

**NATIONAL SURVEY OF POLITICAL CONSULTANTS:**  
Campaign Strategy, Candidate Presentation, and Gender

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## INTRODUCTION

Political consultants play a direct and increasingly important role in shaping campaign strategy and crafting candidate image, campaign message, and tactics in modern political campaigns. More specifically, as those most intimate to campaign dynamics and with experiences across campaign contexts, campaign consultants are the political actors whose perceptions are most commonly translated into electoral practice.

In studies of campaigns and elections, political practitioners like campaign consultants are too often ignored and measures of campaign output (e.g. websites, television advertisements) are too often the sole indicators used to determine gender differences in strategy. This national survey of active campaign consultants, fielded from April to June 2010, remedies this omission by probing campaign consultants directly about their perceptions of voters' gendered beliefs and gender differences in effective campaign strategies and tactics. Finally, in highlighting campaign consultants as political actors important to the study of campaigns and elections, this survey asks consultants about the state of their profession, with particular attention to gender diversity, challenges to male and female consultants, and potential gender differences in approaches to campaign strategy.

Two hundred and twenty-three active campaign consultants responded to the web-based survey, yielding a response rate of 24.8%. Seventeen respondents participated in follow-up phone interviews to supplement the survey data.

## PERCEPTIONS OF CAMPAIGNS

Campaign rhetoric often draws upon masculine terms of competition. When asked, political consultants are most likely to associate campaigns with wars (46%) and sporting events (39%) over less masculine tasks like cooking or selling toothpaste.

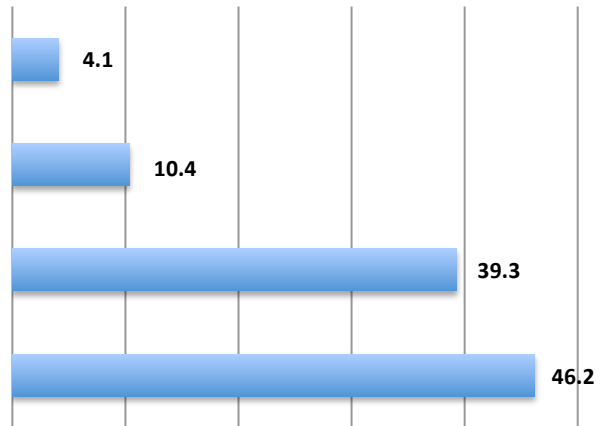
**Chart 1**

**Political campaigns are like selling toothpaste.** The voters are walking down the aisles to see which product cleans the teeth better and which one gives you better breath.

**Political campaigns are like cooking.** You begin with a recipe, make necessary adjustments, and present a dish that will leave a good taste in voters' mouths.

**Political campaigns are like sporting events.** The score changes, competing teams adopt different game plans and the winner isn't determined until the clock runs out.

**Political campaigns are like waging wars.** Each side has a battle plan and, in a limited period of time, you have to seize certain territory and hold it.



*Cells represent percentage of Republican and Democratic consultants responding to the question, "Which of the following analogies best characterizes political campaigns?"*

*N=173*

Within these competitive environments, consultants went on to report their perspectives on the role and/or influence of gender, if any, among voters and in campaign strategy and development.

## PERCEPTIONS OF VOTERS AND GENDER STEREOTYPES

Political science research demonstrates that voters have stereotypical perceptions of men and women politicians and candidates when it comes to traits and issue expertise. Political consultants perceive voter beliefs similarly, noting that voters hold at least some gender stereotypical views of male and female candidates.

**Table 1. Consultant Perceptions of Voters’ Trait Stereotypes**

	Male Candidates	Female Candidates	About the Same
Emotional	0	95.6	4.4
Honest	1.9	58.5	39.6
Compassionate	0	88.1	12.0
Cooperative	1.9	68.6	29.6
Accessible	0.6	53.8	45.6
Liberal	1.3	51.6	47.2
Corrupt	83.1	0	16.9
Assertive	68.1	8.8	23.1
Tough	78.1	1.9	20.0
Strong Leader	63.5	0.6	35.9
Conservative	56.0	0.6	43.4
Qualified	27.9	1.3	70.9
Experienced	39.0	0.6	60.4

*Cells represent percentage of respondents responding to the question, "Do you think the following themes are more effective for male candidates, more effective for female candidates, or do you think that they are equally effective for male and female candidates?"*

*N ranges from 158 to 160.*

### Traits

Consultants note that voters associate certain traits more often with women candidates – emotional, honest, cooperative, accessible, and liberal. They report that voters more often view male candidates as corrupt, assertive, tough, and as strong leaders (see Table 1).

