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Unit #2 Paper

Female Representation in Politics

“Whenever women seek any space traditionally held by a man - and especially the office of the commander in chief - they tend to be pornified, degraded, diminished and treated differently” (Wilz, 358). In so many cases female politicians are discussed in terms objectifying them based on what they wear and how they look and act, often with negative adjectives.

Women that are leaders are considered bossy. Women that are knowledgeable are considered know-it-alls. Women that are passionate are considered too emotional. There is a strong issue of negative or lack of female representation in the media and politics. Women in politics are often underrepresented and misrepresented which ultimately leads to the discrediting of female politicians. This is an important factor in politics because I believe it has perpetuated male dominance in politics. In this essay I will be explaining how commentary on female image and lack of discussion regarding female candidates majorly contribute to lack of female representation in politics.

Women are often discussed in terms of appearance, rather than where they stand on certain issues. The impact that this objectification has on female politicians is present in the objectification theory. According to this theory “a candidate is described as impotent based on one’s physical characteristics. The candidate could be frail, or have a failing that would disqualify one from governance. Objectification theory suggests that objectifying frames would impact the evaluation of an objectified subject (Funk & Coker, 459). From this it is apparent that

objectifying female politicians will have a direct impact on their popularity and credit as a politician. Females are judged for anything they do as politicians, “In addition, female politicians are ridiculed for “shouting”, not smiling enough or simply having a masculine rhetorical speaking style” (Funk & Coker, 460). It is evident that there is a double standard that women are supposed to align with when being a public politician. However it is nearly impossible to adhere to all of these set “rules” to ensure that a female politician is being strong enough so she’s not weak and seen as too feminine, but not too strong to where she is seen as too masculine.

Women often are discredited as politicians as well. Multiple studies found that “the stereotype that women are prone to dishonesty or exaggeration is one that has been seen across several studies measuring attitudes toward women” (Funk & Coker, 467). It is nearly impossible for women to appeal to their constituents because they are constantly under such scrutiny. “Women in the political sphere, to be taken seriously, must enact just the right degree of femininity and masculinity. Secretary Clinton’s “failure” to be “appropriately feminine” not only has hindered her but has also made her the target of hatred for decades (Wilz, 358). Another example of this is “women seeking to publicly address issues of policy must walk a fine line between submissive and assertive, between self-sacrificing and ambitious. They must linguistically tie issues of public policy to their expertise in the domestic realm or risk violating audience expectations” (Robson, 208). There is this double bind present for female politicians and ultimately makes campaigning for politics extremely difficult.

Further, male politicians are praised for having nearly the same opinions as female politicians. When it comes to issues among abortion and women’s rights the male is seen as progressive and often a hero. According to Jackson Katz “A part of Sanders’s appeal to me was

that he conveyed the rough edges of an urban street-brawler who was willing and eager to take on the powers-that-be, especially the “billionaire class” and their representatives in Congress. The Democratic Party has not nominated a presidential candidate with that sort of masculine street cred since Lyndon Johnson” (Wilz, 358). In this sense people see males as progressive or feminists when they discuss issues that many women are passionate about. Women would expect someone of the same gender as them to have similar opinions regarding women’s bodies and women’s rights. However when a male politician has opinions that benefit women it is seen as progressive. In this sense it gives males more credit for having the exact same opinion as their female competitors.

To further that, it is argued that it is not the idea of women in political power that scares people. It is the idea that a female can do a male job and that this will blur the lines between male and female. “Anxiety stems not just from the challenge women like Clinton pose to male power but also from their perceived ability to destabilize gender itself by collapsing distinctions between the categories of “male” and “female”. Recognizing this basis of negative reactions to female candidates is vital in the bid to see more women elected to political office, and also has implications for women seeking other leadership positions in the public realm” (Richie, 114) It is important to note that it is not always females appearing as incapable to run for office, however the public’s fear of difficulty differentiating masculinity and femininity.

To elaborate on this fine line regarding women’s emotionality in politics, women are often seen as too emotional. “Many observers have long suspected that special “rules” exist for female candidates, an issue highlighted by the candidacies of Sarah Palin and Hillary Clinton in the 2008 presidential campaign (Brooks, 597).

Also, it is because males continue to dominate politics that females are not encouraged to run for office. Although we have made great progress in the last few years, there still remains a large gap between the number of male and female politicians in office. According to research conducted by Catalyst women make up 25% of the Senate and only 23.4% of the House of Representatives. This leads male candidates to dominate both areas of the Cabinet at or above 75%. It is important to note however that females fail to run for office because they do not see someone like themselves in government and no one suggests they run. “The lack of recruitment appears to be a particularly powerful explanation for why women are less likely than men to consider running for office...these results corroborate the conclusions of scholars who suggest that vestiges of patterns of traditional gender socialization in candidate recruitment hinder the selection of women candidates” (Lawless & Fox, 8).

Not only are women not recruited, but many women fail to recognize themselves as fit to run for office. “Men remain approximately 65 percent more likely than women to assess themselves as “qualified” to run for office. Women in the sample are twice as likely as men to rate themselves “not at all qualified”(Lawless & Fox, 10). This is interesting to note because it could be this lack of confidence that hinders women from running for office. Moreover, from this same study it was found that women were well-matched credential wise to their male competitors (Lawless & Fox, 11). It is important to recognize, as well, that all of these factors are strongly connected. Because women are not recruited to run for office, they often do not feel they are fit, they do not see anyone that looks like them in office, and because they are supposed to adhere to specific standards of femininity women therefore do not run for office.

Finally, women are often seen as too emotional when they portray emotion. “When Hillary Clinton was asked, just one day before her own emotional moment in New Hampshire, about the double-standard that a woman running for president faces, she expressed the conventional wisdom: ‘It’s that difficult position that a woman candidate is in, because if you get too emotional, that undercuts you. A man can cry. We know that. Lots of our leaders have cried, but, you know, a woman, that’s a different dynamic’” (Brooks, 597). In this sense it is acceptable and sometimes even honorable for a man to cry or get worked up over something, but for a woman they are thought of as weak or overly emotional. This double standard makes it difficult for women to be seen as strong, qualified individuals to run for office. It is ultimately because of this standard that men have and will continue to dominate the United States government.

Overall, it is apparent that females are misrepresented as politicians in the media, often objectified or sexualized. It is because of this that I feel males have been able to dominate the political sphere for so long. Until women are better represented in media, without exploitation or sexualization, males will continue to run our government. It is important that women continue to fight this double standard they are supposed to abide by within politics. Only this resistance will bring more women into power in politics and inspire even more women to run for office. Most importantly, I think it is essential to recognize the issues that women face when running for office as research as shown them. As a woman I now know what to look for regarding female politician media coverage and will not judge them based on what the media says.

Works Cited

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