RESEARCH

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Using Public Interest Communications to Construct Women's Political Candidate Identities Amid Impossible Expectations

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Abstract

Research on women as political candidates has described the negotiations in public presentation that women make to overcome gendered power ideals that have reigned supreme in U.S. democracy since its inception. This qualitative study explores the experiences of 37 women candidates as they engaged in public interest communications strategies to construct their identities and share their values, priorities, and personal narratives to their publics. Participants' public image leaned toward as sincere a representation of the inner self as context allowed. Yet the context was heavily affected by gender, party, and other identities. The circumstances in which participants did not feel comfortable presenting authentically identify areas of challenge that still exist for women to fully participate in democracy.

Introduction

Political candidates, regardless of gender identity, must make decisions about how to present themselves to the public, but women face different decisions in this area and greater challenges in gaining acceptance from voters (Hayes & Lawless, 2016), with some women facing more challenges than others (Brown & Gershon, 2016). Exploration of these challenges is essential to diminishing disparities in representative democracy: Even as more women with more nodes of difference are running for office than ever before, even at the highest office in the country, and

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creating the most diverse slates of candidates from which to learn from their experiences, women continue to be underrepresented at every level of U.S. government in the United States and in nearly every country worldwide (Center for American Women and Politics, 2024a; UN Women, 2024). Moreover, women who are in U.S. public office are whiter, older, more likely to be straight and cisgender (Center for American Women and Politics, 2024b; Victory Institute, 2023) than the countries they represent, even amid record-breaking levels of representation for many identity groups (Center for American Women and Politics, 2024b).

Gender disparities in elected leadership have been attributed to traditional norms, many of them related to public perceptions about women's appearances and family roles, such as the gendered advice and strategies of consultants (Dittmar, 2015). Other studies find that women candidates' appearances and public personas are covered by news media through gendered framing, and voters often see them through gendered heuristics (Schneider & Bos, 2014; Winfrey & Schnoebelen, 2019). Yet amid these disparities are bright spots in women's representation, prompted by a surge of women running for office since the 2016 election (Dittmar, 2020; Lawless & Fox, 2018), which justify the study of this slate of women candidates' experiences with an intersectional approach that evaluates findings for differences among experiences related to their other identities.

Studying the construction of candidates in national and high-level state elections perhaps reveals more about political practitioners than candidates' personal preferences. The professional creation of the public political candidate encompasses a substantive field in both political theory and practice as consultants at the national level, as well as in higher profile state and local elections, guide this construction. However, professional advice has been found to be gendered and racialized (Brown & Lemi, 2021; Dittmar, 2015). This study instead focuses on how women candidates in lower-level elections decide how to present themselves as political candidates absent a team dedicated to the public construction of candidacy, and in how doing so, they worked to change social norms that exist as structural barriers to women attaining political office.

This study uses public interest communications as a framework to analyze the experiences of 37 women who ran for office between 2016 and 2020 to understand, through their own words gathered during in-depth interviews, how they created their public personas during this important surge in candidate emergence. This study positions public interest communications as a critical framework for understanding women's meaning-making processes, illustrating how women candidates navigate structural barriers and normative practices in creating a public political persona.

Building on previous research, our findings support the understanding that differences exist among women's political experience in various intersections, including race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, age, sexuality, gender identity, political party, and geography. Across these differences, key themes emerged in how participants engaged in public interest communications strategies to construct and communicate their political identities as candidates and address systemic challenges in a way that could change norms around who a political office holder

should be—including what they look like and how they behave. Participants demonstrated a dual focus on authenticity and strategic safety when deciding about their public appearance and how they would present their private lives. They intuitively chose to project authenticity in their public presentation as much as they felt electorally and physically safe to do within the unique context of the election. Their efforts to communicate their values, priorities, and narratives reflect an interaction between personal authenticity and societal expectations, shaped by gender and other identities, as well as current political and societal circumstances and underscore the necessity of addressing systemic inequities if women are to achieve full participation in democracy.

Literature review

Representation of women in political candidacy

A common theme in research about women candidates has focused on the advantages or disadvantages of emphasizing traits deemed masculine or feminine and how voters perceive candidates based on gender. When women first started running for office in larger numbers, women candidates presented themselves differently from men candidates in significant ways by emphasizing different traits and issues and even by using different campaign strategies (Bystrom, et al., 2004). Candidate presentation in advertisements, an area where women could best control their messaging, became key to strategy (Kahn, 1994). Yet literature comparing men and women candidates has shown diminishing differences over time in how candidates present themselves and communicate regarding traits, issues, and strategies, with political party mattering more than gender in voter perceptions (Craig & Rippere, 2016). Still, consultants for candidates running for national office and the highest-level state office for governor incorporated gender into every aspect of the campaign, including image, message, campaign tactics, and advertising (Dittmar, 2015). Local and lower-level state candidates typically cannot afford consultants to advise them on presentation and communication. Instead, they receive guidance from trainings, mentors in office, and through their own life experience or that of campaign volunteers or families (Callen et al., 2012; Nielsen, 2012).

