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Why Both the Dems and the GOP Now Think Voters Prefer Female Candidates

A woman's edge?

MOLLY BALL | APR 24 2013, 9:58 PM ET

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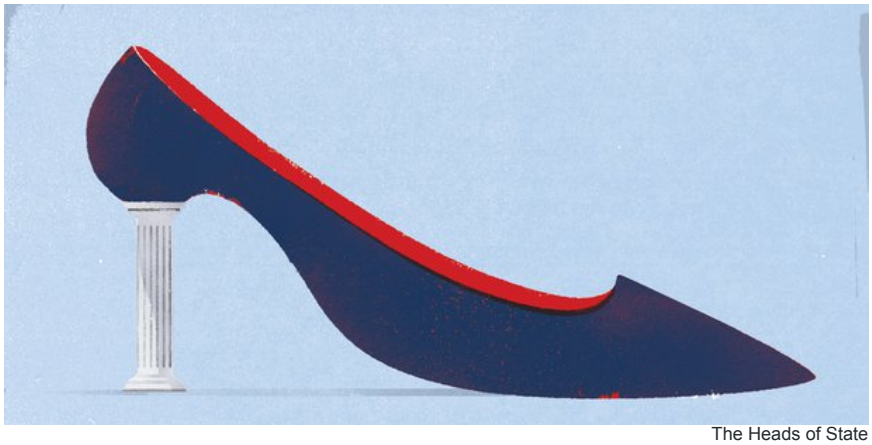

The Heads of State

IN THE TWO-YEAR CYCLE of the political calendar, it is candidate-recruitment season—the time when Washington operatives fan out across the country to size up the political horseflesh. In the months to come, they will meet with scores of state legislators, small-town mayors, community activists, and upstanding business owners, gauging which ones might have what it takes to run for a House or Senate seat, or for governor or state treasurer. These political scouts will take many qualities into account, from life story to speaking ability to baby-kissing skills. But they will be looking, in particular, for a few good women.

These days, political consultants take for granted that, all else being equal, women make more desirable candidates. Which means that Democratic and Republican operatives alike yearn for nothing more than to discover the next Heidi Heitkamp, a Democrat and former natural-gas-plant director who was elected the junior senator from North Dakota last November, or Deb Fischer, a previously little-known state legislator who won a tough Republican primary and then beat former Senator Bob Kerrey on her way to the Senate last year. Democrats recently failed in their efforts to recruit the actress Ashley Judd to run against Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell next year, but the 2014 election cycle will nonetheless feature a legion of eagerly anticipated female political prospects, from Pennsylvania's Allyson Schwartz, a Democrat preparing to seek the governorship, to West Virginia's Shelley Moore Capito, a Republican running for Senate. "Women make wonderful candidates for Republicans," Mike Shields, the chief of staff at the Republican National Committee (formerly the

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political director of the National Republican Congressional Committee), told me. "It's no secret our party needs to make progress with women voters, and for that, we need more women leaders." Democrats feel the same way, according to Andrew Myers, a Democratic pollster who works with an array of local, statewide, and congressional candidates. "We are always looking for more women to run," he said.

In one study, an inexperienced female candidate was viewed as stronger, more honest, and more compassionate than an inexperienced male candidate.

This preference for women candidates may surprise you if you're accustomed to thinking of female politicians in terms of the barriers they face—from Geraldine Ferraro's being asked on *Meet the Press* in 1984 if "the Soviets might be tempted to try to take advantage of you simply because you are a woman," to Hillary Clinton's being heckled at a rally in 2008 by men shouting "Iron my shirt!" Women in politics, it has long been assumed, are trapped in a disabling web of double standards—presumed by voters to be weaker and less capable leaders, but punished for violating gender norms if they do act tough or get angry. Even though women were elected to Congress in record numbers in 2012, their representation still languishes at just 18 percent in the House and 20 percent in the Senate.

And yet the political operatives may be onto something. Evidence suggests that double standards may have once applied but don't any longer. Shields and Myers prefer female candidates for a simple reason: voters, they say, tend to assume women are more trustworthy, less corruptible, and more in touch with everyday concerns. In a white-male-dominated political system, women are seen as outsiders. "Voters want change," Shields said. "A woman candidate personifies change just by being on the ballot." Myers added that, in these intolerably gridlocked times, "voters believe women are more likely to compromise and find common ground and solutions, and less likely to argue and triangulate for political advantage." Both consultants also emphasized that women are harder to criticize than men. Sharp-edged attacks, particularly by male rivals, risk running afoul of the societal bias against, essentially, hitting a girl. The classic example: Clinton's 2000 Senate race, in which her opponent, Rick Lazio, left his podium during a debate to demand that she sign a campaign-finance pledge. Lazio's physically confrontational gesture was regarded as bullying, and helped sink his campaign.

