

Gender is a relative term in politics, study finds

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For only the second time in presidential debate history, a female nominee will take the stage to spar with a male opponent. While Geraldine Ferraro broke new ground in 1984, it has taken 24 years for another female to be included as part of a major party ticket. On Thursday night, the nation will be watching as vice presidential candidates Sarah Palin and Joe Biden clash in the vice presidential debate. A revealing study by a University of Missouri researcher has found that male and female candidates, when debating head-to-head, actually adopt each other's traditional communication styles.

"In politics, the stereotypical 'masculine' traits of being tough and ambitious, as well as having strong leadership and administrative skills, are more highly valued over the so-called 'feminine' traits of being compassionate and family-oriented, and possessing strong people skills," said Mitchell McKinney, associate professor of communication at MU, who conducted the study along with Mary Banwart, communication professor at the University of Kansas.

The study, published in the journal *Communication Studies*, examined candidates engaged in televised, mixed-gender campaign debates, which included U.S. Senate and gubernatorial debates. McKinney found that female candidates were more likely to use so-called "masculine" communication strategies than their male counterparts. Conversely, it was the male candidates who frequently adopted a "feminine style" in their debate responses.

According to McKinney, female candidates issued personal attacks of their male opponents in their debate responses 58 percent of the time, compared with male candidates who attacked their female opponents in 45 percent of their debate responses. Female candidates were more likely to raise traditional "masculine" issues, such as crime, defense, taxes and budget issues, than male candidates and it was the female candidates who were more likely to tout their own experience and accomplishments.

"By being the more aggressive debater, shying away from the so-called 'feminine' issues and adopting strategies that focus on their experience, these women are trying to overcome traditional notions that question a female candidate's governing competence. They also are challenging the stereotype that male candidates possess greater strength or political ability and have greater political experience," McKinney said.

Male candidates were more likely to emphasize feminine traits, such as sensitivity and cooperation, in selling themselves. Men were more likely to address so-called "feminine" issues, such as women's issues, health care and education, than the female candidates.

"This study suggests that when female and male candidates meet face-to-face on the debate stage, both seem mindful of gendered stereotypes and respond with a strategy of gendered adaptiveness – with each adopting communication strategies and styles characteristically attributed to the opposite gender," McKinney said.

Source: University of Missouri-Columbia

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