Previous research has shown that women often face a “higher bar” in being viewed as experienced or qualified candidates. However, 60% of consultants in the 2010 survey say that these traits are associated to about the same extent with men and women candidates. Few consultants, however, say that “experienced” or “qualified” are associated *more* with women candidates than with men, and Democratic consultants are more likely to report gendered perceptions of candidates’ qualifications than their Republican counterparts ( $p < .05$ ) (see Table 2).<sup>1</sup>

Partisan consultants diverge more sharply in evaluating voter associations on other candidate traits, with Democratic consultants more likely to view voters’ trait assessments as gendered and Republican consultants more likely to perceive voters as equally likely to attribute these traits to men or women candidates. While consultants of both parties report that voters more often associate emotional and compassionate traits with female candidates and toughness and assertiveness with male candidates, Democratic consultants are more likely to report that voters associate honesty, accessibility, cooperation, and liberal ideologies with female candidates; Republican consultants report that voters associate these traits to about the same extent with men and women.

On the other hand, Democratic consultants report that voters associate corruption and conservatism with men, while Republican consultants perceive minimal difference in voters’ attribution of the same traits to male and female candidates. Similarly, Democratic consultants believe that voters are more likely to view male candidates as strong leaders (76%), while the majority of Republican consultants argue that voters most often attribute leadership skills to both male and female candidates ( $p < .01$ ).

**Table 2. Consultant Perceptions of Voters' Trait Stereotypes, by Consultant Party**

	Male Candidates		Female Candidates		About the Same		Pearson Chi-Square Value
	R	D	R	D	R	D	
Emotional	0	0	<b>93.6</b>	<b>97.0</b>	6.5	3.1	1.0
Honest	3.2	1.0	37.1	<b>72.2</b>	<b>59.7</b>	26.8	19.2***
Compassionate	0	0	<b>85.5</b>	<b>89.7</b>	14.5	10.3	0.6
Cooperative	3.2	1.0	<b>51.6</b>	<b>79.4</b>	45.2	19.6	13.6***
Accessible	1.6	0	33.9	<b>66.7</b>	<b>64.5</b>	33.3	17.1***
Liberal	1.6	1.0	38.7	<b>59.8</b>	<b>59.7</b>	39.2	6.7**
Corrupt	<b>72.6</b>	<b>89.8</b>	0	0	27.4	10.2	8.0**
Assertive	<b>59.7</b>	<b>73.5</b>	9.7	8.2	30.7	18.4	3.6
Tough	<b>69.4</b>	<b>83.7</b>	1.6	2.0	29.0	14.3	5.2*
Experienced	27.4	46.4	1.6	0	<b>71.0</b>	<b>53.6</b>	6.9**
Strong Leader	43.6	<b>76.3</b>	1.4	0	<b>54.8</b>	23.7	18.2***
Conservative	43.6	<b>63.9</b>	1.6	0	<b>54.8</b>	36.1	7.4**
Qualified	21.0	32.4	1.6	1.0	<b>77.4</b>	<b>66.7</b>	2.5

Cells represent the percentage of Republican and Democratic consultants responding to the question, "Do you think that voters associate the following traits and characteristics more with male candidates, more with female candidates, or about the same for both male and female candidates?"

N ranges from 158 to 160; N (Republican Consultants)=62, and N (Democratic Consultants) ranges from 96 to 98

\*\*\*p<.01, \*\*p<.05, \*p<.10

### Issue Expertise

Political consultants report that voters associate certain issues more often with women candidates – health care, family policies, education, and social programs. They report that voters view national security, defense, taxes/economy, foreign policy, and crime as issues of expertise for male candidates (see Table 3).

- While national security and foreign policy are overwhelmingly viewed as issues with male experts, 45% of consultants argue that voters view domestic security (crime) as an area in which men and women candidates share levels of expertise.

**Table 3. Consultant Perceptions of Voters' Stereotypes on Candidate Issue Expertise**

	Male Candidates	Female Candidates	About the Same
Social Programs	1.3	72.2	26.6
Education	0.6	73.9	25.5
Health Care	1.9	65.8	32.3
Family Policy	1.9	78.5	19.6
National Security	85.4	0	14.6
Defense	86.7	0	13.3
Foreign Policy	71.5	0	28.5
Crime	50.0	5.1	44.9
Taxes/Economy	60.1	0	39.9
Immigration	29.1	1.3	69.6
Environment	2.5	27.2	70.3

Cells represent percentage of percentage of Republican and Democratic consultants responding to the question, "Do you think that voters think of the following policy issues as areas of greater expertise for male candidates, greater expertise for female candidates, or about the same for male and female candidates?"

N ranges from 157 to 158.

- The dominance of economic issues may be shifting gendered perceptions of economic issue expertise. Consultants’ responses demonstrate this shift; while 60% argue that voters most often view taxes/economy as an area of greater expertise for men, 40% of consultants argue that voters view taxes/economy as an issue for which men and women candidates are prepared.
- Seventy percent of consultants believe that voters view male and female candidates with about the same level of expertise on environmental and immigration issues.

