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Jenna Bygall
jbyga1@brockport.edu

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Treatment of Female Politicians and Impact on Voter Perception in the U.S.

“If your dreams do not scare you, they are not big enough.”

(Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, *This Child Will Be Great: Memoir of a Remarkable Life by Africa's First Woman President*, 2009)

This essay explores the treatment of female politicians in the United States government and the impact of negative treatment on potential candidates as well as voters' perception of said candidates. Readers may obtain a better understanding of the stereotypes, double standards, and biases that are projected upon female politicians in the U.S. This work is based on a literature review of peer-reviewed journal entries, research-based books, and credible news sources.

Trouble at Home

In a study of 193 nations, the United States currently ranks 75th on the list for percentage of women in national governments (Catalyst, 2019, Global section). The 74 preceding nations are from Africa, South America, the Middle East, all across Europe, and elsewhere. This begs the question, why is such a developed nation like the United States so far down in the rankings? What factors come into play in our country that prevent women from reaching parity in our national government? Despite strides like the Year of

the Woman in 1992 and the historic midterms we recently experienced, women still only control just short of 25 percent of congressional seats (Catalyst, 2019, Percentage of Women in the 116th United States Congress). I believe that the public mistreatment of female candidates and politicians discourages women from running for office and entering politics.

Imagine you're a stay-at-home mom with two kids, contemplating re-entering the work force. You finally get an interview for that perfect job you've been hoping for, and when you sit down for the interview, you find that they're asking quite a lot of personal questions.

How many kids do you have?

Who will take care of them if you start working?

Are you planning on having more kids?

According to Susan Heathfield (2018), questions like this are illegal to ask in job interviews. But do you think that stops interviewers across the country from asking them? Or asking less-direct versions of them? Meanwhile, the single man they interviewed before you was asked about his ambition and previous experience.

Imagine this scenario, but on the largest stage possible: a presidential election. This is what we, as a nation, witnessed in the 2016 presidential

election. When Hillary Clinton announced she was going to be a grandma, the ground shook, and critics everywhere wondered, how can she be a grandma **and** a president?! No one ever asked Mitt Romney during his previous run if his eighteen grandchildren would be a distraction. Despite the upward trend in women's representation in our government, female politicians still face significant obstacles in the form of stereotypes, double standards, and biased media coverage. The unfair treatment of women in U.S. politics negatively affects the perception of female candidates, as well as the willingness of women to run for office in the first place.

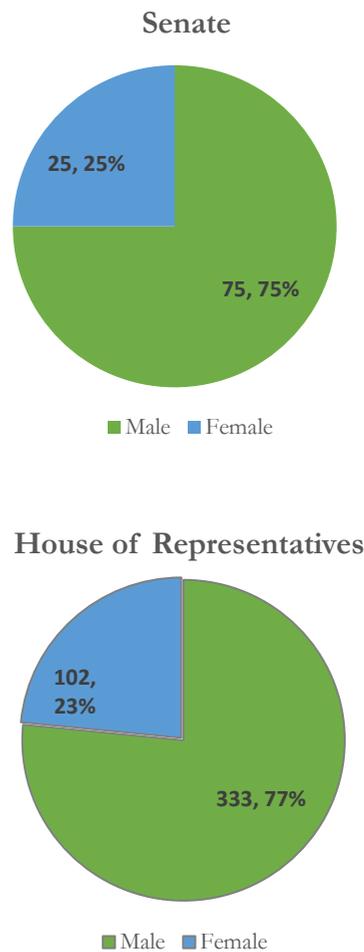
As we explore the treatment of women who choose to enter the political sphere in the U.S., I draw from my experiences as a woman studying Political Science, International Studies, and Women and Gender Studies at a university. I interpret studies proving the existence of bias against female politicians, explore clear examples of media bias, and observe the impact that female candidates can have on voters. Several articles and books by well-known political and feminist scholars including Jennifer Lawless (2016) and Cynthia Enloe (2017) are central to my argument. Through the use of these examples, I

suggest there is a systematic bias against women in government in the United States, and I conclude by pointing out that despite it all, the best is certainly yet to come. This is observable through the silver linings of the 2016 elections, the 2018 midterms, and the emerging field of presidential candidates for the 2020 election.

