

Poll: Breakthrough Messages for Women Voters

April 24, 2012

Executive Summary

The statistics are widely reported: Women make up only 17 percent of Congress but are over 50 percent of the U.S. population. Even President Barack Obama believes Congress would get more done if there were more women in Congress, saying, "I think it's fair to say: That is almost guaranteed."

On behalf of the [Barbara Lee Family Foundation](#), Lake Research Partners recently conducted a poll among 1000 likely voters in key states, with an oversample of 200 young women (age 18-35)* voters, which is the first in-depth look at younger women responding to messages about women candidates. Designed to examine voters' attitudes toward women candidates and elected officials on both sides of party lines, this poll explores whether voters agree with the President and their beliefs about the disparities in leadership between women and men.

- To motivate voters, including young women voters, to vote for women candidates, it is best to focus on how women elected officials are in touch with real life. This includes some kitchen-table economic issues like the price of food, and emphasizing how Congress needs to be more diverse in gender, racial, and age representation to reflect the actual population of the U.S.
- In the current political environment, the perception that women candidates are more in touch is a huge asset.
- Voters sense that there are not enough women currently in office and the nation would be better governed if there were more women in office than there are today.
- At the same time, traditional messages of women governing with better priorities and less partisanship do not work.
- As we have seen in the past, the strongest predictor of voting for a woman is the perception that women govern differently than men. Today, voters are divided on this, but these messages move voters, especially younger women, in that direction.
- A woman candidate being in touch is the best frame. When it comes to priorities, birth control and contraception engages women voters, especially younger women voters.
- Women have a clear advantage on the issues of birth control and women's health.

These results are based on a telephone survey of 1000 likely voters in the following states: MA, HI, MO, NV, MI, WI, NH, CT, MN, VA, TX, OH, and OK, with an oversample of 200 women ages 18 to 34. This survey was conducted March 29 - April 9, 2012. There is a sample of error of +/-3.1%.

Key Points

MESSAGING

- This pivotal research discovered break through messages that resonate with voters, especially younger women voters, and motivate them to support women candidates. These messages are very different than the current messages being used.
- The best message to motivate voters to vote for a woman candidate acknowledges what voters already believe—that politicians today are out of touch with their lives. It proposes that we need more women in office who are in touch with real life, who know the price of food, who understand how tough it can be to make ends meet, and who value benefits like health insurance, because they are important to families. [35% very convincing and 61% convincing overall among voters; 37% very convincing; 72% convincing among young women voters.]
- This message is followed closely by a message on how Congress needs to be more diverse, with an emphasis on improving Congress’s racial diversity and increasing the number of younger members, rather than just focus on adding more women to address inequality. The message that includes diversity with younger elected officials is also the top-testing message among young women voters. [34% very convincing; 62% convincing overall among voters; 51% very convincing; 78% convincing among young women voters.]
- Among young women voters, it is also effective to highlight the gap between women’s representation in Congress in relation to proportion of the general population, along with facts about the US having lower representation by women than Afghanistan and Rwanda. [46% very convincing, 69% convincing among young women voters.]
- Messages traditionally used by advocates for women’s political representation, such as messages that focus on women leaders having the right priorities and the ways women leaders are less partisan and work better, were the weakest messages and had half the power.

Messages Motivating Individuals to Vote for a Woman Candidate				
	Voters Overall		Young Women Voters	
	Total Convincing	Very Convincing	Total Convincing	Very Convincing
In Touch	61%	35%	72%	37%
Diverse/Young	62%	34%	78%	51%
Diverse	60%	32%	79%	45%
51 vs 17 percent	56%	28%	75%	40%
51 vs 17 percent/ countries	53%	28%	69%	46%
Make a Difference	61%	27%	82%	35%
Right Priorities/Viagra	51%	26%	63%	26%
Compromise	57%	23%	65%	26%
Congress Work Better	50%	21%	55%	19%
Right Priorities	53%	20%	64%	24%

*All questions split sampled. See Appendix for message wording.