These findings are largely consistent across consultants’ partisan affiliation. However, across all of these issues, Democratic consultants are *more* likely than Republican consultants to report gender differences in voter perceptions, with more Republican consultants than Democrats reporting that voters associate these issues to about the same extent with men and women candidates ( $p<.05$ ). For example, while 92% of Democratic consultants argue that voters view national security as an area of greater expertise for male candidates, 76% of Republican consultants report the same (with 24% saying that voters view male and female candidates “about the same” on this issue) ( $p<.01$ ). As Table 4 reflects, these differences are also significant for issues of defense, family policy, education, crime, and taxes and the economy.

### Office Matters

Perceptions of gender influence in these areas translate into potential differences in how women candidates fare across types of office, particularly due to the traits and issue expertise required for legislative versus executive, or state versus national, offices. In this survey, consultants were asked whether voters are more likely to vote for a woman candidate for the U.S. Senate (legislative) or for gubernatorial (executive) office. Nearly 50% of consultants argue that voters are equally likely to vote for women for U.S. Senator or Governor.

- While 33% of consultants think that voters are more likely to vote for a woman for the U.S. Senate, only 9.9% think voters are more likely to vote for a woman candidate to be Governor.
- Democratic consultants report that women have an advantage in running for the U.S. Senate over Governor. Republican consultants do not see a significant difference in women’s chances for either office ( $p<.01$ ).

**Table 4. Consultant Perceptions of Voters’ Stereotypes on Candidate Issue Expertise, by Consultant Party**

	Male Candidates		Female Candidates		About the Same		Pearson Chi-Square Value
	R	D	R	D	R	D	
Social Programs	0	2.1	<b>66.1</b>	<b>76.0</b>	33.9	21.9	3.8
Education	0	1.1	<b>64.5</b>	<b>80.0</b>	35.5	19.0	5.9*
Health Care	3.2	1.0	<b>59.7</b>	<b>69.8</b>	37.1	29.2	2.3
Family Policy	0	3.1	<b>66.1</b>	<b>86.5</b>	33.9	10.6	14.5***
National Security	<b>75.8</b>	<b>91.7</b>	0	0	24.2	8.3	7.6**
Defense	<b>77.6</b>	<b>92.7</b>	0	0	22.6	7.3	7.6**
Foreign Policy	<b>64.5</b>	<b>76.0</b>	0	0	35.5	24.0	2.5
Crime	24.2	<b>68.7</b>	8.1	3.1	<b>67.7</b>	30.2	27.2***
Taxes/Economy	<b>50</b>	<b>66.7</b>	0	0	<b>50.0</b>	33.3	4.4**
Immigration	19.4	35.6	3.2	0	<b>77.4</b>	<b>64.6</b>	7.3**
Environment	0	4.2	33.9	22.9	<b>66.1</b>	<b>72.9</b>	4.5

*Cells represent the percentage of Republican and Democratic consultants responding to the question, "Do you think that voters think of the following policy issues as areas of greater expertise for male candidates, greater expertise for female candidates, or about the same for male and female candidates?"*

N ranges from 158 to 160; N (Republican Consultants)=62, and N (Democratic Consultants) ranges from 95 to 96

\*\*\* $p<.01$ , \*\* $p<.05$ , \* $p<.10$

## GENDER AND CAMPAIGN STRATEGY

While many scholars have argued that gender stereotypes do not act as a barrier to women’s electoral success, others have cited the impact of voters’ stereotypes on their support for candidates beyond the ballot box (e.g. fundraising, volunteering) and the influence of gender stereotypes in candidates’ campaign experience and strategy-building. Understanding campaign insiders’ perspectives of voter stereotypes contributes to the latter argument that stereotypes might have an indirect impact on electoral outcomes by shaping how candidates’ and consultants’ negotiate campaign terrain.

### Gender as a Campaign Consideration

When asked about how important select considerations are in drafting campaign strategy, over 90% of consultants view candidate and opponent experience as important in the development of campaign strategy (see Table 5). However, when asked about the importance of race and gender, consultants are less definitive. Fifty-four percent of Republican consultants and 80% of Democratic consultants view candidate race as an important strategic consideration ( $p < .01$ ). This difference remains when consultants are asked about the race of their opponent; 39% of Republican consultants view this as important, compared to 63% of Democratic consultants ( $p < .05$ ). When asked about gender, the partisan difference persists. Sixty-eight percent of Democratic consultants view candidate gender, and 56% view opponent gender, as important to strategic calculations. A minority of Republican consultants, on the other hand, view gender of candidates or opponents as important considerations in the development of campaign strategy ( $p < .01$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

**Table 5. Importance of Considerations in Drafting Campaign Strategy**

	Very Important	Important	Not Very Important	Not Important at All
Candidate Experience	42.7	48.7	7.6	1.1
Opponent Experience	41.6	48.7	8.7	1.1
Candidate Race	12.4	57.8	25.4	4.3
Candidate Gender	7.0	51.4	33.5	8.1
Opponent Race	7.6	46.5	38.9	7.0
Opponent Gender	4.9	42.9	41.9	10.3
Candidate Age	1.1	40.0	56.2	3.8
Opponent Age	0.0	36.1	59.6	4.4

*Cells represent percentage of Republican and Democratic consultants responding to the question, “How important would you say the following factors are in shaping a candidate's campaign strategy?”*

*N ranges from 183 to 185.*

**NOTE:** Categories are listed from those rated most important (very important and important combined) to least important.

