

*In 2014, female candidates are still a minority in electoral politics. The general election in 2014 featured 169 female candidates for U.S. Congress. This study examines four campaigns of female candidates for U.S. Congress. Interviews with campaign staff shed light on how female candidates choose issues and plan communication strategy. Contrary to prior academic literature, findings from interviews suggest that party affiliation is a better determinant of strategy than gender. Staffers acknowledge gender and stereotypes associated with gender; however, in 2014 these staffers did not think gender was an important factor in the general election.*

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my faculty advisor Dr. Daniel Kreiss who oversaw this study at all phases. In addition, I want to acknowledge Meghan Sobel for her time reading early versions of this paper and her constructive critiques. Dr. Barbara Freidman was kind enough to donate her time to aid in the study and read final drafts. Dr. Anne Johnston was also instrumental in the completion of this study. I am thankful for time the interviewees donated to speak with me about this topic.

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## INTRODUCTION

Media deemed 1992 the “Year of the Woman” when a record number of women (four) were elected to the US Senate, bringing the total number of women in the Senate to six. Since then, the number of women in elective office has continued to increase. Females make up 20% of representatives in the Senate and 19.3% in the House in the 114<sup>th</sup> Congress (CAWP, 2011). Over the past decade, there has been a 4.7% increase of the number of women in Congress. The past three U.S. elections have featured female candidates for the office of president, vice president, and governor.

Even as women are rising to prominence in the political world, however, some scholars argue that most females in political campaigning face an up-hill battle. I will examine in my literature review two schools of thought concerning gender and its effect on campaign formation and strategy. The first group of scholars emphasizes how gender stereotypes affects voting behavior and how female campaigns can benefit or suffer from these stereotypes.. The second group of scholars has found that gender stereotypes are not influential in crafting campaign messages and strategy.

I will also review literature on media treatment of female candidates. This body of literature is divided as well. One group of scholars argues that the media upholds gender stereotypes by granting less coverage to women and only covering trivial topics in relation to female politicians. This treatment to female candidates reinforces the stereotype that women are not viable candidates. However, more recent literature has found few differences in how

female candidates are treated by the media. These scholars maintain that female candidates receive equal coverage with unbiased frames.

This study will test these four different theories across the dimensions of campaign formation and media treatments. Through in-depth interviews with campaign staff on four different female candidates' campaigns, I look to analyze how these campaigns developed their communication strategy. I seek to understand the extent to which gender influences how campaign staff make decisions, if it does at all.

My findings suggest that campaign staff do not use gender to determine campaign strategy. Polling is the most influential factor in campaign development. The polling in these campaigns reflect partisan divides and the national agenda. Gender was not prominent for campaign staffers when creating campaign messages and strategy. Gender was also inconsequential in the media. Media bias based on gender is no longer prevalent in campaign coverage.

In the pages that follow I will highlight and examine the different schools of thought about gender stereotypes on political campaigns. From there I will explain my research strategy and the staffers interviewed in this study. I present my findings in relation to the previously examined theories and how my study aids the study of gender in political election s.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Academic literature on female campaign formation can be split into two different categories. The first group of scholars argue that gender stereotypes and norms shape female candidate campaigns. These theories depend on previous findings that gender stereotypes are

relevant and of high importance to voters, thus influencing campaign staff as campaign messaging is developed. A second group of scholars utilize theories aside from gender, political party for example, to explain campaign strategy. These scholars argue that the partisanship of the district and the party of the candidate are the big factors shaping campaign strategy. Literature on this side is supported by findings that female politicians receive even and fair media coverage. Based on these literatures, my study will answer: does gender or party matter more in terms of campaign strategy?

## **Campaign Strategy and Formation**

### *Gender Theoretical Foundations and Stereotypes*

Stereotypes are a mental shortcut for voters when compiling information on candidates (Kahn 1996). When voters have little to no information on the candidate, they use stereotypes to form judgments about issues and other things related to a candidate's performance (Chang & Hitchon 2004). Many studies have explored female stereotypes and their impact in political campaigns.

Scholars working under this paradigm have concluded that women candidates overall place greater stress on "compassion issues" such as healthcare, welfare, seniors, and education (Dolan, 2005; Herrnson, Lay & Stokes, 2003; Kahn, 1996). In comparison, male candidates tend to focus on issues such as taxes, economy, and safety (Dolan, 2005; Herrnson, Lay & Stokes 2003). Stereotypes are important because voters' evaluations of these traits shape the desire for female office holders (Dolan 2009). In 2007, 50-70% of voters employed these traditional stereotypes and judged "male" issues as more important than "females" issues. This poses a

difficult choice for female candidates according to these scholars -- to remain gender congruent or gender incongruent during a campaign. Gender issue ownership theory holds that when a female candidate supports the issues associated with her sex (gender congruence) and targets women voters, she is more likely to win than female candidates who do neither (Herrnson, Lay & Stokes 2003). However, gender stereotypes are not static; they change as gender roles are shaped in an evolving society. This study conducted seven years ago could already be outdated as more women have joined politics.

Contrary to gender congruence, female candidates can address the issue of their gender by subverting it. *Gender bending* is “presenting rhetoric that is counter to . . . gender stereotypes either as a conscious attempt on the part of the candidate to try to change his or her gender stereotype or a natural extension of his or her lack of conformity to the stereotype” (Schneider 2007, p. 19). Schneider (2014) explains that there are times when male stereotypes or female stereotypes are more important to voters. However, when male candidates who stress female stereotypical issues (education, healthcare, welfare) they still have higher competency ratings on those issues than female candidates who did not discuss feminine issues (Schneider 2014). Female candidates still retain credibility on women’s issues (equal pay, reproduction rights) even when she promotes masculine issues (2014). Dittmar (2014) disagrees here, offering that female candidates can risk isolating female voters by a gender-incongruent strategy.