Women running for office in previous decades intended to base campaign strategies on the assumption that voters would see them as warm and passive, as opposed to men candidates' personas as tough and assertive. Strategies presumed most voters preferred their elected leaders more like the latter, especially in presidential and national elections. These gender-based stereotypes continued in future campaigns, where strategies were based on compensating in areas where women might have a disadvantage with voters, while emphasizing what would benefit them (Herrnson et al., 2003). More recent scholarship has shown that, although differences between men and women's political self-presentation have decreased, women candidates continue to face challenges, and gender stereotypes have continued to play a role in how

candidates communicate and how their communication is perceived (Bauer, 2020; Krupnikov & Bauer, 2014; Schneider & Bos, 2014).

Role of public interest communications in constructing authentic political personas

Public interest communications is an interdisciplinary construct bringing together public relations, psychology, political science, and journalism. It is a strategic approach to communication that prioritizes public good by mobilizing audiences toward positive social change rather than operating within the framework of prevailing neoliberal cultures aiming to produce meanings shaped by market-oriented perspectives and discourse (Bozeman, 2007; Demetrious, 2022). This approach to communication attempts to shape public opinion by offering an alternative to market-driven strategies and instead focuses on ethical framing of issues such as emphasizing values such as tolerance, dignity, and truth (Bozeman, 2007). Public interest communications, furthermore, problematizes the status quo and emphasizes social good as the goal (Fessmann, 2017).

In the context of political candidacy, we argue that public interest communications could provide an effective strategy in helping women candidates break barriers by constructing and communicating their public personas to connect with key constituencies, including voters, funders, and endorsers. For women candidates, this process is particularly nuanced because it requires balancing authenticity with the societal and cultural expectations regarding their identities. Presenting oneself as authentic to voters is not easy for politicians, and women candidates and elected leaders, in many cases, must work harder to prove their authenticity (Yarchi & Samuel-Azran, 2018). For example, public interest communications theory is grounded in spheres of influence, including policy, media, communities of influence, activism, and social norms (Center for Public Interest Communications, 2024). These spheres provide a framework for understanding how candidates use them in strategies to drive social change, and specifically in this study, around changing norms for women running for office through the social norm sphere.

In general, voters are reluctant to believe any politician is truly authentic, especially those new to politics, but when candidates break through this hesitancy, their perceived authenticity will most likely garner votes (Stiers et al., 2019). Fostering genuine connections with voters through authentic presentation may serve as a communication strategy for women candidates to overcome skepticism and build trust with endorsers, voters, and the public at large. This aligns with Christiano and Neimand's (2018) five principles of strategic communication, which focus on joining the community, communicating in metaphors or images, intentionally invoking emotion, creating meaningful calls to action, and storytelling. In addition to the spheres of public interest communications, these five principles offer a useful lens for understanding how women candidates strategically constructed authenticity by way of their communication strategies, leveraging the relational, emotional, and narrative aspects through which women connect with their audience and change norms around who belongs in office.

Emphasizing authenticity aligns with the increasing demand for transparency and genuine self-representation in political campaigns. Authenticity, however, is not a static concept—it is constructed and performed within specific cultural and political contexts. Novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie warned of conflating perceived authenticity with the "single story," a flattened, incomplete version of a person or group's experiences reinforced by power structures. When people reject the single story and embrace multiple stories to be told about a group, they gain their full humanity (Adichie, 2009). Women who run for office and become politicians are considered deviations from the norm, and as such, cannot tap into authentic emotion and expression as white male politicians can (Goren, 2018). Former presidential candidate Hillary Clinton has discussed the limitation on female politicians around "being your authentic self" given that, "regardless of who you actually are, as a woman in politics, you must conform to expectations or norms that are extremely difficult for women to fulfill" (Goren, 2018, p. 114). This limitation might be more pronounced for Republican women, as they face more restrictions in tailoring messages to different audiences while retaining authenticity (Barrett et al., 2025).

Public interest communications theory further reinforces this dynamic through five foundational pillars, including policy, media, communities of influence, activism, and social norms. By exploring how candidates constructed their public personas and exploring the role of public interest communications in changing norms around the profile of a typical officeholder, this study contributes to understanding how women candidates negotiate these challenges while striving to present themselves authentically to their constituents. Politicians are authentic "when they speak or behave in ways that violate role expectations, challenge the status quo, or take positions contrary to their own self-interests" (Pillow et al., 2018, p. 851). Although there are multiple definitions of authenticity in political communication literature (Luebke & Engelmann, 2022), political authenticity is understood to be a socially constructed persona built by the media, audience, and politicians themselves and can be understood within the context of consistency, intimacy, ordinariness, and immediacy (Luebke, 2021). The media and audience construct a persona for politicians—that they then expect politicians' actions to fit within—based on news media accounts and overall expectations built for them (Luebke, 2021). Out of the analytic perspectives of authenticity proposed by Luebke, this study focuses on how public interest communications strategies and the spheres of influence aid women candidates in breaking barriers to political office by constructing authenticity in accordance with their personal values.