MOVING VOTERS

- We asked a series of questions to gauge how voters felt about voting for women candidates. We see in this research, as we have in previous Barbara Lee Family Foundation research, that the perception that women leaders are different than men leaders when they serve is a major predictor of the vote for women.
 - As we have seen previously, voters are split between whether or not women and men are different when they serve as elected officials. But this attitude is primarily driven by men. Overall, 46% say a lot/somewhat and 48% say a little/not different at all. Intensity is on the side of female and male elected officials not being different (35% not at all to 15% a lot).
 - A slight majority of women (53% different, 19% a lot) and young women (51% different, 13% a lot) see a difference between men and women when they serve as elected officials, while a majority of men say there isn't a difference (57% not different, 43% not at all different). However, 41% of women and 44% of young women say women do not serve that differently than men.
 - When we re-ask this question following the message battery, a majority of voters see a difference between women and men. In the final ask, 55% say women are different (16% a lot different) and 42% say they are not (26% not at all).
 - Women move from 53% to 64% saying there is a difference and young women move from 51% to 64% seeing a difference. Men voters move from a majority saying there is no difference to splitting with 47% different and 51% not different. That is an increase of 8 points (from 39% different initially).
- About two-thirds of voters (65%) start out interested in voting for a woman candidate, although only a quarter (25%) express intensity. Fewer than one in five (17%) are not interested. Young women (72% interested, 35% very) express slightly more interest than women overall (69%, 30%), and women are more interested than men (60%, 20%).
 - We re-asked this question at the end of the survey, to see if messaging increased voters' interest in voting for a woman. These numbers increase only slightly overall from 65% to 68%. Among young women, the interest went from 72% to 81%. Intensity did not change.

- An overwhelming majority of voters believes it is important to support a qualified woman running for elected office* (80% say this is very/somewhat important and 51% say very important).
 - There is little difference in intensity across gender and among young women voters. Young women and women are more likely than men to say this is important overall (87% among young women; 84% among women; 75% among men).
 - Ironically, this attitude does not predict to voting for women. We need in future research to better understand what people mean by “qualified,” how women demonstrate they are qualified, and why voters question women’s qualifications.
- A majority (59%) of voters say there aren’t enough women in elected office. This sentiment is especially strong among young women (73%). Two-thirds (67%) of women agree, and 52% of men agree. Again, this sentiment does not predict to voting for women. For voters overall, the new message that frames electing more women as “diversity” takes this belief that there are not enough women in office and moves voters to take action to correct that imbalance. For young women voters, the message that focuses on how the U.S. compares to other countries in achieving balanced representation has the same effect.
- Women voters drive the sentiment that if there were MORE women in political office, the nation would be BETTER governed. A majority (51%) of voters overall say the nation would be better governed (23% say much better). Only 9% say it would be governed worse.
 - Young women strongly believe that the nation would be better governed if more women held political office (60% better, 25% much better), and women overall tend to agree (58% better, 29% much better).
- Men are a different story, however. Only 44% say the nation would be better governed, with 16% saying they believe it would be much better. But even though they are less likely to say the nation would be better governed, only 10% of men say it would be worse. A quarter (25%) of men say it wouldn’t make a difference.
 - Attitudes are similar at the end of the survey*, with a bit more depth to these feelings of importance (85% say it is important, 54% say it is very important to support a qualified woman running for elected office). Men catch up to women in thinking this is important over all (86% among young women; 87% among women; 82% among men).
- Women candidates have clear advantages on issues that are traditionally “women’s issues”: education, health care, and women’s health. However, voters are split on who handles the economy better—men or women. In addition, decisiveness and effectiveness are areas where women candidates still need to prove themselves to voters.

* Split Sampled Question

BIRTH CONTROL, CONTRACEPTION, AND WOMEN'S HEALTH

- Voters show remarkable familiarity with the birth control and contraception debates. Adding the state fights to the national arena substantially increases recognition and penetration of this issue.
- A whopping 78% of all voters including 80% of women and 69% of younger women, have heard of these debates. Noticeably, young women are slightly less likely than men and women overall to have heard of either of these areas (31% of young women have not heard about birth control and contraception bills, compared to 20% of women and 24% of men).
- Voters are adamant that a woman elected official would be more likely to protect women's health issues, access to birth control and contraception, reproductive health issues, Social Security and Medicare, and education – which is emerging as more important.
- Voters, especially young women voters, are adamant that a woman elected official would be more likely to protect access to birth control and contraception.* Overall, two-thirds (68%) of voters say women officials would be more likely, and 38% say they would be much more likely. Only 7% say women elected officials would be less likely to protect access to birth control and contraception.
 - This sentiment increases among young women (80% more likely, 53% say much more likely). About two-thirds of both female and male voters agree (among women, 69% say more likely, 37% say much more likely; among men, 67% say more likely, 39% say much more likely).
- On a parallel track, voters believe that a woman elected official is less likely to place restrictions on birth control and contraception* (62% less likely, 33% much less likely).
 - Young women voters are slightly more likely to say that a woman elected official is less likely to place restrictions on birth control and contraception (67% less likely, 44% say much less likely) than women voters (64% say less likely, 35% say much less likely) or men voters (59% say less likely, 32% say much less likely).
- Across the board, women elected officials are also seen as very likely to protect women's health issues.* Voters overwhelmingly hold this sentiment (81% say a woman elected official is more likely to protect women's health issues, 56% much more likely).
 - Two-thirds of young women (65%) believe women elected officials are much more likely to protect women's health issues (88% more likely). And over half of women and men (56% each) agree that women candidates are much more likely, with over eight in 10 (81% each) saying they are more likely overall.

