

Female Political Campaigns: Just the Right Amount of Femininity

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Thesis Question/Abstract

How do female politicians navigate gendered expectations of them while running for office, and in what ways do newspapers enhance or impede these expectations?

Female politicians have to make careful choices about their public image in order to fit societal expectations of women, while they attempt to push the boundaries of political office. Finding the appropriate balance between being a homemaker and engaging in society has plagued women for decades. In this study, I will be analyzing the ways that Sen. Margaret Chase Smith masterfully navigated these expectations, with a specific emphasis on her 1964 presidential primary race. This project utilized archival research of correspondence, newspaper clippings, speech and interview transcripts provided by the Margaret Chase Smith Library and Museum, as well as other research databases. This research provides a deeper understanding of the conscious efforts made by women to succeed in positions historically held by men. A better understanding of the challenges that gender expectations impose on women, specifically on those seeking positions in public office, is a first step in alleviating these additional barriers on future female political candidates.

Context

Margaret Chase Smith was born on December 14th, 1897 in Skowhegan, Maine. After her husband's untimely death, she was elected to finish his term in the United States House of Representatives, becoming the first female representative from Maine to serve in Congress. She would also become the first woman to serve in both chambers. Her strong convictions and one on one interaction method made her incredibly popular and helped her win elections by large margins. In 1964, she ran for the Republican presidential primary against two male candidates. Her refusal to accept any campaign donations caused her to only run in a handful of state primaries but she was able to get 25% of votes in Illinois. Despite the unsuccessful run, Sen. Smith continued as a senator until 1973.

Gender Expectations

This study will look at the traditional expectations of men and women in the United States. The idea of women as nurturers and men as providers continues to survive in a variety of ways today, but this was especially true in the 1960s. As a widow and without children, Sen. Smith did not fit into the typical expectation of women as homemakers.

Femininity has enabled women to have a voice in male dominated careers. During the 19th century, women began speaking to their personal experience, which allowed them to surpass the belief that "it was unsuitable for women to speak in public." This pattern of speech became known as "feminine style."