These scholars argue that candidate gender can determine the electoral success of the candidate when he/she which issues to support (Dolan 2005; Herrnson, Lay & Stokes 2003; Kahn 1996). Schneider (2014), Dolan (2005), and Kahn (1996) all agree the salient issues in the

district influence how successful a gender congruent or incongruent strategy will be. If masculine issues are relevant to voters than a female candidate will have a greater chance of electoral success using a gender incongruent strategy and promoting masculine issues (Schneider 2010; Dolan 2005; Kahn 1996). Schneider (2014) even concluded that female candidates promoting masculine issues still retain a competency advantage on feminine issues.

Gender stereotypes are not confined to only influencing issue selection. Meeks (2013) analyzes the success of female candidates when running for gender-consistent or inconsistent offices. Scholars argue that voters perceive elected offices to be gendered. Offices are defined by the traits best suited for that position and how it relates to stereotypical gender traits.

Meeks (2013) gives the example,

...legislative offices such as those in Congress are seen as more feminine because they require communal relationships to enact policy. This gendered impression is based on the idea that American women are more interdependent than men and seek to develop and maintain relationships, and that their leadership style is perceived to be more collaborative and democratic (p. 61).

Meanwhile voters associated executive offices as masculine because men are perceived to be “independent and autonomous” (2013). Meeks argues that women running for a gender consistent office will have a greater chance of electoral success (2013).

Scholars also argue that female candidates will have a greater chance of success when a candidate is not the first female run or hold that office (O’Regan & Stambough 2011). Research by O’Regan and Stambough (2011) has shown that the novelty of “first” female candidates tends to result in skepticism among voters and media about a female’s competence. This effect can ultimately benefit female candidates who follow, since apprehension about a woman’s political capabilities may have been allayed.

Political elections are not run in a vacuum where the only influencing factor is gender. However, there is literature about how gender interacts with factors, such as, political party. Sanbonmatsu and Dolan (2009) tested gender stereotypes on partisan lines. Their findings suggest that gender stereotypes transcend political party (2009). Republican women are still considered to be 'liberal' because of gender even though she belongs to a conservative party (Sanbonmatsu & Dolan 2009). Dolan and Sanbonmatsu (2009) found this can be advantageous to Democratic women but disadvantageous to Republican women.

### *Political Environment and Party Theory*

Despite this body of work, other literature on campaign formation suggests that all candidates, male and female, develop issue selection based on party lines. Sides (2006) explains issue ownership as it relates to political party: "Party reputation, with their accumulated historical evidence, provide this credibility. Thus, candidates should campaign on the issues that their party is perceived to "own..." (p. 411-412). As mentioned above, Sides (2006) provides that the salient issues in a constituency are a driving force in messaging strategy and the effectiveness of it.

Other scholars echo Sides' argument. In a study of campaign websites, Dolan (2005) compared the issue priorities of female and male candidates. The findings only noted minor differences between female and male candidates' issue priorities (2005). In the 2000 and 2002 elections all candidates focused on education, Social Security, healthcare, and taxes because those were the central issues (2005). Dolan (2005) states, "This is an important and sometimes overlooked finding: what appear today to be gender based differences is often more the

reflection of party-based stereotypes that happen to overlap with sex/gender stereotypes” (p. 42).

It is important to note that candidates belong to multiple attributes in relation to identity, each with its own set of stereotypes. Gender and party are two examples of categories; however, there are other categories voters use to perceive a candidate. Identity stereotypes are also a consideration for voters. These stereotypes are based on candidates’ personality as opposed to issue stance. Identity politics are those that focus “on the descriptive representation and the more superficial aspects of a group’s being” (Pinterhughes, 2008, p.50). For example, in 2008 black men and women supported Barack Obama for president while white and Latina women voters supported Hillary Clinton for the office. In this scenario, race was a bigger identity for black voters than gender. The descriptive voting bloc in this election was race, not gender.

### *Testing Theory*

I expect to find through my study that one of these scholarly camps is correct in how female candidates form campaigns. Scholars in both camps found that prevalent issues in the constituency are influential in issue selection. The debate centers on whether staffers perceive prevalent issues on gender or party lines. Given the growing number of female candidates, voters have had more exposure to women in elected office. The more exposure the public has to female politicians the less likely they are to have to resort to stereotypes. There have been viable female candidates in the past few elections which demonstrate that women to have the

ability to hold elected office. I expect that my findings will reinforce theories that gender does not matter in campaign strategy.

## **Media Treatment**

The media is a large and influential component in political campaigns, and because it operates outside the control of candidates it is worthwhile to examine its treatment of female candidates. Similar to the two scholarly camps presented above, literature on media treatment towards female candidates can be split into two categories. The first group of scholars argue that the media presents gender bias by offering limited and trivial coverage of female candidates. Such coverage perpetuates the idea that female candidates are not viable candidates. The second group of scholars find that female candidates are equally represented as males in media coverage and even presented with a neutral tone in news stories.

### *Gender Bias in the media*

Candidates can exercise a degree of control of their campaign messages, but they are dependent on the media. The media poses an exceptional problem because candidates cannot control frame. Washburn and Washburn (2011) identify five ways in which media coverage of female candidates is characterized. First, media focus on trivial subjects. Second, women receive more negative coverage with regard to competency than their male opponents. Third, women receive less attention overall than men in the media. Fourth, if issue positions are mentioned in conjunction with female candidates, those issues will be “women’s” issues. Fifth, the media question the implications of having an elected female official (2011). Washburn and Washburn (2011) note these patterns in reporting have been in press coverage since 1884.