Research questions

As historical outsiders to politics, women candidates have had to figure out how to present themselves to voters, with conflicting options of either capitalizing on benefits to their gender or ignoring gender altogether (Thomas, 1997, p. 48). While much research concerning women candidates has been done on the effects of gender on campaigning, less has focused on decisions behind campaign strategies and whether or how gender comes into play (see Dittmar, 2015). This study looks not at campaign practitioners but candidates themselves, who make up the bulk of

campaign strategists in local races and are, therefore, less affected by gendered advice by political consultants, perhaps providing them with increased potential to disrupt gendered political systems through individual actions (Dittmar, 2015).

In this study, candidates themselves are the insiders (Thomas, 1997, p. 9) who are uniquely situated to provide insight into campaign strategy surrounding gender and other nodes of difference at local levels. Furthermore, this study employs Dittmar's (2015) framework in studying gender in campaigns by not asking how women have and can have success in campaigns but to better understand how local candidates grapple with gendered campaign norms and challenge the masculinity, heteronormativity, and class-based nature of campaigns. This inquiry was temporally located at an historic time in U.S. political history, when an unprecedented number of women ran for office after a high-profile loss of Clinton's presidential campaign and subsequent social movements, which we deem to be public interest communications trigger events that had a significant impact in prompting women to run for office in record numbers in the years following (Fessmann, 2017, p. 26).

This study explored two key research questions:

RQ1: How did participants engage in meaning-making while navigating the decision-making process to present their public identities as candidates within the framework of public interest communications?

RQ2: What challenges did women face in authentically communicating their identities to voters?

Method

To answer the research questions, this study used semi-structured interviews with 37 people who identify as women and had run for local or state office between 2016 and 2020.

Sampling and participants

To increase exposure to a multitude of experiences while running for office, participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling (Tracy, 2020). Political organizations that assist candidates of specific identity groups, such as Higher Heights for America or the Victory Institute, or party, such as state Republican women's groups, provided recommendations. Participants were then asked at the end of each interview to suggest other participants; if the study had not reached saturation within the potential participants' parties or groups, the request was followed up.

Most participants ran for state or local office in Southern states, including North Carolina, Texas, and Georgia, in rural, urban, and suburban areas with varying ideological, racial, and

ethnic makeups. Participants included 28 Democrats, including one who changed her affiliation after the 2016 election, three independents who leaned left ideologically, and six Republicans. The over-representation of Democratic participants fit with the proportion of women running for office, which has been the case since the 1980s and has grown larger since (Center for American Women and Politics, 2024a).

All participants identified as women, but they varied by their intersecting identities, including race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Further, their positionalities in life differed by age, marital status, nationality, religion, and socioeconomic status. See Table 1 for a breakdown of participants by self-identified identities. Ten participants asked to be de-identified. In those cases, all identifying information was removed from their narratives.

Table 1

Self-Identified Participant Demographics

Subgroup		Number of Participants
Party		
	Democratic	28
	Republican	6
	Unaffiliated/lean left	3
Race		
	African American	9
	Latin(a)x/Hispanic	2
	Asian American	4
	White/not Hispanic	22
Sexuality/Gender		
	Lesbian/Gay	4
	Bisexual	1
	Transgender	2
	Straight Cisgender	30
Age Range		
	20s-30s	11
	40s-50s	24
	60s-70s	2
Citizenship		
	Naturalized citizens	3
Levels of government		
	Local	18
	State	11
	State and local	8

Data collection

The lead researcher conducted the interviews in 2020 over Zoom. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. During interviews, participants were asked to share their decisions on self-presentation in campaign communications and public appearances, including the messaging used and communication strategies implemented, any advice and support they received during candidacy, along with any challenges they faced in any of these areas. The full interview instrument is available in the Appendix. The interviews were informally structured, allowing participants to guide the conversations based on their experiences. Throughout the interview process, the researcher wrote document summaries and analytic memos and assessed new insights to determine when sufficient information power had been reached.

Data analysis

Analysis followed the grounded theory approach as laid out by DeCuir-Gunby et al. (2011), using a blend of inductive and deductive codes. Several cycles of coding were conducted with the use of the qualitative data software Atlas.ti to synthesize meaning, develop themes, and analyze similarities and differences among and within groups. The first cycle consisted of holistic coding to develop potential categories, followed by in vivo and process coding to place emphasis on participant actions and words (Miles et al., 2020). Through Atlas.ti, networks of codes were created to develop a visual display of connections among the codes, from which themes about participant experiences emerged (Miles et al., 2020).

Results

This research study examined how participants engage in meaning-making while navigating the decision-making process to present their public identities as candidates within the framework of public interest communications. We asked participants to explain the challenges they faced in communicating their platforms and identities as political candidates to voters. We found the employment of strategies consistent with public interest communications to present themselves with voters, at a time during which Democratic female candidates were embracing authenticity and eschewing traditional norms that had constrained previous women politicians. The major themes and subthemes are displayed in Table 2 and discussed below.