### Themes

The challenge to navigate voter perceptions and contextual demands in campaign strategy is evident in consultants’ perceptions of effective themes for male and female candidates. Of the ten themes offered, consultants argue that eight are equally effective for male and female candidates (see Table 6). Consistent with perceptions of voters’ stereotypes, consultants argue that a theme emphasizing strength/toughness is more effective for male candidates and that a theme emphasizing compassion is more effective for female candidates.

**Table 6. Consultant Perceptions of Theme Effectiveness for Male and Female Candidates**

	Male Candidates	Female Candidates	About the Same
Compassion	10.7	60.4	28.9
Strength/Toughness	45.9	15.1	39.0
Leadership	27.0	5.7	67.3
Change	1.9	32.1	66.0
Government Reform	4.4	30.2	65.4
Family Values	11.4	17.1	71.5
Ethics	1.9	33.3	64.8
Honesty	3.1	33.3	63.5
Moral Values	3.1	18.9	78.0
Experience	14.0	8.3	77.7

Cells represent percentage of Republican and Democratic consultants responding to the question, “Do you think the following themes are more effective for male candidates, more effective for female candidates, or do you think that they are equally effective for male and female candidates?”

N ranges from 157 to 159.

There is also evidence that consultants’ perceptions of voter stereotypes influence their beliefs about effective themes for male and female candidates. Those consultants who believe that voters view women as more honest and men as more corrupt, for example, are also those consultants most likely to view the honesty theme as more effective for women ( $p < .05$ ). Moreover, consultants who perceive strong feminine and masculine trait and issue stereotypes are more likely than those who do not to argue that each of these themes advantages candidates of one gender or the other.<sup>2</sup>

While the majority of consultants across party lines view ethics, honesty, government reform, and family values as equally effective themes across candidate gender, Democratic and Republican consultants differ in their perceptions, as Democratic consultants are more likely than their Republican counterparts to view a gender advantage on these themes ( $p < .01$ ). For example, while 50% of Democratic consultants view honesty as an equally effective theme for men and women candidates, 84% of Republican consultants say the same ( $p < .01$ ).

**Presentation Style**

**Table 7. Consultant Perceptions of Presentation Styles’ Effectiveness for Male and Female Candidates**

	Works Better for Male Candidates	Works Better for Female Candidates	About the Same
Picturing the candidate with his/her spouse	42.1	4.5	53.4
Picturing the candidate with his/her family ( <i>only</i> when children are grown)	6.3	15.3	78.4
Picturing the candidate with his/her family ( <i>even if</i> children are young)	40.1	6.8	53.1
Picturing the candidate in primarily professional dress attire	2.9	42.9	54.3

Cells represent percentage of Republican and Democratic consultants responding to the question, “Consider the following candidate presentation strategies. Do you think that these strategies work better for male candidates, work better for female candidates, or work about the same for male and female candidates?”

N ranges from 175 to 178.

Consultants' reports of voter perceptions and stereotypes of male and female candidates are also related to the presentation styles they recommend for men and women running for political office. For example, those consultants who perceive strong masculine and feminine trait and issue stereotypes among voters are also more likely to cite professional dress as the best strategy for female candidates ( $p < .05$ ). Likewise, while the majority of Democratic consultants agree with this perception, 68% of Republican consultants report that this style of dress has equal impact for male and female candidates ( $p < .05$ ).

The majority of consultants say that picturing a candidate with his/her spouse and picturing a candidate with his/her children – whether the children are young or old - work “about the same” for male and female candidates (see Table 7). Still, a large proportion of consultants cite spousal presence and picturing candidates his/her own young children as working better for male candidates, reflecting the potential differences in voter perceptions of appropriate familial and professional roles for men and women.

### Targeting Women Voters

Above all, consultants see targeting women voters as most advantageous to Democratic and female candidates. One consultant writes, “As a general rule, all other things being equal, a female candidate will have a natural edge of about 10% with female voters.”<sup>3</sup> However, when asked who would benefit most from targeting women voters between Democratic men or Republican women, consultants are split; 47.5% say Democratic men and 46.9% say Republican women would benefit most. Unsurprisingly, unpacking these responses reveals differences between Republican and Democratic consultants; consultants are most likely to see the benefit of targeting women voters to members of their own party.

### Negative Campaigning

Consultants recognize that negative tactics like emphasizing an opponent’s professional or personal faults and weaknesses are often necessary in political campaigns.