As a result of the previously mentioned 2018 midterms, there are currently 25 women in the Senate and 102 women in the House of Representatives, out of the 100 and 435 total seats, respectively. This adds up to 25 percent in the Senate, and 23.4 percent in the House (Catalyst, 2019, Percentage of Women in the 116th United States Congress). The numbers are crucial, because as one of the most developed nations in the world, there is no reason for us to be so lacking in basic gender equality in our government. Our population is more than one-half female, yet our government hasn't even gotten close to touching that. Why not? The charts in Figure 1 show (in blue) the portion of our government that is female. I believe it is of the utmost importance to get to the bottom of **why** our government looks like this when our population looks far more balanced. It is not representative, and it is not equal. If

Figure 1

Percentage by Gender in U.S. Government



Data from Center for American Women and Politics, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University (2019).

we treated female politicians with the same respect and neutrality as we treat men, politics would be a more equal and proactive entity.

There are a few main factors to consider when discussing the mistreatment of female politicians: lack of encouragement, stereotypes, and double standards and media coverage. What exactly is it that is inhibiting women from running and/or wanting to be politically involved? Every time a woman is ignored, spoken over, criticized for her physical appearance, or sexualized – with no consequences for whomever treated her that way – we set a precedent as to how we treat women who aspire to enter politics in the United States.

EncourageMENT

Susan J. Carroll and Kira Sanbonmatsu (2013), in their research-based *More Women Can Run: Gender and Pathways to the State Legislatures*, explore the implications of gender on the pathway to state legislatures and other political offices. Much of their research focused on the relevancy of encouragement to male vs. female campaigns and candidacies. Because of our historically patriarchal government, one can imagine there might be disparities between the ease of a man's decision to run, and the complexity of a woman's. Carroll and Sanbonmatsu (2013) focus on the fact that "Politics traditionally has been and is still a masculinized domain. In turn,

women more often seek support and encouragement before they enter what is far from gender-neutral territory" (p. 61). The authors quote 2001 research from Moncrief, Squire, and Jewell, concluding that men, more than women, were far more likely to be what they called "self-starters," or people who decide solely by themselves to run for legislature. Women, however, were more likely to decide to run after a suggestion from someone else, and were also more likely to report deciding to run due to a mix of encouragement and personal desire (Carroll & Sanbonmatsu, 2013). But, what are the reasons for the hesitancy to run without encouragement? Carroll and Sanbonmatsu (2013) cite our government as a reason, explaining:

Because of the masculine nature of mainstream politics and women's history of marginalization in the electoral arena, one might well expect women to be less likely than men to view elective office holding as an appropriate career choice or even a realistic aspiration (p. 48).

This, according to Carroll and Sanbonmatsu (2013), leads directly to women requiring more encouragement than men to run. The patriarchal history of our government and the precedent of our majority-male congress/executive is a major intimidation factor when

women are deciding whether or not to run. Later in the book Carroll and Sanbonmatsu (2013) mention that throughout our nation's history, "women have been excluded from and marginalized in the realm of electoral politics," and that female politicians today "are sometimes met with skepticism on the part of voters, the media, and political parties, creating higher hurdles for women to surmount" (p. 124). This becomes relevant here because we can understand that the mistreatment and the hurdles create the hesitancy to run that we observe in American women. This hesitancy creates the need for encouragement and external support.

