

Carly Fiorina's post-debate challenge will be to navigate gender stereotypes to show voters she is both tough and likable.

For many commentators, the former CEO of Hewlett Packard, Carly Fiorina, stood out in last Wednesday's second Republican Primary debate. [Nichole Bauer](#) writes that Fiorina's skillful response to Donald Trump's earlier criticism, her foreign policy expertise, and her status as a Washington and a GOP outsider show that she has the leadership characteristics many voters desire in a presidential candidate.



Wednesday's Republican Primary debate offered candidates another opportunity to discuss pertinent policy issues, highlight their qualifications, and attempt to take down the rising candidacy of Donald Trump. Many of the 11 contenders struggled to gain the moderator's attention, but one candidate did manage to stand out. Carly Fiorina was a newcomer to the "big kids" primary debate, and she certainly stood out as the only woman on the crowded Republican stage. Fiorina's debate performance illustrated her viability as a candidate and her ability to successfully navigate the tricky gender dynamics facing female politicians.

Donald Trump's brash rhetorical style has certainly garnered media attention, though not always for positive reasons. Trump often resorts to personal, ad hominem attacks against his opponents, and the moderators gave his opponents the opportunity to respond in kind. One of Fiorina's attack opportunities addressed Trump's recent comments about her [appearance](#). Rather than showing sensitivity, emotionality, or hurt feeling, Fiorina made a simple but sharp statement that "every woman" heard what Trump said. This method of attacking Trump's statement without actually attacking Trump was a clever move. Especially considering my [research](#) with Yanna Krupnikov showing that going on the attack can be risky for female candidates, but voters do not punish female candidates for defending themselves in the face of attacks. Fiorina's comeback illustrated that she is not going to engage in petty name-calling, and cast Trump in the role of a schoolyard bully.

Fiorina also used the debate to transform potential weaknesses into assets. Fiorina's business experience as the CEO of Hewlett Packard has been the subject of some scrutiny given her ousting by the Board of Directors. Nevertheless, Fiorina aptly pointed out that some members of the board at HP had since recanted that decision. Moreover, she highlighted how her business background gave her useful diplomatic skills—especially when it came to the foreign policy discussion on Wednesday. Fiorina had a strong command of the key players and issues in this domain. For female candidates, being able to highlight foreign policy expertise is key; research by [Monica Schneider and Angie Bos](#) finds that voters hold negative stereotypes about the knowledge and experience of female politicians.



Carly Fiorina Credit: Gage Skidmore (Flickr, [CC-BY-SA-2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/))

Finally, Fiorina is one of the three candidates who have never held elected office – with Trump and Ben Carson as the other political outsiders. Trump and Carson’s rising popularity suggest that Republican primary voters want a candidate that is a Washington outsider. Aside from having never held elected office, Fiorina’s status as a woman certainly marks her as a Republican outsider and a Washington outsider. Throughout the debate, Fiorina rarely made overt references to her gender. This is key because it avoids the miscalculation Republican strategists made in 2008 with Sarah Palin’s flawed vice presidential candidacy. Fiorina knows that she will not automatically win the support of women simply because she is also a woman. For example, when asked to name a woman to replace Alexander Hamilton on the \$10 bill, Fiorina made no suggestion. Instead, she argued against treating women as a special interest group. This strategy may appeal to Republican primary voters who tend to oppose many policies designed to specifically benefit women such as equal pay laws or paid parental leave.

Whether Fiorina can maintain her post-debate momentum is not entirely clear. Her strong, assertive, and decisive performance on Wednesday clearly appeals to voters as Fiorina rises in the polls. She demonstrated that she has the leadership characteristics many voters desire in a presidential candidate. My own empirical research, [here](#) and [here](#), shows that Republicans female candidates do not necessarily face explicit gender bias from fellow Republicans. Thus, it is unlikely voters will automatically discount Fiorina’s candidacy simply because she is a woman and stereotypes about women are incompatible with political leadership. However, she may face implicit gender biases. Voters do not punish female candidates for being tough and aggressive, but it is not clear that voters find tough and aggressive female politician likable or relatable. Fiorina’s continued success may depend on her ability to navigate gender stereotypes to show voters she is both tough and likable—a unique challenge not facing all of her male counterparts.

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