Table 2

Themes and Sub-Themes

(1) Presentation styles among political candidates	a. Authenticity in Democratic presentation b. Traditionalism in Republican presentation
(2) Influences on candidate presentation	a. Training approaches b. Identity-specific mentorship
(3) Voter perceptions and norms	a. Gendered expectations in advice b. Challenges to authenticity and representation

Presentation styles among political candidates

Authenticity in Democratic presentation

Participants at the highest election level, including at least five state-level candidates who received more institutional support and attention, felt the most pressure to conform to the traditional image of a politician. Consultants provided by the state party or paid via donations helped determine their public presentation by openly assessing candidate appearances with perceived acceptance in the community. Common advice included changing one's hair or clothes or leaning into their roles as mothers, a trend among Democratic consultants in 2018 when the narrative flourished that "moms" were running for office as part of the post-Women's March political action (Lawless & Fox, 2018). Participants pushed back against this advice to present more authentically by baring arm tattoos, for example, wearing bright colors rather than the traditional black or navy, and declining to spotlight motherhood as their key life narrative. This strategic decision exemplifies *joining the community* (Christiano & Neimand, 2018), where candidates aligned their presentation with their constituents rather than presenting a consultant-crafted image that relied on traditional political norms.

Although most participants were indeed mothers, they wanted the inclusion of this part of their life to be tangential rather than central. A participant running for state office struggled with how consultants wanted to emphasize her role as a mother in campaign materials to an extent that felt inauthentic. She explained:

> "It became like, the only thing they wanted to talk about a lot and so would overshadow the fact that I was a [professional job title] and that I was a community organizer, and that I had other skills besides being a mom."

At the same time, Democratic women freely mentioned their childcare needs to voters and campaign teams, and many brought their younger children to events out of necessity, not as a

strategic decision. Voters, especially women, accepted and even appreciated their children's presence.

Issue-focus was another area where authenticity was a strong motivator; participants had become politically involved based on their advocacy, and they did not tamp down their interest in furthering these issues when they ran for office. This was evident in the choices of some left-leaning participants who took strong public stances on social justice issues, even when they faced backlash. For example, one participant noticed older women leaders in her community played a backstop role to men leaders rather than championing causes on their own. This prompted her to remain steadfast in her support for social justice issues within her community. The participants' commitments to social justice despite backlash embodied *invoking emotion with intention* (Christiano & Neimand, 2018). They leveraged moral emotion to signal a values alignment among their constituents within the *policy* and *activism* spheres (Center for Public Interest Communications, 2024).

Many of the Democratic and left-leaning independent participants were compelled to run for office due to the 2016 election, citing emotions such as anger and fear for what a Trump presidency might bring, like previous findings about this cohort (Dittmar, 2020). For Democratic participants, choosing authenticity represented an act of rebellion—an outlook influenced both by Clinton's loss, despite her adherence to candidate gender norms, and by Brett Kavanaugh's 2018 U.S. Supreme Court appointment despite sexual assault allegations. The nature of why so many of the participants were motivated to run further contributed to their apathy or even rebellion in conforming to gendered guidance on how to present themselves to voters.

One participant summed up her (and others') frustration, noting, "The problem that I have is with women candidates, we're expected to look a certain way; we're expected to talk a certain way, we're expected to be all of these things that some of us just simply are not." She explained:

> I'm a single mom…involved in politics. I'm defying all different kinds of rules and odds just in that in itself. So I'm not going to come into the room, dressed in a whole suit, from head to toe…I'm not coming into a space wanting people to look at me and perceive me to be holier than thou—because political candidates and elected officials—they're supposed to be people that do no wrong, and that's not always the case. So, take me as I am.

Her perspective represented participants who leaned toward authenticity in appearance with the intent to effect change in moving their communities toward political representation that better reflects constituents.

Traditionalism in Republican presentation

Republican participants had a finer rope to walk to avoid losing the respect of voters and key endorsers. They perceived little flexibility in deviating from candidate norms and advice and therefore described tighter parameters of how a woman could present, reflecting traditional constraints on women running for office. To navigate these constraints, participants relied on strategic appeals in their presentation that served as *meaningful calls to action* (Christiano &

Neimand, 2018), inviting their constituents to reaffirm their shared traditional values while also seeking inclusion in *communities of influence* (Center for Public Interest Communications, 2024). This was evident in several areas, most notably in their strategic emphasis on familial roles in campaigns and subsequently facing apprehension because of it. The white cisgender Republicans included their children and husbands on campaign materials strategically because they said people in their communities were more likely to accept flyers with photos of "cute kids," or to open a letter addressed in children's handwriting. At the same time, emphasizing motherhood reminded Republican voters and local leaders that a candidate had familial responsibilities, which often led to questions about whether she could perform adequately if elected. One participant explained, "I mean, that was a constant theme of questioning, or they would tell my husband, 'I can't believe you're letting her go to [the state capitol], you know."

