Iperstoria
2026, no. 27
ISSN: 2281-4582

DOI: 10.13136/2281-4582/2026.i27.1644
iperstoria.it

Gendering Political Representation

A Multimodal Analysis of US Campaign Training Websites for Women

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Keywords

Political campaign training

Women

Websites

Multimodality

Gender

Abstract

Organizations that offer targeted political campaign training for women tackle the issue of women's underrepresentation in US politics. They do so by offering practical training programs whose goal is to encourage women to get involved in public life and make their voices heard in the political domain. These organizations' websites promote these programs by providing information about the practical aspects of the campaign trainings on offer, at the same time as they showcase, visually and verbally, role models of elected and to-be elected women politicians that set examples for other women to follow. This is achieved by exploiting the affordances of complex digitals texts that construct meaning through an integration of carefully selected verbal and visual semiotic resources. By combining a multimodal approach with a discourse-analytical perspective, this contribution identifies and analyzes the specific semiotic choices in the selection of the visual materials and the discursive strategies in the accompanying texts extracted from the websites of US organizations specialized in political campaign training for women. The analysis shows that two distinct role models of women politicians are visually and verbally negotiated in the sampled web pages.

I may be the first woman member of Congress, but I won't be the last.

(Jeanette Rankin, 1917)[1]

1. Political campaign training for women

Programs that offer targeted political campaign training for women candidates have received substantial scholarly attention from researchers in political science (e.g., Kreitzer and Osborn 2019; Sanbonmatsu 2015; Hennings 2011; Rozell 2000 to name but a few examples), as well as public relations (e.g., Madden and Levenshus 2021). This amount of attention is unsurprising. Political scientists generally agree that women continue to be underrepresented in US politics mainly because they are less likely to run for elected office than men (Thomsen and King 2020;

[1] First Congresswoman Jeannette Rankin, https://visit.archives.gov/whats-on/explore-exhibits/first-congresswoman-jeannette-rankin, last visited in December 2025.

Fox and Lawless 2014; Lawless and Fox 2010). While women can win elections and pursue successful careers in the office, they face significant institutional, organizational and structural barriers that prevent them from entering politics in the first place (Chant and Sweetman 2012). Hence the importance of studying initiatives that specifically address the gender gap in politics.

The political domain, notwithstanding the steady growth in women's representation that started with the passage and ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, continues to be perceived as a masculine community of practice, i.e., "an aggregate of people, who, united by a common enterprise, come to develop and share ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, and values" (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003, 183). In the history of politics in the Western world, such communities have opened doors to men who held influential positions in society, at the same time as they categorically excluded women by gendering politics as an exclusively masculine domain (Romaniuk and Ehrlich 2017) and silencing female voices "in contexts where the community's most cherished values are ritually and solemnly affirmed […] – the Parliamentary chamber, the courtroom, the church" (Cameron 2006, 8). As Jamieson explains,

> [t]he assumption that women are biologically unsuited for political activity was legitimized by Aristotle who held that women's minds should be kept free from exertion because "children evidently draw on the mother who carries them in the womb, just as plants draw on the soil." (Aristotle 1947, 17, quoted in Jamieson 1988, 68)

From the linguistic point of view, this exclusion meant that "the dominant discursive practices which circulate in these domains [such as Parliament and the established Church] are those associated with white middle-class make speakers" (Walsh 2001, 1). More broadly speaking, the discursive norms, as Benwell and Stokoe have pointed out, have the potential to "shape and direct the individual [by inscribing identities] in available discourses" (2006, 31). In line with an anti-essentialist form of identity (Foucault 1972), dominant discourses and ideologies come to play a decisive role in the shaping of the discursive construction of identity. From this follows those women, who aspire to enter politics, will be expected to discursively re-negotiate their stereotypically 'feminine' identities, characterized by collaborative, compassionate, empathetic and passive behavior, and to conform to the dominant masculine norms, which tend to emphasize "tough, resolute, uncompromising and aggressive political leadership" (Fairclough 2001, 151), in order to appear competent and authoritative. Yet, when women adopt the 'masculine' style of communication, the risk is that they will be perceived as unfeminine, confrontational or bossy, as Former United States Ambassador to the United Nations Jeane Kirkpatrick experienced first hand:

> [United Nations] is a place where people make speeches and listen to speeches. But if I make a speech, particularly a substantial speech, it has been frequently described in the media as 'lecturing my colleagues,' as though it were somehow peculiarly inappropriate, like an ill-tempered schoolmarm might scold her children. When I have replied to criticisms of the United States (which is an important part of my job), I have frequently been described as 'confrontational.' (quoted in Jamieson 1988, 87)

This all too familiar double bind, identified by Lakoff in the sadly famous predicament "So a girl is damned if she does, damned if she doesn't" (1973, 48), continues to represent an obstacle in a woman's path to a successful career in politics.