- Seventy six percent of political consultants say that emphasizing an opponent’s *professional* faults is usually necessary, while 63% of consultants say that emphasizing an opponent’s *personal* faults or weaknesses is sometimes necessary.
- Consultants note that emphasizing opponent’s *professional* faults and weaknesses is usually necessary when a candidate is a challenger, is in a neck-to-neck race, and when an opponent attacks first.

Chart 2

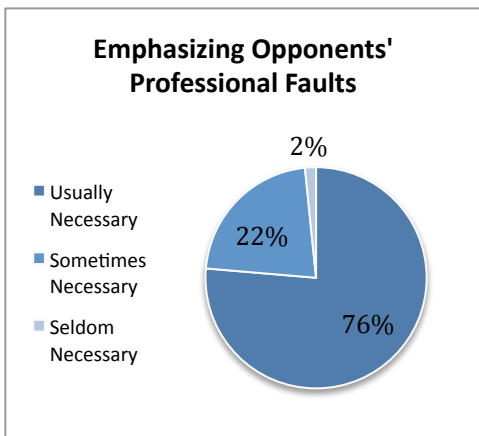
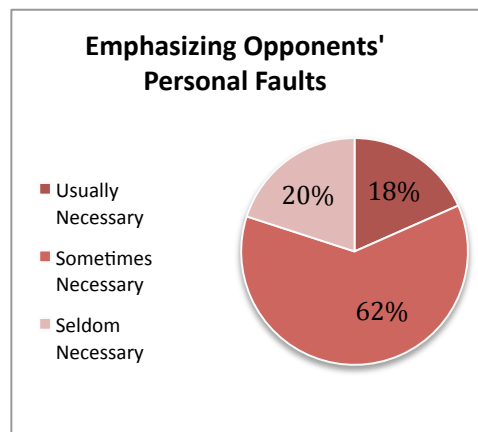


Chart 3



Answers represent the percentage of Republican and Democratic consultants responding to the question, “In your campaign experience, have you found the following tactics to be usually necessary, sometimes necessary, or seldom necessary in competing against your candidate’s opponent?”

N ranges from 177 to 178.

Despite an overall acceptance of the necessity of negative campaigning, 65% of all consultants agree that male candidates need to “tread more carefully” in criticizing female opponents instead of male opponents. Republican and

*“Certainly, you never want to be the guy drawing first blood on a woman. No doubt about it.”*



Democratic consultants are unified in this position, and those consultants who perceive strong masculine trait stereotypes in voters' psyche are even more likely to advocate caution ( $p < .01$ ).<sup>4</sup>

## GENDER AND ELECTORAL CHALLENGES

Consultants note that both male and female candidates face electoral challenges – from media and voter biases to raising money and managing campaign staff. However, they are split on whether or not these challenges are equally difficult for men or women candidates, or are more difficult for women candidates. Very few consultants think that any of these challenges are more difficult for male candidates than they are for female candidates (see Table 8).

**Table 8. Challenges to Male and Female Candidates**

	More Difficult for Male Candidates	More Difficult for Female Candidates	Equally Difficult
Dealing with/Combating Voter Biases	2.3	49.4	48.3
Dealing with/Combating Media Biases	4.6	46.9	48.6
Securing Sufficient Campaign Funds	0	32.2	67.8
Managing Campaign Staff	1.7	18.3	80.0

*Cells represent percentage of Republican and Democratic consultants responding to the question, "Do you think that the following campaign challenges are more difficult for male candidates, more difficult for female candidates, or are equally difficult for male and female candidates?"*

*N ranges from 174 to 175.*

Democratic consultants are more likely to perceive greater media ( $p < .01$ ) and voter bias ( $p < .05$ ) against women candidates than their Republican counterparts.

Among Democrats, female consultants are more likely than their male colleagues to perceive a political landscape that is slightly more challenging to women candidates. Female consultants are more likely than men to say that fundraising is more difficult for women candidates than men ( $p < .05$ ) (see Table 9). While not reaching statistical significance, female consultants also perceive media and voter biases as greater challenges for female candidates than do male consultants; 81% of female consultants (v. 57% men) view media biases as more difficult for women and 76% (v. 55% men) say voter biases are more difficult for women. Overall, while Democratic men and women view the political landscape very similarly in their responses, there is some evidence that female consultants perceive a slightly more gendered campaign terrain. These different perspectives – among men and women, and Democratic and Republican consultants – could influence how, when, and to what extent campaigns consider gender in negotiating campaign terrain.

