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978-0-521-73447-9 - Gender and Elections: Shaping the Future of American Politics, Second Edition

Edited by Susan J. Carroll and Richard L. Fox

Excerpt

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SUSAN J. CARROLL AND RICHARD L. FOX

Introduction

Gender and Electoral Politics in the Early Twenty-First Century

The 2008 elections in the United States will surely be remembered most for the historic election of Barack Obama as the first African American president. In a hotly contested and intensely watched presidential campaign, Senator Obama defeated Republican Senator John McCain and won a higher percentage of votes than any Democratic presidential candidate since Lyndon Johnson in 1964.

Nevertheless, throughout the 2008 presidential election process, gender played a more direct and prominent role than at any time in history. In one election cycle, the country experienced perhaps the two highest-profile candidacies of women in U.S. history. Senator Hillary Clinton emerged as the early front-runner for the Democratic nomination for president, ultimately winning twenty-three state primaries and caucuses in the longest and most competitive presidential nomination process in the modern era. Although Obama ultimately edged out Clinton to become the Democratic nominee, Clinton is the first woman ever to have come close to winning a major party's presidential nomination.

After Barack Obama chose Senator Joe Biden rather than Hillary Clinton as his running mate, Republican John McCain surprised the country and chose a woman, Alaska Governor Sarah Palin, as his vice presidential nominee. As the first female Republican candidate for vice president, Palin joined Democrat Geraldine Ferraro, who was Walter Mondale's vice presidential running mate in 1984, as the only women to have ever run on a national ticket.

The candidacies of Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin were major breakthroughs for women, but even before the historic 2008 election, the traditionally masculine face of top leadership in national politics had begun to change. Most notably, in 2007 Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi was elected

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Speaker of the House after Democrats recaptured a majority of seats in both houses of Congress in the 2006 elections.

Women clearly have been making great strides in the political life of our nation, and gender has been playing an increasingly visible and important role in elections. This volume analyzes various aspects of electoral politics, showing how underlying gender dynamics are critical to shaping the contours and the outcomes of elections in the United States. No interpretation of American elections can be complete without an understanding of the increasing role of women as political actors and the multiple ways that gender enters into and affects contemporary electoral politics.

THE GENDERED NATURE OF ELECTIONS

Elections in the United States are deeply gendered in several different ways. Most obviously, men dominate the electoral playing field. Eighteen of the nineteen major candidates who vied for the Democratic and Republican nominations for president in 2008 were men. Similarly, men constituted the vast majority of candidates for governor and Congress in 2008. Most behind-the-scenes campaign strategists and consultants – the pollsters, media experts, fund-raising advisers, and those who develop campaign messages – are also men. Further, most of the best-known network news reporters and anchors, charged with telling the story of the 2008 election and previous elections (such as Charlie Gibson, Brian Williams, and Brit Hume), were men. The most visible exception was Katie Couric, anchor of *CBS Evening News*. A 2007 Media Matters study of cable television news (such as Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC) found that more than 80 percent of program hosts were men. Also, more than 75 percent of political newspaper columnists and editorial writers across the country are men.¹ The leading voices in political talk radio, to whom millions of Americans listen every week, are men, such as Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity. And the majority of those contributing the largest sums of money to candidates and parties, perhaps the most essential ingredient in American politics, are, of course, men.²

Beyond the continued dominance of men in politics, gendered language permeates our political landscape. Politics and elections are most often described in terms of analogies and metaphors drawn from the traditionally masculine domains of war and sports. Contests for office are often referred to by reporters and political pundits as battles requiring the necessary strategy to harm, damage, or even destroy the opponent.

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The headquarters of presidential campaigns are called war rooms. Candidates attack their opponents. They raise money for their war chests. The greatest amount of attention in presidential races is focused on critical battleground states. In the post-9/11 environment of recent elections, candidates across the country have touted their toughness in wanting to hunt down and kill terrorists.

Along with the language of war, sports language is also prevalent in campaigns and in media coverage of campaigns. Considerable attention is devoted to discussion of which candidate is ahead or behind in the horse race. Similarly, commentators talk about how campaigns are rounding the bend, entering the stretch drive, or in the final lap. Although language drawn from the racetrack is common, so, too, is language drawn from boxing, baseball, football, and other sports. Coverage of political debates often focuses on whether one of the candidates has scored a knockout punch. When a candidate becomes aggressive, he or she is described as taking the gloves off. A popular political cable television talk show is named *Hardball with Chris Matthews*. Candidates running for elective office frequently talk about making a comeback, scoring a victory, or being in the early innings of a campaign. When a campaign is in trouble, the candidate may need to throw a Hail Mary pass. If something unexpected occurs, commentators report that a candidate has been thrown a curve ball.

