SHOULD FEMALE CANDIDATES RUN “AS WOMEN?”
EFFECTS OF GENDERED APPEALS IN THE 2018 US SENATE ELECTIONS

by

MAURA LEE O’BRIEN
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Examining Committee:

Paul Quirk
Supervisor

Andrew Owen
Additional Examiner
Abstract

This thesis looks at strategic campaign strategies for female-candidates running for elective office. It evaluates and investigates to see if female-candidates can gain an electoral advantage when they run their campaign “as women” and include a higher percentage of female-specific rhetoric. The first section of this thesis explores existing knowledge to gain a baseline understanding on the current findings regarding effective campaign strategy and voter’s perceptions of female-candidates. The thesis argues that while the current literature has made some influential findings on what issues are the most successful to mention during campaigns, they fail to explore how a candidate’s gender might play a role. In this thesis I evaluated the potential effect of female-specific campaign strategies by examining, in detail, the campaign messaging from the 22 female-candidates that ran for the Senate in the 2018 midterm elections. I categorized three types of campaign statements, Female-Interest, Female-Advantage, and Non-Gendered Key-Issue statements. The study then ran six different linear regression models to see the effect of female-specific statements on a female-candidate’s percent of the two-party vote. In the end, there is some evidence for advantages of campaigning on female-specific issues and running “as a woman,” however, it is mixed and fairly weak. While this study finds that female-specific campaigning can, in some cases, significantly increase a female candidate’s percent of the two-party vote, for some female candidates they may do better to adopt a nongender-specific approach.
Lay Summary

This thesis explores the possible effect of female-specific campaigning for female-candidates in order to see if women can gain a strategic advantage when they run “as women” and focus their campaigns on more female-specific rhetoric. To do this, it evaluates, in detail, the campaign statements made by the 22 female-candidates who ran for the Senate in the 2018 midterm elections. It finds that there is some evidence to support that women can gain an electoral advantage by making more female-specific statements during their campaign. The study’s findings, however, are rather mixed and fairly weak.
Preface

This thesis is the original, unpublished, and independent work done by the author, Maura O’Brien.
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Dedication

To my dog, Molly.
**Introduction**

Women, though comprising 51 percent of the United States population, are substantially underrepresented within U.S. elected offices (United States Census Bureau, 2018). Before the historic 2018 midterm elections, according to the Center for American Women and Politics, women held a mere 21 percent of the 535 seats in the 114th U.S. Congress, and represented 25 percent of state legislators (Center for American Women and Politics, 2019). The underrepresentation of women in the United States government threatens “the very legitimacy of our democracy” (Aguiar & Redlin, 2014, p.2). Women’s participation in the democratic process enriches the “policy decision environment by emphasizing a different domain of policies than men, including education, family and children” (Aguiar & Redlin, 2014, p.3). There are a few compelling arguments for why women, still, do not hold a proportional number of seats within elected government. Some scholars argue that it is due to systemic political barriers, while others argue that women may just be less inclined than men to run for office in the first place.

While there has been a substantial increase in the scholarship focusing on women’s underrepresentation in U.S. government, more work is needed. The study needs to continue to investigate the underrepresentation of women within the U.S. elected government, with a particular focus on what can be done to get more women in positions of power within the government.

This paper looks to make a contribution to the literature about successful strategies for female candidates on the campaign trail. Campaigns, as will be established in detail later in this paper, can influence a candidate’s electoral outcome. Priming the economy has been established, in much of the literature, as being one of the most valuable campaign strategies (Johnston, 2016). Issues such as the economy and national security, however, are typically stereotyped by voters as
being best handled by male leaders (Dolan, 2008). Women, on the other hand, are often stereotyped as being better at handling issues such as education, healthcare, and child care (Dolan, 2008). Women, for years, have fought to try to overcome these stereotypes, and to prove their abilities and qualifications to deal with these traditionally most salient issues (national security and the economy) (Dittmar, 2012). Gender-stereotyping by voters, some argue, disadvantages female candidates. This, however, may not always be true. In this paper I explore the question of whether or not female candidates receive an electoral advantage when they campaign “as women” and focus their campaigns on more female-specific issues.

Some scholarship has attributed the lack of women in elected office to women deciding to run for office at much lower rates than men. Other scholars argue that the election process is not gender-neutral and that female candidates must face and overcome more challenges than men when running for office. While there is a large amount of scholarship on successful campaign strategy, the studies often fail to mention gender (Dittmar, 2012). The literature on effective campaign strategy may lack, therefore, an important distinction of whether the strategies work the same depending on the gender of the candidate. It is important to determine if typical key-issue campaign strategies work similarly for men and women. Additionally, if campaigned correctly, can women actually gain a strategic advantage by being female candidates? While some argue that being a woman does not hurt the chances of a female candidate being elected, might being a woman change the way candidates campaign and win?

This paper evaluates female candidates as strategic actors, having the power to influence their electoral outcomes. I aim to add to the understanding of what are successful campaign strategies for female candidates. Are women more successful when they promote the more key-issue and gender-neutral topics? Or, do women gain an electoral advantage when they campaign
“as women” and include a higher percentage female-specific rhetoric? In order to determine if campaign strategies differ depending on a candidate’s gender, we must first establish some important components to my argument: (1) Are campaigns important? (2) How does effective campaign strategy produce electoral success? (3) How do voters perceive female candidates? (4) What are the potential challenges female candidates face when running for election? (5) What are female-specific campaign messages and what does it mean to run “as a woman?”

This paper will first review the literature on each of these components and bring their conclusions together to draw some potential conclusions on effective female campaign strategy. The hypothesis of this paper is that female candidates are more successful in general elections when they run their campaigns “as women.” This includes priming more female-specific issues and incorporating more female-specific statements into their campaigns.

This paper will then test the hypothesis by evaluating what effect female-specific statements had on 2018 female Senate midterm candidates’ percent of the two-party vote. Female candidates ran in record numbers in the 2018 midterms and an historic number of women were successful. One of the most distinctive and break-the-mold candidates that emerged victorious, in a massive upset, was Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez who ran to represent New York’s 14th District in the U.S. House of Representatives (Remnick, 2018). In order to gain the Democratic party nomination, she defeated veteran Democrat Rep. Joe Crowley who had not faced a primary challenger in fourteen years (Remnick, 2018).

The 28-year-old Bronx native broke the traditional mold with her campaign imagery, campaign rhetoric, and her grassroots/social media driven methods (Remnick, 2018). Ocasio-Cortez fought a fierce campaign that featured her gender, heritage, and “outsider status” as assets
and not hindrances (Remnick, 2018). In her primary debate, political ads, campaign website, and press interviews, she championed female-specific issues.

Ocasio-Cortez’s strategic campaign choices were of the utmost importance. From the start she was faced with an uphill battle. As she stated in the opening line of her main campaign ad “women like me aren’t supposed to run for office” (Remnick, 2018). Ten months before she became the youngest woman ever elected to Congress, she was waiting tables at a taco place called Flats Fix near Union Square (Remnick, 2018). Her primary opponent, incumbent Joseph Crowley was “the most powerful politician in Queens County and fourth-ranking Democrat in the House of Representatives” (Remnick, 2018).

While Ocasio-Cortez did not campaign solely on a feminine platform, often championing the fight for working families and opposing any influence of “Big Money” in politics, refusing to take any corporate PAC money, she embraced and was not shy about the fact that she was a young, working-class, Puerto Rican, woman, from the Bronx (Remnick, 2018). While Crowley ran his campaign focusing, almost solely, on resonating with voters “who had made a habit of coming to the polls for off-year ballots,” Ocasio-Cortez reached out and mobilized new voters who had generally stayed away (Remnick, 2018).

Ocasio-Cortez was one of many female candidates who triumphed against the odds, making the 2018 midterm elections an historic year for women. The 2018 midterm elections presented a valuable opportunity to compare different types of female candidates’ campaign strategies.
Section 1: Literature Review

Success of Female Candidates

Especially over the last 26 years, since the “Year of the Woman” in 1992, the literature on women’s lack of representation in U.S. government has made substantial progress. This is due to advancements in scholars’ research and analysis methods, a better baseline understanding from previous work, as well as an increase in case studies as the number of women over the years in elected office has increased.

The literature has rather universally concluded that when women run in general elections, they are just as likely as men to win. Scholars have long sought to better understand the reasons for a lack of women in elected office, many determining that the main challenge to women’s equal representation is a lack of women on the ballot in the first place. Scholars Gary Aguiar and Meredith Redlin studied this phenomenon, by focusing specifically on Midwestern state legislatures and their overall political opportunity structure, and individual candidate’s attributes (Aguiar & Redlin, 2014). In their research, published in 2014 titled “Women’s Continued Underrepresentation in Elective Office,” Aguiar and Redlin find once again that women are just as likely as men to win elections (Aguiar & Redlin, 2014). Like much of the established research on women in U.S. politics, they conclude that fewer women are serving in public office because of the lower numbers of women running as candidates (Aguiar & Redlin, 2014). Aguiar and Redlin’s study, once again, finds that the supply side of the equation of women running for office is the problem.

