

NAME IT CHANGE IT Candidate Guide

The Candidate's Guide to Sexist Media Coverage

A PUBLICATION OF SHE SHOULD RUN



NAME IT. CHANGE IT.

sexism & equality don't mix!

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OVERVIEW OF NAME IT. CHANGE IT.

Far too often, political advisors tell women candidates to ignore sexist attacks. That advice is wrong.

Sexist media coverage has been damaging the campaigns and careers of women candidates for years. For far too long, political advisors had been telling their women candidates to ignore sexist attacks. That advice is wrong. Sexist attacks severely hurt a woman's campaign, and ignoring them only makes the damage worse. The groundbreaking research of Name It. Change It. turns conventional wisdom on its head by proving that when women candidates openly respond to sexist attacks, they can repair the damage done to their campaigns—and can even gather more support than they had before.

This guide is a tool for candidates, campaign managers, and political consultants on how to spot sexism and how to respond to it. Just one sexist remark can damage a woman's campaign—but with this guide, you can turn it into an advantage.

Widespread sexism in the media is one of the top problems facing women when they run for office. This groundbreaking research shows that sexist media coverage results in a drastic decrease in voter confidence of women candidates. The ever-changing media landscape creates an unmonitored echo chamber, habitually allowing damaging comments to exist without accountability.

The **Name It. Change It.** project exists to replace the usual silence that follows sexist media coverage of women candidates and public leaders with proactive and responsive tactics. With this guide, we aim to help women candidates, campaign managers, and political consultants **identify and respond to sexism** so that their campaigns can rebound from and succeed despite damaging comments.

FAST FACTS: SEXISM COSTS

Research has proven that sexism against women candidates can cause extreme damage to their campaigns:



Sexism, even mild sexist language, has an impact on voters' likelihood to vote for a female candidate and on how favorably they feel toward a woman seeking office. It also affects perceptions of trustworthiness and effectiveness.



Voters assume the sexist language comes from the woman's opponent and her opponent pays some price—or will—for this type of campaign.



Even if the woman candidate started out ahead in the polls, if sexism is used against her, the race becomes even—demonstrating the powerful effect that a sexist attack can have on a woman's campaign.



The effect of sexist language affects voters of all voting groups.



Acknowledging and responding to sexist mistreatment by the media regains voters across the board and helps repair damage inflicted on a female candidate.



Responding to these attacks benefits a female candidate, even if the audience didn't hear the original slur.

WHY RESPOND?

For years, conventional wisdom has led consultants to advise women candidates to ignore sexist attacks and not draw attention to them. The truth is, **letting sexist comments slide can seriously hurt a woman's campaign.**

Our research shows that **actively responding to sexism** and calling it out **can not only undo the damage that the original comments dealt, it also can win over more voters than before.**

Need more reasons why women should throw the old advice away and start calling out sexism?



Openly acknowledging and **responding to sexist media coverage helps repair damage** that sexism can inflict on a woman's campaign.



Responding will have a **positive effect on a woman candidate's favorability** across the board, whether or not voters heard the original attack. What's more, responding even has a positive effect among men and conservative voters.



Voters will assume that sexist attacks originate from her opponent (even if they didn't), so her opponent could pay the price for this type of negative campaigning. When a woman candidate calls out sexist attacks, **she can win back votes lost by the sexism** and even gain support from people who had previously favored the opponent.



Calling out sexism **deters it from happening again.** It makes journalists, bloggers, and opposition campaigns think twice before making this kind of negative attack again.



By actively responding to sexism, a woman candidate positions herself as **a leader and a role model** for future generations of women who may experience the same thing during their campaigns.

Tactics

Here are some powerful tactics that a woman candidate can use in her response. The key here is **leverage**—all of these methods can help her turn sexist media coverage around to her advantage.



Name It. Report the incident to Name It. Change It. at NameItChangeIt.org. All you have to do is fill out a short survey telling us what happened. We'll serve as a third party validator and respond to the offending media outlet.



Change It. Have the Communications Director contact the offending media outlet to ask them for a retraction or correction. It's important that the outlet be held accountable for what they say. While you can never quite take back what's been printed or said, the outlet should admit that what they did was wrong.



Call It Out. Issue a press release or hold a press conference calling out the incident as sexist. The candidate needs to make her response public, and this is the perfect place to use our research-tested messages. This will put her back in the public eye—but this time, she controls the message.



