Adams, Steph: Understanding the 2016 Election Through Gender

I remember feeling confused as the votes started trickling in and Donald Trump was eventually announced president elect on election day 2016. Most days I'm still confused. I knew that it must have had something to do with gender, but what exactly? In the world of modern sexism (the belief system that discrimination against women has been overcome despite this very notion perpetuating negative attitudes and resentment towards women who seek political and economic equality for members of their gender), the answer can be hard to find amongst all of the claims that Hillary Clinton simply did not run a good campaign or that she was just not trusted enough (Francis 2018). While gender was not the only contributing factor in the 2016 election, it cannot be ignored. In executive branch leadership gender power, or masculinism, exists. This gender power is, “a system of formal and informal power arrangements that privilege masculine character traits, customs, and operating procedures over feminine ones” (Francis 2018). The presidency is steeped in masculinity, and women candidates face several hurdles on their path to election. Even Hillary Clinton, who former president Barack Obama said may have been one of the most qualified candidates for the position, failed to jump the last hurdle on the path to the White House. After Clinton’s first primary debate, Washington Post columnist Dana Milbank praised Clinton on Twitter for being a “man among boys”. Through his tweet, Milbank associated the positive achievements credited to Clinton at the debate with men instead of women thereby providing evidence that “…masculinity is the standard by which presidential competency is measured” (Dittmar 2017). It was not enough for Clinton to be a strong woman, she had to gain power through becoming more like a man. To be successful as a presidential candidate one has to possess this masculinity, but it has proved impossible for women candidates thus far to successfully possess it in a way that does not negate our culture’s strict feminine standards for women. In our patriarchy, women candidates wishing to become president must possess both the masculinity required of political candidates as well as the femininity required of women in a way that does not contradict each other. In the words of Duerst-Laht, “…they must find the perfect blend of pantsuits and pearls” (Dittmar 2017).

The 2016 election in general is the perfect example to demonstrate exactly how gendered the race to the presidency exactly is. Clinton was set up for success in the best possible way with a large financial war chest, family ties to power, name recognition, party support, and extensive political experience; while Trump was largely inexperienced (he became the first successful presidential candidate to come to office without any legislative, executive, or military experience) and many assumed he would lose. The extreme disparity between the two candidates along with the shocking outcome of the election show how the presidency is closely tied to masculinity, possibly in detrimental ways (Jalalzai 2018). This presentation will explore the unique difficulties faced by Hillary Clinton as a woman presidential candidate trying to retain both acceptable levels of femininity and masculinity, and show how actions taken by Donald Trump during his candidacy did not prove detrimental to his campaign because they upheld hegemonic masculinity (Wade and Ferree 2019).

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