The Role of Gender Stereotypes in a Political Campaign: An Exploration of the Gender Gap Within American Politics

By Brianna Morrison

Introduction:

The purpose of this paper is to examine gender stereotypes as a mechanism that maintains the under representation of women within elected office. Focusing exclusively on American politics, this paper will explore the barriers female candidates face in running for office. In 2019, the percentage of women holding seats is 23.7 %. This statistic indicates that women occupy 127 of the 535 seats in Congress. Although a record breaking high, this amount still remains far from achieving parity within Congress. To explore women's under representation, this paper questions the impact gender stereotypes have on a female's candidacy? Exploring how gender stereotypes influence both voter preferences and the attitudes of party leaders, I predict that gender stereotypes can discourage both voters and party leaders from pursuing female candidates. Based on the research findings, this paper argues that the gender gap in political representation is in fact largely rooted in the campaign process that has and continues to present barriers for women seeking elected office. To support my argument, I discuss "gender stereotypes" as a predominant factor that greatly affects the campaign process. This paper primarily examines the impact gender stereotypes have on voter preferences, which I contend create negative connotations about a woman's capability in politics. From there, this paper shifts focus to examine party leaders, exploring how gender stereotypes discourage party leaders from pursuing a female candidate, due to the perception that her chances of winning are low. Lastly, this paper will discuss the differences within the Democrat and Republican parties in terms of effort to increase female representation within their respective parties.

Gender stereotypes refer to the widely shared perceptions that people have about gender and the individuals who belong to that gender. Gender stereotypes remain a barrier that presents specific challenges for women seeking elected office. These stereotypes are inherently disadvantageous for female candidates because they perpetuate distinctions between male and female characteristics/roles, aligning the former's characteristics with the political ideal. By associating male characteristics with political leadership, it influences who seeks and who wins elected office.

This inequity exists due to traditional gender scripts that idolize hegemonic masculinity within American politics. The importance of gender equity within the American political system is to challenge female subordination that is prevalent in all facets of social life. To advance an alternative politics that is

better informed by greater representation of female perspectives whose gender accounts for 50% of the American population. Increased female representation provides greater potential for feminist values within the public realm of politics. It is important to recognize the effect gender stereotypes have within the campaign process, so that the process of resolving this inequity can begin. If American politicians are unwilling to acknowledge the inherent discrimination due to gender stereotypes, women will continue to be underrepresented within government, ultimately preserving the hierarchy of power that corrupts American politics.

Literature Review:

For the purposes of this paper, my research seeks to expand on existing knowledge concerning the gender gap in representation within American politics. I intend to provide an in-depth analysis of the role gender stereotypes play within the campaign process. This literature review, therefore, draws on existing scholarship that discusses the existence of a gender gap within American politics. There are five scholarly works that are most pertinent to my research question. The first two scholarly works provide theoretical frameworks for understanding gender stereotypes, while the other three scholarly works offer their own distinct theory for the gender gap within American politics.

Gender and more specifically gender stereotypes, must be considered when examining who seeks and wins elected office in America. Within their own respective works, authors Andreea Zamfira and Kathleen Dolan provide theoretical frameworks for understanding gender stereotypes. Zamfira contends that gender stereotypes can be understood as the “multi-faceted aspects of gender identities...used for socially constructing the feminine and masculine categories, stereotypes influence...social and political constraints on men and women” (Zamfira, et al. 2018,13). Zamfira argues that gender is an integral part of America’s “traditional and modern configurations” of politics (2018,13). Both traditional and modern configurations of politics continue to emphasize male attributes as the ideal. Contrasted to this idealization of masculine traits within politics, women are often socialized to believe that they do not embody the desirable traits of a politician and therefore are discouraged to enter into politics. As such, seeking elected office remains relatively a male privilege in America.