We must be careful, however, not to automatically attribute the literature’s current findings, that women are as electable as men, as an establishment that the U.S. electoral system is a gender-neutral process. Before any candidate can run in general elections, they must prevail
through a rigorous nomination process. Unlike in many other democracies, the U.S. nomination process is an electoral one. This means that the ultimate power lies in the electorate in determining which candidates emerge victorious from the primaries and thus gain their party’s support. Understanding the process of how voters decide for whom to vote is of the utmost interest to politicians and political scientists alike. A quick look at the established literature on voting behavior will be helpful for this paper’s analysis.

According to Milton Lodge, Marco R. Steenberg, and Shawn Brau in “The Responsive Voter,” the last 50 years of survey data has shown a rather depressing picture of the American citizen as being overwhelmingly ill-informed (Lodge et al., 1995). Conover and Feldman in “Candidate Perception in an Ambiguous World,” however, argue that voter’s lack of knowledge on candidates’ positions is only partially due to voters having little interest to search out information about candidates on their own (Conover & Feldman, 1980). They explain that it is also due to the fact that candidates usually do not go to “great lengths to communicate [their] positions to the public,” and because the media tends to “devote little attention to reporting candidates’ positions on the issues” (Conover & Feldman, 1989, p. 912). Therefore, according to Conover and Feldman, voters will often cope with an “ambiguous political environment” by “inferring the missing or unclear information with their best guess as to what the information should be” (Conover & Feldman, 1989, p.4). Jason Windett in “Gendered Campaign Strategies in U.S. Elections,” further asserts that voters will often use gender cues and their perceived gender stereotypes when evaluating candidates they know very little about (Windett, 2014). Gender stereotypes can shape voters’ “expectations and provide low information cues regarding the policy preferences, ideological positions, and leadership styles of both male and female candidates” (Windett, 2014, p.2). According to Windett, in low-information elections voters may
rely more on gender cues and gender stereotyping when evaluating candidates (Windett, 2014). It is possible, therefore, that gender stereotyping and gender bias is more common in primaries, and if so, gender bias is less easily detected in general elections.

*Women’s Fight to the Ballot*

In one of the first evaluations of how women fare in primary elections, Barbara Burrell, published a study in 1992 evaluating women’s electability in primary elections titled “Women Candidates In Open-Seat Primaries For the U.S. House: 1968-1990.” In this study, Burrell compares the performances of male and female candidates in open-seat primary elections for the U.S. House of Representatives from the years 1968 through 1990. She challenges the prior notion that primary elections hurt female candidates’ opportunities to obtain national elective office because “male party leaders oppose their nomination in situations other than those considered hopeless for the party” (Burrell, 1992, p. 1).

Burrell finds that female candidates during this period tended to do just as well as their male counterparts in gaining votes and overall wins in open-seat primaries (Burrell, 1992). According to Burrell’s findings, the reason that women hold few seats in the House is “primarily due to the scarcity of their numbers in these races” (Burrell, 1992, p. 2). Knowing this, Burrell examined both the performance of candidates as well as the presence of women candidates in open-seat primary elections. Even after accounting for the lower percentage of women in these races, Burrell explains how her findings show that the “electoral performance of female candidates has not been appreciably worse than that of male candidates” (Burrell, 1992, p. 21).

Contrary to Burrell, some scholarship argues that female candidates do face gender-based challenges when running for elected office. Some scholars argue that there is far more encouragement for men to run for office (regardless of their qualifications) than women, there
are still institutional barriers limiting women’s access to running in the primaries and the women who ultimately decide to compete for party nomination may indeed just be substantially more qualified and competent candidates allowing them to be successful, despite the additional barriers.

Jennifer L. Lawless & Kathryn Pearson in “Reevaluating the Conventional Wisdom” published in 2008 advance Burrell’s findings by evaluating the primary process with a more quizzical eye. They again point to the importance for gender dynamics to be considered during the primary process and argue that scholars have not done enough to investigate these dynamics (Lawless & Pearson, 2008). They use a data set ranging from 1958 to 2004 in order to test their hypothesis about women’s victory rates at the primary level.

Lawless and Pearson find that although women generally “do not win primaries at lower rates than their male counterparts, women in both parties face more primary competition than do men” (Lawless & Pearson, 2008, p. 1). Therefore, they assert that women have to do “better” than men in order to be equally successful (Lawless & Pearson, 2008). Lawless and Pearson explain, that over the course of the last 20 years, there has been an extreme evolution in the cultural attitudes towards women in politics and this has resulted in an increase in the number of women who have run for and won election to public office (Lawless & Pearson, 2008). Contrary to some of the previous findings, however, Lawless and Pearson urge that we should not totally “dismiss bias against female candidates as an explanation for women’s underrepresentation” (Lawless & Pearson, 2008, p. 2). They explain that we must look at the natural “winnowing process” that precedes general elections.

They find, rather surprisingly, that even though women had low entry rates in congressional primaries, they had high victory rates (Lawless & Pearson, 2008). While these
results may initially look encouraging for women’s representation, Lawless & Pearson assert, that “primary competition is more difficult for women than it is for men” and therefore only women who are extremely qualified and likely to win will take up the challenge of running in the primaries (Lawless & Pearson, 2008, p. 19). They argue that the primaries are more challenging for female candidates due to a number of factors. These include linkages to political party organizations and platforms, support networks, and culturally promoted gender characteristics (Lawless & Pearson, 2008). This last idea is that historically, “men are taught to be confident, assertive, and self-promoting” while women are not encouraged to adapt these specific characteristics (Lawless & Pearson, 2008, p. 9). They also explain that, in general, women are less likely than men to be recruited to participate in politics (Lawless & Pearson, 2008).

Lawless and Pearson argue, therefore, that although statistically women fare just as well as their male counterparts in primary elections, the process itself is not gender neutral (Lawless & Pearson, 2008). Instead, according to Lawless and Pearson, it is “likely that these primary election dynamics affect the initial decision to run for office” (Lawless & Pearson, 2008, p. 24). They assert that this results in only the most-qualified women being willing to head into a primary battle narrowing the opportunities for women “before the contest begins” (Lawless & Pearson, 2008, p. 24).

Understanding why women don’t run for office as often as men is a statistical challenge. Election data is limited by only including women who ultimately decided to run for office and therefore cannot include potential qualified female candidates who were deterred from running in the first place. In an attempt to overcome this challenge, Jennifer Lawless and Richard Fox in 2012, explored the specific elements that prevent women from running for political office in their study titled, “Men Rule: The Continued Under-Representation of Women in U.S. Politics.”
Lawless and Fox analyze data from a survey of 4,000 male and female potential “political candidates” ranging from lawyers, business leaders, educators, and political activists, who would all be highly qualified political candidates. Lawless and Fox conduct their study aiming to better understand the gender gap in political ambition (Lawless & Fox, 2012). The goal of Lawless and Fox’s study was to conduct a “nuanced investigation of how women and men initially decide to run for all levels and types of political office” (Lawless & Fox, 2012, p. 7). They drew from a national sample of 9,000 individuals from the “professions and backgrounds that tended to yield the highest proportion of congressional and state legislative candidates: law, business, education, and political activism” (Lawless & Fox, 2012, p. 26). They then issued a standard mail survey to conduct their study. Potential candidates received a letter that explained the study as well as a copy of the questionnaire. Lawless & Fox obtained survey responses back from nearly 3,800 members of their “candidate eligibility pool” (Lawless & Fox, 2012, p. 27). They asked respondents questions like: if the idea of running for an elective position had at least “crossed their mind,” do they judge their local and congressional elections as being “highly competitive,” and do they perceive themselves as being qualified to run for office (Lawless & Fox, 2012, p.4).

