Watching Election 2016 with a Gender Lens

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The presence of women candidates in both major parties' presidential primaries, including a likely woman Democratic nominee, has increased the attention paid to gender dynamics in the 2016 US presidential election. However, the presumption that previous presidential elections—without female prominent contenders—were gender neutral is false: gender dynamics have been at play in all US presidential elections to date. The nation's top executive office is arguably the most masculine in American politics. Duerst-Lahti (1997) describes the presidency as a gendered space in which masculine norms and images are reified as the ideal, adding, "the masculinist assumption-made-normal is strong and is made even stronger when it goes unnoticed for its gendered aspects" (22). Presidents and presidential contenders, whether male or female, are expected to meet the masculine expectations of the office through words and actions, and those around them—family, spouses, and advisors—often play a role in shaping the degree to which they are successful. In navigating American politics, candidates also face gendered treatment by opponents, voters, and media, reminding us that presidential politics is far from gender neutral. These gender dynamics have been detailed by scholars, particularly in analyses of the presidential candidacies of women (Beail and Longworth 2013; Carlin and Winfrey 2009; Carroll and Dittmar 2009; Dittmar and Carroll 2013; Duerst-Lahti 2013; Falk 2010; Han and Heldman 2007; Heldman, Carroll, and Olson 2005; Lawrence and Rose 2009; McClain, Carter, and Brady 2005). However, the depth and nuance in scholarly analyses are rarely evident in popular dialogue about the ways in which gender shapes presidential elections.

Seeking to remedy this disconnect between scholarly debates and news coverage, the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) at Rutgers University partnered with the Barbara Lee Family Foundation (BLFF) to launch Presidential Gender Watch 2016, a nonpartisan project to track, analyze, and illuminate gender dynamics in the 2016 presidential election. Presidential Gender Watch 2016 draws upon the research and expertise of both partner organizations, as well as other experts, to further public understanding of how gender influences candidate strategy, voter engagement and expectations, media coverage, and electoral outcomes in the race for the nation's highest executive office. The goal is to lend expert analysis to the dialogue around gender throughout the election season.

Importantly, gender is not a concept or characteristic limited to women. *Gender dynamics* in this project and in this analysis refers to the influence, operation, expression, and disruption of norms of *both* femininity and masculinity in presidential politics for the women and men who engage in them. Gender, then, is something that men and women do, not simply a characteristic that is held or assumed (Kenny 2007).

As an expert for Presidential Gender Watch 2016, I contribute regular analyses for public distribution and compile online posts that review evidence of gender bias throughout the race, whether among media, candidates, or voters. My *On the Bias* posts are not meant to act as an arbiter of what is or is not sexist, nor to call out individuals or organizations for biased behavior. Instead, these posts illuminate the ways in which gender shapes presidential dialogue, candidate experience, and institutional dynamics, referencing scholarly work where possible and demonstrating that gender bias is neither only perpetuated by men nor always employed against women.

Below, I share a selection of themes evident in my *On the Bias* posts within the first year of the 2016 election (April 2015 to April 2016), excerpting specific examples of bias evident in the campaigns. These findings illuminate the ways in which presidential politics are gendered and provide themes worthy of exploring in the remainder of the presidential race.

MASCULINE DOMINANCE

In June 2015, Senator Mark Kirk (R-IL) characterized Republican candidate Lindsay Graham as a "bro with no ho." Reacting to his comment, Rick Santorum[1] told reporters: "Guys will be guys," adding, "Look, people—this is locker room conversation" that should not be held against anyone. Regardless of his or anyone's position on Kirk's comments, the comfort with which we accept sexism as simply "guys being guys" acts as a reminder of the dominance of masculinity and transference of masculine power across all spaces—from locker rooms to congressional committee rooms. It's in these spaces that women are often unwanted or unwelcome, as the May 2015 *New Yorker* cover[2] with only male candidates in a locker room and Carly Fiorina peeking through the door from the outside makes so vividly clear.