**Table 9. Challenges to Male and Female Candidates, by Consultant Gender (only Democratic Consultants)**

	More Difficult for Male Candidates		More Difficult for Female Candidates		Equally Difficult		Pearson Chi-Square Value
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	
Dealing with/Combating Voter Biases	0	0	33.8	61.9	66.2	38.1	5.4**
Dealing with/Combating Media Biases	2.7	0	56.8	81.0	40.5	19.1	4.2
Securing Sufficient Campaign Funds	4.1	0	55.4	76.2	40.5	23.8	3.3
Managing Campaign Staff	2.7	4.8	13.5	23.8	83.8	71.4	1.6

*Cells represent the percentage of male and female Democratic consultants responding to the questions, "Do you think that the following campaign challenges are more difficult for male candidates, more difficult for female candidates, or are equally difficult for male and female candidates?"*

*N=95; N (Male Democratic Consultants)=74, and N (Female Democratic Consultants)=21. The small number of female consultants, while representative of the population, should be considered in data interpretation and generalization.*

*\*\*p < .05*

## THE PROFESSION: GENDER DIFFERENCES AMONG CONSULTANTS

Candidates are not the only political actors facing challenging terrain. Political consultants report that the consulting profession is not for the faint of heart. Nearly 60% of all consultants report that procuring their current positions in the industry was difficult. Moreover, over 75% of consultants note the importance of having a mentor within the profession in order to succeed.

**Table 10. Challenges to Consultants**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
In order to succeed in political consulting, it is necessary to have (a) mentor(s).	39.2	37.3	18.4	1.9
Procuring my current position in the industry of political consulting was difficult.	11.4	48.1	34.2	6.3

*Cells represent percentage of Republican and Democratic consultants responding to the question, "Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements."*

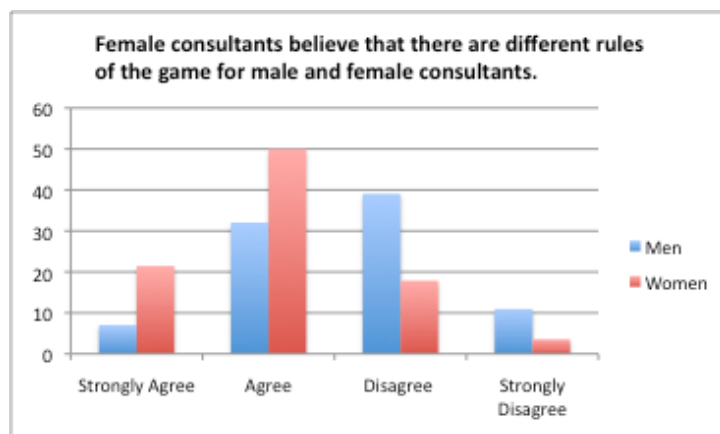
N=161

**NOTE:** Cells do not add to 100% due to "don't know" responses.

These challenges may be accentuated for individuals who do not fit the white male norm within the consulting industry (see Chart 3). From Rosenbloom's (1973) *Election Men* to recent scholarship on campaign professionals, the absence of women professionals is noteworthy. According to a survey of consultants through American University in 2000, roughly 18% of those professionals in the consulting industry are women. Based on the 2010 survey presented here, nearly 75% of consultants working for federal and/or gubernatorial races are men. This number is consistent with the perspective of those in the profession, as more than 70% of respondents believe that women make up less than a third of all political consultants.<sup>5</sup> However, there is greater gender parity among those consultants in the field for five years or less (61% men, 39% women), which may reflect a move toward greater gender parity in the profession.

Political consultants are split on whether or not men and women consultants face "different rules of the game" within their profession; 45% of consultants agree that there are different rules for men and women, while 44% disagree (10% "don't know"). Female consultants are more likely to agree that there are "different rules of the game" for male and female consultants ( $p < .05$ ). Democratic and Republican consultants are not significantly different in their perceptions of the diversity, difficulty, or gender rules of the consulting profession.

**CHART 3**



One female consultant notes, "I have found that female consultants tend to work harder to achieve the same rank as their male counterparts." This challenge, if widespread, may present one possible reason for the dearth of women in political consulting, though it does not reflect the full picture.

*Answers represent the percentage of Republican and Democratic consultants responding to the question, "Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement: There are different 'rules of the game' for men and women consultants." N = 159.*

In interviews with political consultants, men and women attributed the industry's gender disparities to a combination of the historical precedent of consulting as a male-dominated industry, the challenges of an all-encompassing schedule for women with children and families, and the preferences of women to seek professions outside of what is often perceived as a "rough-and-tumble" world of politics. Still, they noted that women are better represented in fundraising and communications roles than general strategic consulting. In fact, most consultants with whom I spoke reported that women make up the majority of prominent fundraisers nationwide. Finally, many consultants reported that they felt women's presence is on the rise in strategic consulting, and there is evidence of this shift in the survey findings presented above.

### Strategic Implications

*"At the end of the day, a winning strategy is a winning strategy," or "hired guns are hired guns regardless of gender."*

Beyond raising questions of access and equality, gender disparities in the consulting profession may have strategic implications. When asked specifically if male and female consultants approach campaigns in the same way, most consultants say that their approaches are similar (58.2%). Forty-one percent of consultants see very little difference in men and women's campaign approach, and just over 1% believe men

and women have distinct approaches to campaigns.

