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Gender and US Politics

Terminology

Just a note on terminology for the lecture: what do we mean by gender? Socially constructed characteristics about human behaviour, actions and roles in relation to ideas of masculinity and femininity. Research into US political participation (especially measuring voting behaviour) and representation lags behind on nonbinary and transgender roles, largely focusing on men and women.

This lecture is not only about women in US politics, it will be focusing on gender inequity and inequality, femininity and masculinity, as well as looking out how women as a historically underrepresented group feature in the story of US politics.

History of Gender and US Politics

Patriarchal Founding

So firstly, what is a patriarchy? It is an unequal system of power relations based on the assumption that men are superior to women. It works to support systems which oppress women and feminine presenting individuals. Feminism aims to oppose this system, and change the culture, seeking equality in treatment of genders.

The language within the founding is white male-centric, using phrases such as ‘all men created equal’ within the original Constitution. We talk about the Founding Fathers, as they were all male, and this presents a paternalistic image of the founders of the nation.

Social dominance of men – male education is prioritised, voting rights only to white men, political office only held by men.

Women’s Suffrage

Feminist political activism was first inspired by women’s involvement in other reformist movements. Women played a major role in the abolitionist movement. There were up to 100 women’s antislavery societies in the 1830s and women provided over half the signatures on anti-slavery petitions to Congress. They also played a role in the temperance movement, around consumption of alcohol.

In 1848, prominent abolitionists Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton helped to organise the Seneca Falls Convention, the first meeting of the women’s rights movement in the US, and attracted hundreds of men and women. The delegates of the convention adopted a Declaration of Sentiments: “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal, the history of mankind is history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her.”

In particular states, women’s right to vote progressed earlier than the rest of the country. Colorado, Idaho, Utah and Wyoming gave the right to vote by 1910, all out on the frontier – partly due to the smaller populations, but also due to increased progressivism. In New Jersey, women actually did get the right to vote way back in 1776, but this was taken away in 1807.

Suffragettes agreed to put aside their opposition to joining WWI, and successfully mobilised fears about immigration and the potential undermining of the political hegemony of White Anglo-Saxon Protestants, together with the growing economic participation of women in the workforce during WWI, to secure the vote in 1920 (19th Amendment).

Women’s Suffrage II

However, that is not to say achieving this goal was easy. There was active opposition to the introduction of Women’s suffrage – suffragettes efforts were countered by groups that argued it was unnatural for women to vote. And let’s face it, white men had it pretty good up to that point: upon marriage, a women’s possessions became her husband’s property. If there was a divorce, husband retained property and custody of any children, even where the husband was responsible for the breakdown of the marriage. Women could not seek employment without their husband’s permission, were excluded from educational opportunities and many professions. So they had an upward battle.

ERA

That battle continued as soon as voting rights were secured. Attention moved to ensuring all rights in the Constitution applied to women as well as men, through the Equal Rights Amendment introduced in to Congress 1923: **Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.**

But nothing really happened with this until the second wave of the women’s movement in the 1960s, which grew out of the anti-war movements, civil rights movement, and student movements. Women found they were still counted as second class citizens among these movement. So they tried to get more women in office, and to pass the ERA to the Constitution.

In 1972, Congress passed the ERA, but a time limit of 10 years was placed on the ratification process of two-thirds of states agreeing. So by 1982, only 35 out of the 38 states had agreed. Although 20 states did adopt the ERA as part of their own constitutions, so it did influence how some states acted.

ERA II

Just to give an idea of the states that didn’t ratify, it was mostly the more conservative southern states which didn’t, along with those three western states.

Political Power and Gender Equality

We now come onto political power and gender equality, with a focus on political participation and representation in US politics. The first area to focus on is this idea of the gender gap.

In the UK, you may associate the gender gap with the gender wage gap, or the difference between genders in incomes for the same roles. However in US politics, the gender gap in voting refers to a difference between the percentage of women and the percentage of men voting for a given candidate, generally the winning candidate. Even when women and men favour the same candidate, they may do so by different margins, resulting in a gender gap. The gender gap can also be used to measure differences in support for political parties, or an a given political issue. The definition provided here is from the Center for American Women and Politics, which is a great website of research on gender and participation in US politics.