In 2009, Deborah Jordan Brooks, a Gallup researcher turned Dartmouth professor, set out to investigate just how much bias female candidates still face, by conducting a series of controlled experiments with a large representative sample of American adults. As Brooks describes in her forthcoming book, *He Runs, She Runs: Why Gender Stereotypes Do Not Harm Women Candidates*, she distributed an array of made-up newspaper articles about a fictional politician who, in various scenarios, ran for office, "erupted" at a colleague, cried, made threats, and got important facts wrong in a public appearance. Half the survey participants read about "Congresswoman Karen Bailey," while the other half read about "Congressman Kevin Bailey." Only the first names and pronouns were different, and the respondents didn't know what the study was designed to measure. After they read the articles, the participants were asked to rate the candidate's characteristics.

On such traits as competence, empathy, and ability to handle an international crisis, the hypothetical male and female candidates were viewed almost identically. Nor was the woman candidate held to different standards of

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behavior: though perceptions of Congresswoman Bailey dimmed when she cried and raged, the same was true for Congressman Bailey. “It is tough to win over the public as a candidate,” Brooks said, “but there is no indication that it is tougher for women than for men.” The only exception to this general parity was in the scenario in which “Karen” and “Kevin” were described as first-time candidates with no experience in politics (“Mrs. Bailey … has owned and operated a chain of eight dry cleaning stores located across the state for the past 10 years”). In this case, the inexperienced female candidate was viewed as stronger, more honest, and more compassionate than the inexperienced male candidate. “One potential explanation is that, as members of a group who have traditionally been underrepresented in Congress and elsewhere, women new to politics get an ‘outsider bump’ when they run that is not accorded to men,” Brooks said.

But what about the media? In describing male and female candidates identically, might Brooks’s study have failed to account for the unequal way men and women are portrayed publicly? Here, too, research fails to find evidence of any systematic bias against women. After the 2010 midterm elections, two Washington political scientists, Danny Hayes of George Washington University and Jennifer Lawless of American University, conducted a massive analysis of nearly 5,000 newspaper articles covering 342 congressional races. They found that women candidates got just as much coverage as men, and were no more likely to be described in terms of their clothing, appearance, or family life. The women were just as likely as the men to be portrayed as having leadership abilities; the men were just as likely as the women to be described as empathetic. Whatever’s hindering women, Hayes and Lawless concluded, it’s not prejudiced news coverage.

So what is holding them back? Brooks believes that women’s own perceptions haven’t caught up with reality. When women run for office, they win just as often as men do. But fewer women run in the first place, perhaps because they’re convinced they will have a tougher time, face more scrutiny, and be subjected to unfair attacks and double standards. In one 2008 survey conducted by Lawless and another researcher, 87 percent of women said they thought the electoral environment was more challenging for women than for men. “That old conventional wisdom that women are at a disadvantage really needs to be debunked if we’re going to fix the pipeline problem,” Brooks told me.

To that end, prospective female politicians might do well to take a cue from Mary Teresa Norton, who in 1925 became one of the first women ever to serve in the House of Representatives. “I’m no lady,” she said, “I’m a member of Congress, and I shall proceed on that basis.”

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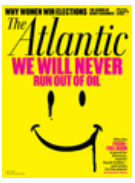

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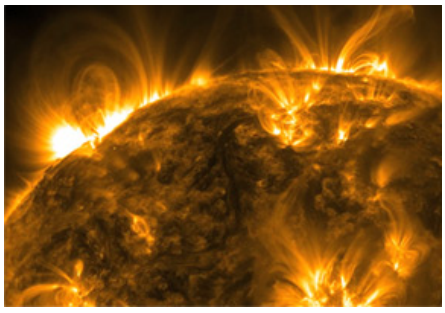
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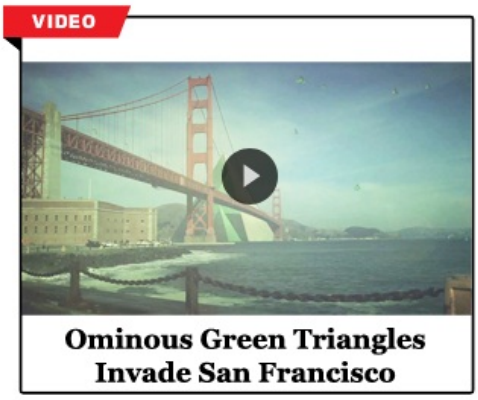

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