

FINDING GENDER IN ELECTION 2016: LESSONS FROM PRESIDENTIAL GENDER WATCH

Highlights

Introduction

In April 2015, the Barbara Lee Family Foundation (BLFF) and the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) launched Presidential Gender Watch 2016, a project to track, analyze, and illuminate gender dynamics in the 2016 presidential election. With the help of expert scholars and practitioners, Presidential Gender Watch worked for 21 months to further public understanding of how gender influences candidate strategy, voter engagement and expectations, media coverage, and electoral outcomes in campaigns for the nation's highest executive office. On social media, in written analyses, and via public presentations, we raised questions, suggested answers, and sought to complicate popular discussions about gender's role in the presidential race by drawing upon the wealth of research and expertise that could best inform the gender dialogue on presidential politics.

Threaded throughout our analyses were a few major points critical to viewing the 2016 presidential election through a gender lens:

- 1. Gender doesn't equal women.** Looking through a gender lens requires understanding how gender shapes behaviors, evaluations, and outcomes for women and men.
- 2. Gender is at play at various stages and sites in presidential politics.** The presidency is a gendered institution, wherein power has been allocated to men and masculinity. Gender shapes behavior, interactions, and expectations of all actors engaged in presidential politics, from candidates and officeholders to media and voters.
- 3. Women are not monolithic; nor are men.** Just as conversations around gender too often assume we are talking only about women, they frequently rely upon singular characterizations of women as voters or candidates, characterizations that ignore the rich diversity among women—ideologically, generationally, and across race and ethnicity, religion, class, or sexuality. Analyzing campaigns through an intersectional lens ensures a more complete picture of the myriad dynamics that influence perceptions, behavior, and evaluation.



4. Gender is one piece of a complex story of what happened in the 2016 election. Few would argue that gender was the sole factor in either presidential candidate's victory or defeat, but ignoring the myriad ways in which gender shaped campaign decisions and dynamics would also paint an incomplete picture of what happened in 2016. In the remainder of this report, we tell parts of the gender story of the 2016 presidential race, recognizing that it is just one story to tell about an unprecedented election.

Putting 2016 in a Gendered Historical Context

In 2016, for the first time in U.S. history, women competed for both major party presidential nominations; Hillary Clinton sought and won the Democratic nomination and Carly Fiorina unsuccessfully competed for the Republican nomination for president. In addition, Jill Stein ran as the Green Party nominee, reprising her role from 2012. While Hillary Clinton put 63 million more cracks in the glass ceiling of presidential politics as the first woman to be a major party nominee and the first woman to win the national popular vote, she stood on the shoulders of women who have chipped away at gender barriers to the presidency for 145 years.

In their bids for the nation's highest elected office, each of these women confronted and challenged the masculine dominance of the presidency. Beyond the implicit assumption of strength and power—not traditionally attributed to women—executives are imagined as singular masculine leaders, "heroes," "protectors," and "great men," presumed to act alone. Our collective imagination of who can and should be president remains stunted by reluctance either to fully accept female leaders as sufficiently masculine to fit this role or to envision the presidency in less strictly masculine terms.

Ready for a Woman? Voter Expectations and Perceptions of Gender in 2016

Many indicators suggested that the public seemed quite ready to elect a woman president in 2016. But these data do not mean that voters do not see, or are not influenced by, gender in evaluating candidates. Research shows that the traits and issue expertise often most desired for officeholders are those most often associated with men and masculinity. For example, an August 2016 Associated Press survey found that nearly 30% of those surveyed reported a woman president would not be tough enough to handle a military crisis or keep the country safe from terrorism, and just over 20% were skeptical about a woman president's ability to make hard decisions.

The often-subtle differences in how voters perceive men and women candidates can mask underlying sexism, according to Presidential Gender Watch guest expert Melanye Price. She used Clinton's candidacy—and reactions to it—to demonstrate the dangers of "aversive sexism," where discriminatory beliefs or behavior are justified on the basis of factors other than gender. Dan Cassino offered more explicit evidence of "gender role threat" negatively affecting Clinton's ratings among men in an experimental setting, finding that reminders of gender role disruption caused a decrease in Clinton's male support. His findings among New Jersey voters aligned with national polling from the Public Religion Research Institute that showed Trump supporters much more likely than Clinton voters to say that men and women should "stick to the roles for which they are naturally suited," that society has become too soft and feminine, and that society today seems to "punish men just for acting like men."

Whether these perceptions of gender contributed implicitly to voter support for presidential contenders or they motivated the more explicit sexism targeted at Clinton via campaign paraphernalia, memes, or commentary, the 2016 election demonstrated that presidential terrain is far from gender neutral.



