

# WHAT NOT TO WEAR: FASHION AND FEMALE CANDIDATES IN OKLAHOMA

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What impact does a female candidate's clothes have on her ability to be elected to office? This controlled experiment draws on candidate image research to compare the same political candidate's chances of getting elected when she assumes three different personas: Powerful, Traditional, and Sexy. When running our experiment on students at East Central University (N=95), we reveal that "voters" prefer the Powerful candidate, although they attribute more favorable characteristics to the Traditional candidate. We applied the results of our experiment to the 2010 gubernatorial election between Jari Askins and Mary Fallin to conclude that in combining the Powerful and Traditional personas, Mary Fallin developed a very effective image.

## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

**It was more the discussions** of Hillary Clinton and her ubiquitous pantsuits rather than the voluminous research on candidate evaluation that spurred the development of this research project. Female candidates and officeholders are nearly never mentioned without at least a glancing evaluation of her clothes and image (Deckman, Dolan and Swers 2007; Kahn 1994). What role does this evaluation play in a female candidate's electability, especially in Oklahoma? We decided to mount a simple experiment to see which images of a candidate –

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<sup>1</sup> Students in the Fall 2007 Women in Politics class assisted in this research.

powerful, traditional or sexy – would be the most effective among potential voters in Southeastern Oklahoma. Interest in the dress of female candidates became even more intense during the 2010 Oklahoma Governor’s race between two women: Mary Fallin and Jari Askins.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This research approaches a very real issue for female candidates who must choose one of three paths in becoming a successful woman in politics. Is it better to emphasize female traits and femininity, enhance one’s masculine traits, or to run in a more androgynous mode? A fair amount of research has been done on this issue. Many researchers (for example, Rossenwasser et al. 1987) have found that voters tend to use gender as a cue in evaluating candidates and assume feminine traits of women and masculine traits of men. Further, if women are particularly attractive voters tend to assume her to be even more feminine (Sigelman, Sigelman and Fowler 1987). An earlier study by Hedlund et al. (1979) found that elite voters were not significantly less likely to vote for a female candidate for judge or school board *a priori*, but once they learned she had small children, support eroded.

Huddy and Terkildsen (1993) attempt to separate the effects of “gender trait” and “gender belief” stereotypes. “Gender traits” might be the actions or style associated with being masculine or feminine, but “gender beliefs” would be considered the innate qualities of being either male or female. When 297 students in their experiment read about different candidates, they believed that candidates – both male and female – who were described as warm, gentle, kind and passive would be stronger on “compassion issues,” while candidates who were tough, aggressive, and assertive would be stronger on military and defense issues. Because voters tend to value masculine traits over feminine ones, their advice to female candidates is to adopt masculine traits to increase electability (Rossenwasser et al. 1987). Deckman, Dolan and Swers (2007, 163) provide many examples of women candidates’ attempts to “make a woman butch,” as Rep. Susan Molinari

put it, but they worry that female candidate who come across too harsh and aggressive will be regarded as “bitchy” (162).<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, Herrnson, Lay and Stokes (2003) suggest that women candidates gain with “gender issue ownership.” In a survey of 1798 major-party candidates who ran for local, statewide, and judicial offices, as well as the US House between 1996 and 1998, women candidates claimed that they gained a strategic advantage when they ran “as women.” These candidates emphasized issues of child care and education over more male issues such as the economy and war.

One would imagine that the choice of strategy would also be dependent on whether candidates intended to strike a more liberal or more conservative image with the voters. Women tend to be seen as more liberal (Herrnson et al. 2003), which is probably related to their perceived competencies with (more liberal) women’s issues. In conservative Oklahoma, it would be a particular hindrance to women to be seen as to be more liberal even if she were not.

In a completely unique study, Sigelman, Sigelman and Fowler (1987) attempted to pit three versions of an actual female candidate against each other. The woman, Rose Elizabeth Bird, was a judge in California who had undergone an image transformation over a number of years from less attractive to more attractive. By selecting certain photos of her that made her appear attractive and feminine, unattractive and masculine, and androgynous; the researchers found that the attractive version of Judge Bird was the one most associated with sex-role related qualities. Using a path model, they showed that the direct effects of her attractiveness did not detract from her electability, but the indirect effects of being seen as nicer, less effective, and less dynamic did significantly affect votes for her.