The amount of trait coverage varies between men and women. Dunaway, Lawrence, Rose and Weber (2013) write, “the presence of a female candidate contributes to the degree to which campaign coverage focuses on candidate traits” (p. 716). Coverage of Sarah Palin, the Republican candidate for vice president in 2008 is an example of media focus on trivial topics. Among five feature articles on Palin in *Newsweek* and *Time*, four were focused on childhood, domestic life, physical appearance, and personality. None of the four examined Palin’s issue stances. Although, the Palin campaign team made efforts to avoid areas where Palin’s experience would be questioned and instead focused on Palin’s physical appearance (Washburn & Washburn 2011). Whether the news media took cues solely from the campaign team on Palin’s image is not studied.

Media tendencies provide less coverage of female candidates and trivialize reporting can have large ramifications for female candidates’ success. Both trends weaken the candidates’ credibility because voters cannot make an informed decision without information on the candidate (Washburn & Washburn 2011).

#### *Recent Trend of Neutral Coverage*

There is another camp of scholars who argue that female candidates are not subject to the media bias cited by those previous studies. Banwart, Bystrom and Robertson (2003) found that during the 2000 election female candidates were mentioned in 95% of news articles and male candidates only mentioned in 75%. In these news stories, female candidates were more likely to be covered with a neutral tone, while male candidates are more likely to be reported with a negative tone (Banwart, Bystrom and Robertson 2003). However, Banwart, Bystrom and

Robertson (2003) found that the coverage of female candidates still mention children, marital status, and gender.

When media do focus on the candidate's issues, other studies have shown that the coverage is evenly framed across gender, as opposed to how Washburn and Washburn (2011) suggest that only feminine issues are discussed. In a study of the 2000 election Banwart, Bystrom, and Robertson (2003) found that articles featuring female candidates are only about 3% more likely to cover feminine issues. Eight years later, a study of female candidate's websites and news coverage found that the issues listed on campaign websites do not differ significantly from issues portrayed in the media (Kim 2008). The results of this study demonstrate that if the news media covers feminine issues it is because female candidates select these issues as priorities. Kim (2008) even found that when the news media presented personal traits of female candidates it was more likely to be traits associated with aggressiveness and strength. This contradicts previous literature which defines female trait coverage as honest, caring, and sympathetic.

Studies of media coverage of female candidates are limited to examinations of how the media portray the candidates, and do not necessarily take into account the campaign strategies that precede and follow such coverage. To do so would add to our understanding of the relationship between gender and politics. My study will incorporate interviews with campaign staffers and campaign media coverage to reinforce one body of literature. As predicted above, I expect gender stereotypes to no longer be prevalent in campaign formation. I expect a similar finding with regard to the media, that campaign staffers do not perceive there to be gender basis in the media.

## **METHOD**

I used interviews with campaign staffers to become immersed into the strategic decisions of female candidates' campaigns. Campaign staffers are the backbone of any campaign and are best suited to give insight into campaign decisions. Previous studies have relied on quantitative research of campaign materials and news stories. This study is offering a new perspective to academic literature by obtaining information from the campaigners themselves.

I used qualitative interviews to examine the campaigns of four female candidates who ran in the 2014 mid-term election. I based my interviews on how consultants planned strategic communication, their perceptions of the campaign, and media interactions. For the 30 days leading up the election on November 4, 2014, I also kept a research journal documenting campaign materials and coverage. I set up Google Alerts to collect daily news stories, blogs, Facebook posts, and Tweets pertaining to or mentioning each of the candidates. I compiled hundreds of media articles into a timeline based on the number of stories and their content. After the election, I used the research journal to inform interviews with members of the campaign staff of the four candidates. By becoming fully immersed in the campaigns of these candidates, I am able to study the context and culture surrounding the campaigns that previous campaigns have not captured.

### **Candidates**

I selected the campaigns of four female candidates: Alison Grimes, Kay Hagan, Renee Ellmers, and Alma Adams. I selected specific candidates who varied in many different ways including: on number of electoral factors including office, incumbency status, district

partisanship, candidate partisanship, novelty, and race. Two of the candidates ran for U.S. Senate and two for U.S. House of Representatives in order to offer comparison of different level offices and constituencies. In the races, two of the candidates were incumbents (Renee Ellmers, Kay Hagan), one was a challenger (Alison Grimes), and one ran in an open-seat election (Alma Adams). The states in the Senate races were less partisan than the gerrymandered districts of the House candidates. Candidate party affiliations also differed, three candidates were Democrats and one was a Republican. One of the candidates was the running for a seat never held by a woman before. Lastly, one candidate was African-American, and therefore a minority. By using a comparative case method, the study enables comparison across female campaigns in very different races.

Alison Grimes was the Democratic nominee for Kentucky Senator running against minority (now majority) leader Republican Mitch McConnell. Grimes is a Kentucky native who started out as a small-business lawyer. In 2012, Grimes became the Secretary of State for Kentucky. This campaign was highly publicized and an extremely competitive race. I selected the Grimes campaign because Grimes is running as a novelty. Kentucky has never had a female Senator. Grimes was also new candidate running against an incumbent. The partisanship of the constituency offers for a salient comparison. Kentucky has a Democratic General Assembly and Governor; however, both current senators are Republican. In November 2014, Grimes lost the race to McConnell but remains active in Kentucky politics.