Lawless and Fox found that women were more likely than men to believe that the electoral environment was “highly competitive and biased against female candidates” (Lawless & Fox, 2012, p. 15). Although previous research has shown that when women run for office, they are equally likely to win as are men, many women still believe that the system is biased against them (Lawless & Fox, 2012). While it is possible that the nomination process may be more challenging for women than for men, Lawless and Fox argue that even women’s perceptions of the electoral system being unfairly balanced may have a dramatic influence on whether female candidates run for office in the first place (Lawless & Fox, 2012).
Another rather influential finding from Lawless and Fox’s study is that even highly-qualified women are much less likely than men to believe that they are qualified to run for office (Lawless & Fox, 2012). Remaining consistent to their previous findings in their 2001 study, Lawless and Fox found that one of the “biggest barriers keeping women from emerging as candidates centered around self-perceptions of qualifications to run for office” (Lawless & Fox, 2012, p. 18). Their study concluded that men are almost “60 percent more likely than women to assess themselves as ‘very qualified’ to run for office,” while women are more than “twice as likely as men to rate themselves as ‘not at all qualified’” (Lawless & Fox, 2012, p. 13). Finally, they found that women are less likely than men to receive the suggestion to run for office from family, friends, teachers, or indeed anyone (Lawless & Fox, 2012). Lawless and Fox explain that “party leaders, elected officials, political activists, and non-political actors continue to encourage far more men than women to enter the electoral arena” (Lawless & Fox, 2012, p. 13). Lawless and Fox asked respondents if “anyone ever suggested that they run for office” (Lawless & Fox, 2012, p.15). Their results found that 49% of men reported that they had encouragement to run for office from political actors, compared to 39% of women reporting that they received such encouragement (Lawless, & Fox, 2012). They explain that an important part of their findings was that women are equally as likely to respond favorably to a suggestion of running for office but are less likely to receive one (Lawless & Fox, 2012).

*Gender Stereotypes and Gender Cues*

While thus far a substantial amount of the literature has argued that a main challenge to women gaining representation is the ability for women to run in the first place, we must also investigate voter’s perceptions of, and willingness to support, female candidates. In agreement with findings from Conover and Feldman, Monicka McDermott, in “Race and Gender Cues in
Low-Information Elections,” find that voters do use gender cues when evaluating candidates, especially in low-information elections (McDermott, 1998). McDermott determines that when voters lack information, they use a candidate’s demographic cues, specifically race and gender, to make judgements about a candidate’s ideology and policy preferences (McDermott, 1998). McDermott argues that voters stereotype candidates both ideologically as well as on specific issues (McDermott, 1998) Ideologically, voters perceive women candidates as being more liberal than the average male candidate (McDermott, 1998).

While much of the previous literature has concluded that voters are not gender biased, McDermott argues that many of their approaches are overly simplified (McDermott, 1998). McDermott’s findings establish that while party cues are the most common tool used by voters in general elections, a candidate’s demographics are also taken into account. When filling out their ballot on election day, party identification as well as a candidate’s demographic information, is readily available to voters (McDermott, 1998, p. 5). For example, even when voters lack any other contextual information, a candidate’s name can be a signal of their gender (McDermott, 1998). According to McDermott’s argument, when presented with a gender cue, voters will use gender stereotypes when making their decisions (McDermott, 1988). In sum, McDermott argues, that voters often rely on their perceived stereotypes pertaining to women when evaluating female candidates. Can these perceived stereotypes, however, actually be an asset to female candidates, if campaigned correctly?

Campaigns: Women as Strategic Actors

This paper, thus far, has focused on the possible systematic, societal, and voters’ perceptions that might make the electoral arena more challenging for female candidates. It is important to remember, however, that campaigns matter and all candidates have the opportunity
to make strategic choices to overcome a variety of different challenges to achieve electoral success. In this section, we will establish that female candidates are strategic actors who can make specific and thoughtful campaign choices in order to win elections.

While some scholars argue that the public is so ill-informed that campaigns make little difference, there are powerful studies that establish that campaigns do matter. There are some influential findings on how campaign strategies can be of the highest importance for electoral victory (Johnston, 2016). Much of the current literature, however, fails to mention how gender might play a role. We will establish some of the findings about how campaigns matter, then focus on why women’s campaigns need specific analysis.

As was argued in Conover and Feldman’s study, voters utilize informational cues to help make their decision (Conover & Feldman, 1989). Not only do various informational cues matter when establishing candidate preferences but what issues candidates promote or prime seem to be pivotal for electoral success. As established by Richard Johnston in his chapter titled “Campaign Effects,” in The SAGE Handbook of Electoral Behaviour, especially in presidential elections, the economy is regularly made a salient issue, and when it is, it is often a “trump” card (Johnston, 2016). Although the issue-importance of the economy may be less important for offices other than for the president, it is still a key-campaign issue. Johnston further asserts that campaigns are indeed informative and important but that the impact of ads are limited and fleeting (Johnston, 2016). Lodge et al. further expand on this idea that specific recall of ads and campaign information are short-lived but adds to the understanding that the conclusions voters make from campaign information remains (Lodge et al., 1995). According to Lodge et al.’s findings, just because citizens cannot recall many of the basic political facts, this does not mean that they are unsophisticated citizens (Lodge et al., 1995). They assert that voters, instead, draw long-lasting
conclusions from campaigns and while the specifics of the content might be lost, due to the limitations of the human mind, the impact of campaigns are lasting and influential (Lodge et al., 1995).

In their evaluation of the 2000 presidential election between George W. Bush and Al Gore, Johnston, Hagger, and Jamieson bring many of these campaign elements together. Johnston et al. demonstrate that the 2000 presidential election campaign trail was divided up into three distinct phases where specific events and decisions by the candidates dramatically affected their polling support, and ultimately the outcome of the election (Johnston et al., 2004). As initially established by Johnston, in “Campaign Effects,” again we see how economic priming can have a dramatic influence over electoral results. Johnston et al. explain that, in September, the economic perceptions yielded a net advantage towards Gore’s campaign but after Gore failed to incorporate the economy into his campaign rhetoric, in order to prime the economy in his favor, that advantage was mishandled and ultimately lost (Johnston et al., 2004). The collapse of the perceptions of Al Gore’s character showed a short burst of bad news with effects (as argued by Lodge) that were evident long after the specifics of the event were forgotten (Johnston et al., 2004). Ultimately, Gore was able to close the gap, however, still not enough to win (Johnston et al., 2004). Johnston et al. find that campaigns and campaign strategies are indeed important, and that decisions and events have an impact on the outcome of elections.

It is clear that campaigns do matter and that voters use information presented by candidates to influence their votes. Much of the literature, however, fails to mention how gender might change candidates’ campaign strategies. Studying the influence of gender in campaign strategy is a relatively recent development. As asserted by Kelly Dittmar in “Campaigns as Gender Institutions,” after reviewing the existing scholarship, “we still know relatively little
about how women candidates make decisions and the image they will cultivate” (Dittmar, 2012, p. 18). Dittmar challenges the idea that campaigns are gender neutral. According to Dittmar, in order for women to gain representation, they must employ different strategies than men to be successful (Dittmar, 2012). Dittmar explains that female candidates are often stereotyped as being most capable on certain issues such as education, health care, the environment, children and families (Dittmar, 2012; Dolan 2010). In contrast, men are often viewed as being more competent on issues such as the economy, and the national security (Dittmar, 2012). Men are also deemed to being more assertive, tougher, and more able to lead (Dittmar, 2012). Female candidates and campaign professionals, when developing their campaign strategies, must therefore “grapple with when and how to address these stereotypes in [their] campaign messages, images, and tactics” (Dittmar, 2012).

Female candidates must ensure that they create an effective campaign strategy in order to overcome potential stereotype setbacks. Women often try to avoid campaigning on “stereotypical female issues” in order to exhibit and establish their qualifications in areas not traditionally related to women.

Female candidates, attempting to use the campaign trail as an opportunity to showcase their skills on a multitude of issues, also face challenges in gaining media attention. Dianne Bystrom in “Framing the Fight,” finds that women who are running for political office “often struggle to receive media coverage and legitimacy in the eyes of the media and, subsequently, the public” (Bystrom, 2001, p. 2). Bystrom also demonstrates that the media often pays much more attention to the personal lives, personalities, and appearances of women as compared with men (Bystrom, 2001). Different treatment by the media towards female candidates hurts the
ability for women to break out of their stereotypically perceived roles and characteristics in the eyes of the voters (Bystrom, 2001).

Not always do gender stereotypes work against female candidates. Kathleen Dolan, in her work titled “Voting for Women in the ‘Year of the Woman’” published in 1998, looked at the monumental year of 1992 when a record number of “119 women stood for election as majority-party candidates for the House and Senate and 53 of them were victorious, bringing the female members of Congress to an all-time high of 10%” (Dolan, 1998, p. 15). Dolan explains that while this record increase alone makes the 1992 elections significant, even more important was the notion that women were running and winning “as women” (Dolan, 1998). Successful female candidates were utilizing their gender to “capitalize on their differences from men and their outsider status” (Dolan, 1998, p. 17). Female-specific issues were an important part of the campaign rhetoric in 1992 (Dolan, 1998). These included sexual harassment, the debate over the Family and Medical Leave Act, and abortion (Dolan, 1998).

