

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84492-5 - Gender and Elections: Shaping the Future of American Politics

Edited by Susan J. Carroll and Richard L. Fox

Excerpt

[More information](#)

SUSAN J. CARROLL AND RICHARD L. FOX

Introduction: Gender and Electoral Politics into the Twenty-first Century

The 2004 elections in the United States will surely be remembered most for the hotly contested and deeply divisive presidential election between incumbent Republican President George W. Bush and Democratic challenger John F. Kerry. Because of the international and domestic controversy over the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, the entire world was watching this election. The Democrats and John Kerry both tried to reassure voters that they could keep the country safe and to turn attention to domestic issues, such as jobs and the economy, where polls showed they had an advantage. In contrast, the Republicans and George W. Bush preferred to keep the public focused on homeland security and the fight against terrorism, where they had the upper hand. After Kerry wrapped up his party's nomination in March, more than seven months before the election, most polls forecasted a close race. Indeed, the race remained tight through election day. In fact, for the first time in history, the Gallup organization's final pre-election poll in 2004 projected the race as dead even,¹ and the intensity of the campaign propelled a higher percentage of voters to the ballot box than at any time in the last forty years. Ultimately, President George W. Bush was re-elected by a margin of 51 to 48 percent, and Republicans strengthened their majorities in both the U.S. House and Senate.

To the casual observer, the storyline of the 2004 election would appear to have little to do with gender. However, we contend that underlying gender dynamics are critical to shaping the contours and the outcomes of elections in the United States. The purpose of this volume is to demonstrate the importance of gender in understanding and interpreting American elections and to provide an overview of the multiple ways in which gender enters into and affects contemporary electoral politics.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84492-5 - Gender and Elections: Shaping the Future of American Politics

Edited by Susan J. Carroll and Richard L. Fox

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE GENDERED NATURE OF ELECTIONS

Elections in the United States are deeply gendered in several different ways. Most obviously, the electoral playing field is dominated by men. Ten of the eleven major party candidates for President in 2004 were men. Similarly, men comprised the vast majority of candidates for governor and Congress in 2004. Most behind-the-scenes campaign strategists and consultants – the pollsters, media experts, fundraising advisors, and those who develop campaign messages – are also men. Further, the best-known network news reporters and anchors (such as Dan Rather, Peter Jennings, Tom Brokaw, Brian Williams, and Brit Hume), who were charged with telling the story of the 2004 and previous elections, are men. On cable television news, the highest rated programs on Fox News, MSNBC, and CNN, all of which cover politics extensively, are hosted by men. Also, more than 75 percent of political newspaper columnists and editorial writers across the country are male.² The leading voices in political talk radio, such as Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity, to whom millions of Americans listen every week, are men. And the majority of those contributing the largest sums of money, perhaps the most essential ingredient in American politics, to the campaigns and parties are, of course, men.

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. 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 the 2004 presidential race was focused on critical “battleground” states. Candidates across the country in 2004 touted their toughness in “hunting down” and “killing” the terrorists who attacked the United States on September 11, 2001.

Along with the language of war, sports language is also prevalent in campaigns and in the coverage of campaigns by the media. Considerable attention is devoted to discussion of which candidate is ahead and behind in the “horse race.” Similarly, commentators talk about how campaigns are “rounding the bend,” “entering the stretch drive,” or “in the final lap.” But while language drawn from the race tracks 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

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84492-5 - Gender and Elections: Shaping the Future of American Politics

Edited by Susan J. Carroll and Richard L. Fox

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

3

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.” 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 to have, 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, since 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 Americans.

Even the expectations Americans have about how candidates and political leaders should dress are gendered. While women politicians are no longer expected to wear only neutral-colored, tailored business suits, jogging attire or blue jeans still are not acceptable. Americans have grown accustomed to seeing their male political leaders in casual attire. During the 1990s we frequently saw pictures of Bill Clinton jogging with members of the Secret Service. More recently, we have all seen images of President George W. Bush on his ranch in jeans and cowboy boots. Yet, never have we seen a picture of Condoleezza Rice or Hillary Clinton outfitted in jogging shorts or dressed in blue jeans and cowboy boots.