Senator Kay Hagan served as a North Carolina Senator from 2009-2015. Hagan obtained her law degree at Wake Forest Law School and remained in Greensboro, NC after graduation. Prior to running for US Senate, Hagan had 10 years' experience as a senator in the North

Carolina General Assembly. In 2014 she ran as the Democratic incumbent against Republican nominee, Speaker of the NC House Thom Tillis. It was a close race, but Hagan lost the 2014 election to Tillis. I selected Hagan because unlike Alison Grimes she filled a seat previously occupied by another woman (Elizabeth Dole). By winning the seat from another female candidate Hagan is removing the novelty effect which was relevant in the Grimes' campaign (O'Regan & Stambough, 2011). Similar to the Grimes' campaign, Hagan ran in what is considered a "swing state" because the political environment is not openly disposed to one party over the other. North Carolina for over the past 10 years has had both a Democrat and Republican Senator in office. This is a salient feature for the comparative case method because it lessens party advantage.

Representative Renee Ellmers served as the Congressional Representative for NC district 2 since 2011. Prior to serving as a Congresswoman, Ellmers received a nursing degree and worked as a nurse in Harnett County, NC. Ellmers was the Republican incumbent running against Democratic nominee Clay Aiken. Representative Ellmers won her election and will be serving in the 114<sup>th</sup> Congress. I chose Representative Ellmers because she was Republican, which allows for a comparison of party affiliation on campaign strategy. Ellmers ran against an exceptional opponent. Clay Aiken was runner-up on American Idol and Celebrity Apprentice. He has no background in politics but already has name recognition. Aiken is also openly gay which earned him support of the LGBT community. The district partisanship has been historically conservative with a military base comprising part of the electorate. The district was redrawn in the 2010 census to be predominately conservative.

Alma Adams was the Democratic nominee for the special and general election for representative district 12 in North Carolina. Incumbent Mel Watt (D) resigned, leaving a vacancy. On November 4, 2014 a special election for the remainder of the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress took place along with a general election for the 114<sup>th</sup> Congress. Adams faced challenger Republican Vince Coakley. Prior to this election Adams served as a NC representative in the General Assembly for 10 years. I chose Adams because she was African-American, as was her opponent. The district is heavily liberal and Adams had five challengers in the May primaries. Rep. Adams won the election by a large margin, making her the new representative.

### **Campaign Staffers**

I chose to interview strategic staff members because of the importance of campaign staffers/ professionals to developing and executing political campaigns. Campaign professionals are individuals who work on a political campaign(s) as his/her primary occupation (Dittmar 2014). As Thurber, Nelson, and Dullio (2000) argue: "Just as we study the media to understand how people receive and process political information, we need to study the role consultants play in delivering these campaign messages to voters" (p. 11). The importance of campaign professionals should not be underestimated. Dittmar (2014) writes, "Campaign professionals play a direct role in shaping campaign strategy and crafting candidate image, campaign message, and tactics (p. 4)." Campaign staffers fill many roles in a campaign: polling, media creation/production, fundraising, press relations. Due to their direct work on campaigns I find them to be best equipped to comment on campaign decisions. Though the candidate is the face of the campaign the campaign staff is the backbone and for this reason I identify them as the best source for campaign decisions.

I chose interviewees because of their positions on campaigns and from recommendations of other staffers. I targeted staff positions that related to campaign messaging, media relations, or communications. The position titles on each staff are different, however jobs are relatively similar to allow for comparative insights into campaign functioning.

I identified staffers through the Federal Election Commission (FEC) database under candidate operating expenses. After I identified consultant names, I used Google to identify the consultant's position on the campaign and current job position. I sent preliminary emails to potential interviewees explaining the study and requesting participation.

On Alison Grimes' campaign I interviewed Greta Carnes (Deputy Digital Director) and Preston Maddock (Spokesman). For Senator Kay Hagan I spoke with Stewart Boss (Deputy Press Secretary) and Chris Hayden (Press Secretary). On Representative Renee Elmers' campaign I interviewed Blair Ellis (Press Secretary) and Patrick Sebastian (Senior Advisor).

Due to limited availability and lack of interest, I only interviewed one staffer on the Alma Adams campaign, Amanda Eubanks, the campaign manager. The campaign was on a smaller scale than the other three in terms of staff and press. A campaign manager oversees strategic campaign decisions across all sections of the campaign. By interviewing a high level staffer, she could grant insight into most aspects of the campaign, eliminating the need to speak with lower ranking staffers. Therefore I do not think it is hindrance that one staffer was interviewed.

The size of the study is confined to seven campaign staffers. Though this is a small group I find it sufficient for the study. The comparative case method included numerous factors that

influence campaigning. By using a comparative case method I find no logical reason that my findings cannot be generalized to other female candidates' campaigns.

The chart below lists the interviewed staffers' positions on his/her respective campaign along with previous campaign experience.

<b>Candidate</b>	<b>Staffer</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Experience</b>
Kay Hagan	Stewart Boss	Deputy Press Secretary	Kay Hagan since 2013
	Chris Hayden	Press Secretary	Senator McCaskill campaign 2012
Renee Ellmers	Patrick Sebastian	Senior Advisor	Pat McCorry-Governor 2008 McCain Campaign Walter Jones- Mayor/Congress Nikki Haley- Governor 2012 Romney Campaign Chris Christy-Governor
	Blair Ellis	Press Secretary	Rep. Ellmers since 2013
Alison Grimes	Preston Maddock	Spokesman	Daniel Malloy-Governor 2012 Obama Campaign Organizing for Action (501C3) Huffington Post
	Greta Carnes	Deputy Digital Director	2008 Obama Campaign DNC-Washington DC 270 Strategies Consulting
Alma Adams	Amanda Eubanks	Campaign Director	Del Mattioli- City council Houston Barnes-Congress Rick Wade-Senate

## **Interviews**

The interviews provided insight into why the campaign staffers and candidate made the communication decisions that they did. Thirty days prior to the November 4, 2014 general election I kept a research journal detailing campaign materials and media coverage. Campaign materials include but are not limited to advertisements, candidate webpages, emails, tweets, and Facebook posts. The goal of the journal was to become familiar with campaign messages and themes. I used material to inform specific questions in interviews. The journal also helped me corroborate or challenge the perceptions of staffers.