## METHODOLOGY

Together, the class designed a research project to test the effects of female candidate image on electability when facing a male candidate.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Alternatively, some male candidates and office holders are graded highly for their feminine gender traits, such as Bill Clinton’s emotionality and communication style.

<sup>3</sup> This project was cleared through East Central University’s Institutional Review Board on Oct. 26, 2007. It is proposal number 2007.04.

When brainstorming about potential images a female candidate may likely project in an Oklahoma political race, we derived three: powerful, traditional, and sexy. Our experiment is designed with a stimulus and a post test. Undergraduate students at East Central University would be shown one of these three images along with a static male candidate and candidate biographies. Similar to other election simulation experiments (Rosenberg et al. 1986, Rosenberg et al 1991, Sigelman, Sigelman, and Fowler 1987), students would be asked to rate photographs and biographies of candidates on questions of political demeanor as well as select a winner of the race.

The class created these photos by meeting with an actual political officeholder and candidate, Hughes County Assessor Kathi Mask, who was beginning her run for Oklahoma State Representative. Mask brought a selection of clothing to class to represent three different types of dress: “powerful,” “traditional,” and “sexy.” As a class, the students examined the clothing and selected the outfits that would best represent these three types of dress. Mask’s daughter took a selection of photos of Mask in her home. The class then selected the photos they thought would be most neutral for the study. We named the candidate “Mrs. Katherine Wilbanks” and created a short biography for her.

The second candidate, the man, was also a student’s parent. The class asked for several photos of him in a suit, which he emailed to his daughter. The class then selected the photo that was the most compatible with our pictures of “Mrs. Katherine Wilbanks.” Only one photo was required. The class named this candidate “Mr. Johnathan Baker” and created a biography intended to be on par with Wilbanks’. Supposedly, each had moved to Oklahoma, graduated from East Central University, worked in the private sector, had grown children, and had acquired political experience. In each display, the photo of Baker appeared on the right and the photo of Wilbanks appeared on the left. See Appendix 2 for the photos.

Students from the class conducted the experiment. They read from a predetermined script outlining the procedure. After completing their informed consent forms and having these collected, students were shown photos of two hypothetical candidates, each labeled “Candidate for State Representative.”

Four different American Government classes (N=95 students) participated in the study. Whereas larger selection of classes may provide for more generalizability, because all students in Oklahoma colleges are required to take American Government, there was a good cross section of students. The average age of the participants was 21. There were 55 females and 38 males. Party affiliation was recorded as 42 Democrats, 36 Republicans, and 13 “other.” When performing ANOVA, we determined that there were no statistically significant differences among the classes in the areas of age, ideology, church attendance, party, knowledge, and gender. However, significant difference among classes was found in self-reported voter registration ( $f=3.958$ , S.E. .047,  $p<.05$ ).

The survey consisted of 31 questions, ten demographic and political questions, and 21 pertaining to the photographs and biographies. Most questions were closed-ended questions on a Likert scale which ranged from one to five. Five open-ended questions were employed. The data was entered into Excel by a worker in the departmental office and then transferred to SPSS for analysis. See Appendix 1 for the survey.

#### RESEARCH ASSUMPTIONS:

The dress/fashion of a female candidate will affect support for that candidate.

Reactions will be affected by both the gender and the ideology of the respondent.

#### HYPOTHESES:

H:1: Men and women will both prefer the female power candidate over the traditional or sexy candidate, but men be more likely to support a sexy candidate over a traditional candidate.

H:2: Men are more likely to support any female candidate versus a male candidate than women will be.

H:3: The respondent’s ideology will have a greater impact on his or her selection of candidates than his or her gender. Conservative respondents will prefer the man over the women. Liberal respondents will be more likely to support the women.

