



Gender themes in state legislative candidates' websites[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Female candidates can represent women by campaigning on issues that have traditionally been the purview of women, and motivating their opponents to do likewise. Although recent research on gubernatorial and congressional elections has found relatively little difference between male and female candidates in their campaign issues, it is possible that greater differences could be found at the state level. This article examines the effects of state legislative candidates' sex and party and opponents' sex on whether candidates campaign on women's or men's issues. It does so by examining campaign websites in three states in 2012: Alaska, Colorado, and Minnesota. The article finds that female, and candidates with female opponents focus more on women's issues in their campaigns than do male candidates and those running against male candidates. In addition, it finds that although Democrats too are more likely to campaign on women's issues, party does not explain away the sex differences. Also as predicted, the article finds little sex difference in the degree to which candidates focus on men's issues, but Republicans are more likely to campaign on men's issues than are Democrats.

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1. Introduction

The issues candidates discuss during their campaigns can educate voters about the candidates and frame the election. In addition, campaign issues can have broader effects. When candidates discuss policy on the campaign trail they engage in a dialog that can help place items on the public agenda. Sulkin (2005), for example, found that members of Congress engage in "uptake." That is members of Congress who are criticized during their campaign for not addressing an issue are more likely to work on that issue in the next Congress. Since campaign issues affect what members do when they are elected, if female candidates are more likely

than male candidates to campaign on women's issues then the presence of female candidates could improve women's representation by affecting the public agenda. Given this potential, this article examines whether female and male candidates differ in their campaign issues. It does this by examining the 2012 state legislative campaigns in three states.

Compared to others, female candidates, and to a lesser degree their opponents, are expected to campaign more on women's issues while not ignoring men's issues. Michelle Swers (2002, 10) defines women's issues as "issues that are particularly salient to women because they seek to achieve equality for women; they address women's special needs, such as women's health concerns or child care; or they confront issues with which women have traditionally been concerned in their role as caregivers, such as education or the protection of children." Women's issues can be contrasted with men's issues: issues that affect men as men, those that "traditionally concern" men as breadwinners, and those that men tend to be concerned about.

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2. Literature review

Candidates' sex is expected to affect their issue priorities for both personal and strategic reasons. On a personal level, differences between the socialization and life experiences of males and females, as well as their biological differences, may affect their interests such that females have more of an ethic of care, and are likely to have care giving roles and males have more of an ethic of justices and value independence (for example see, Gilligan, 1982; Hatemi, Medland, & Eaves, 2009). As a consequence, females and males differ in their issue preferences and concerns particularly as they relate to compassion issues and use of force (for example see Kaufmann & Petrocik, 1999; Norrander, 2008). Even among legislators, females are more likely to work on women's issues, whether measured by bill introductions, roll call votes, or surveys of legislators (Barrett, 1995; Poggione, 2005; Swers, 1998, 2002; Thomas, 1994; Thomas & Welch, 1991).

Female candidates also may be more likely than their counterparts to campaign on women's issues for strategic reasons. A common strategy for candidates is to capture or own issues important to voters. Since voters are unlikely to change their policy positions during a campaign, candidates are advised to frame their campaigns around issues on which they are seen as competent (Arbour, 2013; Petrocik, 1996; Riker, 1983). For example, if voters care about agriculture and a candidate is a farmer, then that candidate could appeal to voters and be the "agriculture candidate." Although Petrocik (1996) argued the candidate's party and record were two key sources for issue ownership, gender may be as well. Female candidates are likely to have records that confer competence in the area of women's issues, and male candidates are likely to have records that confer competence in the area of men's issues. Female are more likely to have care professions and female politicians are more likely to work on these issues (Barrett, 1995; Poggione, 2005; Swers, 1998, 2002; Thomas, 1994; Thomas & Welch, 1991). Female candidates may also be better able to capture women's issues because of voters' stereotypes. Female candidates tend to be stereotyped as competent on issues related to women, healthcare, and education and male candidates as competent on issues related to agriculture, crime and defense (Alexander & Andersen, 1993; Fridkin & Kenney, 2009; Huddy & Terklidisen, 1994; Leeper, 1991; Sanbonmatsu & Dolan, 2009; Sapiro, 1981–82). Recent work by Dittmar (2015) involving interviews with consultants and candidates from statewide races in 2008 and 2010 too demonstrates that campaigns are aware that elections are gendered and take that into consideration when designing strategies. Thus, it is reasonable to expect female candidates to be better able than male candidates to capture women's issues.

Even though there are solid reasons to expect sex differences in candidates' attention to women's issues, recent research has had a difficult time finding significant differences (Dolan, 2005; Sapiro, Cramer Walsh, Strach, & Hennings, 2011). Although research from the 1980s and 1990s tended to find significant differences between male and female candidates, such that female candidates

were more likely to campaign on social policies including children issues, education, environment, and abortion (Kahn, 1993; la Cour Dabelko & Herrnson, 1997; Robertson, Froemling, Wells, & McGraw, 1999), research conducted during the 21st century has not. Dolan's (2005) examination of the websites of candidates for Congress in 2000–2002 found that female and male candidates campaigned on similar issues and what appeared to drive campaign issues was the candidate's party. Looking at House races in the same year, Sapiro et al. (2011) examined television ads produced by candidates and parties/groups and reached similar conclusions.

One of the weaknesses of the research on sex differences in campaign issues is that it has focused on gubernatorial and congressional elections; and level of office may affect the role of sex in campaign issues (Windett, 2014). Only one study has examined sex differences in campaign issues at the state legislative level. Larson (2001) examined brochures of candidates for the Pennsylvania lower assembly in 1996 and 1998 and found that female candidates, particularly Republican female candidates, were more likely to run on women's issues. However, Larson's study was very limited in scope and was conducted prior to the 21st century. The goal of this article is to help fill the void and examine sex differences in campaign issues in state legislative races in a recent election, 2012. This will not directly test whether sex differences are greater in state legislative races than national office, rather it will test whether significant sex differences can be found in state legislative races in the 21st century.

Sex differences may exist between candidates running for state legislature even if they do not exist between candidates running for higher-level offices. Compared to the federal government, states have traditionally been responsible for education, social services and healthcare. These are issues often seen as women's issues. For example, females are more likely to be employed in education,¹ are more knowledgeable about education policies (Verba, Burns, & Schlozman, 1997), and tend to want more government involvement in healthcare and other social services (Norrander, 2008). Conversely, many men's issues are more likely to be dealt with at the national level. For example, states have little role in defense policy and females want less spending on defense and are less likely to be employed in the Department of Defense.² Since women's issues are likely to be policies worked on by state legislatures, the costs for state legislative candidates to run on women's issues may be minimal. Windett (2014, 629) states that "(C)andidates may be successful when running for lower level legislative offices with issue priorities that line up with their respective gender stereotypes, but scholars have persuasively demonstrated that gender stereotypes hurt women as the level of office increases. . ."

¹ According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics in 2014 74% of Americans employed in Education, training and library occupations were female, and among elementary education teachers 80% were female (<http://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat11.pdf>).

² http://electionstudies.org/nesguide/2ndtable/t4d_3b_2.htm.

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