

Can a woman become President?

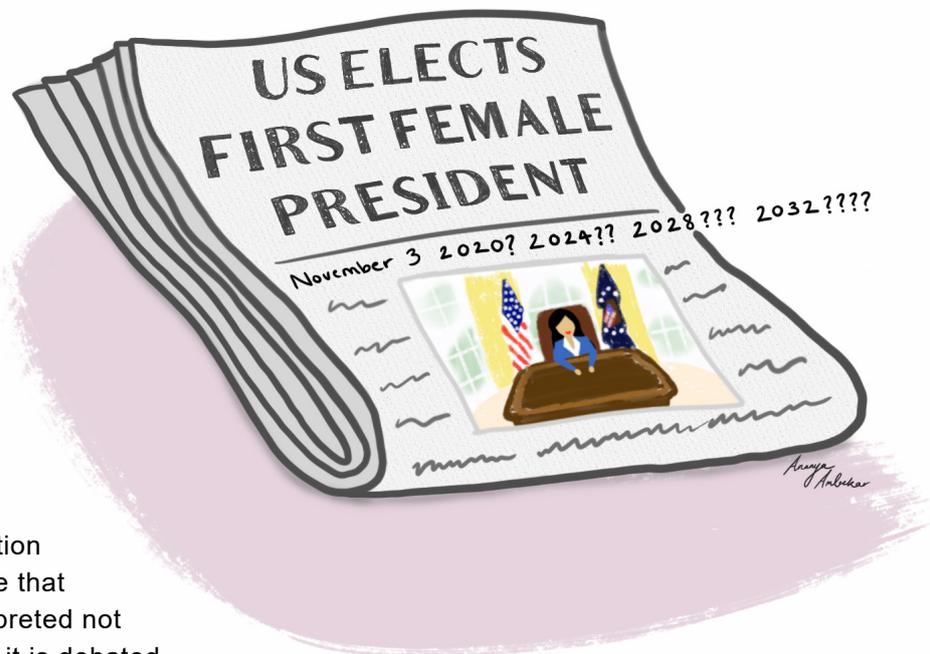
Ross Gale investigates whether structural sexism in the American political system, dating back to the American Constitution itself, means that a woman will never sit in the White House.

As the United States approached the January Iowa caucuses, the non-aggression pact between the progressive Democratic Party presidential nominee contenders, Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, crumbled into acrimony (Riley-Smith 2020). Warren alleged that during a meeting between the two senators in December 2018, Sanders had stated his belief that a woman could not win the Presidency (Schwartz 2020). Sanders vehemently denied this, stating that Clinton won the popular vote: 'how could anybody in a million years not believe a woman could become president?' (Schwartz 2020). The idea that the office is inherently gendered would now appear outdated. Yet, since the very first American presidency in 1789, all 45 politicians elected to the post have been men (Friedman 2016). The 2020 election, however, has had a record number of six women campaigning for the Democratic nomination to run against the male Republican incumbent (Becker 2019). Thus, the question arises: could a woman overturn this historic male monopoly on the presidency and reach the White House? To answer this, the role of gender in the legal framework of the presidency must be assessed before considering whether social barriers to political gender parity operate within the media and the electorate itself.

The Constitution:

The US system of government is structured by the 1789 Constitution which outlines the terms of eligibility for the presidency in Article II. Three qualifications for the office are established: you must be a natural born citizen of the US, be at least 35 years old and be resident in the US for at least 14 years (U.S. Const. art. II, § 1, cl. 5). Although these explicit requirements are ungendered, the use of 'he' in reference to the office-holder in the wider context of Article II fosters conflicting legal interpretation (Nelson 2015). While today it is implausible that the Constitution could be legitimately interpreted not to allow a female president (Nelson 2015), it is debated whether this equality is legislated in the Constitution or is, instead, a product of social change.

On one side of this conflict of legal interpretation are academics who argue the eligibility of female candidacy was mandated by the Constitution. Professor Mike Rappaport contends that the usage of the male pronoun does not imply an implicit requirement as at the time of drafting, the term was also used as a gender inclusive pronoun for all persons (Rappaport 2015). Professor Jon McGinnis argues that the use of 'he or she' is a new convention and, instead, using 'he' was the historical catch-all custom, evidenced in other historic literature such as the Bible (McGinnis 2015). Consolidating this interpretation is the Constitution's listing of requirements for offices, like the presidency and Congress, in clearly designated sections (U.S. Const. art. 1,



§ 2, cl. 2). Rappaport thus criticises the addition of extra qualifications, beyond what is explicit, as in 'conflict with the constitutional structure' (Rappaport 2015). Indeed, as the drafters listed all other qualifications with greater precision, the question arises as to why they would settle on such an ambiguous form for a decisive gendered requirement.

