

GENDERED HUMOR AND SARCASM IN US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION CAMPAIGNS: A CASE STUDY OF FEMALE CANDIDATES

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Abstract. This article examines the role of gendered humor and sarcasm in shaping the political narratives surrounding female candidates in U.S. presidential elections. It explores how female politicians navigate the complexities of humor to engage voters, critique opponents, and manage public perception, all while contending with societal expectations regarding femininity and authority.

Key words: gendered humor and sarcasm, rhetorical strategies, femininity,

Humor in political campaigns serves as a double-edged sword, offering candidates the opportunity to project relatability and wit while also presenting risks of alienation or misunderstanding. The political landscape has seen a gradual increase in female candidates, yet their communication styles often face scrutiny that their male counterparts do not encounter. This article aims to investigate the unique challenges and strategies employed by female candidates through humor and sarcasm during their campaigns, analyzing the impact on voter perception and media framing.

• **Relatability:** Female candidates have used humor to counteract stereotypes of being overly serious or “unrelatable”. For example, Hillary Clinton’s 2016 campaign incorporated self-deprecating humor to humanize her public persona, often poking fun at her reputation for being overly prepared or “wonkish”.

• **Attack and Defense:** Sarcasm and biting humor are often employed as tools for critiquing opponents. However, female candidates risk being labeled as “shrill” or “angry” when adopting such tones, whereas similar tactics by male counterparts may be viewed as assertive or commanding.

The reception of humor in campaigns is deeply influenced by gender norms:

• **Perceived Authenticity:** Women’s use of humor is often interpreted through a lens of authenticity. A sarcastic remark from a female candidate may be perceived as “unladylike” or inauthentic, contrasting with societal norms that often reward women for warmth and decorum.

• **Cultural Expectations:** Historical stereotypes about women’s roles in public life contribute to a narrower bandwidth of acceptable humor. For instance, jokes that are assertive or confrontational may clash with the expectation of women as conciliators or nurturers.

Research shows that when women use humor, they are often perceived as less serious or competent. This double standard can hinder their effectiveness. For

instance, candidates like Kamala Harris and Hillary Clinton have employed humor to connect with voters, but received mixed reactions based on societal expectations of femininity. Their ability to use humor effectively is often constrained by the need to balance being relatable while maintaining credibility.

1. **Hillary Clinton (2008, 2016 Campaigns):** Clinton frequently used humor to soften her image and respond to criticism. In debates and interviews, her sarcasm was often misinterpreted as defensive, showcasing the difficulty female candidates face in maintaining a balance between strength and approachability.

2. **Kamala Harris (2020 Vice Presidential Campaign):** Harris's sharp wit during the debates gained attention, particularly her memorable retorts to then-Vice President Mike Pence. However, the reactions to her humor varied widely, with some celebrating her poise and others criticizing her as "condescending".

3. **Elizabeth Warren (2020 Primaries):** Warren's humor often leaned on relatability, using anecdotes and light-hearted quips to underscore her policy points. Yet, her moments of sarcasm in addressing corporate greed or political opponents were sometimes framed as aggressive.

Additionally, Sarcasm, while powerful for critique, can evoke backlash if perceived as aggressive or condescending. This section reviews existing literature on gendered communication in politics, highlighting the challenges faced by women in maintaining authority while using humor. When female candidates use sarcasm to critique opponents, it can be perceived as aggressive, thus reinforcing negative stereotypes. This contrasts with male candidates, who may be praised for similar tactics. Such gender biases can impact media coverage and voter perceptions, often reducing the effectiveness of their rhetorical strategies.

The analysis of gendered humor and sarcasm highlights the persistent double standards female candidates face. To navigate these dynamics effectively, future candidates might:

- Strategically blend humor with substance to avoid perceptions of frivolity.
- Utilize humor to challenge stereotypes, such as through self-deprecation or by highlighting shared struggles with voters.
- Proactively address the biases in media framing of their humor, leveraging social media to shape public narratives.

Case studies of debates and campaign speeches reveal that successful female candidates often navigate these waters by strategically choosing when and how to incorporate humor and sarcasm. They may employ self-deprecating humor to appear relatable while avoiding overly aggressive sarcasm that could backfire.

In conclusion, while humor and sarcasm can be powerful tools for female candidates, they must be utilized carefully within the context of gendered

expectations. Understanding these dynamics is crucial in analyzing the electoral success of women in politics and the broader implications for gender equity in political discourse. Future research should continue to explore these themes, especially as more women enter the political arena. Gendered humor and sarcasm in U.S. presidential campaigns illuminate broader societal dynamics regarding leadership, authority, and gender roles. While female candidates have demonstrated an ability to wield humor effectively, they often do so within a restrictive framework shaped by enduring stereotypes. As societal norms evolve, the capacity for humor to serve as an egalitarian tool in political discourse may expand, allowing women greater freedom in their rhetorical strategies.

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