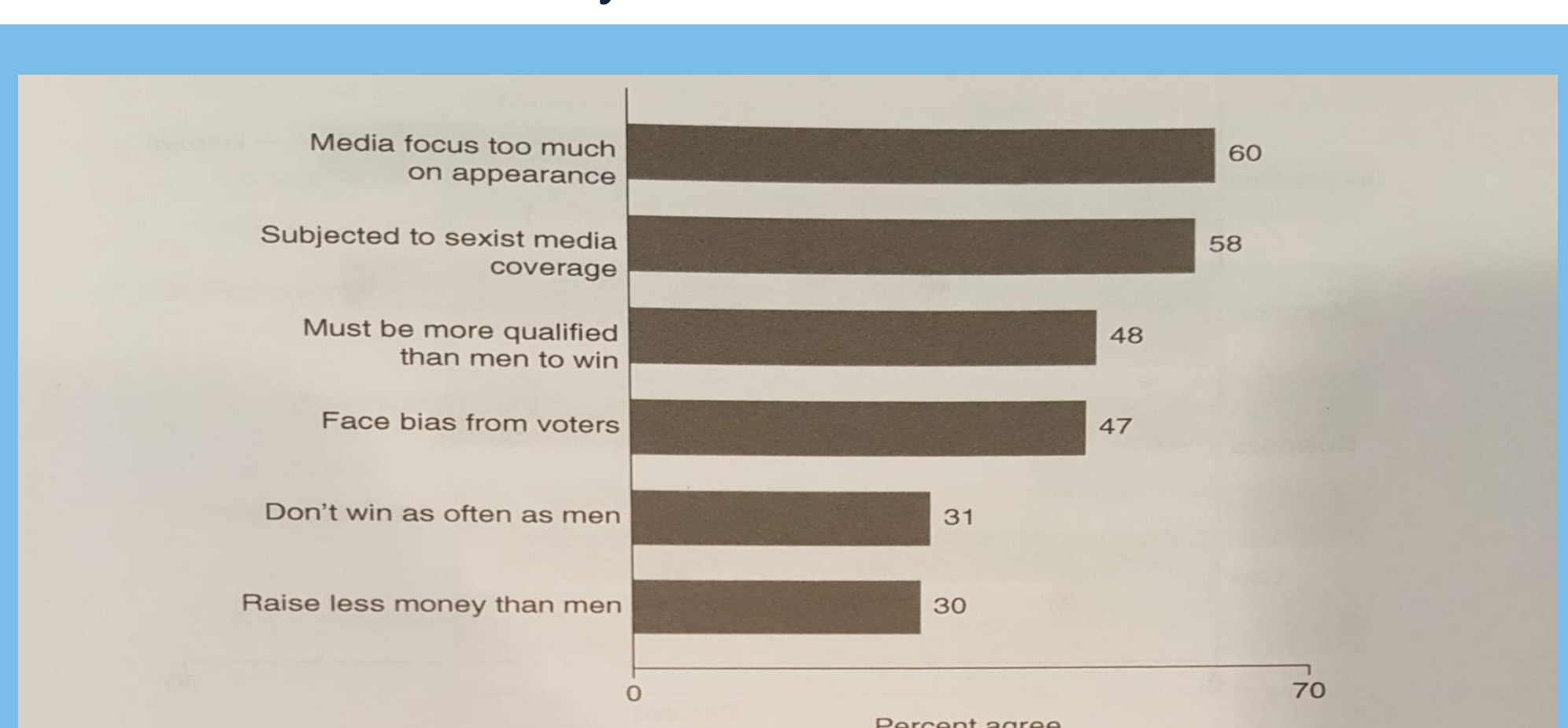


FIGURE 1.1. Public perceptions of female candidates' experiences. Note: N ranges from 1,973 to 1,982. Bars represent the percentage of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with each statement. Data come from a module we designed for the 2014 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, a collaborative survey among dozens of academic institutions, conducted by YouGov. Details about the survey design, sampling, and other technical information is available at <http://projects.iq.harvard.edu/cces/>.

Study published in "Women on the Run: Gender, Media, and Political Campaigns in a Polarized Era" written by Danny Hayes and Jennifer L. Lawless

Physical Presentation

Sen. Smith was always dressed professionally. The image of her blue dress suit, a pearl necklace, and a single rose has come to be inseparable from the senator's legacy. Regardless of age or where in the world she was, Smith was well put together. Pants were not an option for Smith, as shown in a newspaper article titled, "Icy New Hampshire Warms up to Mrs. Smith," published by the *Washington Post* in 1964, in which Smith is shown wearing a large fur coat and her legs exposed, during almost thirty below zero weather.

At the height of her campaign, an article published by the *Boston Sunday Herald*, asked Smith her opinion on hats and their place in formal wear. Smith is quoted saying, "people don't recognize me without one." Additionally, after announcing her presidential run, newspapers reported she had thrown her 'bonnet' into the race.

