



Diane Mack
GUESTVIEW

Voters expect more from women

In the Pensacola mayor's race of 2010 there were four candidates, three men and one woman. I was the woman. Because there were more than two candidates and therefore the likelihood of a run-off, city voters were to cast their first ballots for mayor during the August primaries. Prime time for grassroots, door-to-door campaigning was the usual sultry-hot and humid Gulf Coast summer, during which any sensible person who is not staying cool indoors is sitting on the veranda, iced tea or lemonade in hand.

Street by street we candidates walked, knocking on the doors of registered voters, becoming increasingly "dewier" in the parlance of Southern gentility. The men wore casual slacks and sports shirts. I dressed, usually, in white slacks and casual tops and thought it appropriate given the season, until one Saturday afternoon at a house in Cordova Park when a gentleman voter said, "You don't look like a mayor."

Would the voter have made the same remark to any of the male candidates? Likely not.

As women have become more prominent on the national political scene, there has been much criticism from us and from organizations that support our advancement about the pettiness of national media coverage of women and the double standard evident in that coverage. We have complained, sometimes to the point of sounding whiny, in magazine articles, blogs, opinion pieces, and interviews given toward academic research.

In a recent column in the Wall Street Journal, author and former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan Peggy Noonan offered a perspective that sees the half-empty glass as one that is at least half full.

"Yes... women in national life, especially in this technologically and culturally brutalist age, have it harder. Only a fool would say otherwise-

...Part of the challenge is that voters expect not less from women, but more. They have higher expectations, because deep down they think more of women. It is a compliment, though a difficult one... They elect a woman when they can tell she's better than the guys."

Is it fair that people have higher expectations of women? We would argue that higher expectations are a gift, that they make us more disciplined, more thoughtful, more focused on results. Should we not, each of us, have higher expectations of ourselves?

The mission theme line of the Institute for Women in Politics is "Changing politics one woman at a time." For us to succeed in our mission the women we elect cannot be just one of the guys, they must be better.

That 2010 voter in Cordova Park was right. He cared about his city, and it is never easy to determine who is the best choice from among candidates you don't know. It is the candidate's job to make it easier.

So our message to the women candidates in next year's elections is: Determine how you are better than the guys you are running against. Figure out how you can show voters that you are better. Repeat to yourself every day... Voters elect a woman when they can tell she's better than the guys.

Diane Mack is a former Pensacola City Councilwoman and was the founding president of the Institute for Women in Politics of Northwest Florida. She currently serves as secretary. This Viewpoint is offered on behalf of the IWP Board of Directors. To inquire about membership in the Institute, email contact@iwpflorida.org.