Similarly, Kathleen Dolan defines gender stereotypes as a collective of “dominant and cultural assumptions about women’s nature and women’s capabilities” (2014, 19). Within her definition, she argues that gender stereotypes are mechanisms that generate “antagonism toward women’s political life” (2014, 19). Gender stereotypes serve to discriminate against and exclude women within American politics. This exclusion occurs as a result of gender stereotypes that emphasize men as being innately “more competent, decisive, stronger leaders, and possessing a greater ability to handle a crisis” (Dolan, 2014:20).

In their book, authors Palmer and Dennis, suggest that voters “make assumptions about candidates based on their gender” (2008, 172). By examining trends in both women’s participation as candidates and in winning their party nominations, Palmer and Simons suggest that there is a “partisan component” to the glass ceiling that prevents women from achieving higher levels of political success (2008, 162). In their research, they consider a partisan gender gap that includes “those who seek their party’s nomination, those who win their primary contests, and those who win a seat in both the House

and Senate” (2008, 175). Elaborating from their argument, I suggest that the differing gender stereotypes held by Democrats and Republicans influence the perceptions of female candidates. As Democrats are perceived to be more liberal in thought, there is more opportunities for female candidates, as democratic districts often are more open to diverge from tradition.

Authors Julia Dolan, Melissa M. Deckman, and Michele L. Swers further discuss this idea of voter preferences. They argue that, “female candidates must navigate gender to convince voters that they belong in the masculine world of politics” (2019, 119). It is important to consider which gender stereotypes female candidates portray and which stereotypes they attempt to subvert. Considering the political campaign of Gina Ortiz Jones, as discussed by Dolan, Deckman, and Swers, it is apparent she adopts male gender stereotypes while attempting to balance the female stereotypes already ascribed to her. Kathleen Dolan acknowledges this notion that voter preferences can be gendered. Dolan asserts that “voters look at women candidates and women officeholders from a gendered perspective, ascribing certain stereotyped...personality characteristics to them” (2014, 19). In her work, Dolan goes on to argue that, although gendered stereotypes exist, gendered stereotypes are not imperative to a female candidate’s success. For the purposes of this paper, I engage with her work solely to provide a theoretical framework for gender stereotypes.

Authors, Karen E. Kitchens and Michele L. Swers, discuss the disproportionality in representation between the Democratic and Republicans in their piece concerning the 2010 and 2012 elections in America. They purpose two distinct theories for why Republican women candidates have a more difficult time in the primaries than Democratic women. One theory proposes that Democratic districts are typically “more urban, liberal, higher income, and more racially diverse”(651) , and therefore, are more likely to elect female candidates in comparison to Republican districts which are “distinctly unfriendly to women candidates” (651). The other theory proposed is that “democratic women benefit from the evolution of the parties’ electoral coalitions” (651).

In consideration of the first theory, I suggest that perhaps because democratic districts are often more “liberal” and “racially diverse”, they are not as heavily entrenched in gender stereotypes, having progressed from stereotypical understandings of gender. To support the argument made by Kitchens and Swers, I discuss an analysis done by Kira Sanbonmatsu, where she determines if there is a relation between party practices and perceptions about women’s status as candidates (2006, 120). Situating this paper in relation to the scholarly work discussed in this literature review, the paper emphasizes the inherent gender stereotypes at play that contribute to women’s under representation in politics.

Methodology:

Conducting a feminist critique of research on gender and political candidacy, the overall direction of this paper is to discuss gender stereotypes as a mechanism that contributes to the gender gap in political representation. To begin, this paper discusses the influence gender stereotypes have on both voter preferences and party leaders. Afterwards, a comparison between the Democratic and Republican parties will be conducted. The purposes of conducting a comparison is to demonstrate how, in contrast to republican voters, the perceptions held by democratic voters incline them to be more open to female representation. The comparison also reveals that democratic leaders are less hesitant in

nominating female candidates. While Republican leaders are often more hesitant due in part to the perception that female candidates will not fare well within Republican districts.

