland

“I just didn't like the way she looked.”

- Younger woman in Missouri

Strong Active Language

- **The way women candidates speak, where they speak, and what they say are critical to showing effectiveness. Energetic presentations and active verbs prove to be effective tools for women.**
- **One of the most robust findings is that active verbs work well for female candidates.** Active verbs connote effectiveness and toughness, as well as demonstrating a proven record. Active verbs such as “fought,” “told,” “cracked down,” and “forged” are all verbs that convey effectiveness and toughness to voters, and voters dial up on effectiveness on the language, and overall rate the ads higher.
 - **Voters also respond to women candidates personally making tough statements** – “you break the law, you pay the price;” “you do the crime, you do the time;” “we’ve got to change the system;” “the voters are tired of being lied to;” “there will be honest budgets.” Voters dialed up on effectiveness and tended to have higher recall in the groups of these moments.
 - **Talking in active language also allows women to set up places where they have taken on a tough enemy, and to speak for themselves in more forceful language.**
 - **In all the ads we tested there was never an instance when voters dialed up on effectiveness and toughness but down on appeal.**

Examples of active language that convey effectiveness

"Took neighborhood watch programs statewide"

"Toughened prison sentences and child abuse laws"

"Fight for better schools"

"Fought for death penalty, drug laws and three strikes you're out"

"Fighting for health care for children"

"Forged legislation"

"Fought for fair credit rights for women"

**For more information on this and other reports on women's leadership,
please see**

www.thewhitehouseproject.org

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