Finally, elections in the United States are gendered in the strategies 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

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84492-5 - Gender and Elections: Shaping the Future of American Politics

Edited by Susan J. Carroll and Richard L. Fox

Excerpt

[More information](#)

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 based on their gender and other demographics. Specially devised appeals are directed at young women, working class men, senior women, hunters (mostly men), 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 are legitimate political actors 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 and in many instances 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 2004 for the first time, a woman, former First Lady and New York Senator Hilary Clinton, was forecast as the prospective frontrunner of her party if she were to seek the nomination to become president of the United States. Senator Clinton was the subject of intense media speculation about whether she would indeed run for president in 2004. In fact, toward the end of 2003, Tim Russert, the host of the political talk show *Meet the Press*, asked Senator Clinton eight separate times in one interview whether she might throw her hat into the ring and run for president in 2004. And as we head toward the 2008 presidential election, Senator Clinton is viewed as the early frontrunner for the Democratic nomination.

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

In addition to the reality that gender is an underlying factor shaping the contours of contemporary elections, examining and monitoring the role of gender in the electoral process is important because of concerns over

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84492-5 - Gender and Elections: Shaping the Future of American Politics

Edited by Susan J. Carroll and Richard L. Fox

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

5

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. Prior to the 2004 elections, the United States ranked 57th among countries throughout the world in the proportion of women serving in their parliaments or legislatures; in early 2005, only 15 percent of all members of Congress were women. No woman has ever served as president or vice-president of the United States. Only eight of the fifty states had women governors in 2005, and women constituted only 22.5 percent of all state legislators across the country according to the Center for American Women and Politics.

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 2004 elections, for example, 67.3 million women reported voting, compared with 58.5 million men, according to U.S. Census figures. Thus, 8.8 million more women than men voted in those elections! 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 under-represented 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."³ 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 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.⁴ At both the national and state levels, 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 work place, legal and accessible abortion, minimum wage increases, and the extension of the food stamp program.⁵ Further, both Democratic and moderate Republican women in Congress are more likely than men to use their bill sponsorship and co-sponsorship activity to focus on issues of particular concern to women.⁶ Similarly, a number of studies have found

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84492-5 - Gender and Elections: Shaping the Future of American Politics

Edited by Susan J. Carroll and Richard L. Fox

Excerpt

[More information](#)

that women serving in legislatures at the state level are also more likely than men to give priority to, introduce, and work on legislation related to women's rights, health care, education, and the welfare of families and children.⁷ When women are not present in sufficient numbers among public officials, their distinctive perspectives are under-represented.

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.⁸ 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.⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹

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.¹²

Women officials are committed to insuring that other women follow in their foot steps, and large majorities mentor other women and encourage them to run for office.¹³

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

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84492-5 - Gender and Elections: Shaping the Future of American Politics

Edited by Susan J. Carroll and Richard L. Fox

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

7

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 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. 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 of them. 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 attempts to contribute to an understanding of the status of and electoral circumstances confronted by women of color, particularly African American women.

In Chapter 1, Georgia Duerst-Lahti discusses the gender dynamics of the presidential election process. She begins by examining 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 as the 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 A. MacManus focuses on the changing dynamics of gender and political participation, and particularly on the new, imaginative techniques that political parties and women's groups used to bolster female

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84492-5 - Gender and Elections: Shaping the Future of American Politics

Edited by Susan J. Carroll and Richard L. Fox

Excerpt

[More information](#)

registration, turnout, and candidate selection in the 2004 election. She chronicles the historic fight for women's suffrage and gender differences in political participation before focusing on recent reforms of the electoral system. The reforms, adopted in many states after the 2000 election and the passage of the national Help America Vote Act in 2002, include: streamlined registration processes; stepped up voter education efforts; expanded voting timetables (early voting); improved absentee voting processes; and new high tech voting machinery (touch screens). 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 and Internet web sites (with their catchy logos) that were used in the 2004 election to boost female political participation rates, particularly those of infrequent and non-voting women.