The methods employed focus on qualitative measures, examining in-depth descriptions of how gender stereotypes impact a political campaign. The goal of this paper is to provide a theoretical response to how gender stereotypes uphold the gender gap in political representation. This paper provides contextual knowledge about how gender stereotypes influence the gender gap in political representation, elaborating specifically on how voter preferences and party leaders are influenced by gender stereotypes.

I chose to focus on gender stereotypes, because gender stereotypes are a significant component in understanding women's underrepresentation in political office. This paper demonstrates how gender stereotypes both discourage and undermine women's viability as political candidates. The sources examined in my research discuss themes that relate to the gender gap in political representation, focusing on both voters and party leaders within Democratic and Republican parties. This paper will explore gender stereotypes as a component within the theories proposed, expanding on how gender stereotypes contribute to the barrier female candidates face. The selected secondary sources focus on the relationship between gender and political campaigns, within each source the impact gender has on election dynamics within American politics is considered. For primary sources, this paper includes interviews conducted by Kathleen Dolan to exemplify attitudes of party leaders. Republican party leaders explicitly stated that they felt that female candidates would be less successful in their campaigns. As well, to strengthen the argument on voter preferences, this paper examines articles about Hillary Clinton's campaign to demonstrate the sexist backlash that occurred as a result of her gender.

Research Findings:

Voter preferences bear a large impact on the success of a political candidate. With regards to female candidates in specific, voter preferences can present a barrier for women, as often times a voter's preference can be influenced by gender stereotypes. A voter may favour male candidates, believing that a woman does not possess the desirable attributes to succeed in political office. When a voter uses a female candidate's gender to make inferences about her political candidacy, the voter fails to consider the merit of the female candidate. In the case of the United States, voters rely on gender stereotypes to assess female candidates and their suitability for office (Dolan, 2014, 2). Voters can also rely on gender stereotypes to evaluate male candidates, but these stereotypes often are beneficial rather than harmful. Although intersectionality is not a focus of this paper, I want to emphasize the fact that the male candidates I am referring to are white cis heteronormative males. Engaging with an intersectional approach reveals that it is only men who conform to these ideals that benefit, while often racialized and queer men are subjected to their own specific stereotypes that target them based on their race and sexuality. For the white cis heteronormative man, gender stereotypes assume that they embody agentic traits. Expected to be innate leaders, males' agentic traits heavily align with what American society has constructed as the political ideal. The idealization of male traits implicitly acts to devalue female traits in politics, while simultaneously prioritizing men for leadership roles.

The difficulty with presenting quantitative data on voter preferences, as stated by Amelia Thomson-Deveaux, is that many voters will not explicitly admit their reluctance towards female candidates (2019). They claim that they would vote for a female candidate and yet Hillary Clinton's candidacy demonstrates that her loss may partly be attributed to her gender. As analyzed by Peter Beinart, "the percentage of Americans who hold a "strongly unfavorable" view of [Clinton] substantially exceeds the percentage for any other Democratic nominee since 1980" (2016). If voters claim that they would elect a female candidate, why was the dislike for Hillary Clinton significantly more than for any previous Democratic nominee? I reason that this could be because female candidates face more criticism than male candidates due to their perceived gendered characteristics. Although difficult to find proof of gender discrimination in voting patterns, gender discrimination is both prevalent and apparent in the behaviours of politicians themselves. Clinton's opponent Donald Trump attempted to use her gender against her during his campaign. Trump's advisers explained his "woman's card" attack, in which Trump accused Clinton of using the "woman's card" to garner votes, was intended to undermine Clinton's qualifications (Chozick and Parker, 2016). Trump's attack is a different approach that still serves to damage a politician's image due to their gender. His attack reasons that Clinton's "political success" is attributed to the fact that she's a woman, therefore she garners the women's vote, this statement simultaneously undermines her merit as a political candidate.