Capitalizing on female-specific stereotypes, however, may not be equally effective along party lines. Craig Leonard Brains in “Women For Women? Gender and Party Bias in Voting for Female Candidates” evaluates the effect of women candidates targeting women voters on “feminine issues” and how often voters cross party lines on election day in order to support a female candidate. Brains finds that, overall, there is evidence to support that “female candidates gain marginally greater support from their own gender” than do men but to a differing extent depending on party lines (Brains, 2005). Brains’ analysis finds that when a Democratic female candidate faces a Republican male opponent, they can strongly benefit from Republican women voters crossing over party lines to support the female candidate (Brains, 2005). Brains finds that women disproportionately support other women in both state and federal elections (Brains,
2005). It also seems likely that Republican-female candidates may be especially disadvantaged by their gender (Brains, 2005).

Female candidates often make strategic choices when deciding where to run. Heather L. Ondercin in “Comparing Predictors of Women’s Congressional Election Success: Candidates, Primaries, and the General Election” determines that there are certain districts that are far more likely to have women candidates and to elect female representatives than others (Ondercin, 2009). Incumbency is a major factor female candidate consider when deciding where to run (Ondercin, 2009). Female candidates will often choose to run in open-seat elections without the challenge of trying to beat an incumbent (Ondercin, 2009). Once again, Ondercin reiterates that women candidates “find greater success and support in the Democratic Party and in Democratic districts” (Ondercin, 2009, p. 4). Therefore, female candidates, both Republican and Democrat alike, will strategically decide to run where they have the highest chance of winning, Democratic-leaning districts (Ondercin, 2009). The most “women-friendly” districts are ones that are “strongly Democratic; small in geographic size; more urbanized; located in the North rather than the South and containing more minority, foreign-born, older, more educated, higher income populations, and fewer blue-collar workers” (Ondercin, 2009, p. 5). Ultimately Ondercin finds that female candidates behave in sophisticated and strategic ways when determining where to run, in order to increase their chance of winning (Ondercin, 2009).

This paper aims to begin to address just what types of strategies are the most successful for female candidates. Rather than only looking at the existing literature as a guideline for a successful campaign strategy, could women be even more successful if they embrace a female-specific campaign strategy? Does being a female candidate actually present advantages, if campaigned correctly?
Female Candidates and Campaign Strategies

As mentioned earlier, the study by Kathleen Dolan, “Voting for Women in the ‘Year of the Woman,’” made some groundbreaking conclusions about the monumental year of 1992, when a record number of 119 women stood for election as majority-party candidates. Dolan evaluated and recounted the advancements women made in 1992. Women ran in record numbers and a record number of 53 women were victorious, thus bringing the female members of Congress to an all-time high (to that point) of 10% (Dolan, 1998). Dolan explains that not only were the number of women elected significant when evaluating the 1992 election, but perhaps, even more importantly, women in 1992 were running campaigns and winning elections “as women,” meaning that they were promoting and utilizing their gender as an asset rather than an obstacle (Dolan, 1998). Much of the political rhetoric in 1992 was focused around female-specific issues such as sexual harassment, the Family and Medical Leave Act, and abortion (Dolan, 1998). Women on the 1992 campaign trail were breaking from the expectation that running a successful campaign meant focusing on typical key-issue campaign rhetoric (Dolan, 1998). They, instead, were focusing their campaigns on female-specific issues and establishing that they were, being a female candidate, distinctively qualified to champion and fight for female issues (Dolan, 1998).

Dolan’s study performed a logistic analysis of the 1992 American National Election Study which included respondents from “10 Senate races and 38 House races in which one of the candidates was a woman” (Dolan, 1998, p.6). The dependent variable used in Dolan’s study was vote choice, coded to reflect if the respondent voted for the female candidate (1) or her male opponent (0). The controls in her model included respondents “political party, self-reported political ideology, and the measure of the incumbency status of the candidates” (Dolan, 1998,
Dolan’s study used three different models for her analysis. Model 1 looked at the possible effects of different demographic characteristics. Here, Dolan tested if demographic characteristics: gender, race, age, education, and strength of religiosity were relevant to vote choice. Model 2 explored general issues. This test evaluated how voters viewed women candidates and their positions, as well as determining if their credibility, on less gender-specific issues like economic and national security may give a hint as to broader-issue concern that determined support or opposition to women candidates. Finally, Model 3 looked at gender issues. Here Dolan tested the effect of: “respondents’ positions on abortion, perception of the seriousness of sexual harassment in society, and the need for government action in providing subsidized child care and guaranteed parental leave” on their vote choice (Dolan, 1998, p.8).

Dolan’s results indicated that during the 1992 “Year of the Woman,” women used strategic gender-specific campaign strategies which resulted in the highest amount of electoral success for female candidates in U.S. history (Dolan, 1998). Dolan also recognized that gender was probably a more “important variable in House races than in Senate races” (Dolan, 1998, p.16). This is, according to Dolan, because in Senate races, candidates are more visible, and voters have more information on which to base their vote decision (Dolan, 1998). When voters have little other information about candidates, gender will become more of a factor in voter’s decisions (Dolan, 1998). Subsequently, Dolan finds that with more information, “voters will rely less on heuristic cues such as gender and engage in more ‘sophisticated’ voting” (Dolan, 1998, p. 16). Dolan argues that issue positions are far more important in Senate races and demographics are less relevant to vote choice (Dolan, 1998).

The 2018 midterms (26 years later), was another record-breaking year in the number of female candidates who ran for and won elective office. According to EMILY’s List, in the two-
year period from 2015 to 2016, 920 women contacted the organization with ambitions to run for office (EMILY’s List, 2018). After the 2016 election, however, an astonishing 34,000 women contacted EMILY’s List looking for guidance, tools, and support, to run for office (EMILY’s List, 2018). A record 238 women ran as major-party candidates on the House ballot and 22 women ran for seats in the Senate (The Center for Responsive Politics, 2018). As of election day, Democratic women had won nearly half (47 percent) of their races, gaining a record 93 seats, and Republican women won 24 percent of their races gaining 13 seats (The Center for Responsive Politics, 2018). As described by Elaine Kamarch, the Director of the Center for Effecting Public Management, though there have been previous groundbreaking years for women, “the 2018 midterms shares the most in common with 1992” (Kamarch, 2018).

There are many similarities between these two monumental years for women in U.S. Politics. In 1992, much like in 2018, the United States was dealing with a series of very high-profile cases of sexual misconduct. In 1992, Clarence Thomas was confirmed to the Supreme Court even after Anita Hill levied sexual harassment allegations against him (Totenberg, 2018). The 2018 midterm election was fueled by the 2016 election of President Donald Trump, who was not only accused by multiple women of sexual assault, but had made explicit, recorded, comments about sexual assault and sexual harassment (Totenberg, 2018). Before the 2018 midterm elections, Brett Kavanaugh was controversially appointed to the U.S. Supreme court, despite being accused publicly of sexual assault when he was in high school (Totenberg, 2018). On and before election day, just like in 1992, a substantial and vocal number of women were furious.

The dramatic increase in the number of women running for office in 2018, brought increased national exposure to the issue of sexual harassment. Along with discussions of
repealing Roe vs. Wade, the 2018 midterm elections were of the utmost importance for not only female candidates but female voters alike. Women advance the theme of turning-out-to-vote at slightly higher rates than men (Hartig, 2019). Women increased the percentage point gender gap from +2.2 percent in 2014 to +3.2 percent in 2018 (Hartig, 2019). In addition, 59 percent of women voted for Democrats, while 51 percent of men voted for Republicans (Kamarch, 2018). Just how did these female candidates secure their success and motivate more women to turn out and vote?

This study was inspired and influenced, in part, by Dolan’s study “Voting for Women in the ‘Year of the Woman.’” The unusual circumstances present in both 1992 and 2018, resulting in these years having historic numbers of women running for election, are important to consider when evaluating the study results. It is possible that the findings from studying these two monumental election years may not be applicable to other elections with dissimilar circumstances.

My aim is to develop some possible conclusions about what were successful female candidate-campaign strategies that were used in the 2018 Senate midterm elections. The goal of this study is to determine if female Senate candidates, in 2018, achieved greater electoral success when they used more female-specific campaign messages versus gender-neutral and key-issue campaign messages.
Section 2: Data and Methods

In this study, I evaluate the strategic choices 2018 Senate female-candidates made along their campaign trails, focusing specifically on what statements they made and messages they promoted.

