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Walking an Invisible Tightrope: The Reality of Double Standards in American Politics

She's too shrill. She's abrasive. She's unlikable. She's annoying.

Too much this, not enough that. What about her children? Her husband? What about her hormones?

Like bombs tossed haphazardly into trenches -- filled not with toxic gas, but toxic masculinity -- these words are the weapons routinely brandished against women in politics.

It's no secret that Capital Hill is and always has been a boys' club; for centuries, women were barred from entering the world of politics, or even casting their vote. After they gained this right, gender in politics was supposed to no longer be an issue, right? Wrong. Even now, in the 21st century, with a [record number of women in Congress](#), the representation gap is still wide and the double standards are still glaring.

Women have been integral in shaping the political landscape since the founding of our nation, from Anne Hutchinson shaking the religious foundations of the early colonial settlements all the way to Nancy Pelosi becoming Speaker of the House. However, they have not always been treated as such.

For most of American history, women were shut out of the political sphere, and lawmaking was left solely to men. When they were finally allowed to enter the race, they entered two centuries behind. This has proven to be disadvantageous in many ways, as can be

demonstrated in our modern political era: representation in Congress and the Cabinet has not reached gender parity, every President of the United States thus far has been male, and the women who are able to make it in the political world are held to an entirely different standard than their male counterparts.

Women in power have always been easy targets; their careers and livelihoods depend on how people perceive them, which makes it easy to make sexist criticisms under the guise of political commentary. While backlash and partisan critique is to be expected for any politician that dares to enter the Washington thunderdome, the hefty weight of societal expectations -- along with the double standard they are held to in their actions, their personal histories, even their mannerisms and their dress -- is unique to female politicians.

[A study done by Harvard University](#) demonstrated that “when female politicians were described as power-seeking, participants experienced feelings of moral outrage (i.e., contempt, anger, and/or disgust) towards them” (Okimoto and Brescoll 2010). In other words, ambitious women are perceived as being less “likable,” and people generally feel that these women go against moral values by seeking or attaining positions of power.

Many female politicians must fall into this trap of “likability,” in which they must be appealing to their constituents, their peers and their superiors. They must be smart, but not appear intellectually “aloof” and “disconnected from the common American”. They must [dress perfectly](#), adhering to standards of appearance that are far higher than those of male politicians. They must appear caring and feminine, but not soft or emotional lest they are perceived as “weak.”

They are constantly walking a tightrope that is nearly impossible to balance.

While male politicians are by and large evaluated solely on their performance, female politicians must balance both performance and likability. This is demonstrated in some of the most prominent politicians of today -- people like Hillary Clinton, Elizabeth Warren and Kamala Harris. When both Clinton and Warren began the campaign trail for the Presidency, the immediate question of their likability was raised -- people viewed Clinton as an elitist career politician with too many ties to her controversial family's political dynasty, while Warren was demonized for being ["too divisive" and "too liberal."](#) Clinton must prove herself to be a "doting grandmother" above all things, and Harris must prove that her career was not simply the result of [nepotism in a romantic relationship](#).

Some deny that there is a bias at all, saying that the sole prospect of representation alone should be satisfactory, and that sexism in politics is not a significant problem. Hillary Clinton was right up on that debate stage with Donald Trump, wasn't she? How could she possibly have been treated any differently?

Others even argue that the double standard is, in fact a positive thing; the burden of having to be proven on both likeability and performance can produce politicians "who are more competent and appealing than their male counterparts" ("Chronic Challenges," 2006). Why shouldn't the standard for our nation's leaders be as high as possible? Are opponents of the double standard suggesting we lower the bar for selecting the people who make our laws and govern our country? Female legislators are not barred from running, and they are given the exact same voting and lawmaking power as male politicians. How can they be treated any differently?

To answer these questions, we must think past simply the institutional barriers in place -- we must think of the social structures that have allowed the problem to continue. Of course, a

law can be passed to protect people from harm, but the underlying ideas behind that harm -- sexism, racial bias and a number of other dangerous ideologies -- cannot be killed in their entirety. Coming back to the perennial Clinton vs. Trump debate: Clinton was always first and foremost presented as a loving wife and doting grandmother before a politician. She had only been married once, and stayed with him even through years of scandal and ridicule. Yet, her personal life was always put on blast, made naked for public consumption and criticism. Trump, on the other hand, was marred with personal and financial scandal -- he was an adulterer who repeatedly made derogatory comments about women and minorities. Yet, his advisors and voter base only ever focused on his policy, and his status as an “outsider” to the political world. Two candidates, going for the same position, yet held to entirely different sets of criteria.

As for keeping our nation’s standards for our leaders high, of course the bar should be high -- the American democratic system was founded on the sole principle that the people should be able to choose the best leaders for themselves. However, this system of standards becomes warped when it only applies to half of the population, and only [23.4%](#) of the country’s legislative body. Why does the other 76.6% get away with being abrasive, shrill, cold and “unlikeable”? Societal standards are in place to protect the American people from poor leadership, it’s true. However, the standards applied to women are arbitrary ones that have been created in order to discredit their leadership when in fact, a woman’s choice of clothing or her relationship history have nothing to do with how effectively she can lead.

So next time we are watching a debate, or firing political quips back and forth with a coworker, or making a decision at the ballot box, women and men alike must ask themselves: what preconceived notions do we hold as a society that may influence our perception of these

candidates? How much do we *really* care about the color of their suit, or who's watching their children while they campaign? Do we really think they are "unlikeable"?

Mentor Texts

The columnist I chose was political commentator Jamie Stiehm, who has written opinion pieces and editorials about American politics for a multitude of publications. The first mentor text I chose from Stiehm was a piece from the US News Report titled [“Where Obama Failed,”](#) a piece detailing the shortcomings of the Obama administration and how they have affected the current political landscape. It uses vivid, descriptive language in order to paint a picture for the reader in the image that she wants them to believe. It also switches between pathos and logos by using anecdotes to introduce a topic, then dissecting it in a persuasive manner. I used this strategy within my own editorial, using real life examples of the double standard faced by women in politics, then dissecting those examples as to why they may be present. This strategy is very effective for opinion writing in journalism, as it is the writer’s job to ignite both a passion for the issue through pathos, then shed light on it using logos. Additionally, Stiehm builds ethos with her audience by using a distinct voice that makes it sound as if she is speaking to the reader about the issue -- this makes it easier to trust her analysis and opinion.

The second piece I chose from Stiehm was from the Huffington Post, titled [“Conservative Too Good a Word for Tea Party, Fox News and Newt Gingrich.”](#) In this article, Stiehm makes her argument as to how the most prominent public representations of political conservatives are not representative of the party’s beliefs as a whole, and how they are ultimately unhelpful to the objectives that conservatives want to achieve. In this piece, Stiehm uses specific devices and techniques to convey her argument, such as the repetition of certain sentence beginnings to drive home a certain point. She repeatedly says “Conservative is too good a word for _____,” filling in the blank with recognizable names such as George W. Bush and Newt Gingrich. Doing this

makes it clear the type of persona she is calling out, and points out the common thread between those she mentions. I utilized this strategy in my work, using it as the introduction to point out the most common and recognizable examples of the criticism that women in politics face. By saying “She’s too ___,” it elucidates the point that the public aggressively and unnecessarily nitpicks women’s personal characteristics.