Authors Dolan, Deckman, and Swers analyze women's attempts to manage the often-gendered expectations of voters and media (2019, 120). Unable to circumvent gender stereotypes, female candidates must be cautious of which gender stereotypes they fall victim to. During their campaign, female candidates will attempt to minimize the effect of gender stereotypes by exhibiting a balance of both masculine and feminine traits. Exploring the gender stereotypes that characterize American political culture, female candidates have been observed to portray male stereotypes as a means of affirming to voters that they have the same abilities as men to win elected office.

Gina Ortiz Jones' campaign is referenced in the work of Dolan, Deckman, and Swers to highlight how female candidates manage gender expectation of voters and media (2019, 120). Gina Ortiz Jones' campaign slogan "One of Us, Fighting for us", implicitly communicates to voters that "that she is tough enough for the job" (2019, 119). The word "fighting" in her slogan is associated with ideas of strength, that are linked to male stereotypes favoured in politics. Female candidates must present themselves as both strong leaders but also as compassionate beings, otherwise facing backlash for failing to possess her "innate compassion". Dolan, Deckman, and Swers claim that perceptions of female and male candidates are viewed "through different lenses" (2019, 123). Female candidates must be careful in how they portray their image to voters, because they are often viewed through a lens that is not only critical of their political merit but is critical of who they are as a woman as well.

Managing gender expectations of voters becomes even more challenging for female candidates when faced with sexist backlash for their attempts to assert agentic traits. Female candidates can face public hostility when the public perceives the candidate as attempting to be overtly masculine. For instance, while men are praised for being ambitious, a study by Victoria L. Brescoll and Taylor G. Okimoto found that women are frequently criticized for their ambition (Beinart 2016). Conventionally, ambition is a trait assigned to men, therefore, when a woman is ambitious this can incite backlash because her ambition challenges traditional gendered norms.

Gendered attitudes of party leaders can present a barrier for female candidates. Gender stereotypes limit female opportunities for success by discouraging party leaders from nominating female candidates. Numerous scholars concerned with the gender gap in political representation have argued that party leaders take a candidate's gender in consideration when recruiting potential candidates. In their book, Palmer and Dennis propose that party leaders "are not gender-neutral in their assessments of male and female candidates and their ability to win" (2008, 174). Rather, party leaders are often found to be hesitant in considering female candidates because they fear that recruiting women candidates may risk the party's chances in winning. This prevailing fear is detrimental for female candidates, as party leaders -arguably- are one of the largest factors in determining a candidate's success. Women's opportunities to seek elected office "are controlled, at least in part, by the attitudes and actions of elites in [the] system" (Dolan 2014, 7), therefore, the support of the party leader is crucial for a female candidate's success.

It is challenging, however, for female candidates to obtain the support of the party leader. There is significant evidence that "despite evidence of women's success at the polls, party leaders ...still believe that women have a harder time being elected than do men" (Sanbonmatsu cited in Dolan 2014, 8). Party leaders have admitted that they do not believe that a female candidates' chances would fare well (Dolan 2014, 8), and therefore are discouraged from recruiting female candidates. This belief is a consequence of the gender stereotypes that undermine a women's ability to serve in elected office. Gender stereotypes serve to invalidate a female candidate's merit. Shifting emphasis onto her characteristics as a female, gender stereotypes detract from the candidate's qualifications. This creates additional challenges, as female candidates are burdened with not only have to prove their merit but having to combat gender stereotypes as well.

The disproportionality between Democratic and Republican parties in pursuing women candidacy is a barrier that continues to limit female representation in American politics. Examining the differences in success for female candidates that belong to the Democratic and Republican parties, Palmer and Dennis suggest that "the perceptions of female candidates held by voters and party leaders" (2008, 172) contribute to the greater success of Democratic women in seeking elected office. Elaborating on this, I contend that gender stereotypes are an inherent component to the detriment of Republican female candidates. In examining Republican voters, Palmer and Dennis found evidence to suggest that republic voters "are less sympathetic to female candidates" (2008, 175). For instance, in the case of Sarah Palin, once Palin was nominated to be John McCain's running mate, "references to her gender and maternal status influenced the campaign" (Schreiber 2016, 1), including descriptions such as being a "mama grizzly" and "hockey mom" (Schreiber 2016, 2). The emphasis of Palin's maternal role undermined her viability as a political candidate because it challenged traditional political values of hegemonic masculinity. The conversation around Palin's candidacy was dominated by discussions of how her gender and maternal status challenge her viability as a candidate; demonstrating that the Republican party continues to uphold gendered values. These values, ultimately, preserve the gender role norms that prevent women from entering elected office.

