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Words of Wisdom

Choosing the Velvet Glove

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In "Choosing the Velvet Glove: Women Voters, Ambivalent Sexism, and Vote Choice in 2016", Lorrie Frasure-Yokley (2018) provides some important insights into our knowledge of women's political behavior. Specifically, she uses an intersectionality approach to highlight the way in which an all encompassing "female" variable overestimates or underestimates findings related to the group and ignores the political differences between white women and women of color. In order to demonstrate the importance of this intersectional analysis, Frasure-Yokley looks at the way in which ambivalent sexism, or prejudice, toward women influenced American women's vote choice in the 2016 presidential election.

Frasure-Yokley finds that when one disaggregates the variable, women, by race, ambivalent sexism clearly has a different effect on both groups. Ambivalent sexism has a positive and significant effect on white women, while it has a negative effect and has no statistical significance on women of color. In other words, ambivalent sexism can help explain why 52% of white women were still inclined to vote for Donald Trump even after his lewd and controversial conversation with Billy Bush resurfaced during his presidential campaign.

Another example is the recent election of Senator Doug Jones. On December 12, 2017, Alabama held a special election for Senator that captured the nation's attention. Not only did the election make news because it was meant to fill the open seat left by the U.S. Attorney General Jess Sessions, it also came with, at least one, newsworthy candidate. On one end, there was Democratic candidate Doug Jones, who many remember

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as the U.S. attorney who, in 1997 prosecuted two KKK members for the killing of four black teens in the 1960s. Yet, very few voters felt particularly strong about him as a candidate. Many news outlets signaled the lack of enthusiasm for Jones, some even pointing out Jones' lack of attention to the African American community. At the other end, was Republican candidate Roy Moore, an Alabama Supreme Court Chief Justice that was accused of molesting teenage girls when he was a prosecutor in his 30s.

Part of the reason these candidates were so contentious came from the fact that AL had not voted for a Democratic Senator since 1992, and therefore, the Republican candidate had a much higher chance of taking over the congressional seat. Weeks before the special election took place, stories of sexual misconduct against teenage girls came out against Roy Moore. Given the national context, where the #metoo movement was at its peak, allegations of sexual assault seemed to signal the death of an individual's career. Moreover, news also came out highlighting Moore's response to a question during a rally. When asked by an African American voter to recall a moment when America was "great", Moore replied with, "I think it was great at the time when families were united—even though we had slavery—they cared for one another". Both the sexual allegations and the troubling commentary on slavery led many to see Moore as an extension of Trump, and that led to a clear divide among voters in this historically Republican state.

In the end, only 41% of women voted for Moore, meaning that a majority of female voters chose the Democratic candidate, in a Republican state. However, even with all of the sexual allegations against Moore, exit polls showed that 63% of white female voters chose the Republican candidate. Why is this important to note? If we had stopped short of simply analyzing the gender breakdown of the election, our analysis would suggest that a majority of women voted for Doug Jones; that women, in general, were the reason that Moore was not elected. We would say that women made their voices loud and clear against sexual misconduct, and maybe, even racial discrimination. Yet, the data tell us something completely different. When parsed out even further, the reality is that a majority of white women still supported the Republican candidate. More importantly, it was black women, with 97% of black female voters coming out to support Doug Jones, that really pushed the pendulum over to the Democratic candidate. It was black women who changed a 25-year political trend, and it would do political scientist well to take note of that fact.

Frasure-Yokley's analysis is an important insight into the, often ignored, difference between women and women of color in politics. For years, the

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all encompassing term, women, has been used to signal a voting bloc that is both more democratic and progressive than its male counterpart. Yet, Lorrie Frasure-Yokley debunks this often cited "truth" by establishing a historical record of conservative voting, among white female voters, that did not change even in the face of blatant sexism, at the state and national level, and when dealt with the opportunity for descriptive representation in the oval office.

REFERENCE

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