See Something? Say Something. If a sexist remark is directed at a woman candidate in real-time (during a debate, an interview, a forum, etc.), call it out as sexist on the spot. Trust your gut: if you think a remark is sexist or if it doesn't seem right to you, say something.

Remember, sexist comments hurt a woman's candidacy. Only if she responds immediately can she undo the damage. **It is critical that a woman candidate openly acknowledge and respond to sexist attacks as soon as they happen.**

Messages

Here are several messages, **all proven in this research to have a positive effect on potential voters**, which can be used to call out sexist attacks against women candidates:



Pivot. Note that sexism is inappropriate, but then bridge to the issues her campaign champions:

"This is an inappropriate and frankly sexist discussion that has nothing to do with my qualifications or merits. I care about the voters in my state, and I want to discuss the issues that will impact them and that will move our state forward in these tough times. Instead of focusing on meritless statements, we should be focusing our attention on getting people back to work, getting affordable health care to our hardworking families, and guaranteeing all children a quality education."



Take On Discrimination. Grab sexism by the horns and call it what it is—straight-up discrimination:

“Sexist, divisive rhetoric has no place in the media coverage of our elected races. However, apparently having a different opinion means you get attacked, not for your views, but for your gender. I’m not saying that no one dare ever disagree with me for my policy or votes, but if you’re going to, at least do it in an intelligent and respectful way. Don’t insult me for being a woman and use namecalling. This kind of harmful sexism damages our political debate and our democracy and ultimately it hurts how women and young girls see themselves in our society.”



Enlist a Validator. Have a third party organization like Name It. Change It. come to her defense and issue its own response:

“Across America, a broad array of organizations and leaders, including Name It. Change It., rallied in outrage over the sexist remarks made about Jane Smith in her race. One prominent leader of Name It. Change It. said, ‘These are not acceptable statements in a civilized political debate in today’s America. Often, female candidates are judged based on their appearance, wardrobe, and personality, rather than their qualifications. We must erase the sexism against women candidates in order to move our nation forward. When you attack one woman in this way, you attack all women.’”

All of these messages test well in regaining votes lost by sexist media coverage. In fact, each response gains votes not only among the people who heard the sexist attacks—it also gains votes among people who didn’t. (See page 7 for full data.)

HOW TO SPOT SEXISM

Sexism is omnipresent—but even mild sexism is just as damaging as severe misogyny. It is essential that the candidate and her advisors become experts at identifying sexism as it’s happening, so that they can respond immediately to mitigate any negative effect it might have on the woman’s race. **Not only is it safe to respond, it is essential to respond** if you want to maximize electoral outcomes.

During a political campaign, sexism might come from many different quarters. As this research shows, **male opponents of women candidates receive an outsized benefit from gender-based attacks—giving them ample reason to use sexist language.**

But not all sexism is candidate-driven. **Some of the strongest sexist language we’ve found has come from members of the media.** Whether attacks come from opposing candidates or the media, the effect on the female candidate is the same.

The Rule of Reversibility

Media coverage is sexist if it fails the **reversibility test**—using terms or frames about women candidates that wouldn't be written about men. Reversibility can refer to terms that are almost singularly applied to women but never to men. It can also refer to a *type* of coverage—often about personality, appearance, or family—that is written about women politicians. Academic studies have consistently demonstrated that women candidates frequently receive more articles about their appearance, personality, and families and less issue coverage than male candidates. **These differences, which go beyond mere sexist language, can all erode a woman candidate's credibility.**

Journalists shouldn't mention a woman candidate's young children unless they would also mention the young children of her male opponent. They shouldn't describe her clothes unless they would describe his, or say she's shrill or attractive unless the same adjectives would be applied to a man.

Language that fails the reversibility test can often be found in a journalist's choice of words. For example: men have "brown hair," but women are "brunettes." Women in power are sometimes called "motherly," but men in power aren't "fatherly." Other times, reversibility goes beyond word choice to the very premise of a question posed to a candidate. For example: If Sarah Palin had been a male Vice Presidential candidate, he probably wouldn't have been asked whether or not he could fulfill the job when he had young children, including one with special needs. Therefore, it wasn't okay to ask that question of or about Palin either—**unless it was also asked of her male counterparts.**

Here are incidents of sexist media coverage that all fail the reversibility test. These are examples that, though mild, are just as egregious as severe misogyny:



The Daily Beast/Newsweek, in a profile of U.S. Senatorial candidate Elizabeth Warren, said she "played up her femininity, gushing about her 11-month-old grandson."