The language of war and sports, two of the most traditionally masculine domains in American society, is so prevalent in our political discourse that it is even used by those who wish to increase women's political involvement. For example, to provide more opportunities for women to enter politics, advocates frequently argue that we need to level the playing field.

As the language used to analyze politics suggests, our expectations about the qualities, appearance, and behavior of candidates also are highly gendered. We want our leaders to be tough, dominant, and assertive – qualities much more associated with masculinity than femininity in American culture. In the post-9/11 environment, a military background, especially with combat experience, is a very desirable quality for a candidate, but military credentials remain almost exclusively the domain of male candidates. A military background is particularly desirable for a presidential candidate, who, if elected, will assume the responsibilities of commander in chief. However, because the American public has seen very few women among generals or top military officials, the idea of a female commander in chief still seems an oxymoron to many.

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Americans even have gendered expectations about how candidates and political leaders should dress. While women politicians are no longer expected to wear only neutral-colored, tailored business suits, jogging attire or blue jeans still are not nearly as acceptable for women as for men. Americans have grown accustomed to seeing their male political leaders in casual attire. During the 1990s, we frequently saw pictures of Bill Clinton jogging in shorts, accompanied by members of the Secret Service. More recently, we saw images of President George W. Bush on his ranch in jeans and cowboy boots. To counter criticisms that the McCain campaign had spent an extravagant amount on designer clothes for her and her family, Sarah Palin made a few campaign appearances in 2008 in her blue jeans – a first for a high-profile woman candidate! However, she was careful to pair her jeans with professional-looking jackets and nice jewelry, thus appearing casually dressed only from the waist down. Although Palin broke new ground in 2008 by wearing jeans in public, she is still the exception to the rule. We have yet to see a picture of Nancy Pelosi or Hillary Clinton outfitted in jogging shorts or blue jeans and cowboy boots.

Finally, elections in the United States are gendered in the strategies that candidates employ in reaching out to women and men in the general public. Candidates, both men and women, strategize about how to present themselves to voters of the same and opposite sexes. Pollsters and campaign consultants routinely try to figure out what issues or themes will appeal specifically to women or to men. Increasingly, candidates and their strategists are designing different messages to be delivered to voters on the basis of their gender and other demographics. Specially devised appeals are directed at young women, working-class men, senior women, single women, married women, suburban women, white men, and women of color, to name only some of the targeted groups.

In short, when we look at the people, the language, the expectations, and the strategies of contemporary politics, we see that gender plays an important role in elections in the United States. Even when gender is not explicitly acknowledged, it often operates in the background, affecting our assumptions about who legitimate political actors are and how they should behave.

This is not to say, however, that the role of gender has been constant over time. Rather, we regard gender as malleable, manifesting itself differently at various times and in different contexts in the electoral process. In women's candidacies for elective office, for example, there has been obvious change. As recently as twenty years ago, a woman seeking high-level office almost anywhere in the United States was an anomaly

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and might have faced overt hostility. Clearly, the electoral environment is more hospitable now. Over the years, slowly but steadily, more and more women have entered the electoral arena at all levels. In 2008 Hillary Clinton was for many months the front-runner to become the Democratic Party's presidential nominee. And as we begin to look forward to the 2012 presidential elections, Sarah Palin is frequently touted as a possible contender in the Republican Party.

POLITICAL REPRESENTATION AND SIMPLE JUSTICE: WHY GENDER MATTERS IN ELECTORAL POLITICS

In addition to the reality that gender is an underlying factor that shapes the contours of contemporary elections, examining and monitoring the role of gender in the electoral process are important because of concerns over justice and the quality of political representation. The United States lags far behind many other nations in the number of women serving in its national legislature. Following the 2008 elections, the United States ranked number 84 among countries throughout the world in the proportion of women serving in their national parliaments or legislatures; only 16.8 percent of all members of Congress were women. In mid 2009, women served as governors in only six of the fifty states, and only 24.3 percent of all state legislators across the country were women according to the Center for American Women and Politics.³

Despite the relatively low proportion of women in positions of political leadership, women constitute a majority of the voters who elect these leaders. In the 2008 elections, for example, 70.4 million women reported voting, compared with 60.7 million men, according to U.S. Census figures. Thus, 9.7 million more women than men voted in those elections.⁴ As a matter of simple justice, something seems fundamentally wrong with a democratic system that has a majority of women among its voters but leaves women so dramatically underrepresented among its elected political leaders. As Sue Thomas has explained, "A government that is democratically organized cannot be truly legitimate if all its citizens from . . . both sexes do not have a potential interest in and opportunity for serving their community and nation."⁵ The fact that women constitute a majority of the electorate but only a small minority of public officials would seem a sufficient reason, in and of itself, to pay attention to the underlying gender dynamics of U.S. politics.

