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## Introduction

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

The presidential contest in 2016 revealed the dramatic role that gender continues to play in U.S. politics. On the one hand, Hillary Clinton made history in 2016 by beating back four male challengers in an open Democratic primary to become the first woman ever to win a major party's nomination for president of the United States. With her experience as First Lady, U.S. Senator, and Secretary of State, she was widely considered among the most qualified candidates in recent times to seek the Oval Office. Clinton stood on the precipice of achieving something no woman had ever accomplished – becoming the leader of the most powerful country in the world. The symbolism of this moment was not lost on many who watched Clinton's speech accepting her party's nomination. Former Governor of Michigan Jennifer Granholm tweeted out: "Tear[s] streaming down my face, on behalf of all those women who came before, and on behalf of all who will come behind."

After securing the Democratic nomination, Clinton proceeded to the general election contest with the widespread perception that she would become the first woman president of the United States. For months leading up to the general election, pollsters and election forecasters offered assurances that Clinton would likely win the presidency. Polls showed a small but steady lead for Clinton, and a mid-October CBS News Poll showed that 63 percent of registered voters thought that Hillary Clinton would win the election.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sarah Dutton, Jennifer De Pinto, Fred Backus, and Anthony Salvanto. CBS Poll: Clinton's Lead Over Trump Widens with Three Weeks to Go. *CBS News*. October 17, 2016. [www.cbsnews.com/news/cbs-poll-clintons-lead-over-trump-widens-with-three-weeks-to-go/](http://www.cbsnews.com/news/cbs-poll-clintons-lead-over-trump-widens-with-three-weeks-to-go/)

But something happened on the way to making history. Donald Trump shocked the political world when he defeated Clinton by winning a clear majority of Electoral College votes.<sup>2</sup> The loss was certainly hard to take for those excited by the possibility of electing the first woman president. But the outcome was even more galling for advocates of women's rights. Throughout the campaign, Donald Trump distinguished himself as the most explicitly sexist presidential candidate in modern history.

As the Trump era settles in on the U.S., it is critical to remember that Donald Trump said things about women during his lifetime that would disqualify almost any candidate from seeking high elective office. He even acknowledged as much in a 1999 interview with Chris Matthews on the program *Hardball*. When Matthews asked if he would ever run for president, Trump laughed it off, asking, "Can you imagine how controversial I'd be? ... How about me with the women? Can you imagine?"<sup>3</sup> Voters have frequently forgiven male politicians for multiple marriages and extramarital affairs, but Trump's comments and behavior went well beyond the norm of bad behavior by a politician. In his years as a real estate tycoon in New York City, he often appeared on Howard Stern's frequently lewd radio program. In various appearances, he noted "a person who is very flat-chested is very hard to be a 10," listed the famous women with whom he would like to have sex, and told the host of the program that it was okay to refer to his daughter as a "piece of ass."<sup>4</sup>

Trump's treatment of women seemingly came to a head when, a month before Election Day, NBC released an unaired *Access Hollywood* audiotape from 2005. On the tape, Trump boasted about kissing women and grabbing their genitals whenever and wherever he feels like it. After the segment aired, more than a dozen women came forward claiming Trump had made unwanted sexual advances toward them. Although Trump apologized for the language he used on the *Access Hollywood* tape, he emphatically denied the allegations of the women who accused him of sexual assault and vowed that he would sue them once the election was over.

<sup>2</sup> Hillary Clinton actually won almost 3 million more votes than Donald Trump, but U.S. presidential elections are decided not by the popular vote, but rather by the vote of the Electoral College.

<sup>3</sup> Deborah Orin. Trump Toyz with Prez Run. *New York Post*. July 12, 1999. <http://nypost.com/1999/07/12/trump-toyz-with-prez-run/>

<sup>4</sup> Elisha Fieldstadt. Donald Trump Consistently Made Lewd Comments on 'The Howard Stern Show.' *NBC News*. October 8, 2016. [www.nbcnews.com/politics/2016-election/donald-trump-consistently-made-lewd-comments-howard-stern-show-n662581](http://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2016-election/donald-trump-consistently-made-lewd-comments-howard-stern-show-n662581)

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Trump's inappropriate language and behavior toward women was also evident in the way he treated his female political opponents in the campaign. In an interview with *Rolling Stone* magazine, Trump said of his female Republican primary opponent, Carly Fiorina, "Look at that face ... Would anyone vote for that?" During the general election, he commented that Hillary Clinton had neither the "look" nor the "stamina" to be president, and he referred to her in the third presidential debate as a "nasty woman."