Looking and Sounding Presidential

Women candidates have historically faced disproportionate coverage and commentary on things like hair, hemlines, husbands, and the horse race compared with what their male counterparts experience. But the more obvious gender disparities in 2016 came in the attention paid to women candidates' faces and voices.

Both Hillary Clinton and Carly Fiorina faced criticism for appearing too stern and not smiling enough on the campaign trail, while the rarity of Trump or Sanders' smiles rarely—if ever—was criticized as a character flaw. Because women are expected to appear likable by feminine standards, their serious faces, even if appropriate for serious settings, violate gender norms in ways that may make observers, especially men, uncomfortable. Strong voices from women candidates also appeared to irk men in election 2016, consistent with research that finds gender differences in evaluations of and reactions to speaking tone and style. While Bernie Sanders' "shouting" was a staple of his style on the stump, it was Hillary Clinton who was repeatedly accused by male journalists and commentators of "shouting," yielding direct admonishments from them and reprisals of the "shrill" claims made against her in 2008. Male candidates also expressed their disdain for women candidates' voices, perhaps implicitly noting their aversion to women's power.

However, these criticisms did not go unchecked. Feminist voices broke through on both social media and mainstream outlets in the 2016 presidential election, providing evidence of both evolution in and disruption of the policing of political women's styles of expression in presidential campaigns.

Up to Standards

There was much evidence in the 2016 presidential race that masculinity remains a key standard by which presidential competency is measured. While both men and women running for president are expected to prove their masculine credentials, there are also standards for electoral success that are differently applied based on candidate gender. In 2016, campaign discourse on candidate likability and authenticity, as well as honesty and ethics, provided evidence of persistent double standards by which women candidates are evaluated.

- **Likability and Authenticity:** Evaluations of women's qualifications for office are tied to perceptions of their likability in a way that is not seen for men, according to research by the Barbara Lee Family Foundation. In 2016, Carly Fiorina competed for the Republican nomination amidst a group of arguably unlikable men. But it was only Fiorina's persona that merited a *Raw Story* headline reading, "Not even a room full of puppies can make Carly Fiorina likable." Attention to Hillary Clinton's likability also outpaced concerns about the unfavorability or relatability of her two major opponents—Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump. Relatedly, media appeared particularly preoccupied with Clinton's "authenticity problem" in election 2016. Authenticity, a trait valued strongly among presidential contenders, can present distinctive challenges to women and men, whether due to the axes on which that authenticity is measured or the standards by which it is earned. It is assumed that women, as political outsiders, have to "act" the part of candidate and officeholder in order to meet both the masculine credentials for the job and the feminine credentials of being a "real" woman, while being authentically male also means meeting the expectations of executive office.
- **Honesty and Ethics:** Research on gender stereotypes reveals that voters may be less likely to expect honesty and ethical behavior from men than from women. As a result, it is entirely possible that women candidates might be held to higher standards than men when it comes to honesty



and ethics in their pasts and on the campaign trail. This double standard may help to explain the differences in attention to and influence of Clinton and Trump's indiscretions over the course of election 2016. It may also explain the strategic decision for the Trump campaign to characterize Clinton as "crooked" from day one and to encourage chants of "lock her up" at Trump campaign events. These tactics not only undermined Clinton's credibility, but knocked her off the pedestal upon which stereotypes of feminine virtue place women.

Playing the Gender Card or Expanding the Deck?

Presidential Gender Watch sought to expose the style and tactics by which all candidates played into or against gender stereotypes in election 2016, revealing the ways in which masculine dominance of the presidency was disrupted or maintained not simply in the sex of the candidates, but in the behaviors, values, and agendas they espoused. In some cases, candidates offered examples of adapting to the existing rules of the game, playing the masculinity card to meet expectations of the office. At other times, they expanded the deck of cards that can be played to make a persuasive case for the presidency.

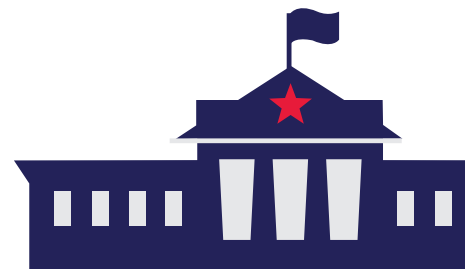
- **Playing the Masculinity Card:** Candidates' use of "tough talk" and emasculation tactics reinforced masculine norms of presidential politics, and Trump's protectionist rhetoric—often targeted at women—drew upon quite basic conditions of patriarchal or paternalistic masculinity that position men as dominant in relation to more vulnerable or dependent women. Even the toxic masculinity evident in Trump's comments about and treatment of women before and during the 2016 campaign revealed an unevolved model of manhood.
- **Expanding the Deck:** Beyond making history as the first female presidential nominee, Hillary Clinton played the gender card in 2016 in ways that not only opened the door for women to embrace gender as an electoral asset at all levels of office,

but expanded the deck of cards—gender and otherwise—from which presidential candidates can draw to prove they are credentialed and capable of being commander-in-chief. Clinton "mainstreamed gender" in her campaign in a way candidates before her have not, integrating the diversity of women's as well as men's concerns and experiences into her strategic decision-making and campaign messaging.