Gender Gap: Stat Attack

In every presidential election since 1996, a majority of women have preferred the Democratic candidate. The magnitude of the gender gap has ranged in size from four to twelve points since 1980, in the last 20 years it has remained around 10. Moreover, women and men have favoured different candidates in presidential elections since 2000, with the exception of 2008 when men were almost equally divided in their preferences for Democrat Barack Obama and Republican John McCain. In 2020, a majority of women favoured the Democratic victor, Joe Biden, while a majority of men voted for the Republican candidate, Donald Trump. This is to offer some evidence that it appears men and women behave differently when it comes to voting behaviour in the United States.

Although prioritising presidential elections here, the gender gap was important in the 2006 mid-terms, the first time Nancy Pelosi became leader of the House, the first woman to do so. Women provided a critical margin of victory in States like Virginia, Missouri and Rhode Island.

Why is there a gender gap?

Party difference on social issues: democratic party more inclusive, focus on progressive issues and modern values, which are more likely to appeal to women voters. Republicans focus on traditional values and conservative political issues, are more appealing to men.

Focus on policies such as abortion (Democratic party being pro-choice) and issues such as paid family leave (Democratic party supporting this to a greater degree) mean women may be more likely to vote for the Democratic party.

Candidate diversity: the Republicans are likely to have older, white male candidates standing who may be less appealing to women voters. Democratic candidates are more likely to have some diversity in policy positions, depending on region or level of government, than Republicans.

Turnout: any favouritism by women will be felt more, due to higher turnout. Women have voted in higher numbers than men in every presidential election since 1964, at higher rates than men since 1980. In 2016, 10 million more women registered, and 53% of voters were women. In 2020, 57% of voters were women. This will benefit the Democratic Party, especially if this continues.

Demographic Intersection

However, we must understand that women are not a monolithic voting bloc. Across white, Black, Latinx, and Asian American voters, women are more likely than men to report voting for the Democratic candidate. However, a majority of white women have voted for the Republican candidate since the 2000 presidential election when white women were almost equally split between Democrat Al Gore and Republican victor, George W. Bush. In contrast, a large majority of Black, Latinx, and Asian women have supported the Democratic candidate for the entirety of the time period in which data disaggregated by gender and race has been available.

In 2016 52% of white women voted for Trump, with 43% of white women voting for Clinton. This continued in 2020, with 55% of white women voting for Trump, and 44% of women voting Biden. In contrast, if we look at Black women, in 2016 94% voted for Clinton, and 90% voted for Biden. All evidence shows that the voting power of Black women is increasingly powerful. They turnout in extremely high numbers, almost the highest of any narrow demographic group, and were key to Biden’s victory in 2020 after turning out in states such as Georgia.

In addition, unmarried women tend to vote at a higher rate than unmarried men, married couples tend to vote at similar rates. There is also an education gap: 64% of white women with a college degree voted Biden.

Gender Representation

Moving onto political representation in US politics, specifically in Congress, we now see how genders are descriptively represented in Congress. In these pictures, we have mentioned some milestones of women’s representation in the Senate and the House. Historically, US political office has been dominated by men. Since 1789, 97% of those in Congress have been men, and less than 400 women. In 1966, this stood at 2 women senators and 10 women in the House. By 1993, this was up to 6 women senators and 52 women in the House, because of the concerted effort to increase the number of women in political office. Well into the 1970s, one of the most common ways for a woman to enter Congress was by succeeding her deceased husband or father, either by election or appointment. Of the 90 women who served in the House between 1916 and 1980, 31 were initially elected to their husband’s seat after he died; three were chosen to replace their husbands on the ballot when the men died before Election Day; and one, Winnifred Mason Huck of Illinois, was elected in 1922 to fill the last four months of her late father’s term. Many of these individuals were then re-elected in those seats.

In 1964, Patsy Matsu Mink became the first woman of colour in the House, in 1992, Carol Moseley Braun became the first women of colour in the Senate, and in 1998 Tammy Baldwin became the first openly gay woman in Congress.

2022: 118th Congress

If we come to the current Congress, the 118th which took office in January 2023, 27% of Congress held by women: 106 Democratic women, 42 Republican women, one independent. Of the 149 women, 58 are women of colour. Overall, the number of women is 59% up on a decade ago. There are also 12 women state governors. The number of women in the House has increased quite sharply in recent years, in the Senate it has been a lot steadier. However, there is some way to go if the US wants to reach a Congress that is completely descriptively representative of the United States on gender, when it comes to numbers of women, and particularly when it comes to non-binary and transgender representation.