In summer 2015, a video[3] was posted of Republican candidate Mike Huckabee that perpetuated this locker room mentality, and affirmed his performance of traditional masculinity. In his address to the National Religious Broadcasters Convention in Nashville, Tennessee, Huckabee said that he wished "someone [had] told me that when I was in high school that I could have felt like a woman when it came time to take showers in PE." He added, "I'm pretty sure that I would have found my feminine side and said, 'Coach, I think I'd rather shower with the girls today.'"[4] Huckabee's language is overtly derisive of transgender people, appealing to the socially conservative audience to which he spoke; but it also

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demonstrates the type of gender policing that is particularly acute when running for the most masculine office in American politics. In these comments, Huckabee brandishes his masculine credentials as a "typical," cue heterosexual, guy attracted to girls, boasting about how he would act on that attraction if given the opportunity. In comments like these, Huckabee, Kirk, and Santorum present masculinity and sexuality as mutually reinforcing, so that masculine dominance relies upon heteronormativity among presidential contenders.

In October 2015, rapper T.I. received swift and harsh blowback for his comments about the potential for a woman president, in which he claimed, "It's kinda like, I just know that women make rash decisions emotionally. They make very permanent, cemented decisions—and then later, it's kind of like it didn't happen, or they didn't mean for it to happen. And I sure would hate to just set off a nuke. [Other world leaders won't be able to negotiate] foreign policy; the world ain't ready yet. I think you might be able to [get] the Loch Ness Monster elected before you could [get a woman elected]."[5] While widely rebuked, these comments are consistent with a history of questioning women's capacity to act as commander-in-chief (remember when vice presidential candidate Geraldine Ferraro was asked on *Meet the Press* if she were "strong enough push the nuclear button"[6]). Moreover, they evoke the most frequently used stereotypes of femininity that work to women leaders' disadvantage, including that of women's emotional fragility.

Morning Joe: "I haven't quite recovered, it's early in the morning, from her shouting that message."[11] A May 2015 piece in *The New Republic* analyzed 2016 candidates' voices with linguistic professor Carmen Fought, wherein she explained, "There's an idea that men and women talk differently, that men are from Mars, women are from Venus. That's really misleading. The biggest difference is in how men and women are perceived, and our ideas about how women should talk and how men should talk."[12] Men, the article claims, are supposed to be assertive, loud, and competitive, while women are supposed to be soft-spoken, cooperative, and helpful. As Frought concludes, "No matter who's saying something, a man or a woman, they're being judged on their language via their gender." The policing of political women's voices reflects another way in which gender shapes treatment and perceptions of presidential candidates.

At an October 2015 debate, Bernie Sanders responded to Hillary Clinton's criticism of his record on gun policy by arguing that "all the shouting in the world" would not end gun violence. The next day, Clinton added this line to her stump speech: "I've been told to stop, and, I quote, 'shouting about gun violence.' Well, first of all, I'm not shouting. It's just, when women talk, some people think we're shouting." In addressing the flap between Sanders and Clinton, Emily Crockett at *Vox* explained: "The flap between Clinton and Sanders is about something different from the outright

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Despite the many polls that show the American public is nearly universally prepared to vote for a woman for president,[7] comments like these demonstrate that implicit biases against women leaders still exist. That said, the strong rebuttals against T.I. also demonstrate that there is little tolerance among the American public for such overt bias, possibly indicating the evolution of public opinion and the ways in which it has influenced, or has been influenced by, the advancement of women at all levels of political leadership.