Democratic women are more likely than their male counterparts to view women's campaign approaches as *less* similar to men's ( $p < .05$ ). While 100% of male consultants working for Democrats cite very similar (43%) or similar (57%) approaches across gender, only 29% of Democratic female consultants report very similar approaches. Moreover, 10% of women argue that men and women's approaches to campaigns are not similar at all. One consultant writes, "Like a family, there are moments a campaign needs testosterone and moments it needs estrogen. An imbalance creates problems."

*"Women consultants are certainly more perceptive to the perception of women candidates, as well as how certain messages and images will play with female voters. Men don't understand women - we don't when it comes to relationships and often don't when it comes to campaigns."*

### MAJOR CONCLUSIONS: GENDER IN POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS

Surveying political consultants provides an important measure of elite perceptions in political campaigns and campaigning. A number of important findings emerge from this survey:

- Political consultants report that voters associate different traits with male and female candidates, viewing women as more emotional, honest, compassionate, cooperative, accessible, and liberal than their male counterparts. They associate male candidates, according to consultants, with corruption, assertiveness, toughness, leadership, and conservatism.
  - Democratic consultants are more likely than Republican consultants to report that voters hold gendered perceptions of candidate traits. Republican consultants are more likely than their Democratic colleagues to report that voters associate these traits to "about the same extent" with men and women candidates.
- Political consultants report that voters attribute issue expertise differently to male and female candidates, citing health care, family policies, education, and social programs as areas of female expertise and national security, taxes/economy, foreign policy, and crime as areas of male expertise.
  - Across all of the issues on which consultants were surveyed, Democratic consultants are *more likely* than Republican consultants to report gender differences in voter perceptions. Republican consultants are more likely than their Democratic colleagues to report that voters attribute a similar degree of expertise to both male and female candidates across the issues listed.

- The majority of consultants view little difference in voters' likelihood of voting for women for U.S. Senate or Governor.
- When it comes to drafting campaign strategy, consultants cite experience of candidates and their opponents as very important considerations. Race and gender, of candidates and opponents, are viewed as relatively important, though Democratic consultants view these factors as more important than do the Republican consultants surveyed.
- Political consultants' perceptions of voters' stereotypical beliefs are related to their perceptions of effective campaign themes for men and women candidates. Those consultants who report that voters hold strong feminine and masculine trait and issue stereotypes are more likely than those who do not to argue that particular themes advantage candidates of one gender or the other.
- Overall, consultants see little difference in benefits of candidate presentation via spouses, family, or style of dress. However, where differences do emerge, consultants are more likely to perceive a benefit to female candidates who dress professionally and male candidates who are pictured with their spouse.
- Political consultants cite the greatest benefit to Democratic and female candidates in targeting women voters. However, holding candidate gender equal, partisan consultants note that targeting women voters is most beneficial for the candidate of their party, reflecting the value of women's votes to both parties.
- While the majority of political consultants report that negative tactics are necessary in campaigning, they add that male candidates need to "tread more carefully" in attacking female (versus male) opponents. Republican and Democratic consultants share this sense of caution.
- Overall, consultants view fundraising and managing campaign staff as equally challenging to male and female candidates. They are split, however, in perceiving voter and media biases as either more difficult for women or equally difficult for men and women candidates. Few consultants view any of these challenges as more difficult for male candidates.
  - Democratic consultants are more likely to perceive voter and media biases as bigger challenges to women candidates, and Democratic female consultants are more likely than their male colleagues to view fundraising and voter and media biases as more difficult challenges for female versus male candidates.
- Nearly 60% of political consultants describe their path toward their current position as a difficult one, and over 75% add that success in the consulting industry relies upon mentorship.
- These challenges may be amplified for women in political consulting, as they represent only about 25% of strategic consultants active in congressional or gubernatorial contests.
- While consultants overall are split on whether or not female consultants face different "rules of the game" within the consulting industry, female consultants are more likely to agree with this characterization of gender difference.
- Most political consultants surveyed report that male and female consultants share similar approaches to campaign strategy, though Democratic women consultants are more likely than their male counterparts to argue that women's approaches are different than men's. If true, these findings indicate that there may be strategic implications of the dearth of women in campaign consulting.

These findings reveal some sites of gender difference and gendered considerations in the development of campaign strategy. Moreover, they provide measures of consultant perceptions on voter beliefs and effective tactics and strategy for male and female candidates. Beyond providing the first systematic measure of these perceptions of campaign elites, this survey highlights the ways in which campaigns are gendered for candidates and consultants alike. Future research should elaborate on similar questions and better incorporate the complexities of campaign contexts and diverse political landscapes. As many consultants wrote in open-ended responses and cited in post-survey interviews, gender is one factor among many in campaigns' strategic development and decision-making. This survey makes evident the multiple ways in which this factor influences candidates, campaigns, and the consulting profession.