In Chapter 3, 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 4, Richard L. Fox analyzes the historic evolution of women running for seats in the U.S. Congress. The fundamental question addressed in this chapter is why women continue to be so under-represented in the congressional ranks. Fox examines the experiences of women and men candidates for Congress by comparing fundraising totals and vote totals. His analysis also presses into the more subtle ways that gender dynamics are manifested in the electoral arena by 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 and 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 5, Wendy G. Smooth traces African American women's participation in electoral politics from Shirley Chisholm's historic campaign

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84492-5 - Gender and Elections: Shaping the Future of American Politics

Edited by Susan J. Carroll and Richard L. Fox

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

9

for president of the United States in 1972 to former Senator Carol Moseley Braun's 2004 campaign for the White House. This chapter provides an 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 this legislation, the number of African American elected officials serving at every level of government has soared from less than 500 in 1965 to more than 9,000 today. 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 these barriers.

In Chapter 6, 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 traditional view of the relationship between political parties and women's candidacies for public office 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 their role 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 these organizations have provided for women candidates.

In Chapter 7, 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. This chapter reviews the state of knowledge about women candidates, their media coverage, television commercials, and web sites, and 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 8, Kira Sanbonmatsu turns to the often overlooked subject of gender in state elections. She addresses two central questions

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84492-5 - Gender and Elections: Shaping the Future of American Politics

Edited by Susan J. Carroll and Richard L. Fox

Excerpt

[More information](#)

in this chapter: How many women ran for state legislative and statewide offices in 2004? How did the performance of women candidates in 2004 compare with previous elections? Sanbonmatsu analyzes the cross-state variation in the presence of women candidates, including the role of political parties in shaping women's candidacies. She also considers the reasons for the variation across the American states in women's presence in statewide executive office. Understanding why women are more likely to run for and hold office in some states and not others is critical to understanding women's status in electoral politics today – as well as their prospects for achieving higher office in the future.

Collectively these chapters provide an overview of the major ways that gender affects the contours and outcomes of contemporary elections. Our hope is that this volume will leave its readers with a better understanding of how underlying gender dynamics shape the electoral process in the United States.

NOTES

1. Poll: Bush, Kerry Split Six Key States. November 1, 2004. CNN. <<http://www.cnn.com/2004/ALLPOLITICS/10/31/poll.sunday/>> 2005, January 8.
2. Clarence Page. March 20, 2005. Hot Air and the X Chromosome. Chicago Tribune.
3. Sue Thomas and Clyde Wilcox. 1998. Introduction: Women and Elective Office: Past, Present, and Future. In *Women and Elective Office: Past, Present, and Future*, eds. Sue Thomas and Clyde Wilcox. New York: Oxford University Press, 1.
4. Debra Dodson, ed. 1991. *Gender and Policymaking: Studies of Women in Office*. New Brunswick, NJ: Center for American Women and Politics.
5. Most recently, see Michele Swers. 2002. *The Difference Women Make: The Policy Impact of Women in Congress*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
6. Swers, 2002.
7. For examples, see Sue Thomas. 1994. *How Women Legislate*. New York: Oxford University Press; Michael B. Berkman and Robert E. O'Connor. 1993. Women State Legislators Matter: Female Legislators and State Abortion Policy. *American Politics Quarterly* 21(1): 102–24; Susan J. Carroll. 2001. Representing Women: Women State Legislators as Agents of Policy-Related Change. In *The Impact of Women in Public Office*, ed. Susan J. Carroll. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. Lyn Kathlene. 1989. Uncovering the Political Impacts of Gender: An Exploratory Study. *Western Political Quarterly* 42: 397–421.
8. Sue Tolleson Rinehart. 2001. Do Women Leaders Make a Difference? Substance, Style, and Perceptions. In *The Impact of Women in Public Office*, ed. Susan J. Carroll. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
9. Lyn Kathlene. 1995. Alternative Views of Crime: Legislative Policy-Making in Gendered Terms. *Journal of Politics* 57: 696–723.