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Dittmar, Kelly. Navigating Gendered Terrain: Stereotypes and Strategy in Political Campaigns

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Dittmar, Kelly. *Navigating Gendered Terrain: Stereotypes and Strategy in Political Campaigns*
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Reviewed by Melissa Pucci, Senior Program Manager, Technolutions

In *Navigating Gendered Terrain: Stereotypes and Strategy in Political Campaigns*, Kelly Dittmar investigates the influence of gender on campaign strategy. Her research centers around two central questions, how candidates and campaign professionals navigate the gendered landscapes of political campaigns and how the decisions and behaviors of both the candidate and their campaign team maintain or disrupt prevailing gender dynamics.

A thorough introductory chapter provides a concise overview of Dittmar's research methods and subjects. She explains her study centers on mixed gender state level races from 2008 through 2010. Furthermore, it includes both a survey of political consultants, as well as interviews with various campaign practitioners and their candidates.

Following this introduction, Dittmar delves into the results of a survey conducted with nearly 160 political consultants. The influence and presence of political consultants has undergone tremendous growth in the last three decades (27). "As both observers and practitioners, political consultants are experts in gauging public opinion, developing strategic plans, and navigating ever-changing political contexts," Dittmar explains (27). Her survey results were consistent with her hypothesis, political campaigns remain gendered institutions, particularly with regards to traits and issue expertise voters associate with male and female candidates. Female candidates have traditionally been perceived as honest, compassionate, and emotional, while their male opponents are thought to be tough and assertive. The split on issues had female candidates more concerned with education, health care, and social programming, while male candidates deemed as more skilled in areas of national security, defense, and foreign policy. While there are few surprises in some of these results, she discusses with exceptional detail the survey results along both gender and party lines.

The remainder of the book chronicles interviews conducted with the candidates, as well as campaign practitioners. Many of the findings were similar to the survey responses, but Dittmar's charts and explanations were nuanced and thoughtful. Dittmar exposes campaign practitioners, who often measure the impact of the campaigns strictly by a win or a loss. She believes

practitioners often obscure the reality of gender bias when women candidates are successfully elected, by then claiming races were gender neutral.

Dittmar also notes the disparity between how Republicans and Democrats campaign practitioners view gender influences in campaigns. These differences align with the results of the survey conducted among campaign consultants. The findings often being consistent with the major party platforms and overall political climate at the time of the campaigns and elections. Gender influences inform the image, message, and campaign tactics. This includes messaging in television ads, direct mailings, and websites. Dittmar unpacks each of these influential areas by citing examples from three gubernatorial races, and three senate races involving mixed gender opponents.

Women candidates, for instance, faced greater scrutiny over their appearance and feeling pressure to always present as professional, which may include wearing make-up and sporting an attractive hairstyle. One senate candidate interviewed, revealed she had “read a book on style” during her campaign (106). And a male campaign practitioner, who had managed races for both male and female candidates, expressed surprise at the attention paid to the appearance of female candidates, noting this was a stark departure from his work with male candidates. “No one ever called to talk about their hair or what color tie they’re wearing or anything like that,” he said (106).

Practitioners also spoke candidly with the author about the challenges women face regarding family, their roles and responsibilities as wives and mothers, coupled with the image they want to convey as confident, accomplished, and qualified candidates. While images of family life can often soften a male candidate’s image, women must answer tougher questions with regards to how they will balance family life and campaigning, not to mention the prospect of holding political office. This includes the role a spouse would play in the campaign. Wives are often viewed as a campaign trail asset for male candidates, especially those seeking to soften their images, while female candidates must be thoughtful about their husbands’ roles on the trail. There is fear a husband could undermine a female candidate’s image as strong executive leader. Several interviewees also speak to the challenges unmarried or childless candidates face, both male and female, especially in what was described as “more socially traditional states” (112).

Women are also held to higher standards with regards to message and campaign tactics, resorting to less frequent use of negative attacks, especially in mixed gender races. This can be attributed to traditional gender roles being at play, with women seeking to uphold femininity and

coming across as likeable. While some of the campaign practitioners argued negative attacks have their place in certain races, leaving negativity to male opponents could further feed into the notion of women being portrayed as either weak or a victim. And male candidates related challenges they faced in staging negative attacks against their female contenders not wishing to be perceived as being a bully or unchivalrous. Either way, navigating gendered terrain in messaging can lead to further perpetuation of the gender imbalance women candidates already face.

While it goes without saying women have faced harsher criticism and higher standards when seeking public office on a state, local, and federal level, Dittmar's text provides an unprecedented, detailed analysis of gender in political campaigns from the perspectives of various players, and not limited to the candidates themselves. Her study was researched and published prior to the divisive presidential campaign in 2016, but it provides an interesting and relevant lens through which to analyze the 2016 contest in a well-researched and written volume that is accessible by both scholars and aspiring political candidates.