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SUSAN J. CARROLL AND RICHARD L. FOX

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# Introduction

## Gender and Electoral Politics in the Twenty-First Century

With unemployment hovering above 8 percent and a burgeoning national debt, the economy was the central policy issue of the 2012 presidential election. But the battle for female voters, attention to “women’s issues,” and the question of which party better understood the needs, values, and experiences of women also garnered substantial attention. Never before had women voters received so much media attention in a general election. A Lexis-Nexis search of major news publications found about three times more mentions of “women voters” in the context of the 2012 presidential election than in any prior election.<sup>1</sup> The attention placed on women voters and “women’s issues” appeared to have a significant influence on the outcome in 2012, an election that featured one of the largest gender gaps ever in presidential voting. Women favored President Obama by a margin of 55 percent to 44 percent, whereas men favored former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney by a margin of 52 percent to 45 percent. The 10-point difference in the proportions of women and men voting for Obama represents the second-largest gender gap in U.S. history, just slightly smaller than the 11 point gender gap in voting for Bill Clinton in 1996.<sup>2</sup>

Gender began to play an important role in the 2012 election long before the final votes were counted. In fact, the Democrats started to characterize the Republicans as engaging in a “war on women” months before Mitt Romney became the official GOP nominee. The “war on women”

<sup>1</sup> The LexisNexis search of “major publications” examined coverage from September 1 through November 15 for every presidential election since 1988. The search terms were “women voters,” “female voters,” and “presidential election.”  
<sup>2</sup> Center for American Women and Politics, “Women’s Votes Decisive in 2012 Presidential Race.” Press Release. November 7, 2012. [http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/press\\_room/news/documents/PressRelease\\_11-07-12-gendergap.pdf](http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/press_room/news/documents/PressRelease_11-07-12-gendergap.pdf). Accessed March 25, 2013.

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narrative came about and caught hold because of a series of remarks made by prominent Republicans. A prolonged and hotly contested Republican presidential primary race among several strongly conservative candidates who sometimes expressed extreme views provided initial material for the Democrats to exploit, and a series of comments by Republican U.S. Senate and House candidates fueled the “war on women” narrative throughout the fall of 2012.

Perhaps the candidate who posed the strongest primary challenge to Romney was former U.S. senator Rick Santorum. Some of Santorum’s extreme views attracted considerable media attention. Most notably, in an October 2011 interview, Santorum claimed that contraception was “not okay.” Rather, he suggested, “It’s a license to do things in a sexual realm that is counter to how things are supposed to be.”<sup>3</sup> Santorum also criticized “radical feminists” for encouraging women to work outside the home, objected to women serving in combat, and expressed his opposition to abortion in all circumstances – all views that provided Democrats with evidence to support their claim that Republicans were hopelessly out of touch with the needs of women.

Another critical event occurred when talk radio host and conservative icon Rush Limbaugh attacked Georgetown law student Sandra Fluke after she testified at a U.S. House hearing on whether employers should be required to include contraception in their health care coverage. Fluke had argued that employers must cover contraception because its use extends well beyond birth control.<sup>4</sup> Limbaugh’s comments, however, veered from the substance of Fluke’s testimony. On his national radio broadcast, Limbaugh asked:

What does it say about the college co-ed Susan [sic] Fluke, who goes before a congressional committee and essentially says that she must be paid for sex? What does that make her? It makes her a slut, right? It makes her a prostitute.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Shane Vander Hart, Interview with Rick Santorum: A Champion for the Family, Manufacturing Jobs. Caffeinatedthoughts.com. <http://caffeinatedthoughts.com/2011/10/interview-with-rick-santorum-a-champion-for-the-family-manufacturing-jobs/>. Accessed October 19, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Amanda Peterson Beadle, The Testimony About Birth Control Republicans Did Not Want You To Hear. ThinkProgress.org. <http://thinkprogress.org/health/2012/02/16/427417/sandra-fluke-contraception-testimony/>. Accessed February 16, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Jack Mirkinson, Rush Limbaugh: Sandra Fluke, Woman Denied Right To Speak At Contraception Hearing, A “Slut.” HuffingtonPost.com. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/02/29/rush-limbaugh-sandra-fluke-slut\\_n\\_1311640.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/02/29/rush-limbaugh-sandra-fluke-slut_n_1311640.html). Accessed February 29, 2012.

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Limbaugh was roundly criticized by women's organizations and Democratic politicians for thrusting a mild-mannered student into the national spotlight. And Fluke became a national hero of the left for being singled out by, and then standing up to, Rush Limbaugh. She was even invited to give a prime-time address at the Democratic National Convention.

The final incident more directly involved the eventual Republican nominee for president, Mitt Romney. Throughout the primary season, Romney had worked to shore up the socially conservative base of the Republican Party. He supported the Blunt Amendment, an initiative in the Senate to allow employers to opt out of providing health care coverage for contraception. He favored the Life Amendment, a proposed constitutional amendment that would establish that life begins at conception. Those positions, however, did not receive as much attention as an interview clip that would be played over and over in campaign commercials across the summer and fall. In response to a question about how he would cut the deficit, Romney stated, "Planned Parenthood, we're gonna get rid of that."<sup>6</sup> With this, Romney handed the Democrats a weapon to use against him in the battle for women's votes; he, too, could be portrayed as a candidate with a radical, socially conservative agenda when it came to women's reproductive rights.