Republican women were also more likely to adhere to gendered norms of how women in leadership roles should behave and speak, even though all participants had been told at one time or another not to show anger or emotion—"Nobody likes an angry lady," a white Republican candidate explained. Thus, presentation took a more strategic rather than authentic approach for Republican women. Yet Republican women faced outsider status as candidates solely based on gender, facing an assumption by voters and leaders in their parties that women who run for office are Democrats. "I think a lot of people have a suspicion of Republican women because people are sold on the idea that the Democrats own the women as part of their base," one participant said. Another participant faced male colleagues who followed the Jerry Falwell rule, similar to former Vice President Mike Pence, in which they refused to meet with her alone, even in a crowded restaurant, to discuss policy.

The additional challenges that Republican women faced in gaining acceptance among leaders and constituents based solely on their gender limited their flexibility in presenting themselves within their gender or in taking more moderate stances on issues. To overcome these constraints, they often hesitated to present as more moderate on social issues, especially at the cost to their own authenticity.

When two Republicans with intersecting identities outside the majority of Republican voters ran, they faced backlash that cost them their elections. This preconception of being a closeted Democrat was even more of a challenge for these women. When a transgender Republican woman entered statewide politics, she faced a barrier to entry too steep to overcome. A lifelong Republican, who was Black, found herself having to emphasize her party loyalty repeatedly and was still snubbed by local party leaders, volunteers, and a women's group in the party. She said, "I think if I was not a Black woman, honestly, it would be a different take on me, to be honest. I just think the party hasn't come as far in that regard."

Influences on candidate presentation

Training approaches

Most participants of either party at lower levels of office could not afford campaign consultants and constructed their identities based on more informal insights. For left-leaning and Democratic women, training to prepare for political candidacy covered many facets of campaigning, including advice on how a woman should present herself. These trainings were helpful for many in that they provided a roadmap for running for office, helping them understand the challenges that lay ahead and how to present themselves to the public effectively. However, guidance from trainings that focused on women in general centered on older, white, cisgender, heterosexual progressive women with financial means and did not provide an adequate road map for those who needed advice tailored to differences. One participant described those trainings as helping women "look and act like white men."

The appearance guidance was generally not helpful for masculine-presenting women, those in their 20s or 30s with an LGBTQ+ identity, unmarried individuals with small children, or those without access to additional funds for new wardrobes or regular visits to hair salons. Although women running for office in the past might have done their best to conform as much as possible to these candidate norms, participants scrutinized the advice, and they considered authenticity when making their decisions about whether to follow it. When a popular local training gave blanket advice for all women, one woman who identifies as gay said she completely "disregarded that shit." She explained: "Like you need to have pearls and like three kinds of necklaces and three types of earrings, and like they have this whole thing—I knew that wasn't about me." Their experiences bring to light the need for more inclusive candidate preparation and identity-based trainings. In the absence of such resources, the participants' rejections of the appearance guidance that was offered to them exemplify how Democratic women candidates interpreted this advice through the lens of *communicating in images* (Christiano & Neimand, 2018). As demonstrated earlier, these women chose instead to craft a visual rhetoric of authenticity (e.g., baring tattoos, and not conforming to stereotypical clothing choices) with the hope that this would resonate with their constituents across the *media sphere* of public interest communications through news coverage and purchased advertising (Center for Public Interest Communications, 2024).

Republican women, on the other hand, did not attend any gender-specific trainings because of the trainings' pro-choice or progressive bent. None of the Republican participants knew of any such trainings for conservative women, and one questioned whether she would attend something like that at all, bristling at the idea of separating the experiences of women from others. The range in attitudes—with most Democratic or progressive participants arguing for more inclusive trainings for women that encompass difference and Republicans hesitant to accept they need specific guidance, even as they conformed to traditional gendered candidate guidance—reflects the widening differences between the two parties.

Identity-specific mentorship

Despite norms that favor heteronormative, cisgender, white women of a certain age, most participants could point to mentors who had come before them. The cohorts of women running for office post-2016 were the most diverse in history. Deep discussions with campaign teams and mentors helped them negotiate how much of their candidate persona could and should veer toward authenticity. This is where mentors who had run in previous decades were especially helpful, as were consultants with similar identities and support networks of other first-time candidates—whom they met through the above-mentioned trainings. Many LGBTQ+ candidates found similar support through the Victory Institute, which offered identity-specific trainings.

These structures helped participants navigate complex situations that general trainings had not prepared them for. For candidates with an LGBTQ+ identity, for example, how to present oneself required deciding how authentically to present one's life; i.e., whether they should be out, and if so, if they should feature wives and/or children in campaign materials. Here, too, participants veered toward authenticity when they could, learning from mentors who had not had that flexibility. Participants who normally presented as more masculine were forewarned by mentors to choose a presentation that felt authentic from the start, as a decision to wear lipstick, for example, would be difficult to change later on. Participants' relationships with these mentors offered a site for *joining the community* and *storytelling*, where authenticity could be rehearsed and refined by sharing stories and the advice given across *communities of influence* (Christiano & Neimand, 2018; Center for Public Interest Communications, 2024).