In addition to linguistic constraints associated with stereotypically appropriate feminine and masculine interactional styles, from a social semiotic point of view, identities "manifest themselves through different uses of shape, color, texture, timbre and movement [through uses that] are socially and culturally valued and regulated" (van Leeuwen 2022, 3). The image of a stereotypical male leader, wearing an expensive dark-colored suit, filling the room with his presence, speaking in a low, authoritative voice, immediately comes to mind. Previous research has shown how notable women political leaders (e.g., Margaret Thatcher) have had to put in a lot of work to appear "authoritative, decisive and tough," at the same time as they strived not to compromise their femininity (Fairclough 2001, 158). In Margaret Thatcher's case, as Fairclough has argued, the British Prime Minister was able to successfully construct a subject position of a woman political leader by 'sounding right' and 'looking right,' her lowered voice (a marker of stereotypically masculine authority) combined with carefully groomed hair, smart clothing, accessories such as jewelry and handbags (all markers of traditional middle-class femininity) projected "a style of womanhood which [was] essentially patriarchal" and which ultimately "contain[ed] the advance of women within patriarchal limits" (2001, 161).

With the steady increase in the number of women entering the public domain, women politicians have been able to advance truly feminist positions and offer new role models for the next generations of women leaders (Aiello 2023). At the same time, recent progress has been hampered by conservative, authoritarian and far-right backlash, amplified by popular misogynists thriving in the so called manosphere. Against this backdrop, it is imperative that we learn more about the ways in which dedicated political campaign trainings tackle the gendered gap in representation by offering role models of elected or to-be elected women politicians that set examples for other women to follow. As such, this investigation aims to identify the specific semiotic resources, such as recurrent multimodal and linguistic strategies, employed in a corpus of websites that disseminate information about political campaign trainings for women, at the same time as they showcase gendered role models of women politicians.

2. Dataset and methodology

The Center for American Women and Politics, a unit of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey,[2] is recognized as the leading source of scholarly research and current data about women's political participation in the United States. Since the foundation of the Center in 1971, scholars at CAWP have conducted extensive research into the impact that women officeholders have had on American public policy. Thanks to their efforts, a vast amount of new knowledge about the career trajectories of women officeholders has been and continues to be made available to academics, students, public officials, as well as to the general public (e.g., Carroll and Sanbonmatsu 2013; Carroll 1994, 2001). CAWP's activities are not limited to research and data collection. In 1998, CAWP launched its hallmark *Ready to Run*® program in New Jersey. Its goal is to encourage women to get actively involved in politics by training them to run for elected office and to get involved in political campaigns. As summarized by Hodgson,

> *Ready to Run*'s model curriculum covers fundraising, positioning oneself for elected office, navigating the political party structure, media training, the nuts and bolts of organizing a campaign, mobilizing voters, and crafting a message. Local campaign experts, who are familiar with the political culture and climate of the state and region, deliver the training. (Hodgson 2017, 7)

Ready to Run® was subsequently extended to a number of other states and today is the longest running nonpartisan national program of women candidate recruitment.

The websites analyzed in this study were sampled by selecting programs based in other states that were still active at the time of data collection (August – November 2023). In addition to the flagship New Jersey program, eight programs affiliated with CAWP's Ready to Run® were included in the sample. To expand the sample, a web search was conducted to locate additional websites that advertise similar programs managed by other non-profit organizations in the United States. The final sample included thirteen websites that provided enough material for an initial exploratory investigation into what Kress and van Leeuwen describe as "the semiotic landscape" (2021, 19) of online political campaign communication for women. Speaking about the concept of the semiotic landscape, Kress and van Leeuwen stress that this notion is meant to refer to "the range of forms or modes of communication available in [that] society and, on the other hand, their uses and valuations" (2021, 19). Analyzing the semiotic landscapes of the sampled websites as "product[s] of social action and of a social history, of human work" (2021,

[2] CAWP, www.cawp.rutgers.edu, last visited in December 2024.

19) can enable us to identify the dominant representations of women politicians that these complex digital texts help to create.