As the fall presidential campaign took shape, several Republican congressional candidates helped further the narrative that Republicans were waging a "war on women." The first of these was Missouri Congressman Todd Akin, the Republican challenger to Democratic Senator Claire McCaskill. In a local television interview, Akin expressed his opposition to abortion even in the case of rape, claiming, "If it's a legitimate rape, the female body has ways to try to shut that whole thing down."<sup>7</sup> The video of Akin's comments immediately went viral and was played repeatedly on broadcast media outlets. Although the Republican National Committee and Mitt Romney immediately denounced Akin, he refused to step down as a candidate, and his continuing presence reinforced the "war on women" narrative advanced by Democrats, serving as a constant reminder of a segment of the Republican Party's "extreme anti-woman" positions.

<sup>6</sup> Laura Bassett, Planned Parenthood Makes Largest Single Ad Buy. *HuffingtonPost.com*. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/09/10/planned-parenthood-ad-campaign\\_n\\_1870438.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/09/10/planned-parenthood-ad-campaign_n_1870438.html). Accessed September 10, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Jaco, Jaco Report: Full Interview with Todd Akin. *Fox2now.com*. <http://fox2now.com/2012/08/19/the-jaco-report-august-19-2012/>. Accessed August 20, 2012.

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Two months later, another Republican candidate made national headlines for a similar reason. In a debate between candidates for the U.S. Senate seat in Indiana, Richard Mourdock, the Republican candidate, was asked whether there were circumstances under which he thought abortion should be legal. Like Akin, Mourdock said no, and followed up with this explanation: "I have thought long and hard about this and have concluded that even in the horrible situation of rape, that life is a gift from God and that God intended that to happen."<sup>8</sup> Again, pundits and reporters pounced, and liberal bloggers, reproductive rights groups, and Democrats went to work portraying Mourdock and Republicans as supporting draconian restrictions on women's autonomy and rights. The Mourdock comments, in particular, put Romney in a difficult spot, as he had just filmed a television ad endorsing Mourdock's candidacy.<sup>9</sup>

The Obama campaign took advantage of the extreme statements and missteps by Republicans and made Obama's support of women's rights one of the themes of his campaign. When Romney pledged to defund Planned Parenthood, Obama expressed support, mentioning Planned Parenthood five times in the second debate. The president made clear that he was pro-choice on abortion. He also stressed his support for equal pay, whereas Romney refused to take a position on the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act that Obama had signed into law.

Although economic issues, especially unemployment, were clearly most important issues in voters' minds as they went to the polls in 2012, voters were also offered a far clearer choice than usual on women's issues. The "Republican war on women" narrative, advanced by Democrats and fueled repeatedly by the statements of visible Republican candidates, seemed to hit its mark, offering an additional incentive beyond economic concerns for many women to turn out and cast their votes for Obama. In the end, Obama won a sizable majority of women voters.

All of these developments in the 2012 election came on the heels of the 2008 race, in which gender played a more direct and prominent role than at any previous time in history, albeit more on the candidate

<sup>8</sup> Lucy Madison, Richard Mourdock: Even pregnancy from rape something "God intended." CBSNews.com. [http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-250\\_162-57538757/richard-mourdock-even-pregnancy-from-rape-something-god-intended/](http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-250_162-57538757/richard-mourdock-even-pregnancy-from-rape-something-god-intended/). Accessed October 23, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Both Akin and Mourdock had significant leads prior to making their controversial comments. Both went on to lose the general election by roughly 16 percent and 6 percent, respectively.

side than among voters. 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. After nominee 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 Republican female 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 national tickets.

Women have clearly been making great strides in the political life of our nation, and gender has played 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 outcomes of elections in the United States. No interpretation of U.S. elections can be complete without an understanding of the growing 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 ways. Most obviously, men dominate the electoral playing field. Ten of the eleven major candidates who vied for the Democratic and Republican nominations for president in 2012 were men. Similarly, men constituted the vast majority of candidates for governor and Congress in 2012. 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 2012 election and previous elections (e.g., Scott Pelley, Brian Williams, Bill O’Reilly, Anderson Cooper) were men. The most visible exception was Diane Sawyer, anchor of ABC *World News Tonight*. A 2013 study from the Women’s Media Center found that in the coverage of the 2012 election, male front-page bylines at top newspapers (such as *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*) outnumbered female bylines three to one, and that in television punditry surrounding the election, more than

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three-quarters of voices were men.<sup>10</sup> The leading voices in political talk radio, to whom millions of Americans listen every week, are men such as Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, and Michael Savage. And the majority of those contributing the largest sums of money to candidates and parties – perhaps the most essential ingredient in American politics – are men.<sup>11</sup>

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 inner sanctums of presidential campaigns where core strategic advisers convene are called war rooms. Candidates attack their opponents. They raise money for their war chests. The most attention in presidential races is focused on critical battleground states. In the post-9/11 election environment, 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 which candidate is ahead or behind in the race. Similarly, commentators talk about how campaigns are rounding the bend, entering the stretch drive, or heading into the final lap – all horseracing analogies. 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. An unexpected occurrence is labeled a curveball.