I conducted interviews based on themes related to the campaign (Weiss 1995). My interviews were divided into three of these themes (1) strategic planning (2) implementation and evaluation (3) reaction to media. Questions in strategic planning asked the interviewee to discuss whether and how his/her candidate's gender influenced communication planning. What type of challenges did he/she envision? Implementation and evaluation questions were centered on the campaign's messages in relation to candidate gender. What was the biggest challenge of campaigning for a female candidate? Media reaction section focuses on how staffers perceived any media bias. See appendix A for interview guide.

I conducted the interviews over the phone with a recording application in place. The interviews ranged from 30 minutes to an hour. I had the audio tapes transcribed to text after interviews to allow for analysis. All interviews began with an explanation of the study and the consent form. Interviewees had the option to declare statements "off the record," "not for attribution," or "on background" at any point. I did not report any statements declared "Off the record." If the interviewees said "Not for attribution," I reported an anonymous quote and "On background" meant that I did not directly quote the interviewer.

### **Statement of Positionality**

As the interviewer my position was to guide the interviewer but allow enough openness to interviewees to respond and expand. I decided against a fixed-question, open-response method which Weiss warns can be too constricting (Weiss 1994). A fixed-question, open-response has a strict interview guide that does not allow deviations. A flexible interview guide

will provide structure but be fluid enough to allow for elaboration and tailoring to certain interviewees.

I have previous campaign experience working for candidates in the local North Carolina area. It is from exposure of working closely with female candidates that I became interested in female campaigning. I used my enthusiasm for political campaigns to research and conduct this study.

## **FINDINGS**

Through six in-depth interviews with campaign staffers on four different candidates' campaigns in 2014, several themes emerged. First, polling was the biggest determinant in developing communication strategy. Second, political party was more influential in messaging than gender. Communication decisions on the campaign were the result of the political environment and were not gender. Third, staffers did not consider their candidate to be treated unfairly by the media because of gender, and some even thought their candidate received preferential treatment. Lastly, an unexpected finding was that female staffers offered greater sympathy and expressed more passion for the role of women in politics.

### **Polling and Campaign Strategy**

Across three campaigns, staffers identified the strategy for selecting and prioritizing messaging and issues to be based on polling. As Blair Ellis described it: "so we actually straight up asked our constituents which... [issues] do you feel...is of highest priority... we found in polling that folks back home are mostly concerned with jobs, very concerned about healthcare..." (Personal Communication, February 19, 2015). Ellis' candidate Renee Ellmers'

campaign website lists “Taxes & Spending” and “Jobs & Economy” as the first two issues, consistent with concerns about money and jobs. When asked about gender as part of Ellmers’ image, Patrick Sebastian, Senior Advisor on the Ellmers’ campaign, responded “You know, I am not really sure if it played an effect in the election result...” (personal communication, March 12, 2015).

Other staffers also stressed the importance of utilizing polling in issue selection. Preston Maddock, spokesman for Alison Grimes, let the polling determine the overall message of the campaign: “ So in the polling obviously what we saw, what we needed to do, was that we needed to introduce Alison as an independent [from the Democratic party] on certain issues or issues important to Kentucky” (Personal Communication, February 26, 2015). For example, the Grimes’ campaign released an advertisement titled “Skeet Shooting” premised depicting Alison as an independent who will and can stand up to the President. Greta Carnes, deputy digital director, thought gender was irrelevant to campaign platforms. She explains,

So in Kentucky for instance, Kentuckians do not usually elect a Democrat to federal office. Mitch McConnell has been there for 30 years, Rand Paul won in a very decisive election. And so there was something that we were going to be able to win over women just because Alison is a woman or just because she talked about women’s issues. I think that, it is sort of the reason is, women don’t just care about women’s issues. Women don’t vote based on the violence concern act. Women vote on economic issues, women vote on all sorts of other issues...(personal communication, February 24, 2015).

Carnes expressed skepticism about appealing as a woman only to women. Carnes thought Alison Grimes, “...ran a campaign as a senate candidate, not as a woman running for senate” (personal communication, February 24, 2015). Carnes speculated whether it helped but thought it did not hurt because, “... women aren’t a voting bloc. I don’t think that it would have helped us to run it anymore as a woman” (personal communication, February 24, 2015). The

campaign, though, did not completely ignore the presence of gender. Maddock explains, “So what we thought, obviously we needed to appeal to women, which we felt like it was natural for us to do considering our candidate” (personal communication, February 26, 2015). Though, it is important to note that women were not the only subgroup singularly utilized by the campaign. Carnes lists, “...we were also pushing the different, women for Alison, coal miners for Alison, students for Alison, veterans for Alison, and seniors for Alison. And so I think there wasn’t anybody that we were sort of leaving out of this” (Personal Communication, February 24, 2015). Although women were appealed to, they were equally targeted as other subsets of the Democratic voting bloc.

However, Carnes was forthcoming about gender was the best strategy. For fundraising purposes, the campaign capitalized on Grimes being Kentucky’s first female senator. Carnes said, “I think 4 out of 5 quarters we beat Mitch McConnell, we out raised him... which then brought us legitimacy” (Personal Communication, February, 26 2015). Several of the Grimes’ advertisements used the same message: this is a chance for Kentucky to be progressive and elect its first female senator.