To many it was simply stunning that a presidential candidate could speak and behave this way and still win a major party's presidential nomination. That a country committed to equality and opposed to rank sexism could elect Donald Trump president of the United States? Unthinkable. The outcome of the election left many wondering how so many women (41 percent), particularly white women (52 percent), could have voted for Trump.<sup>5</sup> For some, the outcome of the election was deeply revealing about the ease with which Americans can shrug off sexist statements and behavior. A few analysts began to question whether feminism and gender equality were still relevant. Trump's victory left many wondering what the election meant for the future of women in the United States.

Prior to this election, women had clearly been making great strides in the political life of our nation. And even beyond the all-consuming story of the presidential campaign, the 2016 elections showed that gender has an increasingly visible and important influence. This volume analyzes various aspects of electoral politics, explaining 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 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. Eighteen of the twenty major candidates who vied for the Democratic and Republican nominations for president in 2016 were men. Similarly, men constituted the vast majority of candidates for governor and Congress in 2016. Most

<sup>5</sup> CNN. CNN Politics: Election 2016, Exit Polls. November 2016. [www.cnn.com/election/results/exit-polls](http://www.cnn.com/election/results/exit-polls)

behind-the-scenes campaign strategists and consultants – the pollsters, media experts, fundraising 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 2016 election and previous elections (e.g. Scott Pelley, Lester Holt, Bill O'Reilly, and Anderson Cooper) were men. Women are making strides in the world of broadcast news with Fox News' Megyn Kelly (now at NBC) and MSNBC's Rachel Maddow becoming leading voices. But a 2017 study from the Women's Media Center found that male reporters and anchors presented roughly 75 percent of television news segments; and that women comprised of only 14 percent on Sunday political talk shows.<sup>6</sup> Further, 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>7</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. Nobody did this more than Donald Trump who, during the campaign, promised to “bomb the shit out of” the terrorist group ISIS if he were elected president.

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 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

<sup>6</sup> Women's Media Center: The Status of Women in the U.S. Media 2017. 2017. [www.womensmediacenter.com/pages/the-status-of-women-in-u.s.-media-2017](http://www.womensmediacenter.com/pages/the-status-of-women-in-u.s.-media-2017)

<sup>7</sup> Donor Demographics: Gender. Center for Responsive Politics. 2012. [www.opensecrets.org/overview/donordemographics.php?cycle=2012&filter=](http://www.opensecrets.org/overview/donordemographics.php?cycle=2012&filter=). Interestingly, however, a majority of donors to Hillary Clinton's 2016 campaign were women.

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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 curve ball.

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 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 current political context, 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. 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, sweatpants 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 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 President Barack Obama playing basketball in sweats and riding the waves in swim trunks on a family vacation in Hawaii. Donald Trump has not followed this trend, appearing in public only in a suit and tie. But the double standard is still clear. Although vice-presidential candidate Sarah 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 Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi or former Secretary of

State and presidential candidate 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. 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. And often in the U.S., the effects of gender are inextricably intertwined with the effects of race and ethnicity. It is not surprising, for example, that the first nonwhite elected to the presidency was a man or that the first female major party nominee was white.

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-five 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. Hillary Clinton's nearly successful presidential run (coupled with Donald Trump's victory) appears to have pushed more Democratic women to consider running for elective office. Organizations promoting the election of more women reported a dramatic increase in the number of women interested in seeking elective office in the wake of the 2016 elections.<sup>8</sup> In fact, as

<sup>8</sup> Katie Orr and Megan Kamerick. Trump's Election Drives More Women to Consider Running for Office. *NPR*. February 23, 2017. [www.npr.org/2017/02/23/515438978/trumps-election-drives-more-women-to-consider-running-for-office](http://www.npr.org/2017/02/23/515438978/trumps-election-drives-more-women-to-consider-running-for-office)

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we begin to look forward to the 2020 presidential elections and consider possible Democratic Party challengers to take on President Trump, four women – Senators Kirsten Gillibrand of New York, Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts, Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota, and Kamala Harris of California – have emerged on most pundits' lists.