Beyond the issue of simple justice, however, are significant concerns over the quality of political representation in the United States. Beginning

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with a series of studies supported by the Center for American Women and Politics in the 1980s, a great deal of empirical research indicates that women and men support and devote attention to somewhat different issues as public officials.⁶ At both the national level and the state level, male and female legislators have been found to have different policy priorities and preferences. Studies of members of the U.S. House of Representatives, for example, have found that women are more likely than men to support policies favoring gender equity, day-care programs, flex-time in the workplace, legal and accessible abortion, minimum wage increases, and the extension of the food stamp program.⁷ Further, both Democratic and moderate Republican women in Congress are more likely than men to use their bill sponsorship and cosponsorship activity to focus on issues of particular concern to women.⁸ Similarly, several studies have found that women serving in legislatures at the state level give priority to, introduce, and work on legislation related to women's rights, health care, education, and the welfare of families and children more often than men do.⁹ When women are not present in sufficient numbers among public officials, their distinctive perspectives are underrepresented.

In addition to having priorities and voting records that differ from those of men, women public officials exhibit leadership styles and ways of conducting business that differ from those of their male colleagues. A study of mayors found that women tend to adopt an approach to governing that emphasizes congeniality and cooperation, whereas men tend to emphasize hierarchy.¹⁰ Research on state legislators has also uncovered significant differences in the manner in which female and male committee chairs conduct themselves at hearings; women are more likely to act as facilitators, whereas men tend to use their power to control the direction of the hearings.¹¹ Other research has found that majorities of female legislators and somewhat smaller majorities or sizable minorities of male legislators believe that the increased presence of women has made a difference in the access that the economically disadvantaged have to the legislature, the extent to which the legislature is sympathetic to the concerns of racial and ethnic minorities, and the degree to which legislative business is conducted in public view rather than behind closed doors.¹² Women officials' propensity to conduct business in a manner that is more cooperative, communicative, inclusive, public, and based on coalition building may well lead to policy outcomes that represent the input of a wider range of people and a greater diversity of perspectives.¹³

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The presence of women among elected officials also helps to empower other women. Barbara Burrell captures this idea well:

Women in public office stand as symbols for other women, both enhancing their identification with the system and their ability to have influence within it. This subjective sense of being involved and heard for women, in general, alone makes the election of women to public office important.¹⁴

Women officials are committed to ensuring that other women follow in their footsteps, and large majorities mentor other women and encourage them to run for office.¹⁵

Thus, attention to the role of gender in the electoral process, and more specifically to the presence of women among elected officials, is critically important because it has implications for improving the quality of political representation. The election of more women to office would likely lead to more legislation and policies that reflect the greater priority women give to women's rights, the welfare of children and families, health care, and education. Further, the election of more women might well lead to policies based on the input of a wider range of people and a greater diversity of perspectives. Finally, electing more women would most likely lead to enhanced political empowerment for other women.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

This volume applies a gendered lens to aid in the interpretation and understanding of contemporary elections in the United States. Contributors examine the ways that gender enters into, helps to shape, and affects elections for offices ranging from president to state legislature across the United States. As several chapters in this volume demonstrate, gender dynamics are important to the conduct and outcomes of presidential elections even though, to date, a woman has not won a major party's nomination for president. Gender also shapes the ways candidates appeal to voters as well as the ways voters respond to candidates. Many women have run for Congress and for offices in state government, and this volume analyzes the support they have received, the problems they have confronted, and why there are not more women candidates. Women of color face additional and distinctive challenges in electoral politics because of the interaction of their race or ethnicity and gender, and this volume also contributes to an understanding of the status of and electoral

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circumstances confronted by women of color, particularly African American women and Latinas.

In Chapter 1, Georgia Duerst-Lahti discusses the gender dynamics of the presidential election process. She examines the meaning of the phrase “presidential timber” to demonstrate how masculinity has shaped ideas of suitable presidential candidates. Duerst-Lahti argues that embedded in presidential elections and the traditions that accompany them are implicit assumptions that make presidential elections masculine space, including the test of executive toughness, a preference for military heroes, and the sports-related metaphors employed in describing presidential debates. Americans have carefully sought the right *man* for the job of single great leader and commander in chief of “the greatest nation on earth.” She demonstrates how this construction of the presidency leads to struggles over different forms of masculinity and has implications for women as candidates and citizens.

In Chapter 2, Susan J. Carroll and Kelly Dittmar examine the 2008 candidacies of Hillary Clinton for president and Sarah Palin for vice president, focusing on the ways that various gender stereotypes influenced the strategies employed by their campaigns, the media’s coverage of their campaigns, and public reactions to the candidates. Carroll and Dittmar review the history of women’s efforts to run for president and vice president, focusing largely on major party candidates. They then provide short overviews of the backgrounds and accomplishments of both Clinton and Palin before turning their attention to gender stereotypes. Despite their different ideologies and personas, Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin both had to deal with gender stereotypes that their male competitors did not face. Carroll and Dittmar assess the specific ways in which gender stereotypes related to experience, toughness, the role of commander in chief, children and spouses, and sexuality affected the campaigns of both women.