Aside from hesitancy to run due to the potential hurdles and mistreatment, there is one other crucial element that results in a need for encouragement: qualifications. Carroll and Sanbonmatsu (2013) quote Lawless and Fox (2005) in saying that "women potential candidates are less likely than men to view themselves as qualified for holding public office" (p. 48). There is an observable disparity between male and female feelings of adequacy. Carroll and Sanbonmatsu (2013) also point out that female candidates for office are frequently more experienced than male candidates, which raises the question of

whether or not that excess experience is necessary, or a symptom of something else. Despite the excess experience, women still frequently feel inadequate compared to their male counterparts. The authors then posit that, "It may be that women acquire more experience in order to bolster their confidence and feel sufficiently qualified while men more often feel qualified without a great deal of experience" (Carroll & Sanbonmatsu, 2013, p. 35). They also sought opinions from female legislators about why women felt compelled to gain more experience than men, one of whom said that perhaps women have more experience in order to "feel solid about their credentials before they put themselves out there," while another said that it was "an act of self protection" (p. 35). Lastly, Carroll and Sanbonmatsu (2013) argue that it may not only be an issue of women not being confident about their experience, but about men being overconfident in their mediocre levels of experience. The overall result is an increase in women feeling hesitant to run because our society continues to uplift and support under-qualified men while devaluing overqualified women. This theory was put to the ultimate test in the 2016 presidential election when Hillary Clinton, possibly the most qualified

woman in the United States, lost the presidency to what I would call an extraordinarily underqualified man. Regardless of the circumstances, across the board Carroll and Sanbonmatsu (2013) conclude that female legislators “are more likely to have received encouragement from parties and organizations” (p. 125). Whether their own personal desire to enact change played a part or not, they likely needed the extra push because they know just how female politicians are treated in the United States.

SterHEotypes

“Politics is a highly masculinized space, and women are still viewed as intruders whose presence disrupts the traditional order” (Carroll & Sanbonmatsu, 2013, p. 47). As intruders, women are faced with stereotyping and character defamation on a daily basis when running for office or trying to enter the political realm. Carroll and Sanbonmatsu (2013) point out that past social-psychological research has found “that men are viewed as more agentic (e.g., assertive, ambitious, confident, and competitive), while women are viewed as more communal (e.g., nurturant, sensitive to the needs of others, helpful, and supportive)” (p. 45). These views perpetuate the stereotypes that hold

female politicians back in the United States. They are seen as weak, emotional, and soft, while men are the strong and ambitious leaders that we believe are capable of leading. In her book, *When Does Gender Matter?: Women Candidates and Gender Stereotypes in American Elections*, Kathleen Dolan (2014) uses her background in research to examine the impact of gender stereotypes in U.S. elections. Dolan (2014) introduces prime examples of gender stereotyping very early on in her book:

In 2010, Kelly Ayotte, the attorney general of New Hampshire and a candidate for an open U.S. Senate seat, had to respond to concerns that being elected to the Senate would leave her with little time to be a good mother to her two young children. In running for governor of her state that same year, Oklahoma Lt. Governor Jari Askins was asked whether, as a single, childless woman, she had enough life experience to understand the concerns of the average Oklahoma family (p. 2).

She continues with more, but the juxtaposition of just these two examples illustrates two oxymoronic biases: first, that a woman with a family cannot be an effective politician, and second, that a woman without a family cannot be an effective politician. Many would call this a lose-lose situation. Women are also commonly referred to as overly

emotional candidates who do not “possess the reason or dispassion to adequately provide political leadership” (Dolan, 2014, p.61). Stereotypes surrounding familial obligations and emotionality are frequently observed stereotypes, with physical appearance also making headlines once in a while. More substantively, Dolan (2014) points out the issue-based stereotypes that are often placed upon women, referring to the assumption that they are “more interested in, and more effective in dealing with, issues such as child care, poverty, education, health care, women’s issues, and the environment” (p. 20), while men are accredited strength in economics, military, and agriculture, to name a few. Women across the country watch female candidates suffer sexist stereotyping and criticism every day. Would you feel confident in running for office after observing all of that?