## RESULTS

To any politically minded person, the first interesting question is: who won? Indeed, it was interesting to find out that Katherine Wilbanks won each of the three match-ups. Power Wilbanks was the most commanding, with a 20 to 6 victory (77% to 23%). Sexy Wilbanks also performed well, winning 23 to 13 (64% to 33%). Traditional Wilbanks had the closest race at 14 to 11 (56% to 44%), but she won nonetheless, in what would be considered a landslide in the real world. Overall, it must be noted that these results are a surprise. We generally assumed that the female candidate would lose to the male candidate every time. However, these results confirm that manipulating the image of Katherine Wilbanks changed the level of support that she received from these simulated voters.

Without controlling for gender or ideology of the respondent, when performing an ANOVA using the three categories of power, traditional, and sexy manipulations as the basis of the analysis, no evaluation of the three Wilbanks personae was significantly different than the others.

H:1

Hypothesis 1 states support for the female candidate should be as follows: Women like power, traditional, sexy; Men like power, sexy, traditional. This hypothesis is not supported because on the measures where there were statistically significant differences, women's scores ranked the three versions of Wilbanks in this order: traditional, sexy, and power. This order was not expected. Among men only, ANOVA revealed no statistically significant differences in evaluating the three versions of Katherine Wilbanks.

Among women only, there were two questions that rose to significance at the .1 level: "This is the kind of person you could trust" and "This person cares about what people like me think."<sup>4</sup> Women ranked Traditional Wilbanks first, Sexy Wilbanks second, and Power Wilbanks third on both trust and caring. The Likert scale on these items ranged from 1 to 5 with 1 being the strongest agreement, and 5 being the

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<sup>4</sup> Whereas the .1 confidence level is not standard, this study does have a small N so it appropriate.

strongest disagreement with the statement. Women who saw Traditional Wilbanks thought she was the most trustworthy ( $N=14$ ,  $M=1.71$ ), Sexy Wilbanks came in second ( $N=22$ ,  $M=2.27$ ) and Power Wilbanks was seen as the least trustworthy ( $N=18$ ,  $M=2.44$ ) ( $F=3.035$ ,  $p<.057$ ). The results are similar for caring: Traditional Wilbanks seemed the most caring ( $N=14$ ,  $M=2.07$ ), Sexy Wilbanks ranked next ( $N=22$ ,  $M=2.3$ ) and Power Wilbanks was seen as the least caring ( $N=18$ ,  $M=2.78$ ) ( $F=3.283$ ,  $p<.046$ ).

The Traditional Wilbanks elicited a number of comments from women, like “she didn’t look like a good leader.” Men made comments like, “Wilbanks looks too nice and motherly, don’t know if she has the aggression she needs.” Both genders specifically thought they could trust Traditional Wilbanks, but, again, it seems unclear that this is a good predictor of electability for women.

Two issues are notable. First, one would assume that women in Southeast Oklahoma would be most favorably disposed to the traditional candidate, yet she is the person who won with the smallest margin. Could it be possible that some of the measures of candidate demeanor are not actually good predictors of electability for women? Second, women seemed to be more manipulable than men when it comes to evaluating a female candidate’s image. Perhaps they are more sensitive to the cues communicated by the subtle changes in dress.

## H:2

Hypothesis 2 stated that men are more likely to support any female candidate versus a male candidate than women will be.

A simple cross tabulation analysis reveals that women and men voted for the male candidate in equal numbers across all three conditions (17 each). However, 40 women voted for Wilbanks and only 11 men did so ( $N=85$ ,  $X^2=7.465$ ).

Hypothesis 2 is rejected, perhaps providing more evidence that the most important gender bias in voting may not be that men will not vote for a woman, but that women are more likely to vote for a woman.

H:3

Hypothesis 3 stated that overall the respondent's ideology will have a greater impact on his or her selection of candidates than his or her gender. Conservative respondents will prefer the man over the women. Liberal respondents will be more likely to support the women.

To evaluate the effect of ideology, we recoded the ideology variable into three groups: liberal (very liberal and liberal) (N= 22), moderate (N=40), and conservative (conservative and very conservative)(N=28). Interestingly, several distinctions arose among the three different versions of Katherine Wilbanks without even controlling for which treatment group the respondent was in. These differences are displayed in the following table 1.