With the goal of constructing detailed evaluations and gathering the largest amount of media content on each candidate, this study will focus on the 22 women who ran in the general election for the Senate during the 2018 midterms. Focusing on just these female candidates is advantageous for this study method for the following reasons. First, by limiting the study to 22 female candidates, we can develop a more detailed evaluation of each campaign. Having a larger number of women in our study would be important to see if the study’s conclusions could be applied to more than just the 2018 Senate midterm election. Evaluating each of the 236 female congressional 2018 midterm female candidates’ individual campaign strategies, however, is well outside the scope of this study. Additionally, by focusing on the Senate midterm elections, there is the advantage of having a greater amount media coverage on each candidate. This presents more opportunities to gather information on candidates’ campaign messages, statements, priorities, and issue focus.

Each of the 22 female candidates’ campaigns was assessed in detail. In order to gather data on each of these candidates’ campaigns, I created three categories of campaign statements and evaluated each campaign using these categories. They are: (1) Female-Interest Statements (2) Female-Advantage Statements (3) Non-Gendered Key-Issue Statements. These three categories are derived from various campaign issues. Female-Interest Statements are statements that focus on issues that are specifically applicable and relatable to women. These statements are coded as
statements referencing, abortion, sexual harassment, or other female-specific\(^1\) statements. The next category, Female-Advantage Statements, includes statements promoting issues that are viewed by voters as better handled by women such as, healthcare, child-care, and education.\(^2\) Lastly, Non-Gendered Key-Issue Statements, are classified as statements made by candidates referencing the economy, national security, and border security. These issues are not gender-specific and were important during the 2018 midterms. The economy and national security are established in previous literature as being some of the most valuable messages to prime and mention on the campaign trail. Boarder security recently has become a key political issue. On the campaign trail in 2016, Donald Trump “made immigration the centerpiece of his campaign” (Pierce & Selee, 2017, p. 1). His focus on immigration and border security rhetoric continued into his presidency (Pierce & Selee, 2017). His calls to build a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border, as well as his extremely controversial enforcement of separating immigrant children from their families at the border, increased the salience of both immigration border security issues during the 2018 midterms (Pierce & Selee, 2017).

For this study, female candidates were not evaluated against male candidates. The focus, instead, was on the effect of female-specific campaign messages on a female candidate’s percent of the two-party vote. I sought to test the hypothesis that both Female-Interest Statements and Female-Advantage Statements had a positive effect on the percent of the two-party vote female Senate candidates won during the 2018 midterm elections.

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\(^1\) Female-specific statements were coded as statements referring to a woman’s underrepresentation in leadership positions, women receiving unequal pay for equal work, and women continuing to fight for gender equality.  
\(^2\) Education statements were coded as statements regarding the cost of higher education, the importance of education, school funding, supporting teachers, supporting students, and access to quality education.
The study carefully examined over 22 hours of debate video.\textsuperscript{3} It also gathered data by evaluating as many political ads put out by the candidate as were available.\textsuperscript{4} In addition, the data included content examined from each of the candidate’s campaign websites, as well as media interviews. In each forum, I made a running tally for each candidate. For each 2018 female-Senate candidate, a mark was made every time they made a statement about, or referring to, any of the three categories established above.

A statement was classified as either a single-sentence or multiple-sentences that pertained to one identifiable idea. If there were multiple sentences that were all explaining or expanding on the same idea, it was marked as a single statement. If there were sentences that built on, or evolved one identifiable idea into another, it was then marked as multiple statements. In order to gather as much information as possible on a candidate’s campaign messaging and campaign strategy, I did not limit a candidate by only counting one issue per statement. Often, candidates would mention two or more of the categories in a single statement. In these cases, a tally mark was made for each of the categories mentioned. For example: if a candidate made a single statement that referred to both healthcare and abortion, two tally marks would have been made; one each for healthcare and abortion. Additionally, a candidate’s position on an issue was not relevant when coding for statements. Regardless if a candidate made a statement for pro-life, or pro-choice, a tally mark was made under the category of abortion.

I did all of this time-intensive coding myself and, therefore, must acknowledge this possible study limitation. Ideally, a third party or a computer program would have coded for issue statements, however, neither option was possible for this study. While I made a deliberate

\textsuperscript{3} This data was gathered by watching each of the 22 female Senate candidates’ publicized 2018 Senate debate footage.
\textsuperscript{4} A minimum of 5 political ads were evaluated for each candidate.
and concerted effort to be accurate and precise when coding for the categorical statements, the
dataset and my findings are, indeed, subject to human-coding error.

Due to the fact that the Senate debates were not always the same length of time, political
ads were more prevalent for some candidates than for others, and there being unequal
opportunities for some candidates to receive equal amounts of media coverage, raw tally
numbers were not compared against each other. Instead, percentages were established for each
candidate for each category. Although there are a multitude of issues and statements that
candidates make on the campaign trail, not specifically falling under the categories of Female-
Interest, Female-Advantage, or Non-Gendered Key-Issue Statements, only these specific
categories were accounted for in this study. The goal of the study is not to establish what
percentage of their overall message was female-specific, but rather, what percentage of their
campaign was made up of either Female-Interest or Female-Advantage versus Non-Gendered
Key-Issue Statements.

For this study, each of the 22 female candidates’ campaign messages are represented by
the following equation:

**Total Campaign Statements = %FI + %FA + %NGKI**

Where %FI is a candidate’s percent of Female-Interest Statements, %FA is a candidate’s
percent of Female-Advantage Statements, and %NGKI is a candidate’s percent of the Non-
Gendered Key-Issue Statements. In this study, we are only looking at those three categories.
Therefore, for our analysis, 100% of the total campaign statements that candidates made, include
these three categories. Table 1. illustrates the complete and compiled dataset that was used in this
study’s multivariate regressions.
Table 1: 2018 Senate Female Candidate: Female Candidates and Campaign Strategies Dataset

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>% of Clinton or Trump Vote in Candidate’s State</th>
<th>% of General Election Vote</th>
<th>% Female-Interest Statements</th>
<th>% Female-Advantage Statements</th>
<th>% Female-Interest + Female-Advantage Statements</th>
<th>% Non-Gendered Key-Issue Statements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Martha McSally</td>
<td>Arizona</td>
<td>Rep.</td>
<td>Non-Inc.</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>47.6</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyrsten Sinema</td>
<td>Arizona</td>
<td>Dem.</td>
<td>Non-Inc.</td>
<td>45.5</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>34.4</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>65.5</td>
<td>34.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dianne Feinstein</td>
<td>California</td>
<td>Dem.</td>
<td>Inc.</td>
<td>61.71</td>
<td>53.8</td>
<td>34.3</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mazie K. Hirono</td>
<td>Hawaii</td>
<td>Dem.</td>
<td>Inc.</td>
<td>62.88</td>
<td>71.2</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>74.3</td>
<td>25.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debbie Stabenow</td>
<td>Michigan</td>
<td>Dem.</td>
<td>Inc.</td>
<td>47.27</td>
<td>52.3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>44.4</td>
<td>55.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy Klobuchar</td>
<td>Minnesota</td>
<td>Dem.</td>
<td>Inc.</td>
<td>46.08</td>
<td>60.3</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>32.4</td>
<td>43.2</td>
<td>56.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tina Smith</td>
<td>SE Minnesota</td>
<td>Dem.</td>
<td>Inc.</td>
<td>46.08</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td>55.7</td>
<td>44.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karin Housley</td>
<td>SE Minnesota</td>
<td>Rep.</td>
<td>Non-Inc.</td>
<td>44.57</td>
<td>42.4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>72.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claire McCaskill</td>
<td>Missouri</td>
<td>Dem.</td>
<td>Inc.</td>
<td>37.87</td>
<td>45.6</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>27.7</td>
<td>43.4</td>
<td>58.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heidi Heitkamp</td>
<td>North Dakota</td>
<td>Dem.</td>
<td>Inc.</td>
<td>27.23</td>
<td>44.5</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>26.36</td>
<td>47.36</td>
<td>52.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deb Fischer</td>
<td>Nebraska</td>
<td>Rep.</td>
<td>Inc.</td>
<td>58.75</td>
<td>57.7</td>
<td>19.35</td>
<td>28.95</td>
<td>48.3</td>
<td>51.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane Raybold</td>
<td>Nebraska</td>
<td>Dem.</td>
<td>Non-Inc.</td>
<td>33.7</td>
<td>38.6</td>
<td>18.75</td>
<td>41.75</td>
<td>62.5</td>
<td>37.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacky Rosen</td>
<td>Nevada</td>
<td>Dem.</td>
<td>Non-Inc.</td>
<td>47.92</td>
<td>50.4</td>
<td>27.27</td>
<td>36.36</td>
<td>63.63</td>
<td>36.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kirsten Gillbrand</td>
<td>New York</td>
<td>Dem.</td>
<td>Inc.</td>
<td>59.01</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>31.5</td>
<td>75.5</td>
<td>24.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chele Farley</td>
<td>New York</td>
<td>Rep.</td>
<td>Non-Inc.</td>
<td>36.52</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marsha Blackburn</td>
<td>Tennessee</td>
<td>Rep.</td>
<td>Non-Inc.</td>
<td>60.72</td>
<td>54.7</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>32.1</td>
<td>53.5</td>
<td>46.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan Hutchison</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>Rep.</td>
<td>Non-Inc.</td>
<td>38.07</td>
<td>29.4</td>
<td>13.79</td>
<td>27.61</td>
<td>41.4</td>
<td>58.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria Cantwell</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>Dem.</td>
<td>Inc.</td>
<td>54.3</td>
<td>41.3</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>34.4</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenny Wilson</td>
<td>Utah</td>
<td>Dem.</td>
<td>Non-Inc.</td>
<td>27.46</td>
<td>30.9</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leah Vukmir</td>
<td>Wisconsin</td>
<td>Rep.</td>
<td>Non-Inc.</td>
<td>47.22</td>
<td>44.6</td>
<td>27.27</td>
<td>36.33</td>
<td>63.6</td>
<td>36.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tammy Baldwin</td>
<td>Wisconsin</td>
<td>Dem.</td>
<td>Inc.</td>
<td>46.45</td>
<td>55.4</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>58.3</td>
<td>41.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth Warren</td>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td>Dem.</td>
<td>Inc.</td>
<td>60.01</td>
<td>60.3</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>57.78</td>
<td>65.38</td>
<td>34.62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Methodology