There exist many influential models of website analysis, with Baldry and Thibault's (2006) model being one of the most popular ones. In Baldry and Thibault's scalar model of multimodality, digital texts are viewed as "[texts] consisting of multiple, interacting textual levels that make their meaning through the constant interplay of smaller and larger textual units" (2006, 54). Taking their model as a starting point for the analysis, I conducted a detailed analysis of the selected web pages, taking into account "the nature of the different semiotic resources that are used and the way they are used to create a particular website" (Baldry and Thibault 2006, 103), with a specific focus on the cultural and social functions of these websites. Defined by Baldry and Thibault as "a visual-spatial unit displayed on a computer screen [which] makes use of written resources such as language and the resources of depiction, including the spatial juxtaposition of objects" (2006, 104), websites that share the same functions (e.g., of the informational type), also share the same generic functions and contain similar component parts that are related to each other and that typically co-deploy similar semiotic and material resources (2006, 114).

Table 1 presents the information about the thirteen web pages, together with the number of the visuals and the length of the accompanying texts (in tokens) that were analyzed in this exploratory study.

Web page	Web address	Visuals	Text
CAWP Ready to Run®	*www.cawp.rutgers.edu/programs/ready-to-run*	*1*	*240*
Colorado 50-50	*www.colorado5050.org*	*0*	*340*
WOR Florida Women on the Run	*www.womensfoundationfl.org/wor2024.html*	*0*	*180*
IOPL Durham- Greensboro- Raleigh	*www.iopl.org/women-on-board/#*	*17*	*170*
Mississippi WPHQ	*www.mswomenspoliticalhq.com/about*	*2*	*400*
Ohio Glenn	*www. glenn.osu.edu/professional-development/power-programs/ready-run*	*1*	*290*
Penn Chatham	*www.pcwp.chatham.edu/ready-to-run*	*13*	*130*
Running Start	*www.runningstart.org/elect-her*	*5*	*450*
SC Women in Leadership	*www. scwomenlead.net/event/fixin-to-lead-workshop*	*1*	*500*
She Should Run	*www.sheshouldrun.org*	*2*	*170*
TWU Elect Her	*www. twu.edu/center-women-government/elect-her*	*2*	*370*
Utah Women	*www. utahwomenrun.org*	*3*	*310*
Vote Run Lead	*www. vrlhq.org*	*3*	*290*
	TOTAL	***50***	***3840***

Tab. 1: Overview of the web pages in the corpus[3]

[3] The websites were last visited in December 2024. Many websites have since been updated, as new campaign training events were scheduled to take place in early 2025.

Given that the focus of this investigation is on the representation of women, visuals that did not show any women were excluded from the analysis.[4] Images of men would have been included in the dataset for comparison, but no such images were identified.[5] Images were extracted from the websites and saved in a single dedicated file, while the texts accompanying the specific visuals were extracted and saved into individual text files.

As is well known, the social semiotic approach stresses the fact that

> the semiotic modes of writing and visual communication each have their own quite particular ways of expressing active relations between *participants* (represented people, places and things, including abstract 'things'), *processes* (the represented actions of these participants) and *circumstances* (e.g., the place where these actions occur)" (Kress and van Leeuwen 2021, 45, italics in original).

When it comes to the analysis of the visuals that actively create the image of a woman (would-be) politician, I was specifically interested in the visuals' "structured social, political and communicative dimensions" (Kress and van Leeuwen 2021, 43). Following Kress and van Leeuwen, I examined the transactional schemas that reveal the specifics of the transactional relations between people represented as 'Actors' (active participants) and those to whom the deed is done, 'Goals,' 'Carriers' and 'Attributes'[6], together with 'Reacters' and 'Phenomena,' in Kress and van Leeuwen's (2021, 44-62) terminology. In the analysis of the visuals (see Section 4), I produced an inventory of the visual narrative structures, focusing on the participants they depict. In the exploratory analysis of the accompanying texts, I focused on a limited set of linguistic phenomena that are examined through the lens of a Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis perspective (Lazar 2014) that will be introduced in the next section.

3. Analysis of the accompanying texts

Within the broader research area of language, gender, identity and politics, some of the most productive research strands have investigated differential practices adopted by female and male politicians, mediated representations of women politicians, gendered language employed to

[4] For example, images showing posters with practical details about the specific campaign training (see WOR Florida Women on the Run) or images showing the logo of the specific organization (see Ohio Glenn for an example).