**TABLE 1**  
**ANOVA OF RESPONSE TO KATHERINE WILBANKS**  
**BY RESPONDANT'S IDEOLOGY**

	<b>Respondant's Ideology</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>p</b>
“This is the kind of person who could get a job done properly” (Likert scale: 1=agree, 5=disagree)	Liberal	22	2.	4.73	.011
	Moderate	40	2.4		
	Conservative	28	2.79		
“This person would probably do a good job leading a group” (Likert scale: 1=agree, 5=disagree)	Liberal	22	2.05	2.64	.077
	Moderate	40	2.53		
	Conservative	28	2.67		
“I think this person looks like a good leader” (Likert scale: 1=agree, 5=disagree)	Liberal	22	2.23	3.58	.032
	Moderate	40	2.8		
	Conservative	28	2.82		
“I would vote for this person” (Likert scale: 1=agree, 5=disagree)	Liberal	22	2.14	3.22	.045
	Moderate	40	2.78		
	Conservative	28	2.71		

df between groups: 2

df within groups: 87



If a respondent self-identified as “liberal” he or she was more likely to view Katherine Wilbanks as a capable leader and vote-worthy than if he or she self-identified as a moderate or conservative. This is true for four of the nine questions asked about Wilbanks.

Table 2 demonstrates the cross tabulation of candidate selection by ideology. It supports hypothesis 3 because it shows that liberals are disproportionately more likely to support the female candidate than conservatives, although conservatives indicate equal support for the male and female candidate.

**TABLE 2**  
**Cross tabulation of Candidate Selection**  
**and Respondent’s Ideology**

	<b><u>Jonathan Baker</u></b>	<b><u>Katherine Wilbanks</u></b>	<b><u>Total</u></b>
<b>Liberal</b>	3	18	21
<b>Moderate</b>	12	26	38
<b>Conservative</b>	13	13	26
	28	57	85

N=85,  $\chi^2=6.77$

## CONCLUSION

Although this paper is just an exploratory study done in unrealistic conditions, it can offer interesting insight into the mind of the voter. For a real candidate like Kathi Mask (our model for Katherine

Wilbanks) this kind of candidate image research was quite useful to her as a candidate for the Oklahoma House of Representatives, although she eventually lost her primary. Clearly, our mock electorate ascribed some feminine traits to our female candidate, such as “motherliness” or “niceness.”

On a negative note, because women candidates and politicians have such a difficult time setting the agenda and the tone of their coverage, they may have difficulty actually choosing for themselves whether to run or govern in a masculine or feminine mode (Deckman, Dolan and Swers 2007). Yes, they can put on a pantsuit instead of a cardigan sweater, but they likely will have little effect on how they are portrayed to the public. The media, rather the candidates or their staffs, is often to blame for reinforcing society’s gender stereotypes because the emphasis originates with the media. Despite a candidate or officeholder’s most professional literature, photographs, or websites, women are still likely to be seen as “women representatives” rather than “representatives who happen to be women.” Niven and Zilber (2001, 148) write, “Though the media are a crucial link between candidates and office holders and voters, many would argue that the media abuse this power by employing stereotypes in political coverage.” Their study of 28 press secretaries of women members of the US House of Representatives suggests that the media (not the officials or their press offices) define women members of Congress by their gender and that this is a significant hurdle for women politicians.

More study definitely needs to be done regarding whether a male and female’s “political demeanor” is viewed the same as it relates to electability. As stated above, women in Southeast Oklahoma seem to be most favorably disposed to the Traditional candidate, yet she is the person who won with the smallest margin. Respondents reported that Traditional Wilbanks seemed much more trustworthy than Power Wilbanks, yet Power Wilbanks received more votes. It seems that the assumptions political consultants make about which candidate attributes are the most important cannot be applied equally to male and female candidates.

Our experiment may also help interpret the historic 2010 gubernatorial election between Jari Askins (D) – who could be identified as a “power” woman, and Mary Fallin (R), who we classify more as a “traditional” woman, or perhaps a “traditional-power” hybrid. In

assessing the two candidates physically, Jari Askins is a larger woman with a short haircut and a round face. Mary Fallin has longer hair and a smaller frame. She wears makeup and would commonly be considered attractive or pretty (see Estus 2010 or Krehbiel 2010 for photographs).