The data used in this research comes from the Table 1 data set. Only the 22 female candidates who ran for the Senate in the 2018 midterm election are evaluated in this study. The dependent variable in this analysis is candidates’ share of the two-party vote.

Control Variables

Six models will be evaluated in this study. The first three focus on studying the effect of female-specific campaigning on 2018 female-Senate candidates’ share of the two-party vote, while controlling for several factors established for candidate’s electoral success. These models will all use the same dependent variable (percent of two-party vote) but different independent variables: Female-Interest Statements, Female-Advantage Statements, and Female-Interest + Female-Advantage Statements. All of these first three models will include the same control variables. These control variables are: candidate’s party, coded as 1 for Democrat and 0 for Republican, incumbency status, coded as 1 for incumbent and 0 for non-incumbent, and the Presidential vote share that the same-party candidate won in 2016, used as an indicator of the
strength of a candidate’s party and support of Trump in their state. The two-party vote that the same-party candidate (Clinton or Trump) received in the 2016 presidential election, is an extremely important control variable to include in this study. It will help capture a candidates’ gross partisan advantage or disadvantage in her state, often the single most important factor in an election. By adding the control of the Presidential vote share that the same-party candidate won in 2016, we can control for the effect of both partisan and Trump-referendum voting.

The final three models will include all of the variables described above, as well as an additional variable that tests the interaction between party and female-specific campaign messages. This interaction variable will test if the effect of a female-specific strategy depends on a candidate’s party. We expect that female-specific campaigning will not work the same for Democrat and Republican-female candidates. Many of these female-specific issues are more aligned with liberal ideology than conservative ideology. Therefore, I assume, that the effect of these issue statements will vary by a candidate’s party. These last three models will test the interaction of party for each Female-Interest, Female-Advantage, and Female-Interest + Female-Advantage Statements.

While the goal of this study is to find out if, on average, female-specific campaigning has a positive effect over on a female candidate’s percent of the two-party vote, it is important to remember that campaign strategy may be endogenous. Therefore, candidates choose campaign strategies that fit their particular circumstances. For example: if a candidate is running in a district that likes female candidates, it might induce that candidate to emphasize female issues, even if the campaign has no effect on the vote. Unfortunately, for this particular study, it was not feasible to incorporate this effect. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind, the possibility that the findings might not entirely indicate the effects of campaigning.
Model I: Female-Interest Statements

The first model examines the possible effect of candidates making Female-Interest Statements on a candidate’s overall percentage of the two-party vote. The primary independent variable in this model is the percent of Female-Interest Statements a candidate made during their campaign. Again, Female-Interest Statements were coded as statements made by female 2018 Senate midterm candidates, pertaining to sexual harassment, abortion, and other female-specific issues. The expectation for this model is: even when a candidate’s party, incumbency status, and the strength of a candidates’ party in her state, is taken into account, a higher percent of Female-Interest Statements made by female Senate candidates increased the percentage of the two-party vote they won. The multivariate regression in Model I is represented by the equation:

\[
\% \text{ of Two-Party Vote} = \alpha + \beta_1 (\%\text{Female-Interest Statements}) + \beta_2 (\text{Party}) + \beta_3 (\text{Incumbency Status}) + \beta_4 (\% \text{ of Two-Party Vote for Same-Party 2016 Presidential Candidate})
\]

Model II: Female-Advantage Statements

The second model examines the possible effect of candidates making Female-Advantaged Statements on a candidate’s percentage of the two-party vote. The primary independent variable in this model is the percent of Female-Advantaged Statements a candidate made during their campaign. Female-Advantaged Statements were coded as statements made by female 2018 Senate midterm candidates focusing on the issues of healthcare, child care, or education. The expectation here is: even when a candidate’s party, incumbency status, and the strength of a candidates’ party in her state, is taken into account, a higher percent of Female-Advantaged Statements made by female Senate candidates increased the percentage of the two-party vote they won. Model II will be represented by the equation:
% of Two-Party Vote = α + β₁ (%Female-Advantage Statements) + β₂ (Party) + β₃ (Incumbency Status) + β₄ (% of Two-Party Vote for Same-Party 2016 Presidential Candidate)

Model III: Female-Interest + Female-Advantage Statements

The third model examines the possible combined effect of candidates making either Female-Interest Statements or Female-Advantaged Statements on a candidate’s percent of the two-party vote. This represents the possible effect of a candidate running “as a woman” and campaigning on both sets of female-specific issues. The primary independent variable in this model is the total percent of Female-Interest + Female-Advantaged Statements a candidate made during their campaign. This analysis, therefore, evaluates female candidate’s compiled percentage of statements on any of the categories coded under Female-Interest or Female-Advantage issues. The expectation for this model is: even when a candidate’s party, incumbency status, and the strength of a candidates’ party in her state, is taken into account, a higher percent of Female-Interest + Female-Advantaged Statements made by female Senate candidates increased the percentage of the two-party vote they won. Model III will be represented by the equation:

% of Two-Party Vote = α + β₁ (%Female-Interest Statements + Female-Advantage Statements) + β₂ (Party) + β₃ (Incumbency Status) + β₄ (% of Two-Party Vote for Same-Party 2016 Presidential Candidate)

Model IV: Female-Interest Statements, adding the Interaction of Party and Female-Interest Statements

This fourth model examines the possible, on average, effect of a candidate making Female-Interest Statements on a candidate’s percent of the two-party vote, while incorporating the interaction term of Party X Female-Interest Statements. The expectation for this model is that

---

5 Sexual harassment, abortion, gender-specific issues, healthcare, child care, or education.
the effect of Female-Interest Statements will be different, and more positive, for Democrat-female candidates than for Republican-female candidates. Model IV will be represented by the equation:

\[
\% \text{ of Two-Party Vote} = \alpha + \beta_1 (\% \text{Female-Interest Statements}) + \beta_2 (\text{Party}) + \beta_3 (\text{Incumbency Status}) + \beta_4 (\% \text{ of Two-Party Vote for Same-Party 2016 Presidential Candidate}) + \beta_5 (\text{Party} \times \% \text{Female-Interest Statements})
\]

Model V: Female-Advantage Statements, adding the Interaction of Party and Female-Advantage Statements

This fifth model examines the possible, on average, effect of a candidate making Female-Advantage Statements on a candidate’s percent of the two-party vote, when controlling for a candidate’s party, incumbency status, the strength of a candidates’ party in her state and the interaction of party and Female-Advantage Statements. The expectation for this model is that the effect of Female-Advantage Statements will be different, and more positive, for Democratic-female candidates than for Republican-female candidates. We do expect, however, that the effect of Female-Advantage Statements will not vary, due to party, as much as Female-Interest Statements. This is because, although still more closely related to Democratic ideology, Female-Advantage issues (healthcare, child care, and education) are less partisan than Female-Interest issues. Model V will be represented by the equation:

\[
\% \text{ of Two-Party Vote} = \alpha + \beta_1 (\% \text{Female-Advantage Statements}) + \beta_2 (\text{Party}) + \beta_3 (\text{Incumbency Status}) + \beta_4 (\% \text{ of Two-Party Vote for Same-Party 2016 Presidential Candidate}) + \beta_5 (\text{Party} \times \% \text{Female-Advantage Statements})
\]
Model VI: Female-Interest + Female-Advantage Statements, Controlling for the Interaction of Party and Female-Interest + Female-Advantage Statements

