

Competence matters more than gender for women running for office

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The nomination of the first woman presidential candidate by a major party has shattered some gender barriers, while at the same time reinforced certain stereotypes and double standards that still exist for women.

Tessa Ditonto, an assistant professor of political science at Iowa State University, studies how gender and political psychology influence voter behavior. Ditonto says the 2016 election has elevated gender, sexism and the role of women in politics to the forefront of national conversation.

"This election will test whether our expectations about presidential masculinity - strength, 'toughness' and military might - affect the way we evaluate the first female major party nominee," Ditonto said. "It will also show how voters' impressions of Hillary Clinton, a major presence in American politics for decades, were influenced by the gendered, and often blatantly sexist, media coverage and comments from her opponent's campaign."

Ditonto's new research, which examines gender and candidate competence - based on [information](#) and looks - provides some insight as to how gender influences voter behavior. The results, published in the journal *Political Behavior*, are encouraging and somewhat troubling, Ditonto said. She found that gender plays a significant role in how much voters care about a candidate's perceived competence.

The good news is women candidates, portrayed as competent in the study, did just as well as men who were viewed as competent. However, voters had different standards when judging incompetence. Ditonto says they were more forgiving of men than women who appeared incompetent.

To test [voter behavior](#), Ditonto created a mock election scenario. In two separate experiments,

study participants were asked to participate in a simulated campaign for a presidential election, answer questions about the candidates they saw and cast a vote for their candidate of choice. The first experiment consisted of both a primary and general election. Ditonto says the combined results suggest that for women candidates who are subject to stereotypes about competence, the actual information available about them matters a great deal.

"It's heartening that gender-based stereotypes related to competence are not insurmountable for female candidates. It seems that voters are allowing substantive information to influence their ultimate evaluations and vote choice," Ditonto said. "Perhaps we should be more surprised that male candidates who are portrayed as politically incompetent are still so well liked and supported."

Of the 449 study participants in the first experiment, 58 percent were female. The majority were white and identified as Democrats.

Voters don't always judge a book by its cover

Voters have access to considerably more information about candidates running for national, state and local office than ever before. Still, prior research has shown that voters judge a candidate in other ways, including looks. Ditonto's work found the opposite to be true. A candidate's facial features didn't matter as much when gender and substantive information were taken into consideration, she said.

In her second study, Ditonto used the computer program, FaceGen, to determine how voters respond to facial features. She created multiple male and female candidates, and varied aspects of physical appearance - eye spacing, jaw width and maturity - typically associated with competence. The 377 participants in this study were evenly split by gender. The majority were white and identified

as Democrats. Ditonto says most seemed unaffected by whether or not the candidate looked competent or incompetent.

Provided by Iowa State University

Voters did their homework based on the information provided. However, if the information portrayed a woman as incompetent, they were less likely to support her campaign, even if that meant voting for the other party's candidate. Men were not judged as harshly. Voters were willing to support their party's candidate, even if that candidate was viewed as an incompetent man.

"The combination of a female candidate whose competence has been cast into doubt is such a potent combination of cues, that it can even trump voters' party identification," Ditonto said. "This was pretty unexpected, since party affiliation is almost always the strongest predictor of someone's vote choice."

What does this mean for women?

Gender stereotypes can have negative effects for female candidates, but they don't have to, Ditonto said. Understanding that [voters](#) care about different things when evaluating women and men should underscore the need for women to focus campaigns on their competence and qualifications. However, [gender](#) stereotypes are often reinforced through [media coverage](#), which is another challenge women must overcome, she said.

"The fact that women are more disadvantaged by negative information than are men is problematic. Since information about political candidates is obtained in large part from the news media, this is a problem for women," Ditonto said. "Women candidates are often 'trivialized' in the way the media talks about them and unbiased portrayals of women as competent politicians are not easy to come by."

More information: Tessa Ditonto. A High Bar or a Double Standard? Gender, Competence, and Information in Political Campaigns, *Political Behavior* (2016). [DOI: 10.1007/s11109-016-9357-5](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-016-9357-5)

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