

# The Impact of 'Kick-Ass' Female Candidates on the Political Engagement of Women and Men

Karen Stenner

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and subsequently incorporated into the book manuscript,  
*Tall Man Talking: Gender Socialization and Political Leadership* (in progress).

This work explores the impact of gender-stereotypic and counter-stereotypic male and female candidates on the political engagement of women and men. It brings together a variety of evidence from:

- 1). an experimental study manipulating (via fabricated newspaper articles) exposure to (unbeknownst to subjects, *fictitious*) male and female Senate candidates, described in gender-stereotypic or counter-stereotypic terms, and
- 2). a large-scale field experiment conducted in Durham, North Carolina pre- and post-election 2000, again manipulating (among other things) whether the male or female candidates *actually* running for various state offices in this election were described in gender-stereotypic or counter-stereotypic terms.

The data from these two experiments provide converging evidence regarding the psychological mechanisms underlying women's oft-noted enhanced political engagement (knowledge, interest, efficacy, participation) when confronted with female candidates (especially tough, knowledgeable, counter-stereotypic candidates) competing for important political offices. And they indicate the 'background' attributes (personality, socialization, childhood experiences, prior attitudes) that condition men's and women's evaluation and acceptance of these candidates, and their enhanced/diminished political engagement in response to same.

*Study 1.* The first controlled experiment suggests one of the important mechanisms (enhanced self-confidence and self-esteem) by which the presence of strong female candidates increases the political engagement (political knowledge and interest) of women (*and* diminishes that of men). This provides some direct evidence to suggest that women's taste for, and involvement in the political 'game' might be immediately and dramatically enhanced by the presence of more women 'players', especially counter-stereotypic players, in that game.

This first experiment used a sample of 155 adults from the NY/NJ/PA area. I exposed the subjects to an unbeknownst-to-them fictitious newspaper article about two candidates—one male, one female—supposedly running for an open Senate seat in

Wyoming, then measured a number of attributes and evaluations. In different versions of the article, the male and female candidates were each described in either gender-stereotypic or counter-stereotypic terms (see Appendix A). Among other things, I discovered that men did significantly poorer on tests of political knowledge, and women did significantly better following exposure to a counter-stereotypic as opposed to a stereotypic female candidate. This most likely was a matter of enhancing the confidence of the women, and diminishing the confidence of the men by the candidate descriptions to which they were exposed, since nothing in the knowledge test bore any relation to things that they had read about in any version of the article. In essence, then, it may be that women gain greater confidence in their political abilities and 'perform' better in politically-relevant domains when presented with a very strong, tough, competent and knowledgeable female candidate. On the other hand, a female candidate behaving in a manner normally reserved for men and incongruent with gender expectations may undermine the confidence and performance of men.

This is unlikely to be a chance result, since I saw similar patterns on some other variables, e.g. males confronted with the counter-stereotypic female candidate were also significantly more likely to write negative comments in response to an open-ended "Is there anything else you'd like to say?" question, and were significantly less willing to make themselves available for a follow-up study. These findings mesh nicely with other research suggesting that women in districts with a female Senate candidate show higher levels of interest, efficacy and participation, all else being equal. All of this I conceive as being under the rubric of 'political socialization'. Women presented with a counter-stereotypic (tough, strong, intelligent) female candidate, who is rewarded and applauded for those qualities, seem to display higher levels of political confidence, psychological engagement and, presumably, willingness to participate in the political 'game'. In contrast, men presented with the same counter-stereotypic female candidate appear to be somewhat confused and undermined by the (socialization) experience, showing lower levels of these attributes of knowledge and interest so important to participating in and succeeding at politics. (Presented with stereotypic versions of the male and female candidates, they seem to be their usual confident selves!). That this simple experimental manipulation can have any such effects on these central political attributes lends weight to my claims about the importance of gender socialization, broadly conceived, to women's abilities to achieve full participation and political equality.

*Study 2.* The second study was a field experiment conducted before and after the presidential election of 2000, where subjects were randomly exposed to (brief, and general) 'expert' commentary in which either the male or female candidates *actually* running for various state offices in this election were praised in gender-stereotypic or counter-stereotypic terms (see Appendix B). Here I manipulated commentary supposedly offered by media experts regarding the general character of the candidates running for office that year: either strong (i.e. stereotypic) men, compassionate (i.e. counter-stereotypic) men, strong (counter-stereotypic) women, or compassionate (stereotypic) women.

This field experiment made analytic use of the fact that a number of viable female candidates were running for various important political offices. Most notably, both the Republican and Democratic parties had put up experienced, well-known and respected female candidates for the office of Lieutenant-Governor. Moreover, this was all taking

place in a state (N.C.) and county (Durham) in which, four years previous (March 1997), I had already collected 300 pre-test measurements (including rarely seen variables such as personality, socialization, and childhood experiences) from a random sample of over 400 respondents, via an extensive mail-out mail-back questionnaire (*The Durham Community Survey 1997*). Of these original respondents, 133 were re-interviewed by phone either prior to, or in the wake of the 2000 elections.

My main goal was to expand upon the initial findings of the first controlled experiment by gauging the impact of the (stereotypic/counter-stereotypic) manipulation on a broader range of measures of political engagement. These included political trust, external efficacy, campaign and voting participation, as well as willingness to vote for the female and male candidates. In that order, the main findings of this second analysis can be broadly summarized as follows:

(a) *Political Trust*

- men become significantly more mistrusting of government than are women when exposed to (counter-stereotypic) strong female candidates (as opposed to the stereotypic strong male candidates).
- strong female candidates decrease the trust of men, but leave women unaffected.

(b) *External Efficacy*

- men generally feel more externally efficacious than women, given exposure to the regular fare of stereotypic, strong male candidates
- women become more externally efficacious than men upon hearing praise of female candidates, especially (but not exclusively) the stereotypic, compassionate female candidates.
- exposure to strong and, especially, compassionate female candidates, rather than the standard fare of strong male candidates, decreases the external efficacy of men.

(c) *Campaign Participation*

- hearing praise of strong female candidates rather than the standard touting of strong male candidates significantly and substantially increases the campaign participation of both women and men

(d) *Voting Participation*

- under normal circumstances men and women do not differ significantly in their tendency to vote at all levels of office, but women are substantially more likely to vote than are men if exposed to praise of compassionate female candidates.
- hearing praise of compassionate female candidates rather than the usual talk of strong male candidates substantially increases women's tendency to vote at all levels of office, but has no impact upon men.