This sixth, and final, model examines the possible, on average, effect of a candidate making either Female-Interest or Female-Advantage Statements on a candidate’s percent of the two-party vote, when controlling for a candidate’s party, incumbency status, the strength of a candidates’ party in her state and the interaction of party and Female-Interest + Female-Advantage Statements. The expectation for this model is that the effect of Female-Interest + Female-Advantage Statements will be different, and more positive, for Democrat-female candidates than for Republican-female candidates. Model VI will be represented by the equation:

\[
\% \text{ of Two-Party Vote} = \alpha + \beta_1 (\% \text{Female-Interest + Female-Advantage Statements}) + \beta_2 \text{(Party)} + \beta_3 (\text{Incumbency Status}) + \beta_4 (\% \text{ of Two-Party Vote for Same-Party 2016 Presidential Candidate}) + \beta_5 (\text{Party} \times \% \text{Female-Interest + Female-Advantage Statements})
\]

Results

Due to a small sample size (22 candidates) this study’s findings are limited and none of the coefficients on campaign-content variables were statistically significant. With such a small sample size, the effect size that would be required for statistically significant results would have need to be quite large. Some of the findings, however, are large enough to be substantively important, if they are not due to sampling error. Election results are often close. In 2018 U.S. Senate and U.S. House elections, “the winning candidate’s margin of victory in 102 races was less than 10 percent and was 5 percent or less in 50 races” (Ballotpedia, 2019). Campaign effects altogether are likely to be a few percentage points. The range of variation in these rhetorical variables is quite large. Some of the findings discussed below are substantially significant while not statistically significant in this present study. This study method, although nascent, was able to produce an initial look into the possible effects of female-specific statements on election
outcomes. A similar and more sophisticated study, including much larger sample size, would be needed in order to determine if the results of this study are generalizable.

Model I: Female-Interest Statements

The first model evaluated the possible effect of Female-Interest Statements on a female candidate’s overall percentage of their two-party vote. In order not to overlook many important factors leading to a candidate being elected, the control variables of party, incumbent status, and the strength of a candidates’ party in her state, as discussed above, were added to the analysis. Table 2. shows the results of the multivariate regression for Model I.

Table 2: Candidate’s Percent of Two-Party Vote given Percent of Female-Interest Statements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Coefficients</th>
<th>P-Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percent of Female-Interest Statements</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incumbent Status</td>
<td>6.88 *</td>
<td>0.064</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party</td>
<td>2.37</td>
<td>0.527</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of Two-Party Vote for Same-Party 2016 Presidential Candidate (Intercept)</td>
<td>0.55 ***</td>
<td>0.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13.02 *</td>
<td>0.069</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: p<0.05 "*, p<0.01 "**, p<0.001 "***" Multiple R-squared: 0.774 N-Value: 22

Interpreting the coefficients from Model I. helps determine the possible effect that Female-Interest Statements had on the 2018 Senate midterm female candidate’s percent of the two-party vote.

The coefficient of most interest in this study is the effect of Female-Interest Statements. What we see from the regression results is that there is a positive relationship between Female-Interest Statements and a candidate’s percent of two-party vote. The Female-Interest Statement
coefficient illustrates that, on average, there was an increase of 0.24% to a candidate’s percent of the two-party vote for every 1% increase in the percent of Female-Interest Statements that a candidate made.

Model II: Female-Advantage Statements

Model II analyzed the effect of Female-Advantage Statements on 2018 female Senate candidate’s percent of the two-party vote. Again, not to overlook many of the important factors leading to a candidate being elected, the control variables of party, incumbent status, and the strength of a candidates’ party in her state, were added to the analysis. Table 3. shows the coefficient results of this multivariate regression.

Table 3: Candidate’s Percent of Two-Party Vote given Percent of Female-Advantage Statements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Coefficients</th>
<th>P-Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percent of Female-Advantage Statements</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.798</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incumbent Status</td>
<td>5.02</td>
<td>0.188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party</td>
<td>5.59</td>
<td>0.199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of Two-Party Vote for Same-Party 2016 Presidential Candidate (Intercept)</td>
<td>0.70 ***</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10.72</td>
<td>0.162</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: p<0.5 ***, p<0.01 *****, p<0.001 ****  Multiple R-squared: 0.735  N-Value: 22*

We see that Female-Advantage Statements had, on average, a slight-negative effect on 2018 female Senate candidates’ percent of the two-party vote. The coefficient Female-Advantage Statements showed an, on average, ever so slight decrease of 0.04% for every 1% increase of Female-Advantage Statements used by a 2018 female Senate candidate.

Model III: Female-Interest + Female-Advantage Statements

The third model evaluated the combined effect of Female-Interest and Female-Advantage Statements. This model shows the average effect between Female-Interest and Female-Advantage Statements. It illustrates the possible effect for a typical female candidate who runs
“as a woman,” campaigning on both types of female issues. Table 4. shows the findings of this multivariate regression.

Table 4: Candidate’s Percent of Two-Party Vote given Percent of Female-Interest + Female-Advantage Statements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Coefficients</th>
<th>P-Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female-Interest Statements + Female-Advantage Statements</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incumbent Status</td>
<td>6.94 *</td>
<td>0.081</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>0.828</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of Two-Party Vote for Same-Party 2016 Presidential Candidate (Intercept)</td>
<td>0.56 ***</td>
<td>0.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9.95</td>
<td>0.160</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: p<0.05**, p<0.01 ****, p<0.001 *****, Multiple R-squared: 0.756, N-Value: 22*

The regression results from Table 4. show, on average, a positive relationship to a female candidate’s percent of the two-party vote in the 2018 Senate midterms, when they campaign “as a woman.” The combined coefficient for Female-Interest + Female-Advantage Statements determines that there is, on average, a 0.16% increase to a candidate’s percent of the two-party vote for every 1% increase in Female-Interest + Female-Advantage Statements.

The overall results from Models I, II, and III are represented in Figure 1. These findings, again, are limited due to a small sample size and may be due to sampling error. Figure 1. illustrates, on average, the effect of a modest 10 percent increase in Female-Interest, Female-Advantage, or Female-Interest + Female-Advantage Statements on a candidate’s percent of the two-party vote in the 2018 Senate midterm elections. This figure shows that a 10 percent increase in Female-Interest Statements had the largest impact with an, on average, 2.4% increase to a candidate’s percent of the two-party vote. A 10 percent increase in Female-Interest + Female-Advantage Statements had, on average, a 1.6% increase to a candidate’s percentage of the two-party vote. Rather surprisingly, my findings found that a 10 percent increase in Female-
Advantage Statements, on average, decreased a candidate’s percent of the two-party vote by 0.4%.

**Figure 1. Effect of a 10% Increase in Female-Specific Statements on Candidate's Percent of Two-Party Vote**

![Graph showing the effect of female-specific statements on candidate's two-party vote](image)

**Figure 1:** Effect controlling for party, incumbency status, and the Presidential vote share that the same-party candidate won in 2016.

**Model IV: Interaction of Female-Interest Statements and Party**

The fourth model evaluated if the effect of Female-Interest Statements was the same for Democratic-female candidates as it was for Republican-female candidates. In this model, all of the same control variables were included. There was, however, an additional interaction variable that included Female-Interest Statements multiplied by the party variable. Table 5. shows the results from this multivariate regression.
Model IV. demonstrates that, on average, Female-Interest Statements did not work the same for candidates from both parties. For Republican-female candidates, when the party variable is 0, there was a positive increase, on average, to candidate’s overall percent of the two-party vote of 0.36% for every 1% increase in Female-Interest Statements. For Democratic-female candidates, when the party variable was 1, there was, on average, an increase in their overall percent of the two-party vote, of 0.23% for every 1% increase in Female-Interest Statements. This means that Republican-female candidates, on average, enjoyed more of a benefit to their overall percent of the two-party vote, when they used Female-Interest Statements.

This finding is initially rather surprising, due to the fact that Female-Interest issues such as sexual harassment, abortion, and female-specific issues typically are more aligned with liberal ideology. I, therefore, had expected Female-Interest Statements to have a greater positive effect for Democratic-female candidates than for Republican-female candidates. A possibility that might explain this finding is that Democratic voters are already pre-disposed to these more ideologically-liberal issues, and therefore are not as swayed by female candidates making Female-Interest Statements on the campaign trail. Republican voters, on the other hand, are not as exposed to candidates running on these types of issues. Therefore, they are more influenced by Republican women bringing the attention to these more female-specific issues.
Model V: Interaction of Female-Advantage Statements and Party

The fifth model evaluated if the effect of Female-Advantage Statements was the same for Democratic-female candidates as it was for Republican-female candidates. In this model, all of the same control variables were included, with an additional interaction variable that included Female-Advantage Statements X Party. Table 6. shows the results from this multivariate regression.