[5] The only exceptions can be found in Fig. 6 (Campaign trainees as Actors on Mississippi WPHQ) where we can see three men in the background.

[6] This is how the roles of 'Carrier' and 'Attribute' are defined, "[this is] about the way participants fit together to make up a larger whole. […] Just as in maps a larger participant, the 'Carrier,' represents the 'whole' (say, Australia), and a number of other participants, the 'Possessive Attributes,' represents the 'parts' (say, the states of Australia)" (Kress and van Leeuwen 2021, 49). 'Reacters' and 'Phenomena,' on the other hand, are human participant[s] "who [do] the looking," in case of Reacters, and either another participant, or, in case of non-transactional reactions, something/somebody that is not shown, that the Reacter is looking at (Kress and van Leeuwen 2021, 62).

reinforce or challenge sexist stereotypes, as well as women politicians' self-presentation strategies on social media (see e.g. Ylöstalo 2025; Igwebuike and Chimuanya 2024; Romaniuk and Ehrlich 2017; Mullany and Yoong 2016). In other words, existing research has privileged the experience of elected women, while research on other forms of women's participation in the political domain has been relatively scarce.[7] Hence the present study contributes to a growing body of literature that focuses on non-governmental organizations that seek to empower women politically by helping them enter the public sphere. This is done by applying the principles of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA, Lazar 2014) to analyze the ways in which the sampled texts challenge androcentric assumptions that associate authority with hegemonic masculinity in a patriarchal system that has, up until recently, isolated and systematically excluded women from the positions of power.

The key principles in an FCDA-oriented textual analysis are broadly concerned with issues of representations, interactions and identities, with the main interest being in

> how gender ideology and gendered relations of power get (re)produced, negotiated, and contested in representations of social practices, in social relationships between people, and in people's social and personal identities in texts and talk […] Ways of doing and being a woman vis-à-vis a man in particular communities of practice, in the public as well as private spheres of life, show up the power asymmetries between women and men in particular gender orders. (Lazar 2014, 190)

In this exploratory study, I tracked the discursive construction of gendered role models of (to-be) women politicians in the digital texts collected from the websites US organizations specialized in political campaign training for women. The grammatical category of pronouns (van Dijk 1998) and the use of the lexical items 'woman' and 'women' provided the entry point to the analysis of the texts. In fact, in the close reading of the digital texts, these two linguistic phenomena emerged as especially salient, for example, in the repetition of the key term 'women' as we can see in examples extracted from three different organizations in (1-3):

(1) Research shows that women make government more transparent, inclusive and accessible. (CAWP)

(2) Women are not a monolith. Our democracy only stands to benefit from the unique perspectives and lived experiences that women bring to leadership […]. (She Should Run)

[7] Some recent studies that have focused on these less visible forms of women's political activities include Esposito and Sinatora (2021) and Chiluwa (2021).

(3) When elected, women are more effective lawmakers. Not only do women introduce and pass more bills, but they also prioritize legislation that benefits women, children, and families. Women are also more likely to co-sponsor bills with other women and reach across the aisle to find a bipartisan compromise. The bottom line, the more women in office, the more that gets accomplished. (Mississippi WPHQ)

What these examples have in common is the focus on the agency of women who are shown as determined agents of change, breaking down the barriers and dismantling the gendered assumptions that would relegate them to providing maternal and household duties away from the public domain. Women are represented as active protagonists, 'effective lawmakers,' who advocate for causes that are important for other women. This discursive strategy is used to challenge the still popular conservative views of 'doing womanhood. Yet, in the same texts, women can also be represented as beneficiaries of actions undertaken by other agents, as shown in examples (4-7):

(4) Ready to Run™ Pennsylvania provides non-partisan political training to encourage women to run for government leadership positions. (Penn Chatham)

(5) Utah Women Run is a collaborative nonpartisan initiative to empower and train women to participate fully in public life through political office and campaigns at all levels, issue advocacy, service on boards and commissions, and leadership in their communities. (Utah Women)

(6) Electing more women and ensuring the composition of the Mississippi Legislature reflects the state's diverse population isn't just the right thing to do, it's what's good for democracy. (Mississippi WPHQ)

(7) Florida Women on the Run (WOR) is a transformative non-partisan campaign training and mentorship program that equips women to step confidently into political roles, campaign leadership, or community advocacy.