Alongside the stereotypical biases placed upon female candidates, because they are women, they are frequently sexualized. Caroline Heldman and Lisa Wade (2011) published an article about the sexual objectification of female candidates in the United States, analyzed through the lens of Sarah Palin’s experience running for Vice President. They reference research from Heflick and Goldenberg (2011) that links the

sexualization of female candidates to negative perceptions of said candidates, and importantly, that, focus on “Palin’s appearance ‘led people to perceive Palin as less competent, warm and moral’” (Heflick & Goldenberg, 2010, p. 156, as cited in Heldman & Wade, 2011). Public sexualization of female candidates is never well-meaning, and it happens far too frequently for us to allow it to continue. Heldman and Wade (2011) reference the sexualization of Hillary Clinton, at times focused on the way her laugh sounds or on her cleavage, while 14 percent of the media coverage of Sarah Palin throughout her election focused on her physical appearance, from “VPILF” (Vice President I’d like to fuck), to Caribou Barbie. They conclude that the stagnation in women’s representation in Congress directly correlates with the modernization of the internet and access to the media’s sexual objectification of female candidates (Heldman & Wade, 2011). The bias is further exemplified in Kelly Dittmar’s (2016) article for the American Political Science Association, where she quotes the rapper T.I.:

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] (p. 808).

This is a sentiment used frequently by misogynists that do not want to see women in office. Jeb Lund tried to discredit Hillary Clinton's campaign progress by calling her shrill and whiny, and that she was frequently angry or nagging. Donald Trump ridiculed Carly Fiorina, saying that her voice caused people to develop headaches (Dittmar, 2016, p. 808). No matter what your policy stances are, what you look like, how old or young you are, if you are a woman in politics, misogyny comes with the territory in the United States, but it doesn't have to be this way. Despite the fact that Dittmar references research proving media attention to women's appearance has a negative impact on voter perceptions of their leadership qualifications, Carly Fiorina had this to say:

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 (McAfee & Westfall, 2015, para. 2).

That just about covers it.

Double Standards and Media CovHERage

Alongside the stereotypes and sexism placed upon women in U.S. politics, we constantly see double standards that are far more forgiving towards our male counterparts. Double standards on a small scale are influencing the way the public interprets the emotions of a candidate. On a much larger scale, they are shaping the stories that the media show to voters that in turn, impact their voting choices. Dittmar (2016) used Hillary Clinton's cool and collected behavior in her Benghazi hearing in 2015 as an example of a woman having to remain calm through what many would consider a highly tense situation. This becomes relevant when Dittmar continues on to point out that experimental research has found that in debate situations, "men tend to gain influence as they become angry, while angry women tend to lose influence" (Dittmar, 2016, p. 808). This is a clear example of different standards men and women are held to in our government, and it is all based off of that age-old assumption that women are far too emotional for politics. To look at the topic from another angle, Carroll and Sanbonmatsu (2013) cite experience as

another area in which there is a double standard. When working under the assumption that women need more experience than men to enter the political sphere, Carroll and Sanbonmatsu (2013) posit that,

An alternative explanation for the finding that women have more political experience is that there may be a double standard in which more is expected of women candidates. Women may need more experience than men in order to be viewed as equally qualified (p. 36).

They quote female legislators they spoke to as part of their research. These legislators frequently saw the experience disparity between genders. One legislator told Carroll and Sanbonmatsu (2013), “When women come on the scene, they have to prove themselves whereas men are given the presumption of competence until they disprove it” (p. 36). The authors quote three women who each echoed the sentiment that women have to work harder than an inexperienced man to be as respected as he is, solely because of our gender (Carroll & Sanbonmatsu, 2013). Women have to cater to the patriarchal system that our government is currently functioning under. From the way we express (or choose not to express) our emotion, to the lengths we will go to in order to convince ourselves and others

that we are qualified enough for our jobs, there is a completely different, and far more lax, set of rules for men.