The above school of thought is opposed by academics who, instead, contend the legal potentiality for a female president only emerged after legal reform, reflecting the social changes of the twentieth century. For example, Professor Erwin Chemerinsky believes the drafters had 'the original understanding' that the presidency would be held by a man (Chemerinsky 2013). Women only gained suffrage and explicit rights to hold political office with the 19th Amendment in 1920, centuries after the Constitution was drafted (General Records of the United States Government 1992). Chemerinsky argues that this meant the Constitution had to be interpreted as gender inclusive, regardless of its original intention (Calabresi 2011, 87). It does seem implausible that, prior to this reform, a Constitution that purposefully neglected to guarantee women any other political rights would have simultaneously allowed women to reach the highest political office. Given the contradiction in political rights women would have possessed if they had been fully capable of running for president before 1920, the 19th Amendment must be understood as the moment the presidency gained gender parity under the law. Thus, while the Constitution can plausibly explain why the presidency remained entirely male-dominated from 1789 to 1920, the continued male lineage for the last century raises further questions (Friedman 2016).

Sexism in the electorate:

The law, however, is not the sole force operating within the political sphere. Yet, if it is not responsible for this exclusively male cast of presidents, other factors must therefore be scrutinised as potential causes, such as whether the people themselves are a barrier to female presidency. Given today's social mores condemning its public expression, it is difficult to identify all voters decisively motivated by sexism. Kantar's Index for Leadership polling (2018, 20) showed only 52% of Americans were 'very comfortable' having a female president; although positive, and an increase from previous polls, this nonetheless suggests that female presidential candidates, from the onset, are disfavoured by 48% of the electorate.

Direct misogyny is further complemented by more subtle formations. David Paul and Jessi Smith studied the influence of gender on voters' perceptions of candidates in the run-up to the 2008 US presidential election. Notably, they found that female candidates were perceived as 'significantly less qualified' than men with 'similar credentials' (Paul & Smith 2008, 451). This gender bias becomes more salient given that it is firmly established 'that perceptions about candidates' competence influences voter choice' (Paul & Smith 2008, 453). Even if such findings do not completely prevent a successful female candidacy, this handicap could explain in part why men disproportionately succeed in presidential races (Paul & Smith 2008, 451).

The study further revealed that a misogynist contingent can also colour the political preferences and ideas of 'electability' of other voters in the electorate (Paul & Smith 2008, 452). Polling shows that one third of Americans assume their neighbour would not vote for a female (Paul & Smith 2008, 452) and Professor Kate Manne argues this encourages voters to lend support to the conventional male candidates who appear more capable of winning (Gontcharova 2019). Additionally, the assumption that sexism motivates a considerable swathe of the electorate may even encourage others to assume a misogynistic outlook. Within groups with a shared sense of identity and solidarity, people are more likely to accept beliefs that appear to be held by a majority and will 'go along with the crowd' to maintain good social relations (Sunstein & Vermeule 2009, 214-217). Thus, within electoral groups with a history of misogyny or a vocally misogynistic subset, sexism can be internalised by others as the prevailing social norm and thus not perceived as active sexism (Valentine et al. 2014, 405). This leaves the electorate systematically averse to a female presidency as significant rates of misogyny combine with those who accept and adopt this bias.

Sexism in the media:

Public opinion and, subsequently, electoral behaviour, is significantly influenced by how the media 'shape public debate' and 'focus public interest on particular subjects' (Happer & Philo 2013, 321). It is thus prudent to consider whether there is a distinct treatment of women in the media and whether this affects their electoral viability in presidential campaigns. This subject was the focus of a study by Northeastern University which analysed the treatment of female candidates in the 2020 presidential race through articles published by five prominent American news organisations. Differentiation by gender was isolated by assessing the tone of terms used in the coverage of each candidate. The 'media sentiment' measured revealed that male candidates had received a far more positive coverage across those media outlets than their female counterparts (Thomsen & Machado 2019). Ralf Dewenter contends that media coverage has a 'positive and significant' effect on voting intentions among the electorate, despite its impotency in affecting long-term party affiliation (Dewenter et al. 2018, 18). Specifically, he highlights that positive treatment by the media increases the support for the benefitting party (Dewenter et al. 2018, 18). Thus, given the media's ability to mould the electoral environment (Happer & Philo 2013, 321), it is evident that sexism in the press hinders the chances of female political contenders to a measurable and potentially decisive degree.