Absent identity-specific mentors, participants forged their own paths, such as a Muslim woman learning to fit in with several diverse communities, as well as young, unmarried women without children, naturalized citizens, single mothers without financial means or childcare, and transgender women. Although these participants were missing guidance specific to their situations and identities, they had already served as mentors and aspirations for others. For example, a Latina participant who did not feel that her state party was helpful to those in her community, and who wanted to run for office because of the specific guidance they needed, served an informal mentorship role to others in the state who looked her up based on her name, looking for advice. This unpaid labor could easily be applied by the state party, exemplifying one of many ways participants identified in which parties could help them and future candidates to come.

Voter perceptions and norms

Gendered expectations and advice

Even as participants were attempting to lean toward authenticity, their own supporters were calling them back. Informal advice about their presentation from voters, political participants at meetings, or their own volunteers often reflected gendered and racialized political norms.

Most of it was not useful and harmed participants' own perceptions of legitimacy. Examples included: Straighten your hair to appeal to white women; Buy new clothes; Stop wearing high heels; Don't go on Facebook live without makeup; Don't wear a black hijab because it might remind voters of ISIS.

Most described the advice as coming from well-meaning supporters who presumed that other voters would not accept the candidate, but it resulted in participants feeling that their acceptance was conditional to changing herself. Comments toward most candidates under 40 made them feel like they had to work harder to gain legitimacy as a candidate with voters and endorsers. These participants endured comments about their heels, hemlines, and necklines with one financial backer saying that he would write a check only if the participant changed her shoes. They were frequently asked their age and told they looked too young or too pretty to run for office. A Republican participant explained: "Most middle-aged men sort of turn their nose up at you and aren't sure that you are capable of doing the job… So that took a lot of effort to convince folks." At the heart of these comments was the perpetuation of a longstanding belief that only certain types of people can be leaders.

Challenges to authenticity and representation

A large part of gaining legitimacy centered around identity and by proxy, appearance. In general, the more authentically a participant felt she could present, the greater the likelihood that this decision was in line with her community. A conflict between what is accepted within their communities and their own identities led some participants to feel like outsiders in political spaces. These reactions were closely tied to place and whether one's intersectional identities and ideology fit with most voters in the community.

A narrative common among Black, Latina, and Asian American participants was the need to over-emphasize qualifications, experience, and degrees when seeking donations in majority-white communities or approval from a white political endorser. As one participant put it, "I have to basically say I'm a Ph.D. for people to think I'm worthy to even have some money. It's crazy." When a Latina candidate attended a fundraising event with white voters within her district, she was mistaken for a childcare worker. "When I looked around, it dawned on me—I was the only Latina in the room," she said. Responses to a Muslim participant's hijab made her feel like an outsider within communities of immigrants from areas in conflict with Muslim countries and sects, as well as in majority white suburban neighborhoods, where she was told one time to come back when she "dressed American." Her male opponent of a similar identity was able to blend in through accent and dress: "He had this ease of integrating himself into that old boy's network, and I just couldn't."

Class was another hindrance to perceived legitimacy. A participant who worked in the service industry experienced repeated questioning on the campaign trail about her qualifications for office. The participant, who was white, said, "It was maybe classist in that it's like, 'Oh she works in retail—does she have the chops or wherewithal to understand city government?'"

The most severe challenges were in terms of safety and mental wellbeing. Younger, feminine-presenting women instituted safety precautions at events, reporting men following them outside and dealing with online harassment in the form of racist, sexist, and/or threatening messages. One participant said that constituents have called her a "cunt," and told her, "I hope your family suffers and burns." "It's so disheartening," said a Muslim woman who received scores of racist and misogynistic comments. These challenges were not addressed in trainings or other avenues of knowledge for local candidates.

Identity-based attacks were especially severe for Democratic women who ran in Republican strongholds and the two Republican women mentioned above, one Black and one transgender. These women did not include their children in campaign materials to protect them. A white Democrat running in a Republican stronghold reported her campaign's volunteers were frequently followed while canvassing in the community. She said that rumors that she was Muslim, among other attributes, made her feel like she didn't belong in her own town. The Democrat, who was Muslim, faced so much hate in her own Republican-led town that she vowed never to run again. The transgender Republican was debating switching parties based on the reception her party gave her.

Taken together, we see that the work of appearing authentic happens across intersecting political, cultural, and social sites, which are shaped by power dynamics and community expectations. Women candidates had to continually negotiate which aspects of self to reveal or withhold amid hostility in many cases. These experiences suggest that discussions about appearance and authenticity are reserved for candidates in communities that will accept them

Discussion

For women candidates, using public interest communications strategies to construct their personas involved carefully navigating intersections of gender, race, and other identities to present a persona that resonates with their publics while maintaining a sense of self that felt true to their personal values and lived experiences. In cases where participant identity was accepted by their party and/or community, participants reported that voters generally welcomed this authenticity. These candidates were able to break free from the single story of female politicians and present in a fuller capacity (Adichie, 2009). Negotiating authentic presentation was more complex for participants with one or more identities that veered from either the community itself or from heteronormative gender norms. Candidate trainings, advice from volunteers, staff, and even well-meaning voters reflected these norms; participants whose authentic presentations existed beyond these norms instead negotiated their appearance, demeanor, and family inclusion with support from mentors and fellow candidates with shared identities and were able to come closer to a more nuanced story than in previous periods of time.