The Senate race in North Carolina was centered on constituency issues. Chris Hayden explained how the campaign chose its messaging, “Our real focus, and what the polls showed, was that jobs and the economy were something that really was important” (Personal Communication, March 23, 2015). The Hagan campaign material supports Hayden’s statement. “Jobs and Economy” was listed as a top issue on Hagan’s campaign website. In numerous campaign advertisements such as “Punches,” “Right for North Carolina,” and “Fabric,” Kay Hagan mentions her commitment to creating more jobs in North Carolina. Gender was

described as an “opportunity” to seem “more credible on to talk on those [women’s] issues,” but not as a subject on which to base the campaign (S. Boss, personal communication, January 27, 2015). Both staffers did mentioned a large gender gap. Hayden said, “...the gender gap was significant in North Carolina, with Kay winning women by a lot, and Speaker Tillis winning men by a lot” (personal communication, March 23, 2015). Boss and Hayden explained the role of embracing women’s issues, especially because Tillis was on record voting against equal wage bills and abortion rights. This gender gap, though, could be a reflection of partisanship because female voters tend to be Democrats.

Amanda Eubanks, campaign manager, was candid about the role of gender in the Adam’s Campaign. Eubanks explained the district Representative Alma Adams was campaigning in as the poorest and most diverse in the state of North Carolina (personal communication, January 29, 2015). She also explained that 65% of the electorate was female and thus the campaign would be remiss in not addressing a majority of the voters (A. Eubanks, personal communication, January 29, 2015).

### **Party Affiliation are Stronger than Gender**

Messaging, policy stances, and issues were shaped by the campaign’s research and polling of what resonates with voters. For these campaigns, the interaction of partisan identification and political context drove what issues voters wanted to hear from candidates. These campaigns were during a mid-year election when the national mood heavily favored the Republican Party. In Kentucky, where Republicans currently hold both Senate seats, Preston Maddock, working on Democrat Alison Grimes’ campaign, described the campaign as "a

referendum on Obama” (personal communication, February 26, 2015). Maddock explains how Grimes's opponent, Republican Senator McConnell, was able to successfully link Grimes, a Democrat, with an unfavorable President Obama (personal communication, February 26, 2015). The election, according to Maddock, was based on party favorability, and Grimes a Democrat and the Democratic Party was unpopular in Kentucky. Maddock even went so far as to say, "... I don't think this campaign was a referendum on Alison's gender. I think that a man or a woman running in that seat probably would have lost this election" (personal communication, February 26, 2015). Maddock predicts that any Democrat running in the election would not have succeeded.

Greta Carnes agreed with Maddock. Carnes says, "...these women like this woman who is the young Secretary of State of their, state but they don't like Obama, and they are not just going to vote for Alison because she is woman” (personal Communication, February 24, 2015). Grimes's association with the Democratic president was more relevant to voters than gender. To Maddock and Carnes, gender was decidedly less important than the political party of the candidate and the party of the president in office. These staffers cite any attacks coming from the opponent as partisan and not gendered.

Other campaigns echoed similar thoughts. Stewart Boss on the Kay Hagan campaign cited the biggest attack the campaign faced as partisan focused. Speaker Tillis was able to link Hagan with President Obama (personal communication, January 27, 2015). Boss says, "... obviously the president definitely overshadowed a lot of questions like that and like impacted the messaging in a lot of ways" (personal communication, January 27, 2015). When staffers were asked how voters perceived Senator Hagan, Chris Hayden, Hagan's press secretary,

responded, “I think unfortunately, they perceived her on party lines...” (Personal communication, March 23, 2015). It was the perception built on party lines that resulted in Hagan’s loss. Boss explained the election loss as reflecting a national mood (Democrats suffering in national elections) and low turn-out in mid-year elections (personal communication, January 27, 2015). Chris Hayden succinctly sums up the loss, “Unfortunately more of the Republicans came out to vote than Democrats in the end” (personal communication, March 23, 2015). CNN exit polls (2014) report that 35% of the population who voted identified as Republican and 36% identified as Democrats. Tillis received a majority of the independent vote. Hagan received 91% of the female Democrat vote, but only 5% of the female Republican vote (C.N.N. 2014). This demonstrates what Hayden said, gender did not determine vote choice Hagan did not win Republican women even though they were female. Similar to what Pinterhughes (2008) observed in the 2008 election, there was another identity that influenced voter choice. In 2008, African-American women voted for President Obama instead of a female, Hillary Clinton. In the 2014 election we see that women again did not vote on gender lines.

On the other side of the aisle, Republican candidate Representative Renee Ellmers’ campaign kept its communication strategy to conservative issues. Patrick Sebastian said,

I mean she really had the same message everywhere she went... people knew she was genuine and they knew that she was willing to compromise when she needed compromise with the other side but they also know that she also will fight for Republican values and conservative values... (personal communication, March 12, 2015).

Sebastian did not name sub-groups the campaign targeted. Ellmers’ campaign website supports this claim by promoting conservative issues such as “Second Amendment Rights.”

There were no commercials released in the late campaign that implied the campaign was messaging to a specific population. The most prominent television commercial was released in April 2014 and focuses on Ellmers' ability to fight for conservative rights.

### **Fair and Positive Media Coverage**

As discussed above, a group of prior academic research posits that female candidates and politicians receive biased coverage in the media. This bias takes form in either granting less coverage to females or coverage on trivial topics such as appearance and family. However, campaign staffers on four different female candidate campaigns in 2014 said that they perceived the media as being fair or even positive to their candidate. Amanda Eubanks describes the media treatment of her candidate Representative Alma Adams,

There was a lot of focus on her ability to go from a single mother to running a campaign, on the school board, her work on the city council, and ultimately her work in the state legislature. I think that at no point did they personify her as just a woman, but really focused on her credentials and how she was the best candidate (personal communication, January 29, 2015).

