The Dangers of Feminine Political Narratives
Krista Klocke, with Project Advisor Dr. Denise Oles-Acevedo
Speech Communication Program, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa, 50011

Introduction

Women who want to run for political offices must deflect the same expectations leveled at their male counterparts while dealing with the assumptions that come with their supposed feminine rhetorical style.

The 2014 elections held special significance in Iowa. If Joni Ernst won, she would be the first female Senator for Iowa, and if Appel won, she would be Iowa’s first Congresswoman. This historical impact also underscores women's continued minority status in American politics.

Political ads are a fascinating medium to study because of the role they play in candidates’ image development. The qualities voters tend to prefer in candidates have favored the images and narratives of males. This puts female leaders in a hard position – traditionally, female gender roles (feminine rhetoric) and leader roles (masculine rhetoric) are contradictory. How are these roles negotiated in political ads?

Materials and Methods

A rhetorical criticism was conducted on five of Staci Appel’s ads and six of Joni Ernst’s. One rhetorical criticism techniques was used. Feminist criticism was employed to assess the construction of Ernst and Appel’s gender roles and evaluate the themes and roles both women present in the ads.

Since both Joni Ernst and Staci Appel used narratives to negotiate their gender performance in their ads, the artifacts were analyzed to assess how the themes and roles emphasized impacted their rhetorical gender conformity. Specifically, the ads were examined to evaluate whether a feminine or masculine rhetorical style was used.

Feminine rhetorical style includes using a personal tone, assuming a feminine persona, emphasizing nurturance, intimacy or domesticity; and talking about experiential learning through anecdotal evidence.

Throughout the five Staci Appel ads studied, the rhetorical tone emphasized themes that stayed consistent within the bounds of a more stereotypically feminine tone. The narrator role created through her rhetorical choices was that of The Mother. This role was accomplished by emphasizing cooperation and harmony (“working across party lines”) and in using a feminine persona.

• Appel’s familial ties were strongly emphasized (“mother,” “wife”).
• Appel’s accomplishments were tied to traditional women’s roles.
• Within the ads, a metaphor of Appel as a mother mediating the arguments of children (i.e., Congressmen) was created.

The six Joni Ernst ads studied offered a sharp contrast to Staci Appel. Ernst consistently employed a more “macho” rhetorical style, emphasized by word choices like “force” and the use of military metaphors. The role created in the ads is that of The Selfless Leader, and builds a more masculine persona. This role was accomplished by discussing Ernst’s military leadership and service.

• There is a prominence of selfless caring that is always seen through a masculine lens (combat).
• Discusses non-traditional accomplishments and roles for a woman (“Mother, Soldier, Conservative”).
• Emphasis on protection is accomplished through examples of Ernst’s military background and the use of military metaphors.

Results

Conclusion

Joni Ernst won her race, and Staci Appel lost hers. While it is tempting to believe there is a causal relationship between rhetorical style (feminine/masculine) and success, the answer is likely more complex. Neither the feminine nor masculine style is “better,” but both may be better suited to certain rhetorical situations. Currently, the “macho” rhetorical style is the norm in political communication, because our stereotypes for “competent” candidates have been based on the images of male leaders. Joni Ernst was successful, in part, because of how well she fit voter expectations for political leaders. The real question isn’t how we want women to talk – it’s how we want our leaders to talk. In order for feminine and masculine rhetorical styles to be equally successful for female candidates, new political norms will need to be created. When women are no longer a minority in races and more inclusive leadership norms are established, the use of a strictly feminine rhetorical style will no longer be a danger to political success.

References

Acknowledgments

This project was made possible by the support and guidance of my project adviser, Dr. Denise Oles-Acevedo, and by the assistance of the Speech Communication Program and the Honors Program at ISU.