WRKO AM Radio in Boston endorsed Karen E. Polito, a Republican candidate for Governor of Massachusetts, for her "banging little body" and her "tight little butt."



Vogue Magazine pressed U.S. Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) on the exact number of pounds she'd lost in a profile about her candidacy, noting she should "no doubt remain attractive to her husband of nine years, who is two years younger than she."



60 Minutes featured three members of Congress accused of using their political influence for personal profit. The men were featured in business suits. The lone woman, former Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, was shown wearing a ball gown.

If media coverage doesn't mention a male candidate's eye color, haircut, makeup, marital status, children or lack thereof—then it shouldn't mention those things about a female

candidate. When it does mention these things about a female candidate, it hurts her. That's why it's so important to respond.

The media should treat women candidates exactly the same way they treat male candidates—but they don't. If the same description, term, story or question would seem ridiculous or “too feminine” for a male candidate, then it should not be used on female candidates for office. Keep an eye out for sexist media coverage like reversibility, and above all, remember: **Media sexism, both mild and egregious, hurts. Therefore, she or a third party needs to call it out.**

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Nearly seven in 10 voters report being less likely to vote for Jane Smith after they heard her called an “ice queen” and a “mean girl,” in addition to more overtly sexist language.

In September 2010, Lake Research Partners conducted a survey of 800 likely voters nationwide to see if sexist language affected voters' preferences. The survey was divided into a systematic experiment based on a hypothetical campaign. Half of the voters heard a back and forth between a male and female candidate, with sexist attacks perpetuated against the woman. The other half heard an engaged debate with a strong critique of the female candidate that lacked sexist language. All of the language and situations we tested occurred in real campaigns and was said by actual media against women running for Congress and Governor.

First, survey respondents were presented with two generic candidate descriptions, one of a man, the other of a woman. After hearing the description of the candidates, voters favored our hypothetical female candidate, Jane Smith, over our hypothetical male candidate, Dan Jones, by 11 points (43 percent Smith to 32 percent Jones), with intense support for Smith twice as strong as that for Dan Jones (18 percent to 9 percent). A quarter of voters were undecided.

But after voters heard a mildly sexist news story that referred to Jane Smith as a “mean girl” and an “ice queen,” the ballot went from Smith being 11 points ahead to being 1 point behind. Sexist language reduced Jane's support among both men and women. **Every single group of voters was negatively affected by even this relatively mild sexism.**

We also tested what happens when even stronger sexist language is used against our hypothetical female candidate. This hypothetical news piece about the candidate was based off of actual remarks from members of the media about a woman candidate:

“Further exploring her votes on health care and taxes, Jane Smith supported an article in the health care bill that said that any state that declared an emergency would get a \$300 million grant. A talk radio host commented, she may be the most expensive prostitute in the history of prostitution. She may be easy, but she's not cheap. Another noted radio host said Stupid Girl describes her vote pretty well.”

Findings

 The **over-the-top sexism left the female candidate even further behind among every group of voters** except men and Democrats. Such over-the-top language does get some push back from men and younger voters, but not enough to make up for the initial losses.

Vote Likelihood				
	Jane Smith		Dan Jones	
	Less likely (0-4)	More likely (6-10)	Less likely (0-4)	More likely (6-10)
Initial	22%	54%	30%	42%
Mild Sexist*	69%	17%	66%	16%
Mild Control*	57%	23%	60%	19%
Top Sexist*	66%	18%	64%	18%
Top Control*	57%	23%	63%	19%

 **Nearly seven in 10 voters reported being less likely to vote for Jane Smith after they heard her called an “ice queen” and a “mean girl,” in addition to more overtly sexist language.** Non-sexist language about Smith also eroded their likelihood of voting for her, **but not to the extent of the sexist attacks.** Republicans, Independents, and blue-collar voters were the most affected by the strong sexism, although sexist attacks lowered Jane Smith’s favorability across the board more than non-sexist attacks. It especially had an effect among men’s voting preferences.