Excerpts such as (4-7) target directly the addressees of training campaigns that are exhorted to take up the challenge of enrolling and making the first step towards more active participation in the public life. To help this happen, the texts evoke the notion of political sisterhood and the importance of women-based and women-lead communities (which, as will be shown in Section 4, are also indexed visually in the group photos of both trainees and trainers), through the

repetition of lexical units such as 'network of women,' 'designed by women for women,' 'a group of female leaders,' as well as in the use of the pronoun 'we':

(8) We have a strong and diverse network of women with experience who can help you make an impact. […] Our organization exists to help women occupy more positions of leadership. (Utah Women)

(9) Designed for women by women who currently serve as elected officials, lobbyists, campaign managers, and issue advocates. (Ohio Glenn)

(10) We believe office-holders – whether elected or appointed – should more closely reflect the population. In other words, since women make up more than 50% of the population, then women should hold at least 50% of the seats. Fifty-fifty, fair and square. […] The promise of our representative democracy will never be fulfilled until our office-holders truly reflect the people they represent. (Colorado 50-50)

(11) We will help you run and win. (Vote Run Lead)

(12) We Need More Women in Public Office. (CAWP)

In terms of a more interactional style that exploits the power of synthetic personalization to establish a more intimate connection with the addressees, the use of 'you' and the possessive 'your' are frequent across the websites,

(13) Have you been considering running for local elected office or serving on a public appointed board or commission but are doubting your readiness or capabilities? […] What are the issues you care about, the problems you want to solve, the change you demand? Why are you the best person to solve them? Learn how to communicate the issues you care about, the problems you wish to solve, and what sets you apart from other candidates. (SC Women in Leadership)

(14) Utah Women Run offers training around campaigning, fundraising, canvassing, and more. It takes a team to make a campaign a success, and we're proud to be part of yours. […] It's your time to shine. (Utah Women Run)

(15) You can run for office right now, no matter your age or experience. (RunningStart)

Examples (2) and (10) above, together with examples (16-17) below, introduce another important dimension of campaign training for women. This is the strategy of emphasizing the need for more women's voices at the table by underlining the importance of women's unique lived experiences that must be taken into account in the decision-making process:

(16) Diverse perspectives are essential to an ethical and effective political process. Women from all backgrounds have the chance to pursue these public service opportunities.

(17) Women bring different priorities and experiences to public life, including perspectives that have been largely absent in public policymaking. Women change the way government works, and their voices are needed around the country. (CAWP)

This reference to difference is not to be interpreted in the light of the much-criticized difference framework that attempted, in the 1990s, to account for differential patterns in language use between men and women by introducing "a two-cultures account of male and female socialization." (Talbot 2020, 97) The reference to difference that emphasizes the uniqueness of the qualities of human experience can be traced, among others, to the thinking of the social justice champion and cultural icon, the late Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Her argument, in the early 1970s brief in *Edwards v. Healy*, that "[e]xempting women from jury service assigns them to inferior status by assuming that as a class they are incapable of shouldering the same civic rights and responsibilities as men" was well received by the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit that ruled that this absence

> is significant not because all women react alike, but because they contribute a distinctive medley of views influenced by differences in biology, cultural impact and life experience, indispensable if the jury is to comprise a cross-section of the community. (Quoted in De Hart 2020, 236-237)

As will be shown in the analysis of the visuals in the next section, both difference and diversity play a prominent role also in the non-verbal elements found on the websites.

4. Analysis of the visuals

The overview of the dataset presented in Tab. 1 (Section 2) shows that the visuals representing women are distributed unevenly. Eleven out of thirteen samples web pages include only a handful of images – from a minimum of one to a maximum of five, with no images at all in two cases. Two web pages, Penn Chatham and IOPL Durham – Greensboro – Raleigh, however, are

outliers, with thirteen and seventeen visuals respectively. Even if the distribution of the visuals is unequal, at least one image of a woman/a group of women can be found on all sampled web pages. This presence hints at the importance that images have come to acquire in complex multimodal digital texts (Stöckl, Caple and Pflaeging 2020).

The main kind of visuals, although the web pages do not explicitly acknowledge this, appear to be photos taken during past campaign training events that specific organizations have offered. For example, the page of IOPL Durham – Greensboro – Raleigh, one of the two outliers in terms of the quantity of the visuals, contains three separate photo galleries that document the training events that took place at the three different locations (Durham, Greensboro and Raleigh) in North Carolina, with four photos in the Durham gallery, six from Greensboro and seven from Raleigh. In a similar way, Penn Chatham web page offers a varied photo gallery from the training event the organization held in Pittsburgh.