So prevalent is the language of war and sports in our political discourse that even those who wish to increase women's political involvement employ it. For example, to provide more opportunities for women

<sup>10</sup> Women's Media Center, The Status of Women in the U.S. Media 2013. <http://www.womensmediacenter.com>. Accessed April 16, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Center for Responsive Politics, Donor Demographics: Gender. 2012. <http://www.opensecrets.org/overview/donordemographics.php?cycle=2012&filter=G>. Accessed April 16, 2013.

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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 are also 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 considered desirable for a candidate, but military credentials remain largely the domain of male candidates. A military background is particularly prized for a presidential candidate who, if elected, will become 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 remains an oxymoron to many.

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 they are for men. Americans have grown accustomed to seeing their male political leaders in casual attire. During the 1990s, we frequently saw pictures of President Bill Clinton jogging in shorts, accompanied by members of the Secret Service. More recently, we saw images of President George W. Bush in jeans and cowboy boots and Barack Obama in swim trunks and basketball sweats. 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 House Majority Leader Nancy Pelosi or former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton outfitted in blue jeans and cowboy boots, a swimsuit, or sweatpants.

Finally, elections in the United States are gendered in the strategies that candidates employ in reaching out to 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 segmenting voters on the basis of their gender and other demographics.



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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 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. Sarah Palin was frequently mentioned as a leading contender for the 2012 Republican presidential nomination until she opted not to run. And as we begin to look forward to the 2016 presidential elections, a Quinnipiac poll conducted in early 2013 shows that Hillary Clinton would be the favorite against any of the most prominent Republican contenders.<sup>12</sup>

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

Beyond the reality that gender is an underlying factor that shapes the contours of contemporary elections, it is important to examine and monitor the role of gender in the electoral process because of concerns about 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 2012 elections, the United States

<sup>12</sup> Quinnipiac University National Poll, Clinton, Christie Lead the Pack in Early Look at 2016. Press Release. March 7, 2013. <http://www.quinnipiac.edu/institutes-centers/polling-institute/national/release-detail?ReleaseID=1861>. Accessed April 30, 2013.



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ranked ninety-first among countries throughout the world in the proportion of women serving in their national parliaments or legislatures; only 18.1 percent of all members of Congress were women. In early 2013, women served as governors in only five of the fifty states, and only 24.1 percent of all state legislators across the country were women, according to the Center for American Women and Politics.<sup>13</sup>

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 2012 elections, for example, 71.4 million women reported voting, compared with 61.6 million men, according to U.S. Census figures. Thus, 9.8 million more women than men voted in those elections.<sup>14</sup> As a matter of simple justice, something seems fundamentally wrong with a democratic system with a majority of women voters in which women remain dramatically underrepresented among 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.”<sup>15</sup> The fact that women constitute a majority of the electorate but only a small minority of public officials is 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 commissioned 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.<sup>16</sup> At both the national and state levels, male and female legislators have been shown 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, flextime in the workplace, legal and accessible abortion, minimum wage increases, and the

<sup>13</sup> Center for American Women and Politics. 2013. *Women in Elective Office. Fact Sheet*. New Brunswick, NJ: Center for American Women and Politics.

<sup>14</sup> Center for American Women and Politics. 2013. *Gender Differences in Voter Turnout*. New Brunswick, NJ: Center for American Women and Politics.

<sup>15</sup> Sue Thomas. 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, 1–14, quote at 1.

<sup>16</sup> Debra Dodson, ed. 1991. *Gender and Policymaking: Studies of Women in Office*. New Brunswick, NJ: Center for American Women and Politics.

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extension of the food stamp program.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> 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 different 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.<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup> Women officials' propensity to conduct business in a manner

<sup>17</sup> For example, Michele Swers. 2002. *The Difference Women Make: The Policy Impact of Women in Congress*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>18</sup> Swers, *The Difference Women Make*, 2002.

<sup>19</sup> For examples, see 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, 3–21; 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; and Lyn Kathlene. 1989. Uncovering the Political Impacts of Gender: An Exploratory Study. *Western Political Quarterly* 42: 397–421.

<sup>20</sup> 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, 149–65.

<sup>21</sup> Lyn Kathlene. 1995. Alternative Views of Crime: Legislative Policy-Making in Gendered Terms. *Journal of Politics* 57: 696–723.

<sup>22</sup> Impact on the Legislative Process. 2001. In *Women in State Legislatures: Past, Present, Future*. Fact Sheet Kit. New Brunswick, NJ: Center for American Women and Politics.