 It’s well-known that negative attacks create an unfavorable impression of both candidates, both the attacker and the target. This is the case with sexist attacks, as well: sexist language used on a female candidate *does* hurt her opponent. Though described as coming from newspapers, voters clearly assumed the sexist attacks came from her opponent. Consequently, there was some backlash with Dan Jones’ favorability as a result of the sexist attacks, especially among men.

 **The key takeaway however, was that sexism hurts women candidates’ favorability more than the male candidate it’s perceived as coming from.** Voters’ favorability toward each candidate plummeted after voters heard about Jane Smith being an ice queen and a mean girl. Nearly three-quarters felt unfavorably toward Smith, giving Jones a slight edge overall.

 These sexist attacks, both severe and mild, dealt serious damage to Smith’s campaign. Initially, she led her male opponent by eleven points; after the attacks, she trailed him by one point. **However, if she openly responded to the attacks, she repaired the damage and regained votes across the board, even among voters who never heard the sexist attacks.** Whether she herself or a third party called it out, she was able to recover her favorability among likely voters and regained a clear lead in the race, leading by 28 points.

WHY DOES SEXISM HURT WOMEN CANDIDATES' CAMPAIGNS?

When voters are presented with a neutral description of a male and a female candidate, they start out believing the female candidate is more likely to care about people like them, to share their values, and is more trustworthy.

These results make sense in light of other research that shows voters have typically given women candidates a “virtue advantage,” having a slight edge in being seen as more honest and ethical than a male candidate.¹



But the advantage of being put on a pedestal of “virtue” for female candidates is in reality more like standing on a knife’s edge. Female candidates are punished more harshly by voters for any whiff of scandal.

Our research showed voters’ views of Smith were strongly impacted by the sexist language. After hearing the sexist attacks, **Jane Smith was seen as less empathetic, less trustworthy, and her values were questioned.** Even more alarming, **voters also questioned her effectiveness after hearing the sexist attacks**—even though the critiques said nothing about Smith’s job performance. Sexism alone costs female candidates all the advantage of their gender in a way that non-sexist critiques don’t. When voters only heard non-sexist attacks, Jane Smith’s positives dropped, but significantly less than they did for the sexist language.

Female candidates are also punished more harshly than male candidates for negative campaigning. When sexist attacks have come out against them in the past, female candidates were typically advised not to respond for fear that making an issue out of sexism would only hurt them more.

But our research found that this just isn’t the case. **Female candidates for office ignore sexist attacks at their peril.** While sexist coverage of female candidates puts a damper on voters’ likelihood to vote for them, a direct response to sexism makes up for lost ground.

Celinda Lake summarized her takeaway from the results thusly: “Up until this research was conducted, I often advised women to ignore toxic media sexism. But now, women candidates are equipped with evidence that shows they can recover voter confidence from sexist media coverage by directly addressing it and standing up for all current and future women leaders.”

¹ “Turning Point: The Changing Landscape for Women Candidates.” Barbara Lee Family Foundation, 2010.

CASE STUDIES

Now that we've provided guideposts for the type of sexist coverage that a woman candidate can encounter during her campaign, let's examine specific sexist incidents that happened to women candidates—and how they fought back.

Janice Hahn (2011)

In 2011, Democrat Janice Hahn was running in a special election to fill the seat for California's 36th Congressional District, recently vacated by Congresswoman Jane Harman. A Los Angeles City Councilwoman, Hahn was running against Republican Craig Huey, a conservative political activist.



With the special election set to occur on July 12th and a month left to go in the campaign, media coverage of the race was almost entirely taken over by a video produced by the SuperPAC "Turn Right USA" and directed by one of its founding members, Ladd Ehlinger Jr.

In the video, a woman is dressed as a pole dancer and has a Janice Hahn "mask" with glowing red eyes. She dances provocatively while two African American men dressed as gangsters sing "Give us your cash, b****, so we can shoot up the streets."

According to Turn Right USA, the basis for the ad was that Hahn, as City Councilwoman, had supported programs that hired gang intervention specialists. While the ad was never aired as a paid TV spot, it was posted on YouTube and discussed endlessly throughout the media.

Craig Huey at first declined to comment on the ad, claiming he had nothing to do with it. Later he did denounce it, but made no move to ask Turn Right USA to take it down. Eventually it was viewed more than half a million times on YouTube during the campaign. Even though it was denounced from all quarters, it essentially dominated the final stages of the election.