Authors, Kitchens and Swers suggest that, Democratic districts are more likely to elect female candidates as opposed to Republican districts. Referencing Kira Sanbonmatsu's study on party chairs, Kitchens and Swers contend that the party leaders who believed their districts to be less welcoming of

female candidates, were leaders from rural areas (2016, 651). From her analysis, Sanbonmatsu found that respondents in both North Carolina and Ohio -both republican states- “believe that party leaders do not always think of women as candidates” (2006, 154-154). Returning again to this idea of the power held by party leaders, Sanbonmatsu’s analysis demonstrates how as a result of gender stereotypes, republican party leaders are less inclined to nominate female candidates. While “democratic women likely benefit from the perception that they are more liberal”(Kitchens and Swers 2016, 661). Being a woman is automatically disadvantageous for a republican candidate, due to perceptions that if a candidate is female, they are automatically “too liberal” (Schreiber 2016, 3). Sanbonmatsu reiterates the notion that democratic women benefit from the perception of being “more liberal”, stating that “where the public is more liberal, more women typically serve in the legislature” (2006, 156). Kitchens and Swers have found that these “more liberal places” are increasingly democratic (2016, 651).

In concluding their analysis, Palmer and Dennis found there to be a disproportionate trend in women candidacy and office holders between the Democratic party and the Republican party. They argued that “if only one party provides increasing opportunities for female aspirants to enter congress, this is a tremendous barrier” (2008, 175). Kitchens and Swers further this argument, suggesting that, “democratic women benefit from the evolution of the parties’ electoral coalitions” (2016, 651). For instance, EMILY’s List, is an example of a female donor network utilized by female Democratic candidates to support their fundraising process. Unlike the Democratic party that has begun institutionalizing support systems for female candidates, the Republican party has made minimal effort in attempts to aid female candidates. I suggest that this is in part because of the gender stereotypes that discourage the Republican party from wanting to increase female representation within the party.

Conclusion:

To conclude my analysis, I reaffirm my argument that the gender gap in political representation is largely rooted in the campaign process that has and continues to present barriers for women seeking elected office. One of the largest barriers being gender stereotypes, this paper contends that gender stereotypes undermine women’s chances in seeking elected office by influencing both how voters and party leaders view female candidates. Female candidates face additional burdens that male candidates are not subjected to. While a male candidate’s merit is assumed, a female candidate must prove her merit. The gender stereotypes placed on a female candidate undermine her qualifications, causing doubt in her capabilities.

Certain scholars have argued that, although prevalent within politics, gender stereotypes do not play as significant a role in women’s under representation. Kathleen Dolan contends that “gender stereotypes are not a central influence on support for women”, but rather there are “traditional influences” that are more imperative to a women’s success (2014, 186). Focusing on the rigid nature of American politics, Dolan considers political parties, incumbency, and campaign spending as “traditional influences” that are detrimental to a female candidate’s success; however, I would argue that Dolan fails to consider the integration of gender stereotypes into the structure of American politics as the derivation of “these traditional influences”.