The culmination of double standards, in this context, appears in the way women are treated in the media. In a research project based around coverage of female candidates in Senate and Gubernatorial races, authors Johanna Dunaway, Regina G. Lawrence, Melody Rose, and Christopher R. Weber (2013) find that female candidates are far more likely to garner trait-based coverage in the media while male candidates are more consistently covered based on their issue positions. While some notable candidates like Hillary Clinton did not suffer from a lack of coverage in any area, differences based on gender nonetheless exist, specifically an overemphasis on women’s personal traits and a lack of coverage on their issue stances (Dunaway et al., 2013). Dunaway et al. (2013) note that their “findings underscore an important dynamic at play in American political campaigns.... Races with a female candidate lead to news that is more focused on the personal traits and characteristics of the candidates,” while all-male contests garnered more issue coverage (p. 722). Echoing the conclusions of this project, Danny Hayes and Jennifer L. Lawless (2016) in

Women on the Run: Gender, Media, and Political Campaigns in a Polarized Era, explain the double standards: “compared to male candidates, female candidates are treated differently – and often worse – in the press and by the public,” (p. 16). These portrayals of female candidates not only align with, but also actively reinforce the public perception of female politicians by voters. The negative perception of female politicians by voters is an apparently everlasting relic of the patriarchy that our society has been formed and conditioned under. Further, Hayes and Lawless (2016) point out that women have to present themselves more strategically to the world. Due to the relatively equal competitiveness and resource supply of male and female candidates, “there are few reasons for journalists to treat equally qualified male and female candidates differently,” (p. 20) yet, they continue to do just that.

Through statistical analysis and simple observation, it is clear to see that the norm favors male candidates, and that women are held to a far different standard from their appearance to their experience. When it comes down to it, Hayes and Lawless (2016) remind us yet again that women are consistently more likely to be described using traditionally feminine traits like compassion and

loyalty while masculine traits like leadership and competence are attributed to the men. This sexist coverage creates challenges for female candidates. Hayes and Lawless (2016) say that because women receive higher amounts of trait coverage and lower amounts of issue coverage when compared to men, voters are less likely to see said women as effective politicians. It is difficult to comprehend the effect that media coverage has on voter perceptions of female politicians, but with today’s media and news coverage being so controversial and polarized, it is surely no small impact.

Experience, emotion, presentation. Three of many realms in which society has wholly different expectations for men and women in politics. Three realms in which women truly prove not only sufficient, but also exceptional, time after time, regardless of the ways in which they are portrayed.

Patriarch-SHE and the Future

Society today is exposed to sexism and misogyny against female politicians through the news and social media in a more pervasive way than ever. Under our current administration, fighting the patriarchy seems to be a common theme amongst those who are resisting the precedents being set by the President.

Given the current climate, however, we are still frequently met with “but things are **so** much better than they used to be!” Sure, but the perpetuation of this idea is a part of the problem. Cynthia Enloe’s (2017), *The Big Push: Exposing and Challenging the Persistence of Patriarchy*, is self-explanatory and nothing but on-the-money for our current situation. She tells us:

Patriarchy is as current as Brexit, Donald Trump, and nationalist political parties. It is as *au courant* as Twitter, hedge funds, and weaponized drones. Patriarchy is not old-fashioned; it is as hip as football millionaires and Silicon Valley start-ups. The fact that patriarchy is a term so many people shy away from using is one of the things that enables it to survive (Enloe, 2017, p. 15).

This country was founded by men. Granted, many of them had a brilliant woman working behind the scenes (I’m looking at you, Abigail Adams), but it nonetheless was founded on their principles, and thus, the United States Government and its patriarchal foundations were born. We are nearing 250 years into nationhood, and Enloe (2017) could not have said it better. Patriarchy is as modern as Twitter and has evolved with society. Enloe (2017) echoes reminders of double standards in her text, saying, “Patriarchy’s fans in the

political sphere, meanwhile, have not been able to prevent more women from running...but they have held them to standards of parenting and appearance that no male candidate has had to meet” (p. 162). She also emphasizes the fact that patriarchal values admire those masculine leadership characteristics in men, with the same admiration for women who “devote themselves first and foremost to mothering,” (p. 18). Pretty reminiscent of the gendered media coverage of politicians, no? My central point for this long descent into the patriarchy is this: patriarchy is the material from which the fateful glass ceiling is made.