The media's distribution of political reporting, infused with misogyny, can plausibly be linked to the institutional dominance of men within the industry (Gontcharova 2019). A study by the Women's Media Centre has found 70% of political coverage and 74% of election news online is conducted by men thus creating an echo chamber of male perspectives (WWC 2017, 4). Given that Kantar's Index for Leadership poll showed only 45% of men were 'very comfortable' with a female presidency (Kantar Public 2018, 20), the statistical constitution of American media means it is likely that sexist male preferences will be amplified to the broader electorate. Furthermore, Martin Wettstein and Werner Wirth find that media output can strongly reinforce existing political opinions amongst aligned voters (Wettstein & Wirth 2017, 267), meaning that sexist coverage can entrench misogynistic attitudes even further. Given the power of the media to shape electoral behaviour (Happer & Philo 2013, 321), it is clear that this environment makes a female presidency less viable.

Are things changing?

While the barriers to a female presidency are clear, some argue that this marked hostility in society and the media is steadily waning. Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign cannot be ignored. Despite losing to Donald Trump and his record-low favourability ratings (Saad 2016), Clinton won over 65 million votes: a considerable swathe of the electorate, and only marginally less than Barack Obama in 2012 (Luhby 2016). Furthermore, this lesser total can be explained by salient factors unrelated to gender. Clinton garnered sustainably less support than Obama amongst ethnic minorities like African Americans (Luhby 2016) due to her reluctance to engage with race-based issues (Gause 2018, 255). Furthermore, she suffered for reasons other than her female identity, with her reputed corruption proving costly (Norton 2019, 40). Amy Pope argues that given Clinton's historically low favourability ratings (Saad 2016), a more 'electable' female candidate has every chance of securing the necessary vote share to win an election (Pope 2019).

This optimism is also backed by recent electoral statistics showing that when women run for political office in the US, they now have the same rates of success as men (Poloni-Staudinger & Strachan 2020). The disparity in gender representation, as only around a quarter of Congress and 29% of state legislatures are female, is, at least partly, a result of fewer women running for office in the first place (Poloni-Staudinger & Strachan 2020). Yet, in this presidential election, a record number of women ran for the Democratic candidacy and in 2018, a record number of women won in the congressional midterm elections (Poloni-Staudinger & Strachan 2020). Not only is this directional shift indicative of an electorate less influenced by misogyny than in the past, but some academics argue that seeing women in 'visible political office' encourages other women to engage in the political process and run for office too (Burns et al. 2009, 9).

David Broockman challenges this, however, instead arguing that his statistical analysis shows the election of female 'role models' has 'no meaningful causal effect' on the rates of female mass political participation or female candidacy (Broockman 2014, 202-3). This suggests that improved rates of female candidacy may not

materialise through the example of trailblazing women alone and gender inequality in political candidature may remain a salient factor weakening the chances of witnessing a female president (Broockman 2014, 203).

While electability may be a diminishing issue for women, polling of voters still evokes significant doubt, especially among women, that the highest office of the presidency is achievable (Scott 2020). While only approximately 9% of men believe a woman could not win a presidential election, around 20% of women thought it impossible (Scott 2020). While this not only explains the limited rates of political candidacy amongst women, this belief also encourages women to assume a preference for seemingly more electable male candidates.

Furthermore, the legacy of unequal political representation means there is a much smaller pool of women in senior political positions who can undertake a viable presidential campaign (Friedman 2016). Even if the traditional political career path can be bypassed, as Trump did on his journey to the presidency in 2016, women are still vastly underrepresented at the top of society, leading less than 5% of Fortune 500 companies (Friedman 2016).

Conclusion:

A woman could win the presidency in the 2020 election. Despite ingrained assumptions of masculinity in the Constitution, this outcome is undoubtedly legal (Chemerinsky 2013). Instead, what restricts the political viability of female candidacy is an electorate with a substantial tendency towards misogyny (Kantar Public 2018, 20) and media that systematically reports on women unfavourably (Thomsen & Machado 2019). Recent electoral results suggest these disadvantages may be decreasing in salience, yet, while they persist, women are discouraged from entering politics and the number of potential female candidates remains highly limited. While progress is evident, the chances of a new female president remain remote.

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