Name It. Change It., along with many other groups, was outraged over the ad's overtly sexist, racist, and violent content. Using this research, we advised Hahn to speak out against this attack. Two days after the video was posted to YouTube, Hahn condemned the ad:

"[This video is] degrading to women in the worst way, and any reasonable candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives would demand that his supporters apologize and take down the video...These extremist, sexist videos have no place in a race for Congress."

Had Hahn chosen to ignore the attack, the ad could have derailed her campaign. Instead, she pulled ahead in the polls and ended up winning the special election by nearly 10

points—whereas before the incident, she was polling only 5 points ahead of her opponent. Janice Hahn’s win is a perfect example of how **the correct handling of media sexism can result in enhanced electoral outcomes for a woman candidate.**

Krystal Ball (2010)

In 2010, first-time candidate Krystal Ball ran for U.S. Congress in Virginia’s 1st District against a well-entrenched incumbent. On October 5th, with just about a month left to go in the campaign, racy photos of Ball at a costume party from 2004 appeared on a little-known conservative website, *Virginia Virtucon*. Although *Virginia Virtucon* eventually decided to take the post down, within days, the photos were all over the internet, including a slideshow run by Gawker with this caption:



“Krystal Ball dressed as a naughty Santa at a party ‘right after college.’ Her then-husband wore a dildo on his nose and leash around his neck. Years later, Krystal decided to run for Congress in Virginia. Guess what happened next?”

Using the recently-completed **Name It. Change It.** research, Ball immediately released a statement and began giving interviews to speak out against this sexist incident. As she told Richmond NBC reporter Ryan Nobles on October 6, 2010:

“Of course it’s embarrassing, but more than that, I’m pretty angry about it. I think this is incredibly sexist. I think it’s outrageous. I think it’s exactly the sort of thing that voters are extremely frustrated with...I’m angry at the way women in this country are unfairly treated in this regard when they step up and run for office.”

In the end, Krystal Ball did not win her Congressional race. But by calling attention to sexist coverage, she was able to recover from the damage dealt to her campaign and ended up losing by a much smaller margin than had been originally predicted.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that sexism can seriously damage a woman candidate’s prospects for success at the polls. However, as we’ve shown here, women can effectively fight back against sexist attacks and mitigate the damage done to their campaigns. **When women candidates openly and immediately respond to sexism, they can regain lost votes and can even win over more support than they had before.** Furthermore, candidates can position themselves as leaders on this issue by calling out sexism when it happens to them and even when it happens to other women candidates.

We can make sexism in the media against women candidates a thing of the past, but we can’t do it alone. **Always report any sexist incidents** at NameItChangeIt.org, and be sure to call out sexist attacks when they occur. Together, we can eliminate one of the biggest barriers facing women when they run for office.

ABOUT SHE SHOULD RUN

She Should Run is dedicated to dramatically increasing the number of women in public leadership by eliminating and overcoming barriers to success.

As of May 2012, women make up only 17% of Congress and 23% of state legislatures in this nation. That disparity is largely due to the obstacles that women face when they run for office. It is essential to the health and future of our country that 50% of our population have equal power and leadership.

Through our programs, She Should Run eliminates the barriers that prevent women from ascending into public leadership:

She Should Run In Action She Should Run's signature program is designed to inspire and ask women to pursue public leadership. This national movement of 180,000 women and growing, provides talented women leaders the encouragement, information, and connections they need to make an informed decision about running for office. Ask a woman to run today at SheShouldRun.org

Vote With Your Purse She Should Run's nationally acclaimed research study examines trends in women's political giving and financial power. In 2010, women made up just 26% of recorded federal political contributions to candidates, political action committees (PACs), and party committees. Vote With Your Purse provides concrete ideas on how women can tap the "power of the purse." View a copy of the report at SheShouldRun.org/purse

Name It. Change It. A non-partisan project of **She Should Run**, the **Women's Media Center**, and **Political Parity**, Name It. Change It. works to end sexist media coverage of women candidates and public officials by monitoring coverage from all members of the press, from bloggers to radio hosts to television pundits. **Name It. Change It.** was launched in 2010 in the heat of the election cycle to hold media outlets accountable for their role in our government's gender disparity. Report sexist coverage at NameItChangeIt.org

For more information about the She Should Run and our programs or to view additional research findings, please contact Clare Bresnahan, She Should Run Programs Director, at (202) 393-8164 or info@sheshouldrun.org.

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