The 2010 election is historic because Oklahoma had never seen two women square off for such a high office. It was also an interesting race because both candidates faced male opponents in their primary elections. Although both Askins and Fallin won their respective primaries, a review of newspaper articles published during the primary season reveals that neither candidate was attacked either by her opponent or by the media for being a woman (see, for example, Murphy 2010A).

During the general election, the two candidates held very similar (and centrist) issue stances on almost all major issues (see, e.g., Krehbiel 2010, Murphy 2010B). Political scientist Keith Gaddie noted, “The only difference between them is what kind of tab they want business to pay . . . . You can’t separate them on social issues” (quoted in Raymond 2010, 7A). This similarity on issue stances may have caused more focus on personal traits. When Mary Fallin was asked what set her apart from Jari Askins in an October debate, she responded that the main difference was that she had been married and raised children, and that Jari Askins had not (Estus 2010). This comment triggered an intense – even national – debate over the “Mommy Question.” The Mommy Question dovetails into the voters’ perceptions of these two female candidates because it was suggested that a woman could not really understand her constituents unless she had raised children herself. Mary Fallin, in invoking the motherhood role, seems to embrace the “Traditional” role for woman, and thus “gender issue ownership.” Jari Askins could not similarly embrace the role, but she stated that her marital status or lack of children did not affect her “understanding of the issues of families in Oklahoma” (Hoberock 2010, 14).

In our experiment, we revealed that voters would tend to prefer to vote for the Power candidate but perceive the Traditional candidate as more caring and trustworthy. Mary Fallin – in being a hybrid of the Power candidate and the Traditional candidate – may have hit just the right note with the voters of Oklahoma to be elected governor in 2010.

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## APPENDIX 1

### Voting Survey

1. Age\_\_\_\_\_
2. Gender: Male / Female
3. Registered to vote: Yes / No
4. What is your political party?
  - a. Democratic
  - b. Republican
  - c. Other
5. How would you describe your political ideology?
  - a. Very liberal
  - b. Liberal
  - c. Moderate
  - d. Conservative
  - e. Very conservative
6. How would you rate your knowledge about politics?
  - a. very high
  - b. high
  - c. medium
  - d. low
  - e. very low
7. How often do you attend church?
  - a. more than once a week
  - b. once a week
  - c. once in a while
  - d. never
8. Have you ever voted in an election before?
  - a. yes
  - b. no
9. What are a candidate's most important characteristics when you select for whom to vote?
10. What do you think is the most important issue facing America right now?

**Look at the picture of Mr. Jonathan Baker. Please agree or disagree with the following statements:**

Agree				Disagree
This is the kind of person you feel could get a job done properly.				
1	2	3	4	5

This is the kind of person you could trust.				
1	2	3	4	5

It would be enjoyable to be around this person.				
1	2	3	4	5

You would like this person to represent you in the Oklahoma House of Representatives.				
1	2	3	4	5

This person would probably do a good job leading a group.				
1	2	3	4	5

This person cares about what people like me think.				
1	2	3	4	5

I think this person looks like a good leader.				
1	2	3	4	5

This candidate appears to be very qualified.				
1	2	3	4	5

I would vote for this person.				
1	2	3	4	5

**Now look at the picture of Mrs. Katherine Wilbanks.  
Please agree or disagree with the following statements:**

Agree				Disagree
This is the kind of person you feel could get a job done properly.				
1	2	3	4	5

This is the kind of person you could trust.

1            2            3            4            5

It would be enjoyable to be around this person.

1            2            3            4            5

You would like this person to represent  
you in the Oklahoma House of Representatives.

1            2            3            4            5

This person would probably do a good job leading a group.

1            2            3            4            5

This person cares about what people like me think.

1            2            3            4            5

I think this person looks like a good leader.

1            2            3            4            5

This candidate appears to be very qualified.

1            2            3            4            5

I would vote for this person.

1            2            3            4            5

If you had to select one candidate over the other, would it be

a. Johnathan Baker

b. Katherine Wilbanks

Why did you make the choice that you did?

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Is there anything else you would like to tell us?

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APPENDIX 2:

Jonathan Baker, Traditional Wilbanks,  
Sexy Wilbanks, and Power Wilbanks