Some challenges undermined the very legitimacy of candidacies and were directly related to party and/or a community's lack of acceptance of participants' authentic appearance and

presentation. To navigate these challenges, participants relied on robust networks—plentiful for many Democratic and progressive women during this time of candidate surge following the 2016 election—and political mentors. A small handful, however, faced challenges to their legitimacy as candidates so insurmountable that not only did they lose their elections, but they also vowed in interviews to never again run for office, refusing, or being unable through identity, to adhere to the single story allowed for women candidates.

Although many candidates at this level felt that a more authentic presentation would not harm them electorally—and might even help—these findings point toward acceptance as conditional to an ideal match of place and identity, with an expanding societal ideal of what a leader can look like in urban, rural, and suburban communities in the United States.

Theoretical implications

Even amid varied experiences, participants tended toward choices about their presentation as candidates that felt authentic to them, for different reasons and to varying degrees. Their challenges in doing so, for the most part, did not prevent them from serving in office, as 25 won at least one of their elections, with authenticity rewarded when community expectations aligned; still, their decisions and challenges can affect their trajectory to run for higher office, as well as perceptions and pathways for other women in the future (Dolan, 2014).

Expectation consistency (Luebke, 2021) is an appropriate lens to understand how some participants were received and how they constructed their public presentations. The public image participants constructed and then performed (Luebke, 2021) leaned toward as sincere a representation of the inner self as context allowed, and context was heavily affected by identities. The circumstances in which participants did not feel comfortable presenting themselves authentically identifies areas of challenge that still exist for women to reach candidacy and elected leadership.

By situating these challenges within a public interest communications framework, this study argues that authenticity is a strategic and relational process that occurs across intersecting spheres of influence, including policy, media, communities of influence, activism, and social norms (Center for Public Interest Communications, 2024). The participant experiences uncovered in this study led to two theoretical contributions. The first illustrates the opportunities within intentionally constructing and performing an authentic public persona. The second demonstrates the value of eliminating ideological barriers that hinder authentic self-representation.

Bright spots in women's experiences

This study identifies some bright spots in women candidates' experiences through the intentional choices to lean toward authenticity that some felt comfortable enough to make. These choices varied widely, reflecting previous findings of women running for office during this timeframe

(McDonald et al., 2020). Participants often described their acts of intentionality in comparison to experiences of women leaders before them who had to contort themselves to conform to standards of what a leader looked, acted, or sounded like.

The emphasis on authenticity by so many of the progressive-leaning and Democratic candidates exemplifies the importance of social movements to increasing and diversifying the field of political candidates (Andrews, 1997), suggesting such movements can catalyze disruption of gendered campaigning, as Dittmar (2015) argued was needed. The expectation of being judged similarly to how Clinton's authenticity was debated (Parry-Giles, 2014) was foremost in mind for some participants when creating their public presentations. Many of these candidates leaned toward authentic presentations, not necessarily because it would make them appear a certain way, but as a sort of rebellion after the 2016 election. In this way, they were both violating role expectations and challenging the status quo while changing social norms (Pillow et al., 2018).

These experiences highlight how *storytelling, intentional emotion*, and *community connection* (Christiano & Neimand, 2018) can transform these perceived individual acts of rebellion into collective normative changes in politics, shifting societal expectations across the *social norm* and *activism spheres* of political culture (Center for Public Interest Communications, 2024).

The desire for participants to present authentically suggests a potential positive shift in how women candidates approach their presentation, considering that the more candidates feel they can present their full selves authentically, the more space exists within society for different kinds of leaders. Participants who disrupted expectation consistency, thereby choosing *not* to present how the public expects based on party or gender (Luebke, 2021), did so to appear closer to their authentic selves—and to send a message eschewing such norms. Their leaning into a more authentic presentation regardless of expectations challenged the inherent masculinity of political campaigns, thereby "redefining expectation of both gender and candidacy" (Dittmar, 2015, p. 165).

Continued persistence in pushing back against norms and expectations could eventually achieve the disruption Dittmar (2015) and Thomas (1997) argued was needed in campaign systems. However, the low levels at which some candidates were accepted—and the outright harassment of a handful—suggest that some communities and political parties were less welcoming toward women leaders with multiple nodes of minoritized difference, and thus leadership gaps in these areas could be more difficult to disrupt. Their experiences provide an example of the party being unwelcome or moving to the far right regarding identities veering from the mainstream leadership, including women, similar to what Weeks and Allen (2023) found in Europe. Moreover, Republican participants were more likely to lean into traditional expectations of women candidates' appearance and demeanor, reinforcing a larger need and willingness of conservative women to compensate for and/or benefit from their gender (Dittmar, 2015). These sentiments suggest a more difficult path to closing representational gaps within the Republican Party.