Table 6: Female-Advantage Statements with Party Interaction Variable

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Coefficients</th>
<th>P-Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female-Advantage Statements</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.957</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incumbent Status</td>
<td>4.90</td>
<td>0.218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party</td>
<td>7.04</td>
<td>0.501</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same-Party % of Two-Party Vote in the 2016 Presidential Election</td>
<td>0.70 ***</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female-Advantage Statements X Party</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>0.877</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Intercept)</td>
<td>10.14</td>
<td>0.246</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: p<0.5 ***, p<0.01 ***, p<0.001 ****

Multiple R-squared: 0.736

N-Value: 22

Model V. demonstrates that for Republican candidates, there was, on average, no apparent effect to a candidate’s overall percent of the two-party vote. For Democratic-female candidates, there was, on average, a decrease in their overall percent of the two-party vote, of 0.06% for every 1% increase in Female-Advantage Statements.

The results from Model V. find that when the interaction between party and Female-Advantage Statements is evaluated, there is not much of a difference between the effect of Female-Advantage Statements for Democratic female candidates than for Republican-female candidates. For both Democratic and Republican-female candidates, there is an ever-so-slight decrease in their overall percent of the two-party vote for every 1% increase in Female-Advantage Statements.
Model VI: Interaction of Female-Interest + Female-Advantage Statements and Party

The sixth, and final, model evaluated if the overall effect of the Female-Interest + Female-Advantage Statements on a candidate’s percent of the two-party vote, was the same for Democratic-female candidates as it was for Republican-female candidates. Again, all of the same control variables were included, with an additional interaction variable that included Female-Interest + Female-Advantage Statements X Party. Table 7 shows the results from this multivariate regression.

Table 7: Female-Interest + Female-Advantage Statements with Party Interaction Variable

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Coefficients</th>
<th>P-Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female-Interest + Female-Advantage Statements</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.561</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incumbent Status</td>
<td>8.42 *</td>
<td>0.054</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party</td>
<td>-10.04</td>
<td>0.427</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same-Party % of Two-Party Vote in the 2016 Presidential Election</td>
<td>0.49 **</td>
<td>0.019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female-Interest + Female-Advantage Statements X Party</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.354</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Intercept)</td>
<td>15.85</td>
<td>0.104</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: \( p<0.5 \) **, \( p<0.01 \) ***, \( p<0.001 \) ****, Multiple R-squared: 0.768, N-Value: 22

From Table 7, we can see that, on average, a female candidate campaigning on both types of female-specific issues did not work the same for candidates of both parties. For Republican candidates, there was a positive increase, on average, to candidate’s overall percent of the two-party vote of 0.09% for every 1% increase in Female-Interest + Female-Advantage Statements. For Democratic female candidates, there was, on average, an increase in their overall percent of the two-party vote, of 0.31% for every 1% increase. We can see that, while Female-Interest + Female-Advantage Statements had a positive effect for both Democratic and Republican female candidates, the Democratic candidates received a larger boost to their overall percent of the two-party vote when they campaigned “as a woman.” This finding is not surprising. As mentioned earlier, these female-specific categories are more aligned with liberal
ideology than conservative ideology. It makes sense, then, that Democratic-female candidates are more likely to not only use more female-specific rhetoric but receive greater success because of it.

The results from Models IV, V, and VI are represented in Figure 2. Figure 2 shows, on average, the effect of a modest 10 percent increase in female-specific statements had on the percent of the two-party vote for Democratic and Republican-female candidates. We can see that female-specific statements do not work the same for female candidates of both parties. The least amount of partisan difference is with Female-Advantage Statements. For female candidates, of both parties, there was, on average, a slight negative effect on their percent of the two-party vote when they use more Female-Advantage Statements.

Somewhat surprisingly, my results found that Female-Interest Statements had a stronger positive effect for Republican-female candidates than they did for Democratic-female candidates. With a 10 percent increase in Female-Interest Statements, there was, on average, a 3.6% increase to a Republican-female candidate’s percent of the two-party vote. A 10 percent increase in Female-Interest Statements for Democratic-female candidates resulted in, on average, a 2.3% increase to their percent of the two-party vote. For Female-Interest + Female-Advantage Statements, we find the largest amount of partisan difference. With a 10 percent increase in Female-Interest + Female-Advantage Statements, Democratic-female candidates, on average, had a 3.1% increase to their percent of the two-party vote, while Republican-female candidates had an, on average, an increase of 0.9%.
Figure 2: (Effect controlling for party, incumbency status, and the Presidential vote share that the same-party candidate won in 2016)
Conclusion

Similar to the “Year of the Woman” in 1992, the 2018 midterm elections saw an historic increase in both the number of women who ran for office and the number of women who were elected. In 2018, as in 1992, women were not only running and winning at historic rates, they were doing so “as women” (Dolan, 1998). They ran their campaigns priming female-specific issues and focusing voters’ attention to the many ways in which being a female candidate was an asset. The 2018 midterm elections presented a great opportunity to study these seemingly advantageous female campaign strategies to try and create a better understanding of what the most successful campaign strategies are for female candidates.

By evaluating the 2018 Senate midterm elections and focusing specifically on Female-Interest and Female-Advantage rhetoric, this study attempted to determine if female-specific campaigning had a positive effect on female candidates’ percent of the two-party vote. Our findings across categories, Female-Interest, Female-Advantage, and Female-Interest + Female-Advantage, were not highly consistent and were somewhat surprising. While Model’s I, II, and III found that Female-Interest Statements and Female-Interest + Female-Advantage Statements both had a positive effect on female candidate’s percent of the two-party vote, Female-Advantage Statements had, on average, a subtle negative effect. For the 2018 Senate midterm elections, Female-Advantage Statements did not show the expected outcome. It is hard to conclusively determine why this was.

As mentioned earlier, 2018 was an unusual election. A possible hypothesis is that because during the 2018 midterms there was more attention on issues like sexual harassment, and abortion rights, Female-Advantage Statements were not as effective as would have been expected. There is no way, however, for this study to make any clear conclusions.
Not surprisingly, this study found that female-specific campaigning did not work the same for Democratic and Republican female candidates. This was to be expected due to the current political and ideological divide between Democrats and Republicans. While running “as a woman” and using both more Female-Interest and Female-Advantage Statements had the greatest positive effect for Democratic-female candidates, rather unexpectedly, Female-Interest Statements, on their own, had a greater positive effect for Republican-female candidates. I expected Democratic-female candidates to have the greatest benefit from these types of issues, due to the fact that sexual harassment, abortion, and female-specific issues seemed to fall more under the liberal ideological umbrella than a conservative one. It is important to remember, however, that “statements” were counted regardless of a candidate’s position on the issue. It is possible that the issue of abortion was a far more powerful issue for Republican voters than it was for Democratic voters, for opposite reasons. This may be another possible explanation for the larger positive effect of Female-Interest Statements for Republican-female candidates than for Democratic-female candidates.

The results from this study conclude that while, in some cases, from a fairly modest 10 percent change in female-specific statements there were up to a 3.6% increase to a candidate’s percent of the two-party vote, the findings were not highly consistent across models. Female-Interest and Female-Advantage statements worked differently, and the effect of female-specific issues did vary depending on a candidate’s party. It, therefore, seems possible that female candidates are free to campaign “as women” or not. While this study finds that female-specific campaigning can, in some cases, significantly increase a female candidate’s percent of the two-party vote, for some female candidates they may do better to adopt a nongender-specific approach.
This study is somewhat limited in scope. Gathering enough information for each candidate, required many hours of watching debate footage, political ads, website records, and news articles. This time-intensive method was advantageous in producing a detailed records of candidates Female-Interest, Female-Advantage, Non-Gendered Key-Issue rhetoric, it was not, however, easily applicable for studying a large number of female candidates such as the women running for the House of Representatives, Governors, or local elections. Having evaluated only the 22 female candidates who ran for 2018 Senate midterm elections, this limits the generalizability of this study’s conclusions. With more resources, a similar study method could be used for a larger number of female candidates, in order to test the generalizability of this study’s results.

In the end, there is some evidence for advantages of campaigning on female-specific issues and running “as a woman,” however, it is mixed and fairly weak. A study utilizing a larger dataset and evaluating more female candidates would be needed to see if some of the basic findings from this study would hold.

Updating the literature on successful campaign strategy to include gender differences, is crucially important in giving women equal resources when establishing their campaign strategy. While specific campaign strategies are different for each candidate, guidelines for what are the most advantageous topics for focus can make a big difference when getting started.
Works Cited


Hartig, Hannah. (2019). “In Year of Record Midterm Turnout, Women Continued to Vote at Higher Rates Than Men.” 