Given this, we nevertheless have to remain optimistic about the future. If nothing else, draw your optimism from the November 2018 midterms. Kayla Epstein and Eugene Scott (2018) write for *The Washington Post* that the 2018 midterms “ushered in one of the most diverse groups of politicians in American history, bringing in a new wave of governors, senators and representatives who will break decades-or even centuries-long barriers” (para.1). Among the victors:

- Kyrsten Sinema: the first openly bisexual Senator, *and* Arizona’s first female Senator (Epstein & Scott, 2018, para 4);

- Ayanna Pressley: Massachusetts' first black Congresswoman (para 5);
- Marsha Blackburn: Tennessee's first female Senator (para 6);
- Jahana Hayes: Connecticut's first black Congresswoman(para 8);
- Deb Haaland & Sharice Davids: the first Native American Congresswomen (para 9);
- Rashida Tlaib & Ilhan Omar: the first Muslim Congresswomen(para 11);

And lastly, a personal favorite of mine:

- Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez: the youngest woman ever elected to Congress (para. 12).

I choose to be hopeful. If we ensure that no one remains complacent and we keep putting the work in, I am not sure anyone can hold women back in this government moving forward. Once midterms were over, society immediately began looking towards November 2020. The field is not lacking in women. Kirsten Gillibrand, Liz Warren, Kamala Harris, and additional women have already thrown their hats into the ring, running for the biggest office in the country. I am thrilled to see how the campaigns will develop through the primaries and beyond. Cynthia Enloe (2017) said it best, "Where patriarchal ideas and relationships flourish, there is

the possibility that they can shrivel. For such shrivelings to occur, however, we need to view each of these places with fresh feminist eyes" (p. 76). That is precisely what I intend to do.

Love, ME.

May 18, Year 2033

Dear Me,

*Work went well today. That bill I've been working for since last year finally passed into law. Things are finally starting to slow down since the last election; the whole city has been crazy. If you're reading this in 2019, then I know you know what a crazy election looks like already. But I have to make an important distinction here. I mean crazy in a **good** way, not crazy in a 2016-election way. It was even better than 2028, and no one thought that was possible.*

I'm writing because I know things have been tough. Your college years taught you a lot, but they also showed you that things really aren't as equal as society wants you to think they are. You found that niche, that spark that really sets your soul on fire, and it all started with you asking yourself, why are there so few women in our government? From there, the snowball of research and discovery grew larger than ever imaginable. You'd never believe everything you're going to be a part of in the future, simply because of that one question. Graduation is just the beginning. Don't be nervous about moving to D.C., you know that it's the right decision,

and the city is waiting for you to come make your mark.

*The year 2019 left you with a Congress that was just shy of 25 percent women. Well, you're 35 years old now, and Congress is now 44 percent women. We haven't quite doubled it, but damn are we close. Close enough to be proud. Not close enough to be complacent. The ERA finally passed in 2026, and because I know you're wondering, Roe v. Wade is alive and well, and Planned Parenthood is still fully funded across the country. Comprehensive parental leave laws are federal now, our previously dismal maternal mortality rates have improved, and women have continued to fight for what we need and resist those who want to speak over us. Change has been made. And you might be surprised to hear, you've been there in the thick of it all. The work has been hard, and at times disheartening, but you have climbed the ranks like you wanted to, not necessarily exactly **how** you wanted to. Where you are now is because of everywhere you've been along the way.*

Inching closer to parity in government, stepping more aggressively into the realm of politics, and proving our knowledge and skill over and over again in those "masculine" areas like military, foreign policy, and national security; these are the things that have created a more equitable air in politics. The glass ceiling has been shattered, and you're reaching for the next level. You've spent all four years of your undergraduate education wondering if it will all be worth it in the end, and if change will ever truly be effected. You're wondering when you'll see a woman sitting at the desk in the Oval Office. It is closer than you think, and it is so, so worth it. Take it from me... because you know what never gets old? Despite all the steps backwards and disheartening vetoes? Despite all the doubters, all the stereotypes, and all the good, long, cries along the way?

The joy in your heart when someone calls you "Senator Bygall."

Love, Me

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