Practical implications

This study suggests that normative changes could increase the likelihood of women candidates accessing local elected leadership by utilizing public interest communications strategies to advocate for their platforms effectively, address systemic challenges, and establish authentic connections with diverse constituencies. Adopting communication strategies grounded in *storytelling*, *emotional resonance* and *shared values* (Christiano & Neimand, 2018) and focused on building trust and connecting on issues of shared values, such as equality, justice, and transparency, can help women candidates communicate in ways that focus on ethical frameworks of politics. This can help counteract negative stereotypes and media biases and create a more meaningful connection with voters who seek integrity and transparency in their leaders.

For local candidates, trainings and mentorship were the most important sources of guidance. Their experiences make clear that women need specific, cultural and intersectional advice to construct their public identities and navigate current political contexts. By integrating communication strategies in trainings that emphasize community connection, values-based messaging, emotional resonance, purposeful action and authentic storytelling (Christiano & Neimand, 2018), these resources could better prepare women candidates to navigate the spheres of influence, including policy, media, communities of influence, activism, and social norms (Center for Public Interest Communications, 2024). Identity-specific training programs and encouragement within training programs to form bonds with candidate peers are steps in the right direction and were cited by participants as having helped them make it as far as they did, expanding on previous findings that have called for LGBTQ+-identifying candidates and women of color (Sanbonmatsu, 2015). Furthermore, formal roadmaps to office must adapt to an increasingly diverse candidate pool to include a range of life experiences and perspectives. Traditional advice on presentation might help some women be successful in conservative districts, but roadmaps should incorporate the experiences and unique needs of women with different positionalities, which would contribute to the development of a framework for public interest communications strategies for future candidates.

To help women come to those decisions, however, consultants, media, campaign staff and volunteers, and even well-meaning voters should stop putting extra pressure on candidates, which Dittmar (2015) identified as prevalent among the advice political practitioners gave to women running at the national level. Participants had already taken on the added burden of deciding what their look would be. Once they made those choices, facing criticism, judgment, and advice felt like a nagging poke that added to the stress of an already difficult endeavor. Perpetuating an ideal way to present and appear as a candidate at all levels of candidacy through multiple entry points further sends a message that office-holding and leadership are only for certain people.

Limitations to promote future research

As with all research, there are limitations to the conclusions to be drawn from qualitative interviews with a purposively selected group of participants. Most of the participants ran in the Southern United States, so gender norms and racial attitudes would differ in other geographic areas. The sample includes a much smaller number of Republicans. Future research on Republican women who run for office should explore the context of ideological shifts within the experiences of candidates running for office against Republicans to further understand the effects on women's local candidacy and how public interest communications strategies could be tailored in these unique contexts. As Republican candidates faced additional structural barriers and a more restricted set of traditional presentation norms that favored Christian white women over all others, future research should engage directly with this tension.

It should also be pointed out that all participants were able to act on their desires to run for office and made it to candidacy. Those unable to navigate many points of intersection on the margins would not make it to candidacy. Research, including the experiences of women who were interested in running for office but ultimately did not, would illuminate additional challenges that keep people from elected office.

Conclusion

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the nuanced experiences of women candidates running for office after 2016 and highlights the complex interplay between authenticity, identity, and strategy used to construct and perform their public political personas for various audiences. This study found differences in the ways local Democratic and Republican women candidates presented themselves and in how local communities accepted them. Through the lens of public interest communications, we found that candidates balanced deeply personal values and narratives within the societal and political contexts that shaped their campaigns, extending our theoretical understanding in two significant ways. First, these women shared experiences that illustrated the opportunities inherent in intentionally constructing and performing an authentic public persona, highlighting authenticity as both a strategy and a value in public interest communications. Second, these experiences underscore the importance of eliminating ideological barriers that hinder authentic representation, which remain a critical challenge for women pursuing political leadership. These findings reinforce the importance of addressing systemic inequities to enable women's full participation in democracy.

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Appendix: Interview questions

1. (If not specified)* Walk me through the evolution of your political involvement and how you came to run for office.
2. Was 2016 was motivating for you to run? If so, why?
3. How do you think your identity affected your reaction to 2016?
4. What changed at home and work when you decided to run for office?
5. Who helped you run for office, staff, consultants, outside organizations? What was their advice? How did it shape the way you run? Can you give me an example of advice?
6. How did you present yourself as a candidate, what aspects of your personality and life did you focus on and why?
7. What issues make up the main focus of your campaign and why?
8. How do you present yourself in relation to your family/spouse/children, if you have them?
9. Have you ever done anything while campaigning that felt inauthentic to who you are?
10. How do you balance your image as a political candidate with who you are as a person?
11. Do you think you present yourself differently from other candidates, have a different approach, examples of that?
12. How do you think your experience differs from women who ran for office in the 90s or 00s?
13. Do you think your opponent's strategy was impacted by your gender/race/orientation?
14. What are challenges you've had in running for office?
15. What has made you successful in your campaign or in office?
16. Have you faced any challenges related to your gender/race/orientation/etc.?
17. What can the party do better to recruit women running for office?
18. Do you think political power at the local/state level both in your party and in general being distributed equally by gender and/or race is important?