“Strategy is shaped by the political environment and the attributes of the two candidates. Gender is simply another attribute that has to be taken into consideration.”

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“[Gender] matters, but it is just one small element in a very complex equation.”

## METHODOLOGY

The author used *Campaigns and Elections'* annual "won-lost" report of consulting firms active in the 2008 and 2009 election cycles and *National Journal's* consultant database to identify national consulting firms. Individual consultants from each firm were then identified using individual firms' websites and the *Political Resources Directory*. Those consultants listed as principals, senior/junior associates, and those sharing similar titles or responsibilities were included. The population was limited to firms active in congressional and/or gubernatorial races according to the "won-lost" report and Congressional Quarterly's *Campaign Insider* reports. Finally, the population was limited to those consultants most engaged in campaigns' strategic development, including image cultivation, message creation, and tactical plans. This includes general consultants, media consultants, and pollsters. The final population contacted includes 878 active political consultants.

The survey was conducted online through *Survey Monkey Professional*. This format accounts for the high mobility of the population and takes advantage of their technological aptitude and experience. Consultants received a maximum of three to seven contacts for recruitment, depending on the availability of email and physical addresses, over a seven-week period (April – May 2010), with the survey remaining open through June 2010. Three mailings were sent to all consultants for whom physical addresses were available; the first two mailings were formal letters, and the third was a postcard reminder. In addition to these mailings, the same three recruitment letters and reminders were sent to all consultants for whom email addresses were available, with a final additional email reminder sent at the conclusion of the seven-week period. All recruitment contacts included a brief note on the survey purpose, request for participation, and unique URL address for the online questionnaire; no paper questionnaires were sent to consultants. The unique URL address was tagged to an identification number that protected against false or duplicate responses and allowed tracking of respondent completion. Respondents were promised confidentiality.

After an initial screening of participants to ensure that they were actively engaged in consulting work, the survey proceeded for twelve brief web pages, asking about campaign strategy, tactics, and perceptions of gender stereotypes and the consulting profession. Two hundred and twenty-three active campaign consultants responded to the survey, yielding a response rate of 24.8%.<sup>6</sup> Upon completion of the survey, participants were asked if they were willing to participate in a brief follow-up telephone interview, ranging from 20-40 minutes. Eighty-four respondents volunteered to participate in follow-up interviews, 32 were contacted, and 17 were interviewed between July 21, 2010 and November 12, 2010. These interviews supplement the survey data reported here.

For additional details on survey questions and findings, please contact Kelly Dittmar at [kdittmar@rci.rutgers.edu](mailto:kdittmar@rci.rutgers.edu).

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<sup>1</sup> In this report, those consultants reporting that they work primarily for Democratic candidates are referred to as "Democratic consultants" and those consultants reporting that they work primarily for Republican candidates are referred to as "Republican consultants."

<sup>2</sup> Masculine and feminine trait and issue stereotype scales were created based upon respondents' perceptions of voter associations of specific traits and issues with male or female candidates. The feminine trait scale includes consultants' perceptions of voter associations of the following traits with women candidates, with a score of 1 for each trait for which the respondent views voters' as associating the trait with women candidates (-1 if they associate the trait with men and 0 if they report that voters associate the trait to about the extent with male and female candidates): emotional, liberal, accessible, cooperative, compassionate, and honest (Cronbach's alpha = .71). The masculine trait scale includes consultants' perceptions of voter associations of the following traits with male candidates: corrupt, tough, leader, strong leader, conservative, and assertive (Cronbach's alpha = .64). The feminine issue scale includes consultants' perceptions of voter attributions of issue expertise to female candidates on the following issues: health care, education, family policy, and social programs (Cronbach's alpha = .80). Finally, the masculine issue scale includes consultants' perceptions of voter attributions of issue expertise to male candidates on the following issues: national security, defense, foreign policy, taxes/economy, and crime (Cronbach's alpha = .74). Scales are additive and scores range from 0 to 6 (feminine trait scale), -1 to 5 (masculine trait scale), -4 to 4 (feminine issue scale), and 0 to 5 (masculine issue scale). The lowest scores reflect weak perceptions that voters hold traditional gender stereotypes. The highest scores reflect strong perceptions that voters hold traditional gender stereotypes.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted comments are taken from open-ended survey responses of consultants or from post-survey interviews conducted with respondents.

<sup>4</sup> Sixty-four percent of Republican consultants and 66% of Democratic consultants agree that male candidates need to "tread more carefully" in criticizing female opponents.

<sup>5</sup> Democratic consultants report a greater percentage of female consultants than do Republican consultants ( $p < .10$ ). This may reflect the recognition that female consultants are disproportionately Democratic.

<sup>6</sup> This response rate is calculated using AAPOR's standard definition for response rate 2, including partial responses (partial defined as 50% or more missing responses). Final disposition codes were determined by combining code definitions for mail and Internet surveys, as guided by AAPOR for mixed-method surveys.