In Chapter 3, Susan A. MacManus focuses on the changing dynamics of gender and political participation, particularly on the techniques that political parties and women’s groups used to bolster female registration, turnout, and candidate selection in the 2008 election. She chronicles the historic fight for women’s suffrage and examines changes over time in registration and turnout rates. MacManus details the razor-sharp targeting of women through the use of various advertising and mobilization tools, and she provides examples of direct-mail ads that were used in the 2008 election to persuade women voters and to boost their turnout rates. MacManus devotes particular attention to the use of female star power

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and woman-to-woman mobilization efforts. Many high-profile women played key roles in convincing women to vote and to support one presidential candidate over the other in 2008.

In Chapter 4, Susan J. Carroll examines voting differences between women and men in recent elections. A gender gap in voting, with women usually more likely than men to support the Democratic candidate, has been evident in every presidential election since 1980 and in majorities of races at other levels of office. Carroll traces the history of the gender gap and documents its breadth and persistence. She examines the complicated question of what happens to the gender gap when one of the candidates in a race is a woman. Carroll reviews different explanations for the gender gap and identifies what we do and do not know about why women and men in the aggregate differ in their voting choices. She also analyzes the different strategies that candidates and campaigns have employed for dealing with the gender gap and appealing to women voters.

In Chapter 5, Christine Sierra focuses on the role of Latinas in U.S. politics. She assesses the evolving nature of the Latino electorate and describes the political and voting behavior of Latinas. Sierra also examines Latina officeholders and the roads they have traveled. She devotes particular attention to the role Latina voters played in 2008 in the battle for the Democratic nomination, at the national conventions, and in the general election. Her detailed analysis of the 2008 presidential race examines how the Democratic and Republican campaigns tried to reach out to the Latina electorate.

In Chapter 6, Wendy G. Smooth traces African American women's participation in electoral politics from Democrat Shirley Chisholm's historic 1972 campaign for president of the United States to former senator Carol Moseley Braun's 2004 campaign for the Democratic nomination to the lower-profile, third-party presidential bid of Cynthia McKinney in 2008. The chapter provides a historical overview of African American women's political participation as candidates in American politics. Following the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, African Americans made unprecedented strides in electoral politics. Since the passage of that legislation, the number of African American elected officials serving at every level of government has soared. Smooth chronicles the successes of African American women in politics, the continued barriers they face as they seek greater inclusion in the American political system, and their activism in overcoming those barriers.

In Chapter 7, Richard L. Fox analyzes the historical evolution of women running for seats in the U.S. Congress. The fundamental question

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he addresses is why women continue to be so underrepresented in the congressional ranks. Fox examines the experiences of female and male candidates for Congress by comparing fund-raising totals and vote totals. His analysis also explores the subtler ways that gender dynamics manifest in the electoral arena, examining regional variation in the performance of women and men running for Congress, the difficulty of change in light of the incumbency advantage, and gender differences in political ambition to serve in the House or Senate. The chapter concludes with an assessment of the degree to which gender still plays an important role in congressional elections and the prospects for gender parity in the future.

In Chapter 8, Barbara Burrell examines the roles played by political parties and women's organizations in promoting and facilitating the election of women to public office. The conventional view has been that parties primarily have recruited women in "hopeless" races and as sacrificial candidates in contests where the party had little prospect of winning. Over time, political parties have become somewhat more supportive of women's candidacies even as the role of parties in campaigns has been challenged by other groups, such as women's political action committees. Burrell describes the increasing involvement of women in the party organizations and the evolving focus on electing women to public office as a means to achieve equality. The role of national party organizations and women's groups in increasing the numbers of women running for and elected to Congress is examined, with particular attention to the financial support such organizations have provided for women candidates.

In Chapter 9, Dianne Bystrom examines the impact of the media on candidates' campaigns for political office. Studies have shown that newspapers often cover women less than their male opponents, focus on image attributes over issue stances, and raise questions about the women's viability. Consequently, candidate-mediated messages – television advertising and Web sites – are particularly important to women candidates as they attempt to present their issues and images directly to voters during a political campaign. The chapter reviews the state of knowledge about women candidates, their media coverage, television commercials, and Web sites, and it provides examples of how women candidates may be able to capitalize on their controlled communication channels to influence their media coverage and create a positive, integrated message that connects with voters.

Finally, in Chapter 10, Kira Sanbonmatsu turns to the often-overlooked subject of gender in state elections. She addresses two central questions: How many women ran for state legislative and statewide