Women in US Politics

In terms of specific women who have achieved high office in the US, here we have the first woman VP in Kamala Harris, 4 women on the SC (Sonia Sotomayor, Elena Kagan, Ketanji Brown Jackson, and Amy Coney Barrett), Janet Yellen as Secretary of Treasury after being Head of federal reserve. In fact, Biden has 12 out of 25 Cabinet members are women. Nancy Pelosi served a 4th term as speaker of the House. Condoleezza Rice – first female African American secretary of state. Clinton, first woman presidential candidate. Deb Haaland is the first Native American women in the Cabinet (Secretary of the Interior).

Gender Politics of Presidential Elections Campaigns

Obviously up until this point, the United States has only seen male presidents, and as such there is something of a sense that many Americans, when they picture the office of the president, can only imagine a man in the seat. It means that at present, masculinity is seen as the default in US politics, and is taken for granted for the highest office in the land.

This section draws on the work of Duerst-Lahti and Oakley. They use a term called ‘presidential timber’, which is the factors and characteristics that it takes to construct a president. Up to this point, these building blocks have always been viewed as masculine. They might include charisma, stature, being a warrior leader as commander in chief, and acting as the United States’ lead protector. There also is a tendency to use sports and war metaphors in debate. To be successful in running for office in a space where masculinity is the default, women need to exhibit masculine characteristics, whilst retaining femininity.

Contesting Masculinities

The authors discuss two forms of masculinity that one came aim for. Dominance masculinity is the idea that one can be commanding and controlling, be able to reach the top of the hierarchy, and have a level of physical or financial success. A good example of a president fitting into this would be Bush Jr., who positioned himself as a cowboy taking on the world. The other type is expertise masculinity, where one shows experience of their capacity to govern, and demonstrates intellectual ability. Obama strategically positioned himself here, to avoid being labelled as an ‘angry Black man’ who wouldn’t appeal to white voters. Women have better success in positioning themselves in this latter category, as it is harder for them to be perceived as having dominance masculinity.

2016 Election

It is worth breaking down the methods Trump used to draw on the advantages that masculinity in campaigning can bring.

Firstly, Trump aimed to establish his dominance masculinity during the Republican primary process. He belittled his opponents in the race, questioning their virality and masculine prowess. For example, labelling Marco Rubio as ‘little Marco’, talking about ‘low energy Jeb’. He wanted to remove their masculinity as a selling factor.

When it came to the election against Clinton, he sought to undermine the two biggest attributes that women are often looked to more than men, and they are honesty and trustworthiness. He accused her of lying about her involvement in Benghazi, and about her famous private email server, and then labelled Clinton as ‘Crooked Hillary’. This undermined her claims to both, and by attacking her record as Secretary of State, he was able to remove her ability to tap into expertise masculinity as well.

On the gender voting gap in 2016, 538 found that if only men could vote in 2016, Trump would have carried all but a handful of states. If only women could vote in 2016, Clinton would have won quite easily, carrying most states bar the South and the western desert states.

Women Voting for Trump

And just to provide another visualisation, to emphasise what was discussed earlier about demographic intersection in voting, Trump won key groups of women across the country. So Conservative women he won by a landslide, despite the many misogynistic things he said. He also won 45-64 year old white women very comfortably, and white protestant women by a large margin. 70% of people said Trump’s treatment of women ‘bothered them’, but 30% of these people still voted for Trump. However, if it did not bother you, only 10% didn’t vote for Trump.

Women in the 2020 Presidential Race

In the Democratic primary process, there were six possible women candidates, perhaps as a reaction to Trump’s presidency. Here, we have Kirsten Gillibrand (Sen. NY), Tulsi Gabbard (Rep. HI), Elizabeth Warren (Sen. MA), Amy Klobuchar (Sen. MN), Marianne Williamson (Activist and Author), Kamala Harris (Sen. CA). However, all were obviously unsuccessful at winning the nomination. One of the reasons for this lies with the idea of what Americans think ‘electable’ means.

Whiner

A quote from Elizabeth Warren just after exiting the Democratic Primary race in 2020. A 2018 PEW research center poll found that 45% of Americans said they personally hoped a women would be elected in their lifetime. 51% of women, 38% of all men. However, 66% believe it is easier for men to get elected. In a primary process, most voters, whilst of course considering their preferred candidate, are also being strategic, and aiming to find the most electable candidate, the person they think will be able to stand up against the opposition the best. The scars of 2016 were playing a role – democratic voters were terrified of not being able to beat Trump with a woman candidate.