Coming to the specifics concerning the types of recurrent visuals in the sample, a number of patterns has emerged. Firstly, naturalistic images are given preference over the conceptual ones. The use of clip art drawings was found in only two cases shown in Fig. 1:

Fig. 1: Conceptual visuals used by Vote Run Lead (left) and Running Start (right)

In addition to clip art, one organization uses collages that can contain, for example, images of different women combined into a single, decontextualized composition (Fig. 2). The second example in Fig. 2 shows a collage that combines an image of a woman with infographics that draw our attention to the name of the specific organization (Utah Women Run) and the main goals of its training program (Campaign, Influence, Lead).

Fig. 2: The use of composite visuals by Utah Women

In Fig. 3 we have the only example of the use of a headless selfie. Here the focus is on a woman wearing a T-shirt with some motivational text.

Fig. 3: A headless selfie on SC Women in Leadership

The remaining forty-four visuals, all of which can be described as naturalistic, have been divided into subsets according to two main criteria that emerged in the preliminary analysis of the visual choices that these organizations made in the selection of the photos, 1) the choice to foreground either campaign trainers or campaign trainees and 2) the choice to represent individual women rather than groups of women. As the author of this article had a first-hand knowledge of this type of training events, it was possible to easily distinguish between trainers and trainees, based on the activities that the two groups were shown to perform in the photos.[8] While the trainers – women holding elected office, communication and fundraising experts, etc. – are invited to talk about their experiences and offer practical advice on stage, as well as to take questions from the audience, the trainees follow experts' lectures, sitting in groups at separate tables, are encouraged to ask questions and take part in discussions and, occasionally, are invited to carry out group activities. Table 2 shows the breakdown of the visuals according to the parameters participants/activities:

Protagonists	Single trainer, with or without audience	Group of trainers, with or without audience	Single trainee during a training session	Group of trainees during a training session	Group photos of trainees	Uncatego-rized
Campaign trainers	*11*	*8*				
Campaign trainees			*8*	*10*	*4*	
Uncategorized women						*3*

Tab. 2: Patterns identified in naturalistic visuals

8 The author visited CAWP twice. The first research trip was made in October 2023 when a preliminary field study was conducted. This research trip was sponsored by the ESSE Bursary for Gender Studies, which is gratefully acknowledged. In March 2024 the author participated in CAWP's two-day *Ready to Run*® as a campaign trainee.

The numbers show that the sub-division into categories reflects a more or less even (19 vs. 22) distribution of the visuals that focus on campaign trainers vs. campaign trainees. The quantitative data does not reflect the fact that trainers and trainees play very different roles in the selected visuals, as is shown in Figures 4 and 5.

Fig. 4: Campaign trainers as Actors (Penn Chatham, Ohio Glenn, Running Start)

The group of three visuals in Fig. 4 exemplifies the role of Actor that is typically assumed by the campaign trainers. Whether they are shown with or without an audience, they hold the floor, they have the microphone, it is them who are making their voices heard. If trainees are present as audience in the visual, they are represented as Goals in a unidirectional transactional action.

Moreover, as we can see in the first image in Fig. 5, the salient pattern presents trainees as Reacters, looking at and reacting to something or somebody that the viewer is not shown. Typically, the close-up shots allow us to read the women's facial expressions that appear happy, interested, engaged with whatever activity they are involved in. Group photos, such as shown in Fig. 5, are used to create a sense of women-led communities, a sisterhood of trainees committed to making a difference.

Fig. 5: Representations of campaign trainees as either Reacters or Goals (Running Start, CAWP, IOPL, Penn Chatham, TWU Elect Her, IOPL)

We find a different approach to the representation of trainees only on the website of Mississippi WPHQ (Fig. 6). Here stock photos appear to have been used, but the choice has been made to select photos that show trainees assuming the role of Actors in real-life electoral campaign initiatives, presumably after completing their training with the organization.

Fig. 6: Campaign trainees as Actors on Mississippi WPHQ

Another example that can be highlighted is the visual in Fig. 7 found on the website of She Should Run. Here, two women, who are presumably two campaign trainees, are posing as two Rosies the Riveter, re-creating the iconic image of the factory worker flexing her muscles in a bid to "[exhort] other women to join the World War II effort with the declaration that 'We Can Do It!'" (Vergun 2019). It is easy to interpret the empowering visual message that is conveyed here, 'We Can Get Involved in Politics and Make a Difference!.'