Other consultants share Eubanks' sentiment of an unbiased media. Chris Hayden, Press Secretary on the Hagan Campaign, said "I never really had to get into it with reporters because I didn't believe they were being unfair in their coverage, or if they were making something out of something they weren't. I think the coverage was pretty fair" (Personal communication, March 23, 2015). News on Hagan ranged from showing her ahead in the polls to noting her absence in the 4<sup>th</sup> Senate debate. Two weeks prior to the election noted five news stories highlighting Hagan leading Tillis. Stories like this close to the Election help to make the candidate more

viable. My collection of media and news stories over the final month of the campaign, there was no evidence of unfair reporting or gender stereotypes.

When asked if the campaign(s) ever felt targeted for any reason, the answer was an overwhelming 'no'. Blair Ellis commented that she even felt her candidate, Representative Renee Ellmers, was given additional press activities, such as interviews and guest invitations, because of her gender (personal communication, February 19, 2015). Ellis said,

I think in terms of media coverage it is maybe, I think that maybe, she is sought out sometimes. I feel like it works to her advantage in the sense that she is a female sometimes you will have different TV stations or radio stations that they want kind of a different perspective on something, and so they want to be honest, they want a different look and so they want somebody besides a man in a suit. And that is point blank, I have had people share that with me before, which sometimes it really does it can work to your advantage as long as you are speaking on issues that fall into your wheel house (personal communication, February 19, 2015).

Ellis was careful to mention that although the additional opportunities are positive they also come with increased diligence (Personal Communication, February 19, 2015). The media are drawn to a woman to break up the monotony of just male politicians, and do so by inviting or hosting female candidates. This operates under the assumption that simply being a woman offers different insight on an issue. Ellis does not "...want her [Representative Renee Ellmers] to be guest on a show just because she is female." If the press opportunity does not fall within the scope of the campaign's platform, then Ellis argues that it is better to forgo the opportunity (personal communication, February 19, 2015).

Both staffers on the Kay Hagan campaign mentioned a specific incident when the media defended Hagan. During the first debate Tillis consistently referred to Hagan by her first name

instead of addressing her as “Senator.” Neither staffer was offended by the comments. However, the North Carolina news media and social media immediately began reporting outrage with headlines: “Female Voters are not OK with Tillis’ use of Kay.” Boss speculates, “I think, I am sure, it was why it that played out the way that it did, that he was a man and she was a woman. I mean it would have been disrespectful if Kay had been a man too probably, but I think that is sort of why people picked up on it...” (Personal Communication, January 27, 2015).

None of the campaign staffers said their campaign was negatively attacked in the media. The closest staffers came to feeling mistreated by the media was when they perceived the media failing to report on their opponent. Greta Carnes commented “...Mitch McConnell was literally sort of two-facing Kentucky and that didn’t get reported on” (personal Communication, February 24, 2015). Though the media was not blatantly being unfair to Grimes, Carnes felt that the whole story was not being reported. Patrick Sebastian on the Representative Renee Ellmers’ campaign expressed similar frustrations with the press (personal communication, March 12, 2015). Sebastian thought the media, journalists specifically, ignored the limited experience of Ellmers’ opponent, Clay Aiken (personal communication, March 12, 2015). By not being critical of Aiken, he appears a more viable candidate against Representative Renee Ellmers.

### **Impact of Consultant Gender**

In examining the interviews, I noticed a finding that I was not expecting. There was a personal connection female staffers adopted when speaking about their candidate that male staffers did not have. Of the campaign staffers interviewed, 3 were female and 4 were male.

Female consultants were more likely to describe their candidate as personable or relatable and having a refreshing “new face” to politics. Ellis describes her candidate as “...a rock star... she is just super fun and very laid back and so friendly” (personal communication, February 19, 2015). Carnes comments on her candidate that, “...people watch her and she is this warm and friendly person... somebody handed me Mitch McConnell or Alison I would vote for Alison every time” (personal communication, February 24, 2015). There was almost camaraderie between female campaign staffers and female candidates.

Female staffers were able to relate to being a female in the political sphere in a way male staffers were not. As Ellis remarked,

It [being female] affects everything. It affects what you wear to a certain meeting... affects how you do your hair that day. It affects a lot of things and women up here are all very perceptive as to those things (personal communication, February 19, 2015).

Ellis continues about the lack of women as candidates or staffers,

I am very perceptive to how I and my boss are spoken to up here just because there are not that many girls that work on Capitol Hill, there are not that many women that work in press on Capitol Hill, there are not that many women in Congress in Capitol Hill (personal communication, February 19, 2015).

Greta Carnes vocalized her passion for women in politics and how “...that was one of the reasons why I chose to her over going to work for Bruce Braley [Iowa U.S. Representative] or someone else” (personal communication, February 24, 2015). While these quotes indicate female staffers may have a unique sympathy for female candidates, that is not to say that male staffers are not sympathetic or do not care about female candidates. In fact, Chris Hayden said “...I think it’s really important to have women in the Senate. I don’t think there’s enough of

them” (personal communication, March 23, 2015). Male staffers think about female politicians in an abstract manner whereas female staffers speak personally.

On campaigns where there was both a female and male consultant, there were dichotomies between their responses. Greta Carnes on the Alison Grimes campaign thought Grimes was “good with the media by and large” and that she “had a lot of media training” (personal communication, February 24, 2015). However, Preston Maddock who also worked on the Grimes campaign was more critical. Maddock commented that Grimes should have been “a little bit more open” and given “more color, if you call it, to the media, less so of these sound bites and preplanned speech” (personal communication, February 26, 2015).