After Super Tuesday in 2020, voter after voter said they’d vote for a woman, just not Warren. She was exceptionally qualified for the role, but still came third in her home state of Massachusetts. Likability is crucial – in 2019, just 4% of voters saw Warren as likeable, a mighty 5% for Harris. This contrasts with 20% for Biden and Sanders. Women are held to a higher standard than men in elections, media coverage is bias in the way it presents women, in both appearance and policies, and much research shows they are frequently held to higher ethical standards than men.

Gender and US Society

Now to move onto looking at gender in US society more broadly, it is important to examine how far gender inequality is reducing across different measures in the United States. In education, women have caught up with men in degree attainment in the United States, which should have knock on effects throughout society, if there are meant to be more women graduates now than men.

Leadership Gap

However, there is a disparity between men and women in who has leadership roles in the United States: In the legal profession, make up only 20% of partners. In academia, make up only 32% of full professors, despite outstripping PhDs for 8 years. In finance, they are only 12.5% of CFOs in Fortune 500 companies. Since 2016, there have been no black women heading Fortune 500 companies. Women account for 18% of all film directors, producers, writers and editors of top grossing films. They make up only 7% of CEOs at Fortune 500 companies.

Gendered Economic Power in the US

In terms of gender equality, of the 153 countries the World Economic Forum assesses for gender equality, through the global gender gap index, the US comes in at 53rd, way off the top three countries. In terms of the gender pay gap, this diagram on the right shows the percentage of men’s pay that women achieve in the United States for the following jobs. In terms of lifetime income, women consistently earn less than men, the Census website has some great data on this for more information. Around major cities, women have a much better level of income equality, but in poorer states, they do far worse compared to men.

Equal Pay Day

This calendar shows equal pay days, demonstrating how many days into the new year women of different ethnicities must work in the US to receive the same income as men. For example, it would take 67 days for Asian women to catch up, and Latina women 293 days to catch up with a man’s earnings from the year before.

Even though the Equal Pay Act was signed into law in 1963, it has not equalised the pay of men and women in the US. Occupations traditionally dominated by men tend to be much better paid than those dominated by women (such as nursing, elementary education, and service industries).

Anti-Feminism in US Politics

The New Right, especially the evangelical Christian Right, celebrate ‘traditional family values’. The New Right believes the traditional nuclear family to be the most important pillar of a moral and successful society. It explicitly endorses the notion of separate spheres, in the belief that men and women are biologically destined to play different roles in society. The power of anti-feminism was demonstrated in the battle for ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the Constitution. An anti-feminist coalition was formed, led by Phyllis Schlafly and her organisation, STOP-ERA. It was instrumental in persuading enough states to reject ratification, thereby blocking the ERA.

There has been links to conflict over the right to same sex marriage in US politics, this has not diminished since 2015 Obergefell v Hodges.

This links to the social breakdown of the family over the last 30-40 years within the United States. It does have the highest divorce rate in the world, there are more extended families and blended families have become much more normal within the United States in recent years, with lots of single parent female-headed families as well. All men share responsibilities but also demand that working women to be everything, to be at work and control of things at home.

Political Issues and Gender

We finally come onto political issues that have a gendered dimension to them. A lot of focus in the last four or five years have been on LGBT rights and access to reproductive healthcare and abortions, particularly due to policies during the Trump administration. Since the overturning of Roe v. Wade, we expect access to abortion to be hugely restricted in the following areas:

Abortion Map

This map helps to show which states will spring into action now to restrict abortion. The states in dark blue have plans to restrict abortion once Roe was overturned. The states in turquoise blue are states where pre-Roe decision abortion bans are still on the books, but have not been enforced while this decision stood, since 1973. And the light blue states of OK, Arkansas and Mississippi have both pre- and post-Roe v Wade laws that will trigger into action. So overall, at least 19 states are expected to trigger restrictive laws now.

Did abortion as an issue feature in the 2022 elections? Yes, massively. Polls regularly showed Democrats caring more about the topic this year than Republicans, which makes sense in the wake of the Dobbs decision overturning Roe. There were many voters who said the topic of abortion got them out to vote. In polling, abortion was not necessarily top of mind, but it was a prominent data point supporting a narrative that some Republicans were too extreme. Exit polls broadly suggest that young women broke hard for Democrats. But then, a post-election survey from AARP also showed that women over 65 swung significantly toward Democrats between July and November. Pro-choice policies, in isolation, did well. Five statewide ballot measures all came out in favour of abortion rights, even in red states like Kentucky and Montana.