Where Were the Women?

The underrepresentation of women in presidential politics is not limited to candidates and office-holders. Throughout election 2016, Presidential Gender Watch paid close attention to the gender balance of campaign staffs, on debate and convention stages, and among those journalists covering the major candidates. We found:

- There was near gender parity among Clinton's top campaign staff, while women were one-quarter of Trump's senior campaign team. However, Kellyanne Conway—Trump's final campaign manager—became the first woman to ever manage a winning presidential campaign.
- Nineteen of 51 primary debate moderators, or 37%, were women. Of the three general election presidential debates, three of four moderators were men. The sole vice presidential debate was moderated by Elaine Quijano, who also became the first Asian American woman to moderate a general election debate at the presidential level.
- Women were 50.4% of speakers at the Democratic National Convention and just 26.1% of speakers at the Republican National Convention.
- Women were well-represented in the 2016 presidential campaign press corps, particularly among those journalists embedded with the Clinton campaign. Importantly, though, gender parity in presence did not mean gender equality in experience; female reporters were subject to particularly sexist vitriol from candidates and their supporters throughout election 2016.



Complicating Conceptions of “the Women’s Vote”

In the autopsy of the election 2016, there is good reason to pay close attention to women voters, as they outnumber and outvote men. Presidential Gender Watch analyzed women voters throughout election 2016 without homogenizing them and by evaluating their behavior or beliefs within historical context. Recognizing the complexity among women voters is necessary to tell a complete, and complex, story about women voters’ influence in the race to put a woman in the White House.

According to exit polls, there was an 11-point gender gap in presidential vote choice in 2016; 52% of men and 41% of women voted for Donald Trump. This is a larger gender gap than in any year since 1980 except 1996, when there was also an 11-point gap, with Bill Clinton winning 44% of men’s and 55% of women’s votes. But neither women nor men are monolithic voting blocs. For example, Clinton fared better than her primary and general election opponents among women of color, particularly black women and Latinas who are more reliably Democratic voters. Trump edged out Clinton among white women, and specifically non-college-educated white women, in the final exit polls. Thus, Clinton did not fail to win women voters, but instead failed to win over enough women who have voted Republican in recent history.

There appeared to be two primary ideas for why Clinton should have fared better with women than previous Democratic candidates. The first relied upon the electoral myth that women voters vote for women on the basis of shared biology; in reality, partisanship trumps gender in presidential vote choice. The second theory for why Clinton would overperform among women (by historical standards) assumed that Trump’s misogynist history and unfavorability among Republican women would translate into votes for Clinton. For Republican women who were concerned about Trump’s misogyny, though, disliking Trump didn’t have to translate into voting for Clinton. Instead, a more reasonable prediction was that Trump’s behavior might deter them from voting at all. There is some

evidence that some other Republican women may not have viewed Trump’s behavior as misogynistic at all, or at least tolerated it as normal.

The real critique underlying post-election shock about any women voting for Donald Trump seems to be that they were somehow voting against their own interests. Of course, this assumes that there is a singular set and shared prioritization of interests for all women, regardless of class, race, education, or ideology.

This report, which—along with supplementary resources and references—can be downloaded in full at presidentialgenderwatch.org, tells part of the gender story of the 2016 presidential election, highlighting key ways in which candidates, media, and voters engaged with a presidential institution that has long been dominated by masculinity and men. It reveals evidence of the maintenance of masculine dominance in presidential politics, as well as signs of institutional change that may expand our ideas of what and whom is deemed presidential.

About the Presidential Gender Watch Partners

The **Barbara Lee Family Foundation** (blff.org) advances women’s equality and representation in American politics and in the field of contemporary art. Our work in both our program areas is guided by our core belief that women’s voices strengthen our democracy and enrich our culture. We achieve our overall mission through our nonpartisan political research program, strategic partnerships, grants, and endowments.

The **Center for American Women and Politics** (cawp.rutgers.edu), a unit of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, is nationally recognized as the leading source of scholarly research and current data about American women’s political participation. Its mission is to promote greater knowledge and understanding about women’s participation in politics and government and to enhance women’s influence and leadership in public life.