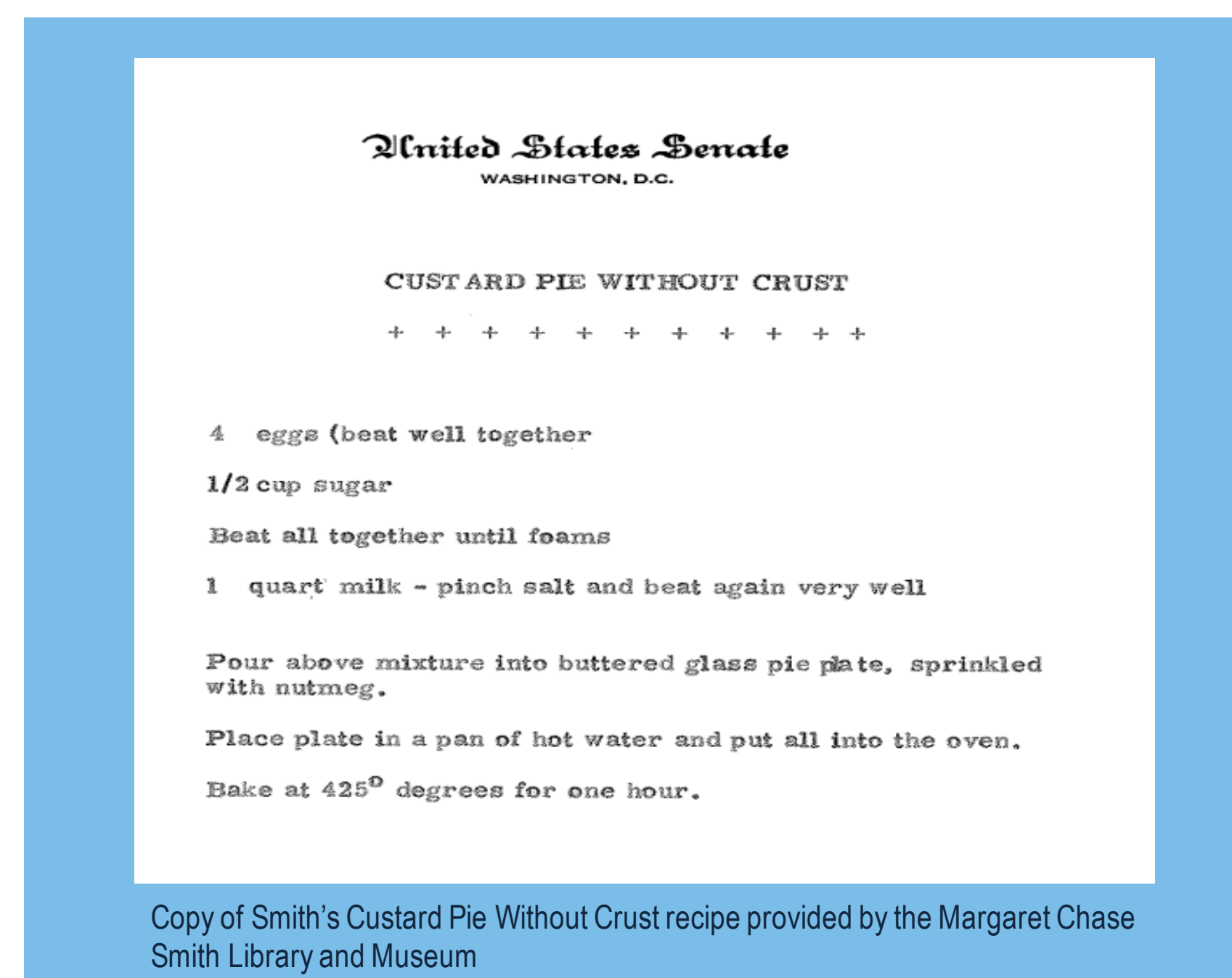


Sen. Smith is pictured during her campaign in New Hampshire in early 1964 (left) and depicted in her official portrait from the U.S. Senate Collection (right).

Recipes

As a way to further the perfect image of domesticity, Smith would frequently send constituents copies of her recipes printed on official senate stationary. Individuals across the nation would write to Smith specifically for these recipes. Smith would respond to each request. She would also often entertain her colleagues in Washington, by serving Maine-style foods. Food and recipes are useful in presenting a display of femininity even without assuming the homemaker role in any other capacity.

Food is often a social event, therefore utilizing it as a way to connect with female constituents, entertaining coworkers, and use it to further confirm her identity as a female politician not above 'women's work,' makes it a useful and strategic tool.



A Senator, who is a Woman

Smith rejected the term female senator and would correct it to 'a senator who happens to be a woman.' She often argued that there were no woman's issues, only human issues. In response to the question "where is the proper place for a woman?" Sen. Smith said, "woman's proper place is everywhere."

Smith was adamantly opposed to the woman's movement and feminism. In her speech, "The Challenge For Women," she insisted that there were no differences between women and men. In a letter, a young woman asked Smith her thoughts on how to deal with the disadvantages women face in office, and Smith stated that there were none as long as women are "willing to be accepted as an equal and not demand or accept feminine privileges."

Press

The press coverage of Smith's presidential primary paid a great deal of attention to her gender. Often, newspapers would use gendered expressions such as, "bonnet into the race" and "madam president."

While Smith was firm in rejecting notions of her gender influencing in her capabilities as president, many people from the media pressed on the subject. In an interview by the *Radio Press International Panel Program* called "From the People," posed the question, "do you believe your age, which will be used against you in the campaign, hurt the cause of women?" Smith responded by saying she had not realized she was sixty-six until she constantly read it in the newspapers headlines.

Another article discussed the late President Kennedy's remarks of Smith, in which he had called her "formidable." The accompanying photo, showed her posing in a kitchen, as opposed to her office or another space.

Conclusion

Smith knew that being a woman in office meant there were certain obstacles that she would face, even if she would not admit it. In order to appear non-threatening to men and women, she was able to mold her public identity as a woman who was incredibly feminine to fulfill domestic expectations of women while she was able to wield great power while in public office. This came across through her attire, recipe collection, and her conversations around gender. While the media frequently pushed traditional ideas of gender while covering her, she was able to utilize this by playing into some expectations, while majorly challenging others. She looked and acted the part of a homemaker while reaching for the highest office in the United States. Smith masterfully created an image and dialogue that suggested she was not challenging the status quo while setting an example for young women in politics for generations to come.

Thesis Going Forward

In the research to come, I will be comparing my findings of Margaret Chase Smith, with a similar study of Carol Moseley Braun and her 2004 presidential primary race. This comparisons will demonstrate how gendered expectations of women have changed and remained the same, as well as looking into the ways that gender can be utilized in political campaigns. This study aims to identify obstacles that women face under the public's eye and the ways that they craft their identity to fit public opinions in hopes that women will eventually be able to run without these additional challenges.

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