Fig. 7: Campaign trainees posing as Actors on She Should Run

The three images shown under 'Uncategorized' in Table 2 are reproduced in Fig. 8. These visuals have been extracted from the banners found on the web pages of three different organizations. The lack of context makes it problematic to categorize the women represented here as either trainers or trainees. Potentially, they could be either, and this ambiguity could have been intentional as well – these visuals have the potential to appeal to both groups of women political candidates:

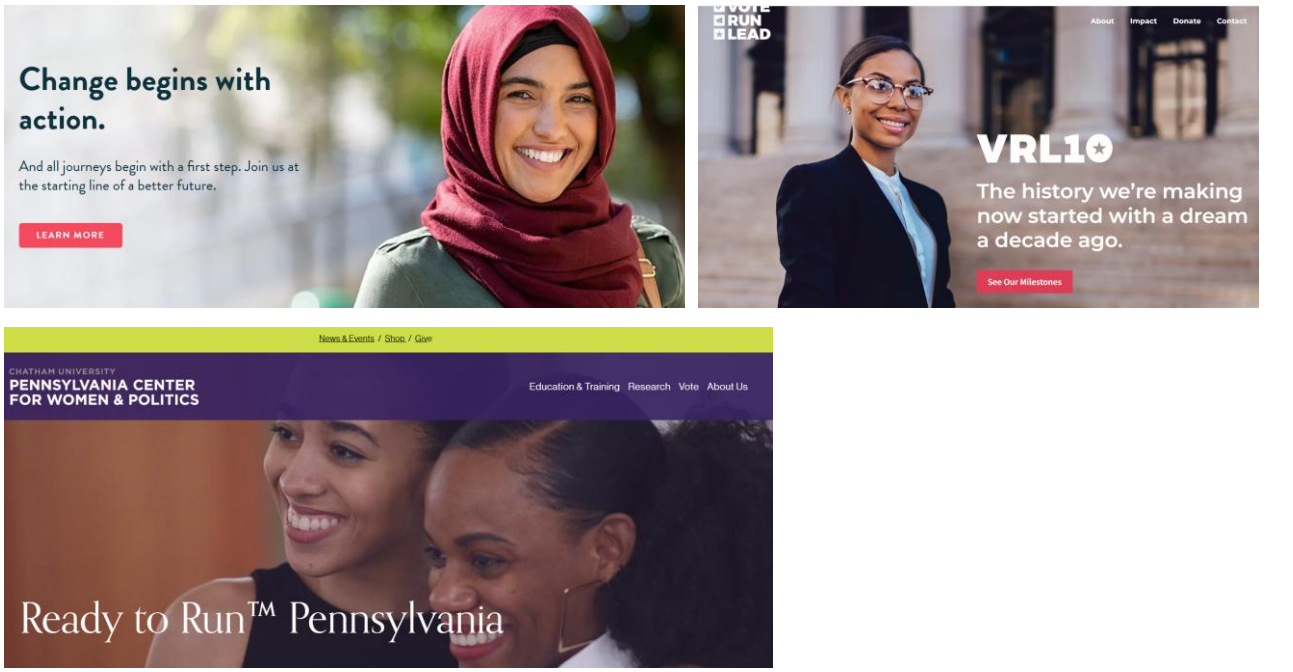

Fig. 8: Uncategorized women in the banners (She Should Run, Vote Run Lead, Penn Chatham)

The final example in Fig. 9 offers a powerful visual metaphor that can be used to summarize the message that is at the core of women's campaign training initiatives, women, led by and supported by other women, can work their way up and climb the career ladder in the public sphere:

Fig. 9: Use of a visual metaphor on Running Start

The examples above present women as a heterogeneous group, if we look at the sampled images from the perspective of diversity conceptualized as

> the vast array of human difference (Loden and Rosener, 1991) [that] encompasses a range of dimensions from demographic features such as age and gender, to informational abilities such as cognitive skills and educational background, to value diversity linked, for example, to religion and national culture, to psychological characteristics including personality traits and attitudes, to the varied mixture of all these qualities (Maier and Ravazzani 2021, 465).