* Split Sampled Question

- Similarly, women elected officials are also seen as more likely to protect reproductive health issues. Seven in 10 (70%) say women elected officials are more likely to protect reproductive health, with nearly half of voters (47%) who believe they are much more likely.
- This is another closely held belief for young women voters (86% say women elected officials are more likely, 59% say much more likely) as well as women voters (73% say more likely, 46% say much more likely) and men voters (67% say more likely, 48% say much more likely).

Who Would Do a Better Job Handling...?			
Advantage by Woman Official		Birth Control and Contraception	Women’s Health Issues
Democratic Woman or Republican Man	Voters Overall	+41	+52
	Men	+31	+45
	Women	+50	+57
	Young Women	+72	+71
Republican Woman or Democratic Man	Voters Overall	+11	+28
	Men	+14	+37
	Women	+9	+18
	Young Women	+15	+33

- In head-to-head match-ups between females and males in elected office, voters believe that both Democratic elected women and Republican elected women would do a better job handling the issues of birth control and contraception and women’s health issues than Democratic or Republican elected men. Voters also give a Democratic woman and a Republican woman an advantage on their handling of health care and education. Both lose on taxes and jobs, and voters split on who would handle economic issues better, which can be a major vulnerability for women.
- Looking first at a match-up between a Democratic male elected official and a Republican female elected official, voters give the Republican woman an 11-point advantage on the issue of birth control and contraception and a 28-point advantage on women’s health issues.
- A Democratic female elected official has even wider margins over a Republican male elected official on these issues: She enjoys a 41-point advantage on the issue of birth control and contraception and a 52-point advantage on women’s health issues. The Democratic female candidate enjoys a huge advantage over a Republican male among women voters and young women voters on both of these issues.

Appendix: Message Language

[In Touch] Our politicians are out of touch with our lives. We need more women in office who are in touch, who know what the price of food is, what it's like to try to make ends meet these days, and how important benefits like health insurance are to families today.

[Diverse/young] Congress needs to be more diverse, not just with more women, but with more racial diversity and younger people as well. Currently only 17% of seats are held by women, 15% are held by people of color, and 4% are held by people under 40. Only when Congress reflects the actual make-up of the US will every voice have a chance to truly be heard.

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[51 vs. 17 percent] Women make up 51% of the population, but only 17% of Congress. This division is not right, and we need to make sure that half of our population is not ignored. We need more women in office to level the playing field and make sure women's voices are represented. At our current rate, it will take 500 years to move women's representation in Congress to 50%.

[51 vs. 17 percent/countries] Women make up 51% of the population, but only 17% of Congress. The US has the lowest representation of women of any other developed country, and even countries like Afghanistan and Rwanda have more women in elected office. At our current rate, it will take us 500 years to move women's representation in Congress to 50%.

[Make a Difference] Women in office make a difference. When there are more women in office, they introduce and pass more legislation that has to do with child care, equal pay, minimum wage, and better schools. They make a difference to all of us and come up with new ideas and new approaches to issues that help the country.

[Right Priorities/Viagra] Women tend to have the right priorities, like education and jobs. They recognize the politics that is being played with birth control and have introduced similar legislation on men's health, like restricting access to Viagra to point out how ridiculous it is for politicians to be wasting time on this debate.

[Compromise] Women understand the importance of compromise and they know what it takes to make tough decisions. They are more willing to cooperate across party lines to make sure that the interests of their constituents are the priority, not the partisan gridlock that we have come to expect.

[Congress Work Better] Congress would work better if there were more women in office. More women would help cut back the influence of special interests and lobbyists. We would have more legislation introduced that dealt with the real needs of our families.

[Right Priorities] Women tend to have the right priorities. They know how to balance cuts and investments in critical areas, like good schools for our children and job creation. They also understand the importance of focusing on the important issues to voters, not spending time on birth control.

*All questions split sampled.