Although there are important differences between women and men in the aggregate, there also are significant differences among women. The role of gender is neither constant over time nor independent of the influences of race, ethnicity, sexuality, social class, and even age/generation. Rather, these categories are mutually constitutive, and thus, for example, the experiences of an African American woman in politics are likely to differ from the experiences of a white woman, and the perspectives of a Latina millennial might vary from those of her senior citizen grandmother. The diversity among women may never have been more evident than in the 2016 election, with young women favoring Bernie Sanders over Hillary Clinton in the Democratic primary, women of color heavily supporting Clinton in both the primary and general election, and majorities of white women of differing education levels voting for different general election candidates.

## 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. In 2017, with only 19.4 percent of members of Congress being women, the United States ranked number 101 among countries throughout the world for the proportion of women serving in its national parliaments or legislatures.<sup>9</sup> In mid-2017, women served as governors in only six of the fifty states, and only 24.9 percent of all state legislators across the country were women, according to the Center for American Women and Politics.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Women in National Parliaments. Inter-parliamentary Union. May 1, 2017. [www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm](http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm)

<sup>10</sup> Center for American Women and Politics. 2017. *Women in Elective Office 2017*. New Brunswick, NJ: Center for American Women and Politics. [www.cawp.rutgers.edu/women-elective-office-2017](http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/women-elective-office-2017)



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 2016 elections, for example, U.S. Census figures showed that 73.7 million women reported voting, compared with 63.8 million men; 9.9 million more women than men voted in those elections.<sup>11</sup> As a matter of simple justice, something seems fundamentally wrong with a democratic system where women are a majority of voters but 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>12</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>13</sup> Although party differences are usually greater than gender differences,<sup>14</sup> at both the national and state levels male and female legislators have been shown to have different policy priorities and preferences.<sup>15</sup> 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 (now known as SNAP).<sup>16</sup> Further,

<sup>11</sup> Center for American Women and Politics. 2017. *Gender Differences in Voter Turnout*. New Brunswick, NJ: Center for American Women and Politics. [www.cawp.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/resources/genderdiff.pdf](http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/resources/genderdiff.pdf)

<sup>12</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, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Debra Dodson, ed. 1991. *Gender and Policymaking: Studies of Women in Office*. New Brunswick, NJ: Center for American Women and Politics.

<sup>14</sup> Michele Swers. 2013. *Women in the Club: Gender and Policy Making in the Senate*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>15</sup> Jessica Gerrity, Tracy Osborn, and Jeanette Morehouse Mendez. 2007. Women and Representation: A Different View of the District? *Politics & Gender* 3(2): 179–200.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Michele Swers. 2002. *The Difference Women Make: The Policy Impact of Women in Congress*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. For a more recent take, see Tracy Osborn, 2012. *How Women Represent*. New York: Oxford University Press.



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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.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, several studies have found that women serving in state legislatures 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>18</sup>

Beyond possible gender differences in policy priorities, 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>19</sup> Similarly, a recent study of women members of Congress found that most of them believe that they are more consensual and collaborative and more likely to work across party lines than their male colleagues.<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

<sup>17</sup> Swers. *The Difference Women Make*.

<sup>18</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, IN: Indiana University Press, pp. 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>19</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, IN: Indiana University Press, pp. 149–65.

<sup>20</sup> Kelly Dittmar, Kira Sanbonmatsu, Susan J. Carroll, Debbie Walsh, and Catherine Wineinger. 2017. *Representation Matters: Women in the U.S. Congress*. Center for American Women and Politics. [www.cawp.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/resources/representationmatters.pdf](http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/resources/representationmatters.pdf)

<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.

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.<sup>23</sup>

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.<sup>24</sup>

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.<sup>25</sup>

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 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 utilizes 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 and helps to shape 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

<sup>23</sup> See Cindy Simon Rosenthal. 1998. *How Women Lead*. New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>24</sup> Barbara Burrell. 1996. *A Woman's Place Is in the House*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, p. 151.

<sup>25</sup> Debra L. Dodson and Susan J. Carroll. 1991. *Reshaping the Agenda: Women in State Legislatures*. New Brunswick, NJ: Center for the American Woman and Politics. [www.cawp.rutgers.edu/reshaping-agenda-women-state-legislatures](http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/reshaping-agenda-women-state-legislatures)