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Will St. Petersburg female voters rally behind Kathleen Ford?

By [Cristina Silva](#), Times Staff Writer
In Print: Monday, October 26, 2009

ST. PETERSBURG — Mayoral candidate Kathleen Ford believes her gender has made her more susceptible to complaints about her temperament.

Her eye rolls spark media analysis. Her tense interactions with other politicians come up during community forums. Her questioning style has been labeled harsh. She's been called the B-word.

"I'm a woman and I'm assertive and I'm a hard worker," said Ford, a 52-year-old lawyer and former City Council member. "It's concerning to me that that term is used for assertive women."

But for all Ford's insistence that the ongoing debate about her temperament is sexist and not reflective of her everyday behavior, her gender could prove to be a political asset.

In a heated election where neither she nor rival Bill Foster has managed to build a strong lead, Ford is polling well among women, who make up the majority of the city's voting population and are more likely to cast a ballot.

Thirty-nine percent of women said they planned to vote for Ford in a recent *St. Petersburg Times*/Bay News 9 poll.

In contrast, 31 percent said they were backing Foster, a 46-year-old attorney and former City Council member.

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Twenty-six percent of women said they were undecided.

Meanwhile, Ford and Foster each received 38 percent of the male vote in the poll, which had a margin of error of 4 percentage points.

Foster has made Ford's demeanor a cornerstone of his campaign, painting her as a pencil-throwing, pessimistic Chicken Little so unpopular with her former council colleagues that most eagerly endorsed him. In a recent television ad, he called her a "divider."

"It has nothing do with gender. The idea is silly," Foster said of his strategy.

"It's a fair question. The people of this city need a mayor who is capable of bringing people together."

It's unclear how successful Foster's tactic will be.

More people said they were supporting Ford because of their dislike of Foster than vice versa, according to the *Times/Bay News 9* poll of 608 registered voters.

And voters overwhelmingly cited issues such as crime, economic development and taxes as deciding factors in how they cast their ballots over personal issues such as Ford's temperament and Foster's Christian conservative beliefs.

If anything, Foster has to be careful about how he frames his attacks or he could end up pushing more women into Ford's corner, political scientists said.

"There will be a lot of people who will object to what they see as a caricature of her and the good ol' boys talking behind the scenes and calling her a b----," said Raymond Arsenault, co-director of the Florida Studies Program at the University of South Florida St. Petersburg who follows local politics.

Ford agrees.

"It's a tired argument that folks, quite frankly, see right through."

'It's very different to run as a woman'

St. Petersburg has a short, but colorful, history of aggressive women who won elected office.

Rene Flowers remembers the criticism she received as a young mother of three running for City Council: "Shouldn't you be home raising your children?"

"It's very different to run as a woman," said Flowers, who served from 1998 to 2008. "You have to worry about the clothes you have; don't wear something too revealing, too shapely. If you wear makeup, don't wear too much. You have to be very careful of what you do. If you are around too many men? 'Oh, she is not being respectful.' You're not around too many people? 'Oh, she's keeping to herself.' You just have to be very mindful."

These days, Pinellas County has a female school superintendent, an all-woman School Board and a handful of female politicians, including Largo Mayor Pat Gerard and Tarpon Springs Mayor Beverly Billiris.

One of St. Petersburg's three deputy mayors is a woman. Of the eight-member council, Leslie Curran is the only woman.

The Tampa Bay area's most prominent female politician, Tampa Mayor Pam Iorio, said she never experienced sexism on the campaign trail.

"I just don't think it's a factor," she said. "Today people judge you by your merits, which is the whole point of equality."

Instead, Iorio said she likely benefited from being a woman.

"There are a lot of women out there who do vote for other women," she said.

"There is a lot of pride that women have in seeing other women achieve."

But none of those women attracted the many accusations of divisiveness that haunt Ford, who

was a council member from 1997 to 2001 before finishing second in the mayoral race that year.

Women don't always vote for other women

Voter turnout rates for women tend to equal or exceed those of men.

But that doesn't translate into more female leaders. Less than 17 percent of the nation's mayors are women, according to the Center for American Women and Politics in New Jersey.

Women clearly don't always vote for other women, said Judithanne Scourfield McLauchlan, director of the Center for Civic Engagement at the University of South Florida St. Petersburg, and a political science professor who has closely monitored the election.

"It would be foolhardy to assume she would have these extra votes in the bank because she is a woman," said Scourfield McLauchlan.

A handful of the city's former female politicians are supporting Foster, including former council members, Bea Griswold, Connie Kone and Virginia Littrell.

Kone said Foster was the better candidate.

Flowers also has endorsed Foster.

"I don't look at gender," she said, adding, "I felt like he was the best candidate based on the work we have done together for the last 11 years."

Some of Ford's female supporters said they prefer her policy ideas, and would probably vote for her if she were a male candidate.

But, they also said they empathize with her.

"She's obviously assertive, and often assertive women get hit with the B-word," said Linda Darin, president of Pinellas NOW, a political organization that strives to get women elected.

"When men are being assertive, that's just appropriate."

For example, Foster was not publicly reprimanded after he mocked Ford, a former nurse, for calling herself as scientist during a recent forum, Darin said.

"I thought she was a nurse. Now she's a scientist," Foster said.

Darin said her friends, including a nurse, were offended.

Environmental activist Beth Connor, 45, recalled walking into a room full of men at a county meeting and hearing one say, "Here comes that b----."

"They want to knock you down a peg so they could shake you off your game," said Connor.

Connor said she likes both candidates, but thinks Ford is the stronger leader.

"You can't be a nurse, a soccer mom, a lawyer, a council person and get the things done that she has gotten done without being able to work with people," she said.

"It doesn't have to be kumbaya all the time."

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[Last modified: Oct 26, 2009 12:36 AM]