STYLE OVER SUBSTANCE

In an April 2015 editorial condemning Carly Fiorina's candidacy, *Guardian* contributor Jeb Lund begins by characterizing Fiorina's style: "One is tempted to focus on her peculiarly peevish demeanor, a Grinchy soft-talking that sounds, even at the start of speeches, like she's already *had. it. up. to. here.*"[8] While Lund proceeds to focus more on her campaign strategy and failed record at Hewlett Packard, this emphasis on her demeanor and vocal style is reminiscent of similar coverage of fellow female politicians, including her Democratic counterpart Hillary Clinton, as shrill, whiny, or unnecessarily angry or nagging.[9] In retaliation to her denunciation of his comments about Megyn Kelly, Donald Trump took to Twitter to ridicule Carly Fiorina's voice in a similar way: "I just realized that if you listen to Carly Fiorina for more than ten minutes straight, you develop a massive headache."[10] He was similarly affected by Hillary Clinton's "shouting" in response to his claims that she was playing the "woman's card" in April 2016, telling sexism that Sanders swears he didn't intend. What Clinton was pointing out was a subtler, more pervasive kind of discrimination—and the disbelieving response of both the Sanders campaign and the media shows why she was right to bring it up." That subtler, more pervasive kind of discrimination toward women includes criticism of aggression and hearing women's voices differently than we hear men's. It was evident in the strategy Clinton employed at the October 2015 Benghazi hearing, when "not losing her cool" was a mark of her success, not just because of the setting, but also because a response deemed too emotional or aggressive would easily be labeled unstable and irrational.[13] But don't take my word for it: a new research experiment by Dr. Jessica Salerno finds that in the context of debate, men tend to gain influence as they become angry, while angry women tend to lose influence.[14] Salerno opts for a more optimistic take on the findings: "The message here is that we should all be very aware of the biases we express without meaning to. . . . I would definitely not advise women to temper their anger when they're talking about something they're passionate about, especially when men can do it at no cost." However, women running for office *have* had to temper their emotion, whether anger or otherwise, in order to navigate the biases that shape their path to political office, including expectations of niceness and femininity that their male counterparts do not face.[15]

Voice, aggression, and emotion are not the only sites for attention to style over substance for women candidates. Much research to date notes the persistent gender differences in coverage of men

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and women candidates' appearance (where coverage of women includes more attention to hair, hemlines, and husbands), as well as the implications of those disparities for women candidates' support and success. Matt Drudge claimed that Hillary Clinton *must* be wearing wigs, posting a series of tweets perpetuating his theory and making it a front-page story on his site.[16] Donald Trump weighed in with his thoughts as well, telling radio host Mark Levin that she must have done something because "her hair became massive."[17] Appearance also provides another site for policing sexuality for women and men who run, like when media and opponents alike criticized Marco Rubio's heeled boots as being too feminine[18] or when a *Slate* columnist wrote, "Hillary Clinton isn't a lesbian, but she dresses like one."[19] Of course, standards of attractiveness are tied to sexuality, and differ for men and women. In an interview with *Rolling Stone*, Donald Trump said of Carly Fiorina, "Look at that face! Would anyone vote for that? Can you imagine that, the face of our next president?!"[20] Nearly two months later, the women of *The View* criticized Carly Fiorina's appearance at an October 2015 Republican debate, saying she looked "demented" and comparing her face to a Halloween mask.[21] These comments from Trump and *The View* were called out by other politicians,[22] other women in media[23] and, eventually, by Fiorina herself.

Consistent with research finding the most effective responses to sexism are immediate ones,[24] Fiorina told the crowd of women after Trump's initial comments, "This is the face of a 61-year-old woman. I am proud of every year and every wrinkle."[25] That comment, which evoked huge cheers and a sense of female camaraderie, was clipped in a highly effective and much shared video produced by CARLY for America PAC called "Look at This Face."[26] When CNN's Jake Tapper raised the issue in the second GOP debate, Fiorina succinctly stated, "I think women all over this country heard very clearly what Mr. Trump said."[27] Fiorina also confronted *The View* cohosts directly when she appeared on the program a week after their comments.[28] She rejected this focus on appearance most clearly in an interview with *People*: "The point is, whether a man thinks you're homely or a man thinks you're beautiful, it's not a topic of conversation when a woman is trying to do a job—whether it's President of the United States or secretary or anything else."[29] More significantly, research shows that promoting attention to women's appearance can have real negative effects on voter perceptions of her seriousness and qualifications to lead.[30]

"VAGINA VOTERS"