These visual materials routinely emphasize the importance of inclusivity in the representation of women in politics (the analysis of the accompanying texts in Section 3). In fact, both trainers and trainees represented on the websites of women's campaign training programs are shown to be demographically diverse (e.g., in terms of age and ethnicity), as well as culturally diverse (e.g., through explicit visuals linked to religion whereby Muslim women are represented wearing hijabs). This is not a token effort as many organizations offer workshops tailored to address the specific needs of minority groups.[9]

There is perhaps less diversity when it comes to what van Leeuwen has defined as role styles, i.e., "ways of performing more or less institutionalized roles, which come with specific ways of

[9] For example, CAWP offers dedicated programs "to attract more women of color into the political process and encourage them to seek public leadership, including programs for Black women, Asian American women, and Latinas" (www.cawp.rutgers.edu/programs/ready-runr/ready-runr-new-jersey, last visited December 2024). Mississippi WPHQ offers an initiative called The Mississippi Black Women's Roundtable introduced as "an intergenerational, civic engagement statewide network of Black women and girls that focus on increasing voter participation, civic engagement and champions equitable public policy on behalf of Black women and girls in Mississippi" (www.mswomenspoliticalhq.com/about, last visited December 2024).

dressing and grooming and specific props and settings that are often institutionally regulated, whether formally or informally" (2022, 40). It appears that women are made to conform to the traditionally masculine norms when it comes to the conventions of professional dress code, we find many examples of women wearing smart two-piece suits, with some 'feminine' touch added occasionally, such as pastel colors or jewelry (the case of Margaret Thatcher mentioned in Section 1).

Overall, the analysis of the visual materials has shown that women's campaign training websites tend to use naturalistic images depicting women either as experts or trainees taking part in training events as the preferred strategy leveraged to get other women to enrol in campaign training programs.

5. Concluding remarks

This case-study has examined the use of the visuals and the salient linguistic phenomena in the accompanying texts in a sample of websites managed by US organizations working towards the goal of increasing women's representation in American politics. The aim of this exploratory investigation was to identify the meaning-making processes that arise in the interaction between these distinct semiotic modes that realize "the social meanings of the community" (Kress and van Leeuwen 2021, 41). The findings show that these organizations use a range of discursive multimodal strategies to challenge androcentric assumptions such as the old and persistent belief "that politics is a male prerogative and government a men's club" (De Hart 1995, 214). These websites make women's participation in public life visible, desirable and beneficial, stressing the need for diverse representation that must include women's voices as well as those of men.

Across the sample, visual materials interact with the accompanying text to portray two kinds of women role models that addressees can choose to identify with. Accomplished elected women politicians and women experts, who are introduced as agents in the accompanying texts and Actors in the visuals, embody the role model of a woman leader who has learned the tricks of the trade and can make her voice heard at the table. Instead, women (would-be) trainees are gently encouraged to make the first step, led by expert women. The trainees thus are presented as beneficiaries of other women's actions, a move that foregrounds the importance of women-based, women-led communities. While it is true that these websites, to some extent, employ the typical persuasive language associated also with 'new' postfeminist gender ideologies (Lazar 2014) that address women as empowered and entitled subjects by inviting them to take control

of their lives,[10] these organizations avoid the pitfalls of postfeminism in their celebration of community diversity and the value of political sisterhood.

To conclude, I would like to comment on two important absences in these materials. Firstly, men are conspicuously absent across the sample, in the visuals, as wells as in the texts. The only visual that includes men in the background (see Section 4) appears to be a stock photo. In a similar vein, men are only mentioned explicitly once in a text that references a research study.[11] This is potentially problematic given that real-life politics is abundantly populated by men. In the current political climate, which is characterized by a pronounced anti-feminist backlash, politically inexperienced women must be prepared to confront potentially stereotyping and discriminatory discursive strategies. According to recent research, women politicians around the world are routinely subjected to such treatment (studies in Bischof and Illie 2018). A second issue concerns the absence of the *F* word - feminism. This absence is perhaps not surprising, particularly in the U.S. context, where women candidates have long been wary of "the radical, sectarian connotations often associated with the label." (De Hart 1995, 215) At the same time, this absence is significant, as it hints at the contradictions and complexities of gendered political experience: women who pursue explicitly feminist goals, such as facilitating other women's access to politics, have to disguise themselves as 'leaders' and 'experts' to achieve these aims.

Acknowledgements

The author gratefully acknowledges the support of the European Society for the Study of English (ESSE), whose Bursary for Research Trips in Gender Studies within English Studies enabled her to make the first research trip to CAWP in October 2023.

Bionote

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[10] Cf. example (15) in Section 3.
[11] "Studies show that women are less likely than men to see themselves in politics and must be told "you should run!" several times before they consider political candidacy." (TWU Elect Her)

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