The Grimes campaign was not the only campaign that yielded these results. On the Renee Ellmers’ campaign there were differences between female staffer Blair Ellis and male staffer Patrick Sebastian. Ellis cited instances when Representative Ellmers received media attention because she was a female (personal communication, February 19, 2015). Sebastian was clear that women do face different challenges than men. However, Sebastian did not think that Representative Ellmers was advantaged by being a female (personal communication, March 12, 2015). Sebastian said point blank, “I don’t know if I can really remember any time she was given an interview because she was a woman, at all” (personal communication, March 12, 2015). It is possible the difference in opinion owes to staff position and staffer gender. Ellis worked directly with the press and handled daily press operations while Sebastian was part of the overall leadership team. Through direct handlings with the press, Ellis might have been more attentive to press motivations.

## DISCUSSION

Research on female politicians has been divided on the relevance of gender in campaign strategy and electoral success. Previous studies have relied on quantitative analysis of media and campaign material. Through close study of the campaigns of four female candidates, this study was able to gather first-hand information by in-depth interviews with key staffers into communication strategy. The data from these interviews support recent literature in which scholars argue that gender is becoming less of a defining point in campaign strategy.

Furthermore, I found that female candidates do not receive more biased coverage in the media.

Polling was the dominant means through which campaigns determined the issues they would run on. The websites of the candidates revealed an overwhelming majority of masculine issues used by female candidates because, staffers argued, that was what polling showed resonated with voters. As discussed above, the top issues on Representative Ellmers' and Hagan's campaign site are associated with masculine stereotypes. These issues were identified by staffers as relevant in polling and not selected because of the gender of the candidate. In instances when "compassion issues," as defined by Herrnson, Lay & Stokes (2003) and Kahn (1996), were listed it was because that is what the district was concerned about. The category "women's issues" was only listed at the top of the page on Alma Adams' site, and as a staffer on her campaign mentioned, the district was 65% female.

The reason for these findings are as Sides (2006) suggests: the public agenda shapes campaign strategy. Sides (2006) argued that the national agendas in the 1998 and 2000

elections were similar, and thus candidates focused on the same issues. In 2014, Chris Hayden on the Kay Hagan campaign supports Sides' (2006) finding,

I think what we saw at the end was a kind of national environment took hold, not only of our race, but every race throughout the country. It was a complete wave, and a lot of those issues, what was leading the news every day, was stuff about ISIS and Ebola, and all that. That really took over (personal communication, March 23, 2015).

Both the Hagan and Grimes campaigns suffered from national displeasure with the president. Therefore as the national mood changes, it can be expected that candidates will adjust their messaging to reflect the salient issues on the public agenda. The use of healthcare in the Ellmers' and Hagan campaign, for example, was not gender congruence but a reflection of public's focus on the Affordable Care Act.

Staffers were aware though, when gender could be advantageous. As seen in the findings above Ellis commented that her candidate received press invitations because she was a woman. However, this was not a planned strategy the campaign used, but instead utilized the opportunities as they presented themselves (B. Ellis, personal communication, February 19, 2015). Greta Carnes was the only staffer to name gender as a strategy (personal communication, February 24, 2015). Carnes explained how selling Grimes as the first female senator from Kentucky was a profitable for fundraising (personal communication, February 24, 2015.) The campaign appealed to voters across the country to help Kentucky elect a female to federal office. This is direct contradiction to the novelty effect explained by O'Regan and Stambough (2011) who argue that being a woman running for an office never held by a female results in increased challenges. Instead the Grimes' campaign was able to capitalize on being a novelty.

As with the recent trends in literature, these findings support what scholars such as Banwart, Bystrom, and Robertson (2003) find to be a relatively level media experience between male and female candidates. Banwart, et al. (2003) found in the 2000 elections that female candidates were only minimally likely to be linked to feminine issues in the press. Kim (2008) found that there was no significant difference between issues female candidates openly supported and those mentioned in news articles. The findings from a practitioner's perspective suggest that these scholars are right; staffers unanimously stated that the media were "fair" to his/her candidate. My immersion into the campaigns yielded no results to contradict the feelings of the staffers. This is contrary to the finding set out in a study by Washburn and Washburn (2011) that female candidates received less or more trivial coverage in the news media. If consultants do not feel that coverage is problematic, is it still a problem?

This study helps bridge the gap between literature on female candidates' campaign communication and literature exploring the formation of campaign communication. With this study I was able to test theories in existing literature about female campaigning. I am able to lend support for theories that reject the influence gender stereotypes in female candidates' campaign formation.

My interviews showed that scholars who perceive that gender stereotypes are relevant in campaign formation are unsupported in their claims. In these cases, and likely others, gender was not influential. There are many factors that could have influenced results such as incumbency, fundraising, district, and gender of opponent. As my finding demonstrated, national agenda is highly influential and thus future research in upcoming elections can offer further support for my findings.

## **CONCLUSION**

In 2014, over 150 female candidates sought an office in the U.S. Congress. This study focused on four of these candidates and their campaign to the Capitol. Though there is a body of literature suggesting that female candidates' campaigns determine success based on prevailing gender stereotypes, my findings contradict such theories. Staffers overwhelmingly cited polling to be top determinant in issue selection, not gender. For the candidates who lost the election, staffers pointed to party affiliation to be the cause, and again gender was not mentioned. All staffers used the term "fair" when describing campaign media coverage.

These findings paint a hopeful future for female candidates as more women choose to run for elected office. Times have changed and female politicians are no longer a rarity. I have found that female candidates can and do run a campaign based on the issues that they want to talk about and that will provide them with electoral advantage and not gender stereotypes.

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