Scholars, such as Melinda Adams and Michal Smrek, argue that political institutions are gendered. Taking on a feminist approach, they emphasize that “the interplay of formal and informal practices creates different opportunities for women and men by prescribing acceptable masculine and feminine forms of behavior, rules and values” (2018, 271). As a result, gendered norms shape the structure of American political institutions, and therefore I argue that every facet within American politics is in some way influenced by gendered stereotypes. In consideration of the research explored, it becomes apparent how gender stereotypes influence a female candidate’s campaign. Overall, there is an inequity in treatment that needs to be addressed. Otherwise, how can America truly take pride in itself as a democratic country? A democracy would mean there is equal representation for all constituents. Yet, in America, there is a large inequity in the representation of women in government in comparison to the representation of men, demonstrating that perhaps American politics does not embody the inclusive characteristics necessary for the fulfilment of true democracy.

References

- Adams, Melinda, and Michal Smrek. "Making Institutions and Context Count: How Useful Is Feminist Institutionalism in Explaining Male Dominance in Politics?" *Politics & Gender* 14, no. 2. 271-275, 2018.
<https://mcgill.on.worldcat.org/search?databaseList=283%2C638&queryString=Melinda+Adams+and+Michal+Smrek#/oclc/7735803125>
- Beinart, Peter. "Fear of a Female President". The Atlantic. October 15, 2016.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/10/fear-of-a-female-president/497564/>
- Chozick, Amy, and Ashley Parker. "Donald Trump's Gender-Based Attacks on Hillary Clinton Have Calculated Risk." The New York Times April 29, 2016.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/29/us/politics/hillary-clinton-donald-trump-women.html>
- Dolan, Julie, Deckman, Melissa M., and Swers, Michele L. "Women on the Campaign Trail". In *Women and Politics: Paths to Power and Political Influence*. 118-150. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2016.
<https://web-ebshost.com/login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=573a9f1-1f45-41fd-bf60-992643815cd8%40sessionmgr4007&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhtc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#AN=122226&db=nlebk>
- Dolan, Kathleen. *When Does Gender Matter?: Women Candidates and Gender Stereotypes in American Elections*, 1-15. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
<https://www-oxfordscholarship-com.login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199968275.001.0001/acprof-9780199968275>
- Kitchens, Karin E., and Michele L. Swers. "Why Aren't There More Republican Women in Congress? Gender, Partisanship, and Fundraising Support in the 2010 and 2012 Elections." In *Politics & Gender* 12, no. 4, 648-76. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2016.
<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/politics-and-gender/article/why-arent-there-more-republican-women-in-congress-gender-partisanship-and-fundraising-support-in-the-2010-and-2012-elections/3E3C34C6098A2A1EC5B3956FFA8A44CD>

Palmer, Barbara, and Simon, Dennis. "Understand the Glass Ceiling". In *Breaking the Political Glass Ceiling: Women and Congressional Elections*, 161-176. London: Routledge, 2008.
<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ualberta/detail.action?docID=325570>

Rutgers Eagleton Institute of Politics. "Women in the U.S. Congress 2019." Accessed October 2, 2019.
<https://cawp.rutgers.edu/women-us-congress-2019>.

Sanbonmatsu, Kira. *Where Women Run : Gender and Party in the American States*, 156-181. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2006.
<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ualberta/detail.action?docID=341470>

Schreiber, Ronnee. "Gender roles, motherhood, and politics: Conservative women's organizations frame Sarah Palin and Michele Bachmann." In *Journal of Women, Politics and Policy* 37(1), 1-23. United Kingdom: Taylor and Francis Group, 2016.
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1554477X.2016.1115319?journalCode=wvap20>

Thomson-Deveaux, Amelia. "Americans Say They Would Vote For A Woman, But...". *FiveThirtyEight*, July 15, 2019. <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/americans-say-they-would-vote-for-a-woman-but/>

Zamfira, Andreaa, Christian De Montilibrat, and Daniela Radu. "The Interplay between Identities, Codes, Stereotypes and Politics in Studying Gender in Western and Non- Western Societies". In *Gender in Focus: Identities, Codes, Stereotypes and Politics*. 13-38. Opladen; Berlin; Toronto: Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2018.
<https://www.jstor.org/login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/stable/j.ctvddzn5f?refreqid=excelsior%3A6e9562307f1faaed74b0f632a9c162>