Some columnists and pundits have criticized what they view as gender essentialism in the support of women candidates on the basis of gender identity, using this presidential race as a case study for identity politics. In the *Boston Globe*, Jeff Jacoby argues that "gender is no credential for the White House," claiming that "sex organs" are irrelevant to the job of US President.[31] Presidential Gender Watch 2016 responded to Jacoby's piece with a letter to the editor, highlighting that women's "distinctive experiences contribute to their approaches to governing,"[32] as we know from extensive research on women's representation and impact.[33] A post on reason.com is particularly critical of "vagina voting," calling out female columnists and commentators who pledged their support for Hillary Clinton on the basis of shared gender identity.[34] This post simplifies the arguments that many of these women have made, ignoring the fact that even Kate Harding's piece, "I Am Voting with my Vagina,"[35] moves from biologically shared traits to shared experiences of sexism to justify why she might be better represented by a woman in the Oval Office:

> There has never been a president who knows what it's like to menstruate, be pregnant, or give birth. There has never been a president who knows what it's like to be the target of subtle and categorically unsubtle sexism. There has never been a president who was criticized widely for his political ambition, or forced into a bake-off to prove he's not too career-oriented to cook for his family. . . . There has never been a president who was presumed to be mentally and emotionally unstable because of naturally occurring hormones. Until 2009, there had never been a president who had to work twice as hard to be seen as half as competent, and it's been a welcome change.

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The reality is few if any voters vote simply on the basis of gender identity.[36] Research consistently counters claims that women vote for women, instead showing that women's votes, like men's, are motivated most by party identity. As Kathleen Dolan (2008) concludes, "Certainly women support female candidates, but the evidence suggests that this support can be shaped by party loyalties as much as any gender loyalty. Women in the public evaluate female candidates in the same way that they evaluate all candidates, through the lens of personal and political considerations that take many forms."[37] Those personal and political considerations may include the perception that women candidates and officeholders might be particularly representative of women's interests, a finding also supported by research and complicating claims that gender is neither a cue or credential for voters to consider in candidate evaluation.

Shared identity cannot be entirely separated from shared experiences that inform shared priorities among women. Those shared priorities (or at least her perception of them) have rooted Hillary Clinton's message, not the simplistic notion that women should vote for the woman candidate. At the Iowa Democratic Ding Wing, Clinton told the audience:[38]

> I am so tired of politicians shaming and blaming women. I am tired of Republicans dismissing the contributions women make to our economy and ignoring the obstacles that hold so many back from contributing even more. We cannot afford to leave talent on

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the sidelines. Women who want to work should be able to do so without worrying every day about how they're going to take care of their child or what happens when a family member gets sick. That is not a luxury, it's a necessity, and it's also an economic growth strategy.

She also took on claims that she was "playing the gender card," refining a talking point she is likely to repeat on the stump: "Well, if calling for equal pay and paid leave is playing the gender card, then deal me in. Let me add, if helping more working parents find quality, affordable childcare is playing the gender card, then I'm ready to ante up." Clinton's rebuttal contends the claim that talking to or about women is simply a strategic ploy, but also serves as an important reminder that everyone in this race is playing the gender card—the question is, how?[39]

But gender affinity may also be evident among male voters in the 2016 race. Across 27 Democratic primaries where exit polls were conducted, for example, Clinton earned an average of 60% of women's votes and just 49% of men's support; Sanders nearly matched Clinton's success among men (48%), but earned just 38% of women's votes. Sanders' support among men was not only evident at the ballot box, but also online and on the campaign trail. By October 2015, journalists had named Sanders's die-hard male supporters "Bernie Bros," characterizing a particularly devout subset of Sanders voters as "flustered, shouting white guys."[40] Rebecca Traister explains this characterization is grounded in the "sexist condescension and dismissal of feminist argument that is happening online."[41] The Sanders campaign denounced the online misogyny amongst its supporters in February 2016,[42] but the gender divides among Democratic primary voters persisted through early summer.

Some argue that the Bernie Bros' behavior represents male anxiety about having a woman in charge.[43] Others note that their ire seems targeted at Hillary Clinton, but that their dislike seems to go beyond policy or personality. Whatever explains it, the Bernie Bros phenomena demonstrates that gender has been at play in diverse and definitive ways for women *and* men, candidates and voters, in Election 2016. ■

NOTES

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